

Reports of the New World

Before the Pilgrims landed in Massachusetts, artwork and writings about the New World, and the people who lived there, were already being produced and sent back to Europe. These creative and factual works would have influenced the way that those boarding the Mayflower thought about the New World and its inhabitants.

Christopher Columbus's journal was one of the first accounts of the New World. It undoubtedly influenced European attitudes about the natives that he encountered when he landed in the Bermudas, on an island he named San Salvador. Below is an excerpt from his journal, detailing his first encounter with the native Lucayan people.

[October 14, 1492]

As soon as dawn broke many of these people came to the beach, all youths, as I have said, and all of good stature, a very handsome people. Their hair is not curly, but loose and coarse, like horse hair. In all the forehead is broad, more so than in any other people I have hitherto seen. Their eyes are very beautiful and not small, and themselves far from black, but the color of the Canarians. Nor should anything else be expected, as this island is in a line east and west from the island of Hierro in the Canaries. Their legs are very straight, all in one line, and no belly, but very well formed.

They came to the ship in small canoes, made out of the trunk of a tree like a long boat, and all of one piece, and wonderfully worked, considering the country. They are large, some of them holding 40 to 45 men, others smaller, and some only large enough to hold one man. They are propelled with a paddle like a baker's shovel, and go at a marvellous rate. If the canoe capsizes, they all promptly begin to swim, and to bale it out with calabashes that they take with them. They brought skeins of cotton thread, parrots, darts, and other small things which it would be tedious to recount, and they give all in exchange for anything that may be given to them. I was attentive, and took trouble to ascertain if there was gold. I saw that some of them had a small piece fastened in a hole they have in the nose, and by signs I was able to make out that to the south, or going from the island to the south, there was a king who had great cups full, and who possessed a great quantity. I tried to get them to go there, but afterwards I saw that they had no inclination. I resolved to wait until to-morrow in the afternoon and then to depart, shaping a course to the S.W., for, according to what many of them told me, there was land to the S., to the S.W., and N.W., and that the natives from the N.W. often came to attack them, and went on to the S.W. in search of gold and precious stones.

The people are very docile, and for the longing to possess our things, and not having anything to give in return, they take what they can get, and presently swim away. Still,

they give away all they have got, for whatever may be given to them, down to broken bits of crockery and glass.

First-hand accounts were not limited to Columbus' journal. Below is an excerpt from Captains M. Philip Amadas and M. Arthur Barlowe's letter to Sir Walter Raleigh in 1584. The captains described their arrival on Roanoke Island, VA, and their first meeting with the natives:

The next day there came unto us divers boates, and in one of them the Kings brother, accompanied with fortie or fiftie men, very handsome and goodly people, and in their behaviour as mannerly and [civil] as any of Europe. His name was Granganimeo, and the king is called Wingina, the country Wingandacoa, and now by her Majestie Virginia. The [manner] of his [coming] was in this sort: hee left his boates altogether as the first man did a little from the shippes by the shore, and came along to the place over against the ships, followed with fortie men.

When he came to the place over against the ships, followed with fortie men. When he came to the place, his servants spread a long matte upon the ground, on which he [sat] downe, and at the other ende of the matte foure others of his companie did the like, the rest of his men stood round about him, somewhat a farre off: when we came to the shore to him with our weapons, [he] never [moved] from his place, nor any of the other foure, nor never mistrusted any harme to be offred from us, but sitting still he beckoned us to come and sit by him, which we performed: and being set hee made all signes of joy and welcome, striking on his head and his breast and afterwarde on ours, to shewe [we] were all one, smiling and making shewe the best he could of all love, and familiaritie. After [he] had made a long speech unto us, wee presented him with divers things, which [he] received very joyfully, and thankfully. None of the company durst speake one worde all the time: onely the foure which were at the other ende, spake one in the others eare very softly.

While many accounts related nonviolent meetings, others revealed an uneasy relationship that sometimes ended in violence. As fledgling settlements expanded beyond small, isolated forts, native peoples strategized on how to respond. Some smaller native communities viewed the Europeans as allies against larger rivals; others, especially more powerful Indian nations, saw the Europeans as upstart expansionists whose growth needed to be checked.

For example, relations between the Powhatans, the dominant native nation in what is now eastern Virginia, and the settlers at Jamestown had been rocky since the colony

was first established in 1607. The wary Powhatans had initially tolerated and sometimes aided the small band of Jamestown colonists, but eventually relations between the two groups soured, especially after the Virginians effectively extorted the Powhatans to sell winter supplies to the struggling colony. Bouts of violence broke out and attacks escalated between the two groups. The Jamestown colonists, who had become dependent on trade with the Powhatans, barricaded themselves in their fort, fearing continued attack by the militarily superior Powhatans and largely starving in 1609 and 1610 until resupply ships arrived. The small-scale skirmishing grew into the first Anglo-Powhatan War, which lasted until 1614.

Peace was brokered until 1622, at which point the Powhatan chief Opechancanough, recognizing that the English expansion was now threatening his people's culture and economic security, sought to reverse the English growth. He organized various native allies for a concerted pre-emptive strike reclaiming what had been Powhatan lands, aimed at forcing the English back to Jamestown or out of the area entirely. Aided by Christian Indian allies who warned them of the attack, the English settlers fended off the attack and continued their steady expansion. Opechancanough initiated one last campaign in 1644, but the English, defeated it, reducing the once dominant but now defeated Powhatan Tribe to a vassal state of the English monarch.

A similar experience happened in New England.

Relations between the Pilgrim settlers and the indigenous peoples had been generally good in the decades after the 1620 landing in Plymouth. However, the shift in the balance of power—far more English had moved to the area and expanded their land holdings—disconcerted some native peoples who feared being displaced by the ever more numerous settlers.

The 1661 death of Massasoit, the Wampanoag chief who had made the peace treaty with the Pilgrims in 1620, eventually led to the rule of his second son, Metacom (or Metacomet), who also went by the English name of Philip (and hence, as the leader, King Philip).

Surveying the expansion of the English, Metacom, who initially had friendly relations with them, resolved to drive them back before they became too strong to defeat. (He also faced additional pressure from the west from the Mohawks and Mohegans).

In 1675, the Wampanoag and their allies, predominantly the Narragansett who had recently been their foes, launched what became known as King Philip's War, raiding villages and towns in Massachusetts and the surrounding New England colonies. The English (and some of their Indian allies from other tribes, such as the Mohawks and

Mohegans) similarly destroyed Indian villages in what became a vicious combat between the two peoples.

Metacom, in a sense, launched his war too late: the English were simply too numerous and too powerful by that point. The settlers took extremely high losses—52 of their 90 towns were attacked, with 17 of them totally destroyed—and they suffered up to 5% casualties, leading some to consider it the highest casualty rate of any war in American history. Nonetheless, the colonists and their Indian allies eventually defeated Metacom's forces, killing Metacom himself in 1676. The defeat of the Wampanoag and their allies signaled that the land known as New England would indeed remain English.

The excerpts were not the only form of information available at the time. Illustrations, like the one below, were also available.

This particular drawing, ca. 1578, illustrates a scene from Sir Francis Drake's expedition near Rio de la Plata. In it, one of the natives is taking Drake's hat.



While it cannot be assumed that the Pilgrims would have read any writings or looked at any illustrations about the New World, it can be assumed that these works influenced

the English understanding of the Native Americans in some manner, seeping into daily life through newspaper articles, gossip, speeches, and sermons.

Image: Theodore de Bry, "Francis Drake's Hat Stolen by Indians near Río de la Plata" (1578)
(image available at [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Excerpt from Columbus's Journal from The Northmen, Columbus, and Cabot, eds. Julius E. Olson and Edward Bourne (Charles Scribner and Sons, 1906) available from [Project Gutenberg](#)

Excerpt from the Roanoke letter available at [University of North Carolina, "Documenting the American South,"](#)

Account of the Jamestown colony drawn from Helen Rountree: *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (U of OK Press, 1990) and Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The Peopling of North America, 1600-1675* (Vintage Books, 2012); of New England and King Philip's War, from Daniel R. Mandell, *King Philip's War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); James D. Drake, *King Philip's War: Civil War in New England 1675-1676* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Douglas E. Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War* (New York: MacMillan Co, 1958)