HERO, VILLIAN, AND DIPLOMAT: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF COMMANDER JOHN MASON IN COLONIAL CONNECTICUT

BY William Lee Dreger

Traditionally, historians have treated the convergence of cultures between natives and Europeans in North America as a linear narrative resulting in overwhelming European dominance. While much that has been argued in favor of this stance is strongly supported by available sources, this position tends to oversimplify the dynamics of colonial interaction. Through an in-depth and focused study of Commander John Mason and his many identities in seventeenth-century colonial Connecticut this widely-accepted simplified explanation of interaction can be replaced by the more complex reality. Mason, the commander of English forces during the Pequot War, simultaneously attempted to annihilate surrounding Pequots and maintain positive relations with members of the Mohegan tribe, a group that in the previous decade had splintered from the Pequot tribe. Through both primary and secondary sources one can better understand Mason, the Pequot War, and the intricacies of colonial interaction concerning settlers and natives writ large.
Hero, Villian, And Diplomat: An Investigation Into The Multiple Identities Of Commander John Mason In Colonial Connecticut

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Interpretations of the Pequot War have shifted dramatically in the last thirty years. This conflict pitting colonists from Massachusetts and Connecticut against the Pequot tribe of the Connecticut River Valley region was once understood as a righteous war fought against native savages who threatened the spread of European colonization. More recently it has been understood as an act of colonial aggression amount to genocide. This dichotomous view is too simplistic. The Pequot War, the first official war in New England, was a brief, bloody, and complex conflict waged between English settlers and native Americans in colonial Connecticut. In a few short weeks, the once mighty and feared Pequot were crushed physically and psychologically by the English and their native allies. Preoccupied by the violence and bloodshed, scholars have oversimplified the many intricacies involved in the cross-cultural interaction taking place. For some of these individuals the Pequot War was a universal physical struggle between Europeans and natives. Ignoring any aboriginal factionalism and especially family and tribal rivalries, these individuals framed not only the war, but also colonial interactions writ large as a simple dichotomous relationship of native versus settler.

In reality, the events leading up to the Pequot War, war itself, and the happenings following the conflict open a panoramic window onto the dynamics of colonial Connecticut in the first half of the seventeenth century. In addition to the well-documented events of the war, colonial Connecticut illustrates Indian-settler interaction and diplomacy on a grand scale, native-native relationships, and Indian, more specifically Algonquian, customs. Although difficult to uncover, various native voices are present within the available sources concerning this area and period.
The standard scholarly accounts of the war adopted a European perspective. In doing so they relied upon primary source documents in which Europeans meticulously recorded native-settler interaction. Early memoirs by contemporaries of the war such as John Underhill and Lion Gardener simultaneously position the English as pious victors and the Pequots as vicious losers overcome by their righteous opponents. According to these sources the English, commanded by John Mason, fought the war to eliminate any surrounding “savages.” This view of English superiority leading to their dominance is furthered by Louis B. Mason in his work *The Life and Times of Major John Mason of Connecticut* (1935). Louis Mason depicts his distant relative John Mason as a hero who eradicated any Pequot threat to the spread of English culture, civilization, and influence. Celebrating English victory was the dominate approach to the Pequot War for centuries.1

This position on the war began to change from about 1974 as anti-imperial arguments became popular when discussing colonial interaction. With the emergence of the Indian movement, following the lead of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, scholars began to rethink their position concerning early native-settler interaction. Historians now tended to present the Pequot War as a battle of White versus Red in which a racist and technologically superior society brutally crushed the indigenous inhabitants. Scholars, drawing upon the model of genocide provided by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, compartmentalized participants involved in the Pequot War and forced them into either an English or Pequot camp. According to Lemkin, genocide was defined as the “deliberate destruction of an ethnic group or nation.”2 With the development, adoption, and application of this term in the political realm the popularity of using “genocide” to describe an incident increased dramatically.

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Once political leaders applied this term to current events, historians began to ascribe the label of “genocide” to happenings in the past. For many early American historians the first appropriate use of the word “genocide” to the historic record involved the Pequot War of 1637.

In sharp contrast to earlier sources, these historians, led by Francis Jennings, presented the English as unwelcome invaders. Following the paradigm presented by Jennings, and employing earlier arguments by previous historians, like Roy Harvey Pearce, charged with colonial racism and hatred, other anti-imperial scholars such as Gary Nash and Neal Salisbury focused on the cultural clash that took place during the Pequot War. Pearce provided the necessary framework for these anti-imperial scholars by explaining the “metaphysics of Indian-hating.” According to Pearce, “Indian-hating thus is subsumed under a larger metaphysics, that of Christian, civilized progress.”

Armed with a myriad of both primary and secondary sources explaining the annihilation of natives in the name of “civilized progress,” Jennings, Nash, and Salisbury attempted to present a more balanced approach to understanding early contact. Unlike their predecessors, these historians provided the reader with both the settler and Indian perspective to inform their arguments. The titles of their works *Manitou and Providence; Red, White, and Black*; and *The Invasion of America*-- all suggest cultural difference and conflict. As posited by Pearce decades before, these scholars precisely explained that “the Indian stood as a vivid reminder of what the English knew they must not become. The Native was the counterimage of civilized man…”

The English-Pequot relationship during the Pequot War has been oversimplified by both those writing at the time of the conflict and by recent scholars. In the past this conflict has be simultaneously portrayed as a black and white, hero or villain, version of events as well as treating the settlers and the

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Indians as monoliths. Native-settler interaction has perplexed historians since the rise of the field of history as a profession. Using primarily European sources, many scholars have assumed that contact amounted to a battle of primal forces with only a single culture surviving. In reality, however, early contact cannot be framed as a linear narrative ultimately resulting in European dominance. In her work *Indians and English*, author Karen Kupperman argues directly against those that have simplified the interaction of colonial New England. “Colonists, English men and women who actually tried to make a go of establishing themselves in America, could not simply dismiss the American natives as negligible or as cultureless savages— and none did.”5 Instead of discussing the Pequot War as an isolated and individual entity this paper will illustrate the complexities and intricacies of early colonial society in New England by thoroughly investigating the many roles played by a single individual. Through both available primary and secondary source material a single individual investigated in-depth can help the historian to gain insight beyond the binary view often presented by previous scholars and uncover the complexities and multiple layers of interaction involved in this short war. This thesis will challenge both the monolithic view of settler and native and the simplistic view of war as heroism or genocide.

Major John Mason, the commander of the English forces during the Pequot War, has served all versions of events. Mason, according to well known seventeenth century sources, was a loyal military veteran willing to go to any measure to reach his objective. In the Pequot War, Mason was told to eliminate any Pequot threat after a series of unsuccessful negotiations between the English and Pequot; two cultures that mutually misunderstood each other. In this campaign, Mason set fire to the Pequot village at Mystic River, killing hundreds of men, women, children, and the morale of the surviving Pequot. For some he was a heroic settler defending his people against predatory Indians. Later he

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was seen as a genocidal maniac ruthlessly murdering innocents. Throughout he has generally been treated as enacting a fairly simple role as an Indian fighter.

The binary view of Mason presented by scholars suggests that he was a complicated figure of American colonial history. Although easily accessible sources married to the agendas of the some scholars studying the war have painted Mason as a ruthless Indian-hater, John Mason, like the Pequot War itself, was much more complex than often credited. In addition to being loyal to the English cause, Mason also was devoted to furthering the political and societal position of his steadfast allies, the Mohegan. Simultaneously, Mason attacked the Pequot of Connecticut and sheltered the Mohegan from English encroachment. While Mason absolutely did abhor the Pequots of the Connecticut River valley and worked meticulously to erase a Pequot presence, he simultaneously strived to maintain and protect the Mohegans, a splinter group of the Pequots that mirrored them in all things except leadership. Concurrently, Mason assumed the role of Pequot annihilator and Mohegan guardian, two native groups related by blood ties and similar in all cultural aspects, in seventeenth century Connecticut. Just as Mason’s hatred of Pequots, spawned from his experience during Pequot War continued throughout his remaining life, so too did his position as Mohegan patron, protector and diplomat.

By peering through the narrow window offered by Commander John Mason concerning Indian relations during the seventeenth century, we can more fully recognize the many identities that individuals fulfilled during the fledgling years of colonialism in North America by English imperialists. Through a thorough investigation into the events of the Pequot War and the bifurcated images of John Mason that arose out of it, one can better comprehend the intricacies and complexities of not only Mason but also the Pequot War and colonial society.
Chapter I: The Pequot War

In the early 1630’s the mighty Pequot tribe of Connecticut began to self destruct. An internal rift over leadership coupled with external tensions involving European settlers and rival Native groups commenced the erosion of a tribe thought by its many tributaries to be indestructible. Competition for access to precious European goods such as copper, cloth, alcohol, and weapons fueled wars between neighboring tribes while encroachment from settlers created uncertainty, mistrust, and mutual misunderstanding.

The Dutch presence along the Connecticut River in the early 1600’s was recognized by surrounding tribes. In fact, “the Dutch West India Company had monopolized trade in this region since the early 1620’s.” Competition over a tribe’s access to the Dutch trade resulted in the development of two powerful tributary systems, one headed by the Narragansett and one controlled by the Pequot. Since the Dutch had no substantial military force they turned to the Pequot and Narragansett to keep their trade networks stable and insure the continual flow of goods along the Connecticut River. This reciprocal system between the Dutch, Pequot, and Narragansett worked well until the 1630’s when English settlers from the Massachusetts Bay Colony began to spill into Connecticut and disrupt Dutch hegemony in the region.

With an increased presence of English settlers also came an elevation of friction politically and economically. Fearing English competition and a loss of their trade monopoly, the Dutch purchased land in 1633 at the mouth of the Connecticut River and established the House of Hope trading post at the present-day location of Hartford. “The Hope” created a free trade zone for all neighboring tribes that wished to exchange goods with the Dutch. This

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designated free trade area upset the existing Pequot- Narragansett- Dutch trade relations, causing the Pequot to feel betrayed. No longer did Indian goods such as furs have to flow through Pequot hands before reaching Europeans. These feeling of animosity were furthered by a smallpox epidemic in 1633 that “ran rapidly through the tribes.” In 1634, the Pequot tribe displayed their anger by attacking several Native traders destined for “The Hope”, including Narragansetts.

Realizing that the Pequots were directly confronting and threatening them, the Dutch retaliated by kidnapping the powerful Pequot sachem, Tatobem, as he boarded a Dutch vessel to trade. Dutch trader Jacob Elekens, understanding the importance and value of wampum, beads constructed of seashells used to confirm and document a relationship, agreement or, transaction, demanded of the Pequot tribe a steep ransom of 140 fathoms of wampum. “The Pequots immediately sent the payment demanded for Tatobem’s freedom to the House of Good Hope. They received in return his corpse.” Enraged by the behavior of the Dutch, the Pequot sought to avenge the death of their leader.

Although the Pequots could have easily erased the Dutch presence in the Connecticut valley, this was not their goal. Having grown accustom to European goods, the Pequots yearned only to once again control the energetic trade along the Connecticut River. This motivation coupled with Algonquian custom directed the Pequots to avenge the murder of Tatobem to restore communal harmony. Shortly after the death of their sachem, a group of Pequots and western Niantics attacked a ship in the lower regions of the Connecticut River. Unfortunately for the Pequots, the victims of their retribution were English traders, not Dutch. The entire crew of nine on the small vessel was slaughtered including Captain John Stone, “a disreputable West Indian trader, smuggler, and

privateer temporarily operating out of Virginia.”9 While Stone’s men were occupied by Pequot warriors pretending to desire trade, Sassacus, the son of Tatobem and new grand sachem, paid a visit to Stone in his cabin. After several drinks Stone collapsed, allowing Sassacus to murder him easily with several blows to the head with a hatchet. The remaining crew members were slaughtered and the ship was destroyed with a gunpowder explosion orchestrated by the Pequots.

Believing that all disputes with the Dutch were resolved, the Pequots soon returned to the House of Hope to trade. To the surprise of Pequots, once they were in range, they were fired upon by Dutch cannons, which killed another sachem. Both sides feeling betrayed, mutual misunderstanding continued to fuel the friction between the Pequots and Dutch. Feeling they could no longer trade with the Dutch or Narragansetts, the Pequots turned to the English for support in this conflict. In 1634 a delegation was sent to Boston to discuss a possible Pequot-English alliance. Pequot delegates offered furs and wampum in exchange for English trade and friendship. The English were also urged to settle permanently in Connecticut. According to John Winthrop:

The reason why they desired so muche our frendshippe, was because they were now in warre with the narigansett whom till this yeare, they had kept under, & likewise with the dutche who had killed their old Sachim, & some other of their men, for that the Pekodes had killed some Indians who came to trade with the dutche at Conectecott. & by these occasions they could not trade safely any where therefore they desired us to sende a pinace with Clothe & we should have all their Trade. They offered us allso all their right at Conectecott & to further us what they could if we would settle a plantation there.10

In addition to the Pequot’s initial generous offer, Winthrop and his colleagues demanded a more considerable quantity of peltry and wampum from the

Pequots. Demanding four hundred fathoms of wampum, thirty otter skins, and forty beaver pelts, the magistrates clearly thought of their connection to the Pequots as solely based on trade and economics. Winthrop “promised to send traders to the Pequots but cautioned that they would not enter into any sort of military alliance with them.”

The significance of this agreement is often overlooked by scholars. By agreeing to such a substantial amount of tribute to be paid the Pequots were underscoring the desperate situation they were involved in and agreeing to a subordinate position to the English. Simultaneously the Pequots were at odds with the Dutch, the Narragansetts, and the Mohegans, a splinter group of Pequots that disagreed with the leadership of Sassacus. While some have argued that this tribute was simply a means of cementing an alliance, Francis Jennings puts this agreement in a different perspective. Through a meticulous investigation into available sources, Jennings uncovered the enormous strain the English demands would have put on the Pequots. The various monetary demands made by Winthrop and his associates “amounted to nearly half of the colony’s levies.”

After outlining the payment terms of the treaty the English insisted that the Pequots surrender the western Niantic killers of John Stone. This demand violated Algonquian ideas of honor, a situation that made the Pequots unable to meet this demand. The western Niantics were tributaries of the Pequots, and therefore exchanged tangible goods for protection and security. Only if western Niantics had attacked a member of the Pequot tribe could the Pequots have avenged the death. According to the Pequot envoy, the Englishman was thought to have been Dutch and was killed for purposes of retribution. When further pushed by the English diplomats concerning this issue the Pequot’s claimed that most of those involved died shortly thereafter from smallpox. “Massachusetts’s

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12 Jennings, The Invasion of America, 193.
demand could not have been satisfied without setting the Nantics at feud with
the Pequots and unsettling the whole tributary system of the latter.”\textsuperscript{13}
Adamantly explaining their inability to meet this demand the Pequots eventually
convinced the English to the payment terms of the treaty with the exception of
presenting those individuals who had murdered Stone. Over time the Pequots
also failed to send wampum and furs, causing the English to further question
their intentions of the relationship.

Taking full advantage of the Pequot offer to settle Connecticut, English
settlers began to flood the river valley. According to John Mason the initial
migrants to Connecticut number two hundred and fifty. Benjamin Trumbull
estimated the first wave of settlers to total eight hundred. He believes that
Mason’s statistics refer only to land owning men and that the total population
was considerably higher. Although the exact number of settlers is difficult to
ascertain, it can be assumed that the number multiplied quickly, for within two
years the towns of Hartford, Windsor, and Springfield had been established.\textsuperscript{14}
The English presence upset native relationships and the balance of power in
place. “The new settlers immediately began to bully all the persons previously
resident in their vicinity, that is, the traders of New Netherland and New
Plymouth as well as neighboring Indians.”\textsuperscript{15} Friction between rival groups
continued for the next two years as more English settlers flocked to Connecticut.
With time the Massachusetts colony began to lose patience with the Pequots and
their failure to pay the agreed upon tribute. It commissioned John Winthrop Jr. to
once again demand of Sassacus the killers of Stone in the summer of 1636.
Threatening to erase all amicable relations, the English tried to corner the Pequot
sachem.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 195.
\textsuperscript{14} John Mason, \textit{A Brief History of the Pequot War} (Readex Microprint Co., 1966), ix; also Benjamin
Trumbull, \textit{A Complete History of Connecticut} (New Haven, 1818): 68. For a more in-depth discussion of
the establishment of Hartford, Windsor, and Springfield see Dennis Connole, \textit{The Indians of the Nipmuck
Country in Southern New England, 1630-1750: An Historical Geography} (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and
\textsuperscript{15} Jennings, \textit{The Invasion of America}, 204.
Before negotiations aimed at peace could come to fruition, another incident further added to the deterioration of native-settler relations. In July of 1636, John Gallop on his way to Fort Saybrook discovered “near Block Island John Oldham’s pinnace, its deck crowded with Indians and no sign of a white man.”¹⁶ Boarding Oldham’s vessel, Gallop slaughtered most of the Native intruders. Once aboard Gallop discovered the mutilated body of John Oldham. According to a contemporary account by John Underhill, the Natives “came to trade as they pretended watching their opportunities, knockt him in the head, & martyred him most Barbarously.”¹⁷ Immediately the Narragansetts were labeled the culprits, for the Block Island Natives were among their tributaries. It was believed that Oldham’s attempt to “make pease & trade with the Pekodes last yeare” upset the sachems of the Narragansett and had fueled this aggressive act.¹⁸ Canonicus and Miantonomo, the two leading chiefs of the Narragansetts, quickly extinguished the initial feelings of animosity by returning surviving crewmembers from Oldham’s ship along with some cargo. Colonist Roger Williams, who was then residing with the Narragansett, was told that all surviving participants in the mutilation of Oldham had found refuge with the Pequots.

Immediately a small force of ninety Massachusetts volunteers was assembled under the leadership of John Endicott and set out for Block Island. Upon their arrival the entire island seemed deserted except for a single Indian walking along the shore. As the expedition moved closer preparing to storm the island a number of warriors emerged ready to fight.

Drawing neere to the place of landing, the number that rose from behind the barracado were betweene 50. or 60. able fighting men, men straite as arrowes,very tall, and of active bodyes, having their arrowes nockt, they

¹⁷ John Underhill, Newes From America (London, 1638), 2.
drew neere to the water side, and let fly at the souldiers, as though they meant to have made an end of us all in a moment.\textsuperscript{19}

This fighting lasted only a few moments, for the natives retreated into the treacherous swamps of Block Island when Endicott’s forces began to take the offensive. Frustrated that only one native had been killed, Endicott began to loot and burn the villages and harvests on the island.

After spending several days putting wigwams and cornfields to the torch Endecott’s force set sail for Fort Saybrook at the mouth of the Connecticut River. Upon their arrival they infuriated the fort’s commander, Lieutenant Gardener, by outlining the plan to present the nearby Pequots with an ultimatum that demanded wampum and returned hostages. “You come hither to raise these wasps around my ears and then you will take wing and flee away.”\textsuperscript{20} With crops located far outside the boundaries of the fortified settlement of Saybrook Gardener knew that Pequot agitation ultimately translated into starvation for his people. Unable to persuade Endicott to postpone his raid, Gardener did talk the expeditionary force into stealing Pequot corn so that those sheltered within the fort would have a small surplus of food. Using a Dutch ship anchored in the harbor, Endicott’s forces set out to commandeer the crops along the Pequot River.

Endicott’s intentions immediately became evident to the Pequots. As the ship sailed into the Pequot River both Pequots and western Niantics began to taunt the punitive expedition. John Underhill recorded that the Natives exclaimed “What, English man, what cheere, what cheere, are you hoggerie, will you cram us? That is, are you angry, will you kill us, and doe you come to fight?”\textsuperscript{21} The English dropped anchor and sat in silence throughout the night while the Natives built fires to light the night sky and made cries that were “eerie

\textsuperscript{19} Underhill, Newes from America, 3.
\textsuperscript{20} Lion Gardener, Relation of the Pequot warres (London, 1660): 126-127.
\textsuperscript{21} Underhill, Newes from America, 5.
and unsettling to English ears.”

At dawn an Indian elder boarded the vessel and demanded an explanation for this English visit. Endicott and his officers informed the man that

the Governours of the Bay sent us to demand the heads of those persons that had slaine Captaine Norton, and Captaine Stone, and the rest of their company, and that it was not the custom of the English to suffer murtherers to live, and therefore if they desired their owne peace and welfare, they will peaceably answer our expectation, and give us the heads of the murderers.

In an attempt to make the English understand the Algonquian worldview the Pequot diplomat explained that Sassacus had killed John Stone believing he was avenging the death of his father. Through the Pequot perspective, the English demands for the killers were unreasonable, and could not be met without humiliation and a loss of honor. The envoy’s story, however, was not received as was hoped by the Pequots. Endicott and his company became enraged, arguing that all tribes in the Connecticut River Valley could easily distinguish between a Dutchman and an Englishman. The Pequot elder asked the English to wait on their ship while he returned to shore to inform his people and return with a prompt answer.

Although the elder was allowed to return to shore, Endicott refused to remain stationary on his ship and immediately followed the Pequot ambassador “clad in armor and in full battle array.” The Pequot diplomat returned shortly after leaving, asking Endicott to advance his troops no further; he also reported that no one in the vicinity could answer his demands. According to the elder, “neither of both Princes were at home, they were gone to Long Iland.”

The English began to threaten to spoil the harvest of the Pequots if they continued to ask the expedition to be patient. Several hours passed and the English began to

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22 Cave, *The Pequot War*, 114.
prepare for war when all Pequot women and children disappeared and the men began to bury valuable food.

Just as English patience had worn thin, Endicott and his men were insulted by the Pequot demand to put down their weapons and walk thirty paces forward if they wished to talk with a sachem. Sensing an ambush, Endicott marched into the village and began randomly firing at any Pequot attempting to flee. In a matter of moments the village was emptied of Pequots and the English forces “spent the day burning and spoyling the Countrey.” On their way back to Fort Saybrook, Endicott and his men tried to seek revenge against the western Niantics, a tributary group to the Pequot. Despite this effort, English participant John Underhill recorded that “no Indians would come neere us, but runne from us, as the deere from the dogges.”26 After a brief stay with Lion Gardener at the fort in August of 1636, Endicott and his men retuned to Boston, boasting a great English victory. Although the claims of the expedition forces inflated the impact of the campaign on the Pequots, John Winthrop later wrote that “the Narigansett men tould vs after that 13: of the Pequodes were killed & 40: wonded.”27

Infuriated that Endicott had failed to return with the surplus provisions promised at the commencement of the excursion, Gardener was forced to send members of the fort beyond its fortified walls in order to feed his hungry people. Unsurprisingly, the men were attacked by the enraged Pequots. In response to Endecott’s violent excursions, Pequot “raids claimed the lives of thirty Europeans, or five percent of all settlers in Connecticut.”28 English musket fire proved more effective than Pequot arrows. Only one Englishman was wounded while several Pequots were killed or wounded. The surrounding Pequots continued to harass the small English fort, often taunting those contained within its walls. “We are Pequits, and have killed Englishmen, and can kill

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26 Ibid, 6-7.
27 Dunn, Savage, and Yeandle, The Journal of John Winthrop, 186.
them as mosquetoes, and we will go to Conectecott and kill men, women, and children, and we will take away the horses, cows, and hogs.”

Over the next few months several of the garrisons protecting Fort Saybrook were ambushed by Pequot warriors. Twenty reinforcements from Massachusetts were sent under the command of John Underhill to aid Gardener in his fight. Upon the arrival of these soldiers the Pequots turned their focus to the surrounding unprotected plantations of Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield, leaving the now well protected fort alone. On the morning of April 23, 1637, two hundred Pequot warriors descended on Wethersfield and “slew nine men, women and children.” Coupled with the harassment of Fort Saybrook, the Pequot actions at Wethersfield caused the English to respond immediately. John Mason, an experienced war veteran, was assigned ninety men and sent to combat the Pequot tribe. According to scholar Laurence Hauptman, the attack at Wethersfield “became an excuse for a full-scale Massachusetts and Connecticut colonial war of extermination against the Pequots.”

Witnessing the influx of English troops, the Pequots turned to their competitors the Narragansett and pleaded for a pan-Indian alliance against the European intruders. The English worked to thwart this effort; John Winthrop quickly contacted Roger Williams asking him to persuade his good friends the Narragansett to agree to an anti-Pequot alliance. Luckily for the English, Williams was able to “breake to pieces the Pequts negociation and designe, and to make and promote and finish by many Travells and Charges the English Leauge with the Nahiggonsiks and Monhiggins agnst the Pequts” After much discussion, the Narragansett finally agreed to accompany the English. Realizing

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29 As quoted in Jennings, _The Invasion of America_, 212.
30 Underhill, _Newes from America_, 7.
the great opportunity to turn on his former rival, Sassacus, Uncas enthusiastically joined the English forces along with sixty Mohegan warriors. “A Pequot-Narragansett alliance would have placed in jeopardy not only the tiny Puritan settlements in Connecticut but the parent colonies as well.” With the enormous threat of a powerful Indian alliance smothered, the commander John Mason prepared for an offensive war.

Despite a long relationship with Plymouth traders, the intentions of Uncas were unclear and questioned by the English. Although the English settlers realized the need for native allies on the frontier, skepticism often ruled the day. Understanding that Uncas and his Mohegan warriors were former Pequots caused many of the English soldiers to fear that the Mohegans “in time of greatest tryall might revolt, and turne their backs against those they professed to be their friends, and joyne with the Pequeats.” Captain Mason, in an attempt to understand if the motives claimed by Uncas were genuine and to calm the fears of his men, asked several of the Mohegan warriors to find and kill any nearby Pequots. The following day, Mason and the English forces were presented with five Pequot heads, and two prisoners, one of whom later died of his wounds. This show of loyalty on the part of the Mohegans proved to Mason the sincerity of Uncas. The heads of the Pequots symbolized a Mohegan-English alliance that “incouraged the hearts of all.”

Mason’s orders from officials in the Connecticut court were to amphibiously attack the densely populated village where Sassacus resided. A windstorm, however, held up the expedition for a couple of days, thus allowing Mason, Underhill, and Gardener to discuss the many risks of such an ambitious attack. Of the many plans discussed the most promising, according to Mason, was to “by-pass Pequot harbor, sail to the Narragansett country, recruit a party

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33 Cave, *The Pequot War*, 123.
34 Underhill, *Newes from America*, 10.
of Narragansett warriors, and then attack the Pequots from the east.”35 This plan, it was decided, would maximize the chances of a swift English victory by incorporating the element of surprise. The only problem with the plan was that it directly violated orders given by the men’s superiors. True to Puritan form, the three men turned to divine mediation, asking the chaplain to seek guidance from God concerning their new, unauthorized plan of attack. The following morning Mason was told by the chaplain, Reverend Samuel Stone, that the attack should begin in Narragansett Bay.

Believing themselves to be directed by the divine, the force consisting of ninety English soldiers and sixty Mohegan warriors set sail under Mason’s command for Narragansett Bay. Upon their arrival, Mason’s forces were greeted by Miantonomi, a powerful Narragansett sachem. Marching to the residence of Miantonomi Mason explained that “we did only desire free passage through his Country.”36 The sachem reported that his people too had ill feeling towards the ruthless Pequots and that they were willing to aid in this conflict. Tributaries of the Narragansett would also fight with the English in their effort to defeat the Pequots. Despite this generous offer Mason and his associates were hesitant to accept, for the tributary group the eastern Niantics were once close tributaries to the Pequots and in several instances were related to them through blood. The now trusted Uncas predicted that the Narragansetts and their tributaries would slowly lose interest and erode away as they marched toward the enemy. John Mason explains that “I then enquired of Onkos, what he thought the Indians would do? Who said, The Narragansetts would all leave us, but as for himself he would never leave us; and so it proved.”37

Around eight o’clock the following morning, Mason and his men began their long journey towards the Pequot River. At this point Mason’s small force

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35 Cave, *The Pequot War*, 144.
37 Ibid, 6.
was supplemented by about “five hundred mixed Indians.”38 Informed by native guides that the Pequot fort at the Mystic River was much closer than the fortress where Sassacus resided, Mason paused to rest his troops. During this hiatus the commander realized the poor condition of his inexperienced troops and decided to attack the nearby fort at Mystic. As predicted by Uncas, Narragansett warriors began to disappear, leaving their “allies” and returning to their village. Camp for the night of May 25th was made within a few miles of the fort. Indian informants relayed to Mason that the Pequots were celebrating, believing that when the English had sailed by the Pequot River on their way to Narragansett country it was a retreat and blatant display of English cowardice.

Just prior to dawn, John Mason and John Underhill positioned their men around the great fort in two concentric rings. The larger of the two circle contained “approximately three hundred Indian allies.”39 Deciding to enter both of the entrances of the fort at once, Mason and Underhill divided their forces. Fearing that if they were to wait any longer they would lose the benefit of surprise, Mason quickly mobilized his men and prepared to enter Mystic Fort. Just as he was about to command an attack the troops “heard a dog bark and an Indian crying Owanux! Owanux! Which is Englishmen! Englishmen!”40 Responding immediately, Mason gave the command to attack and the battle commenced.

Bursting through the brush that camouflaged the entryways of the fort, Mason’s men were well armed with “our swords in our right hand, our Carbins or Muskets in our left hand.”41 Awaken and surprised by a volley of musket shot, the Pequots had no other choice but to put up a fierce resistance. Both Mason and Underhill reported that they were greeted with a shower of arrows as they entered the fort. “Two of the English invaders were killed; twenty others

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were wounded in their effort to take Fort Mystic by storm.”42 Claiming that the Pequots refused to employ European methods of fighting out in the open, Mason began a search for fire. “We must burn them; and immediately stepping into the Wigwam where he had been before, brought out a Fire Brand, and putting it into the Matts with which they were covered, set the Wigwams on Fire.”43 The result of this slash-and-burn technique was utter confusion for the Pequots. Hundreds of men, women, and children were massacred in the small space of half an hour. As Francis Jennings noted, “battle is only one of the ways to destroy an enemy’s will to fight. Massacre can accomplish the same end with less risk, and Mason determined that massacre would be his objective.”44 Those that escaped the violent barrage of fire, “hot mouth’d weapons,” and swords within the fort were ultimately killed or captured by the seamless rings of warriors just outside the fort.45

After the smoke had cleared and the final musket shots had been fired several hundred Pequots were dead. While the exact number of casualties resulting from this lethal campaign will never be known it has been predicted that between 400 to 700 Pequots were massacred at Mystic Fort.46 Cotton Mather recorded in his later history Magnalia Christi Americana that “in little more than one hour, five or six hundred of these barbarians were dismissed from a world that was burdened with them.”47 Realizing that the billowing smoke would alert all other Pequots of their presence, the English and their allies began to march to their ships which were to meet them in Pequot Harbor. On this journey Mason and his men encountered an additional 300 Pequot warriors. These men, leery of

42 Cave, The Pequot War, 149.
43 Mason, A Brief History of the Pequot War, 8.
44 Jennings, The Invasion of America, 220.
45 Philip Vincent, A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England, between the English, and the Pequet Salvages in which was Slaine and taken Prisoner about 700 of the Salvages, and those which Escaped, had their Heads cut off by the Mohocks: With the Present State of Things there (London, 1637): 6.
the devastating potential of European muskets, backed off after only a few minutes. The English forces returned to Fort Saybrook and reported the good news to the skeptical Gardener. Using scripture to justify the atrocities performed at Mystic, both Mason and Underhill believed their campaign a success. “Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents; some-time the case alters: but we will not dispute it now. We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.” From the English perspective, the annihilation of the Pequots was an act mandated by God to punish the “savage” and elevate the “chosen.”

Unable to provide adequate transportation for his men and his Indian allies on board the already crowded ships under the command of Captain Daniel Patrick of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Mason made the risky decision to restock their ammunition and march twenty miles back to Saybrook through the territory of their enemies. As his exhausted forces trekked through the territory Mason and his men attempted to chase after the enemy in hopes of killing or capturing them. The Pequots that were fortunate enough to escape the chase found shelter deep in the surrounding swamps or with neighboring tribes. Even the grand sachem Sassacus could not rely on his people for protection after the massacre at Mystic. “Held responsible for the catastrophe at Mystic, Sassacus was now a target of popular wrath.” Realizing this, the English began to spread the message that no tribes harboring Pequots were eligible to trade at Saybrook. “Tribes desiring friendly relations with the English were placed under an obligation to deliver to the Puritan authorities the heads and hands of any Pequot warrior who sought refuge in their midst.” Economic self-interest coupled with the Pequot’s poor treatment of their tributaries left many Pequot stragglers roaming Connecticut. As often was the case, Pequot refugees wandered the frontier in search of shelter. Daniel Richter explains that “refugees

50 Ibid, 162.
and remnants, families and fragments of families, individuals and ad hoc bands resettled and coalesced into new polyglot communities that blended kinship structures, traditions, and dialect.”

Not satisfied, the Massachusetts Bay Colony along with settlers in Connecticut mustered a fresh group of English troops in hopes of erasing the Pequot problem forever. Under the command of Israel Stoughton and William Trask 120 men began to comb the land for Pequot men, women, and children. Employing native guides the English forces commenced the eradication of Pequots, an idea recorded in the 1638 Treaty of Hartford. While captured warriors were put to death, women and children were divided amongst the victors. Those not executed were enslaved by the colonists, Narragansetts, and Mohegans, or shipped to the West Indies for purchase by slave owners there.

“Approximately 200 Indians were captured, of whom 22 or 24 were adult males; these braves were executed. The remaining women and children, almost 80 percent of the total captured, were parcelled up evenly, as was common Indian practice, among the victorious Indian allies and the colonists of Massachusetts Bay.” Eighty Pequots were ordered to live under Uncas and the Mohegans, eighty were assigned to live within the Narragansetts and Miantonomo, and the remaining few were awarded to the eastern Niantics and the English.

After the captives were parcelled out over several months the leaders of Connecticut along with their allies penned the Treaty of Hartford. From the perspective of the English settlers and their allies, this agreement effectively erased the existence of a Pequot tribe. “The survivors were now no longer to be known as Pequots or to reside in their tribal lands, and the Pequot River was renamed the Thames and the Pequot village, New London.”

53 Ibid, 220.
have argued over whether to characterize the Treaty of Hartford as a document striving to physically eradicate all Pequots, or to culturally eradicate the Pequot tribe. In either case, the motive of the parties allied with the English was to annihilate the Pequots as a collective people and create a hierarchy which placed any remaining Pequot at its base. Both physically and psychologically the once mighty Pequots of colonial Connecticut were crushed. English settlers in Connecticut assumed ownership of both Pequot lands and persons. The Puritans of the Connecticut River Valley sought to obliterate the Pequots politically, economically, and socially. According to Philip Vincent immediately following the war, “the Pequetans now seeming nothing but a name.”

With a serious Pequot threat effectively eliminated from the power struggle in Connecticut, many immediate English profits transformed into long term benefits. In addition to the vast tracts of land gained, the English made an example of the Pequots. The war displayed to all surrounding tribes the destructive capabilities of the English. A final requirement of the Treaty of Hartford, perhaps the most important feature of the agreement, demanded that all intertribal conflicts dealing with the Mohegans and the Narragansetts had to be submitted to the English for ruling. This requirement allowed the English to assert their power over their former allies. The sachems, after submitting a complaint to their English mediators, were then required to abide fully by the decision handed out by their European neighbors. It was now obvious that Puritan intentions were to control the Indians of New England both physically and culturally. English authority and hegemony replaced Dutch power in Connecticut as English settlers dispersed throughout New England. The Pequot “savages” believed to be a threat to Puritan security had been officially subdued by the Treaty of Hartford.

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Chapter II: John Mason: Hero or Indian-Hater?

Through a well-orchestrated surprise attack against the Pequot at Mystic, John Mason and his forces efficiently and effectively removed any serious Pequot presence in colonial Connecticut. Despite this resounding success John Mason continued to be driven to fight against his enemy. On multiple occasions in the years following the official end of the Pequot War, John Mason would lead a military force to ensure the continued nonexistence of a Pequot tribe. Although the vast majority of Pequots had either been slain or given away as slaves to neighboring tribes following the war, a few hidden clusters of Pequots dotted the New England landscape. Shortly after declaring the Pequots obliterated, Mason with forty settlers along with Uncas and one hundred Mohegan warriors were mustered and set out “to supplant them, by burning their Wigwams, and bringing away their Corn.”55 Following a series of diplomatic conversations, the Pequots with a small number of native allies explained they would fight against Uncas and his Mohegan warriors, but refused to fight with the English “for they were Spirits.”56 Realizing his powerful position, Mason ordered his troops to destroy any attempt by the Pequot to regroup and rebuild, in the process taking all valuable food stuffs. Devastated by the raid, the Pequot remnant trying to reunite their people was forced to disperse and seek shelter among other tribes.

For his leadership and decision making during the Pequot War, Mason was rewarded in several ways. In addition to claiming a five hundred acre island at the mouth of the Mystic River by right of conquest, Mason’s diplomatic and political influence also soared. Over the next few years Mason was promoted “to major and was subsequently elected deputy, magistrate, and ultimately deputy governor.”57 John Mason was also made a major general of all

55 Mason, A Brief History of the Pequot War, 18.
Connecticut forces, a position that instantaneously brought him fame, recognition, and increased wealth. In sum, “the part he played, and the success of the expedition in which he was the leader, made him without question the hero of the war and placed him on the roll of New England’s great men.”

Mason was even equated with biblical figures, a considerable compliment among the Puritans. Religion was the foundation of the Puritan worldview. All aspects of society in seventeenth-century Puritan New England turned to the divine for not only guidance in everyday decisions but also justification for actions already done.

As Perry Miller observed, “The Bible is fiat, it cannot be questioned, it alone is authority.” From the Puritan perspective, Mason was a hero for his efficiency and his ability to effectively deal the Pequots a lethal blow. Mason was rewarded for defeating several hundred men, women, and children and thus eliminating any serious Pequot threat to English settlers in the Connecticut River valley.

First-hand accounts describing John Mason’s role in the Pequot War have allowed the image of Mason as an opponent of natives to remain dominant. Contemporary testimonials concerning Mason and his actions during his campaign and the years immediately following perpetuate him as a slayer of the Pequot. The four major seventeenth-century accounts dealing with the Pequot War are the records of Mason, Underhill, Vincent, and Gardener. Through a thorough investigation into these seventeenth-century sources one can better understand both the Pequot War and the mentality of the men who fought it.

In true Puritan form, John Underhill, a fellow commander in the Pequot War from Massachusetts, sets up his biblical justification for John Mason’s actions by stressing the good versus evil dichotomy. Underhill transforms the

focused and punitive Pequot War into a widespread crusade of dark versus light, right versus wrong, and civilized versus savage. On several occasions Underhill declared the events that transpired to be “a speciall providence of God.” Religious statements of this type imply a strong divine backing in the expedition, thus justifying the actions of Mason as well as of Underhill himself. When their native allies questioned the brutality of English tactics Mason and his Puritan supporters had a ready response:

Why should you be so furious should not Christians have more mercy and compassion? But I would referre you to Davids warre, when a people is growne to such a height of bloud, and sinne against God and man, and all confederates in the action, there hee hath no respect to persons, but harrowes them, and sawes them, and puts them to the sword, and the most terriblest death that may bee: sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents; some-time the case alters: but we will not dispute it now. We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings.

According to Underhill, Mason was God’s answer to the problem represented by the Pequots in the Connecticut River area. When Mason entered the Mystic Fort at dawn divine intervention protected him. “God preserved him from any wounds.”

This interpretation would resonate for centuries to come. Echoing the thoughts of Underhill, Thomas Prince, an eighteenth century minister, makes the biblical comparison of Mason and his forces to the:

Heroes of whom we read the History in the Eleventh Chapter to the Hebrews-By Faith, they not only chose to suffer Affliction with the People of God than to enjoy the Pleasures of Sin for a season; esteeming the Reproach of Christ greater Riches than the Treasures of Egypt: But by Faith they even forsook the same, passed thro’ the Sea, subdued

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61 Ibid, 81.
62 Ibid, 80.
In this particular passage not only are Mason and his men elevated to a position of comparison to those found within the sacred pages of the Bible, but the Pequots are labeled as “Aliens.” Simultaneously this source is presenting the English as righteous and pious while painting the Pequot as the evil other, a well deserving recipient of the punishment inflicted by Mason. “As for those that fought on the wrong side, in the livery of Satan or Antichrist, there was nothing tragic in their fate, since they got precisely what they deserved.”

This legacy of Mason as a hero of biblical proportions continued well into the second half of the twentieth century. In the work *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, author Richard Slotkin explains that Mason’s diplomatic actions following the war when coupled with his bravery in combat created a model for all attempting to create a “city upon a hill.” By refusing to publish his memoirs of the war, Mason enhanced his image as a pious warrior doing the work of God. “John Mason hero of the Pequot War, refused to publish his account of his exploits, deeming them too immodest and likely to detract from the glory ascribed to God.”

Mason himself states in his account written years after the war that “My principal Aim is that God may have his due praise.” It is this pious, heroic Puritan viewpoint that is left for the historian to analyze when investigating the Pequot War. The Pequots, or any of involved natives, left no written records of the conflict for the historian to cross-reference or compare with the surviving English accounts. Armed only with these Puritan sources that employ religion to justify Mason’s actions, historians have depicted Mason as an Indian hater.

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63 Ibid, 3.
Luckily for the historian, the justification colonists found in their religion allowed the chroniclers of the Pequot War to be brutally honest when describing the actions of Mason’s forces. By believing that the events of the Pequot War were sanctioned by God, wrote accounts as if the participants had nothing to hide. It can be assumed that these records more closely and accurately outline the actual events than those sources explaining less-respectable happenings where the author must search for, or cloak the justification for his or her actions.

In addition to justifying Mason’s actions through religious rhetoric, Underhill also questions those same actions by describing how the Native Americans allied with the English reacted to Mason’s policies. John Underhill’s account of this issue is by far the most complete source dealing with the role that Native allies played in the battle. After witnessing the massacre at Mystic, “our Indians came to us, and much rejoiced at our victories, and greatly, admired the manner of Englishmen’s fight, but cried Mach it, mach it: that is, It is naught, it is naught, because it is too furious, and slays too many men.”67 By recording this statement made by “uncivilized savages,” Underhill himself is indirectly questioning the severity of Mason’s actions. Had Mason’s commands been completely acceptable to Underhill this question would have been dismissed as simple native ignorance regarding the English methods of fighting. Both natives and settlers looked to the other in fascinated horror when it came to warfare. For the settler, the ritualistic nature of warfare performed by the natives of North America simultaneously seemed exceptionally cruel and violent, and “lesse blody and devouring then the cruell Warres of Europe; and seldome twenty slaine in a pitcht field.”68 As is the case with Mason’s expedition against the Pequot, many native witnesses felt as though the relentless attack of Europeans was much too devastating to the enemy.

67 Ibid, 84.
68 Roger Williams, A Key into the language of America (London, 1643): 188-189.
While many natives questioned the European techniques of warfare employed by Mason, most English soldiers, desensitized by exposure to European style fighting, believed that Mason was justified in his action. Philip Vincent, a soldier serving under Mason, submits that his commander’s ability to instill fear in his opponent through total destruction is the primary reason the Pequots were defeated so swiftly. In his record *A True Relation of The Late Battell fought in New-England, between the English and the Pequet Salvages*, Vincent explains that Mason defeated the Pequots both physically and psychologically during his 1637 campaign. The massacre at Mystic, in addition to killing hundreds, also crushed the morale of surviving Pequots. “For having once terrified them, by severe execution of just revenge, they shall never hear of more harm from them.”69 According to Vincent, Mason’s “severe execution” had eliminated any serious threat from their enemies, thus allowing English settlement in Connecticut to grow. Not only had the Pequots been eliminated, but Mason’s forces made an example of the Pequots for all other potential Indian adversaries to digest. Nineteenth-century scholar John Gorham Palfrey employs Vincent’s account to document in detail how the English forces in the Pequot War set out to teach a “salutary lesson” to all natives in New England.70 Along with the Pequots many other possible Indian threats were erased.

For Louis Mason, the only author to dedicate an entire volume to John Mason and a distant descendent of the colonial leader, the Pequot War was absolutely necessary. “There was no alternative for the colonists…it was a fight to save the lives of themselves and their families.”71 Having set up this no alternative situation, Louis Mason, following the early lead of John Underhill, romantically depicts John Mason as the brave savior of English settlers in Connecticut. For him, it was Mason who single-handedly provided the

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69 Ibid, 110.
71 Mason, *The Life and Times of Major John Mason, 1600-1672*, viii.
leadership that allowed the English to triumph. “John Mason, whose courage and initiative advanced the growth of the colonies, and gave peace and freedom from Indian warfare to the plantations for many years.”72 Like seventeenth-century accounts of the war, Louis Mason justifies the brutal actions of John Mason by placing them in a religious context, thus elevating John Mason above his adversaries. By implication, the Pequots were irrational, uncivilized savages who could only be controlled by extermination. Mason was a hero for “wisely” abandoning his instructions to attack the heavily fortified base housing Sassacus and opting to destroying the many noncombatants of Fort Mystic.

In his seminal study *The Invasion of America*, author Francis Jennings approaches John Mason very differently than did Louis Mason. Armed with the same documents as his predecessors, Francis Jennings focused on the killings orchestrated by John Mason in the Pequot War. Mason is depicted as a conniving and ruthless leader who would, at any cost, eliminate the Pequots. From Jennings’ perspective, “mere victory over them was not enough to satisfy Mason’s purpose.”73 Jennings argues that Mason and Underhill both knew in advance from their Indian guides that the people at Mystic Fort were for the most part defenseless women and children. Massacre was exactly the outcome that Mason desired. “Massacre can accomplish the same end with less risk, and Mason determined that massacre would be his objective.”74

To further his depiction Mason, Francis Jennings then explains that the native allies that assisted the English in their campaign were against the methods of massacre employed by Mason. “The Narragansett allies had dissented sharply from Mason’s procedures. After his intentions became plain to attack Mystic instead of Sassacus’s fort at the Pequot River, hundreds of Indian allies withdrew.”75 So brutal was Mason’s plan that many Narragansetts refused to

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72 Ibid, 19.
73 Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, 221.
74 Ibid, 220.
75 Ibid, 222.
participate in the rout of the Pequots. Through this comparison, Jennings is painting Mason as more cold-blooded, callous, and cruel than Natives. This characterization reversed the usual version in which Indians have traditionally been treated and labeled in historical texts as the primitive, uncivilized, savage “other.” For Francis Jennings, Mason, a well-respected Englishman, degenerated into an animal-like savage, mirroring early depictions of the enemy he was fighting.

Arguing against Jennings’ position concerning John Mason’s, author Ronald Karr admits that “Mason’s actions were consistent with what would have been expected of a European military officer of his experience.”76 Despite this disclaimer, Karr goes on to paint Mason, similar to Jennings, as the ringleader of a massacre at Fort Mystic. In addition, Karr argues that the Pequots were not as powerful as the tribe outlined by Jennings. According to Karr, John Mason slaughtered without mercy a group of noncombatants that were already demoralized, “weak and unstable.”77 This view of the Pequot War and Mason’s actions associated with that conflict continues to present Mason as the annihilator of Natives.

Alfred Cave, a scholar that has dedicated the bulk of his research to the events of the Pequot War, buttresses the image of Mason outlined by Jennings. Cave presents Mason as an experienced military man willing to use any measure to obtain a goal. After explaining that Mason was a veteran of the continental wars with the English expeditionary army in the Netherlands, Cave perpetuates the popular image of Mason as a ruthless Indian-hater. When describing the well-known events at Fort Mystic, Cave pens that “most of the residents of Fort Mystic were burned alive…that deliberate, cold-blooded slaughter of women and children.”78 By association, Mason, the architect of the attack at Mystic, was the slaughterer of defenseless Pequots. According to many scholars, including

77 Ibid, 907.
78 Cave, The Pequot War, 151.
Cave, by burning the village and killing several hundred of its inhabitants, and imposing the extreme condition of the Treaty of Hartford on their enemy, Mason’s forces attempted to eliminate completely the Pequot threat in the Connecticut River valley. “The disaster at Mystic broke their will to resist...power and ruthlessness that had turned Fort Mystic into a flaming funeral pyre.”79

Cave depicted Englishmen settling in Connecticut including Mason, as not only Pequot-haters but also doubtful of all surrounding natives. Lion Gardener, the man in charge of Fort Saybrook, immediately questioned the loyalty of the Mohegan allies accompanying Mason. Gardener, realizing the close blood ties between the Mohegans and the Pequots, only accepted Uncas and his warriors after they had captured and killed several Pequots in the close vicinity of the Saybrook Fort. When marching towards the Pequot forts on their way to attack, John Mason began to question the Indian scouts in charge of delivering the English, Mohegan, and Narragansett allies. “After marching two miles, the Indian village was not in sight, and Mason began to suspect that his Indian guides had deliberately misled him.”80 By doubting those assigned so much responsibility, Mason, according to some scholars, is exposing his feelings of distrust in general about natives.

Whether framing Mason as a loyal Puritan fighting for God, or a crazed degenerate, historians have depicted John Mason as implacable foe of Indians. Whether fueled by piety or hatred John Mason, for the most part, occupies a negative position within the pages of recent anti-imperial literature. No matter his motivation, Mason has been portrayed by his contemporaries and scholars alike as a simple character focused on exterminating any native presence in colonial Connecticut in hopes of furthering his cause.

79 Ibid, 156.
80 Ibid, 148.
Chapter III: John Mason the Mohegan Protector

During the Pequot War John Mason did much more than simply question the natives allied with him and destroy the fort at Mystic. While scholars have focused on Mason’s destructive behaviors he worked equally hard and was equally relentless in building strong bonds with Uncas and his Mohegan followers. While vilifying the Pequot grand sachem Sassacus, Mason was simultaneously befriending an individual with whom he would develop a lifelong friendship. During the campaign against the Pequot, Uncas and his Mohegan warriors proved to be loyal allies to Mason’s objective. In fact, Mason asked the advice of his native friend concerning the willingness of the Indians belonging to other tribes to continue to traverse toward Pequot territory. After many natives from other tribes had “disappeared,” as predicted by Uncas, the Mohegans substantiated their claims to be valiant warriors willing to meticulously follow orders issued by their English allies. This display of allegiance bonded Mason and Uncas for years following the war.

The idea of interacting with natives in a positive reciprocal relationship, although rare, was by no means unheard of. Despite the fact that the variables involved differed significantly, one can better understand the relatively unknown and poorly recorded friendly relationship that existed between Mason and Uncas by visiting the well-known and often investigated symbiotic interactions between Roger Williams and the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island. In the early 1630’s, Roger Williams began to seriously question and challenge the established leadership in Massachusetts. According to Williams, the New Englanders were not truly pure because they refused to sever all ties from the Church of England. In addition, Williams proclaimed that the settlers of New England were intruders on land that belonged to the various Native groups in the region. Believing that Williams would “split the colony into
competing religious groups; destroy all stability, cohesion, and authority; and bring about the disintegration of the colony through his religious perfectionism,” John Winthrop and others banished Williams from the colony, attempting to ship him back to England. Instead Williams escaped, heading south to establish his own settlement to follow godliness.

Upon his arrival to the area latter designated as the colony of Rhode Island, Roger Williams immediately befriended the local Narragansett Indians. For Williams, the natives used the land more effectively and systematically than the Europeans. To acknowledge Indian land use challenged the Puritan land policy of *vacuum domicilium*. According to this rule, since the natives of New England had not “subdued” or exploited the land on which they lived, they had no right to occupy that real estate. In sum, the land was for European taking. Analogous to the Pequots of the Connecticut River valley, the Narragansetts were the most powerful tribe in the Rhode Island area. Realizing this, Williams quickly became a diplomat for the Narragansett tribe and initiated a friendship based on mutual respect and converging interests. For the Narragansett, Roger Williams acted as a critical link between them and the encroaching English. Despite having been banished, Williams continued to act as a conduit for information, sharing both happenings and intelligence between Indians and settlers. This important mediation helped Williams to maintain the high-ranking position he had achieved while questioning the magistrates of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In sum, Roger Williams “placed himself at the center stage of all diplomatic dealings with the Narragansetts, establishing himself as an indispensable instrument in their often rocky relations with the English.”

Although no sources explicitly detail any influence that Roger Williams or John Mason may have had on one and other, it can be gleaned from sources that it was significant. In a letter of June 1670 Roger Williams addressed Mason as a

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82 LaFantasie, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, xxxii.
“honrd deare and ancient friend.” 83 Williams acted as a contemporary model, or parallel, for Mason’s diplomatic go-between relations concerning Uncas and the Mohegans and Mason’s English colleagues. After being banished from Massachusetts Roger Williams immediately befriended the Narragansett of Rhode Island so that he could further his base of support. Of the many gifts given to Williams by the Narragansett, including large tracts of land, the most valuable one was the lasting alliances created. Realizing the power and potential of the Pequots, Mason allied his English forces with Mohegans, Narragansetts, and many of their river Indian tributaries in hopes of smothering his foe. Both Williams and Mason employed natives in time of distress and continued to use their relations with Indians to elevate their personal, social, and political positions. Although the situational factors surrounding Mason and Williams differ enormously, both men provide the historian with valuable information concerning the complexities of Indian-settler relations in colonial New England.

While Roger Williams continued to criticize the hierarchy and mechanisms of society in New England from a safe distance, John Mason delicately balanced two identities that many would label as conflicting. Simultaneously Mason over time increased his influence with Uncas and his fellow settlers in Connecticut by highlighting his diplomatic placement within both groups. Mason’s role in the United Colonies increased as he became recognized as an “Indian expert” by other Connecticut officials gradually after the Pequot War. Access to these prominent individuals caused Uncas to gradually increase Mason’s power when representing the Mohegan in ambassadorial conversations with English colonists. As a commissioner, Mason was present at diplomatic gatherings that concerned Mohegan control of power or land in New England that could impact the Mohegan. It was then left to Mason to decide whether the topic presented was “fair” to those included. Both settlers and Mohegans benefited from the political relationship orchestrated by

83 Ibid, 609,
Mason. For the colonists, protecting Mohegan land ensure that no neighboring tribe could begin to move toward the English settlements in Connecticut without having to first deal with the prowess of the Mohegan. For Uncas and his people, Mason’s defense of their hunting lands meant the maintenance of a native lifestyle that would otherwise have been lost. In addition, both sides gained a valuable ally in case of attack.

In his account of the Pequot War penned many years later, Mason explicitly declared his hatred aimed at the Pequots and his acceptance of the Mohegans. When explaining the war in the third person, Mason wrote “The Captain also said, We must burn them; and immediately...set the Wigwams on fire...and when thoroughly kindled, the Indians ran as Men most dreadfully amazed.”84 Just prior to torching the fort at Mystic, Mason had cemented a friendship with Uncas and his Mohegan warriors. When worried that his Narragansett allies, a relationship strengthened by diplomatic work from Roger Williams, were slowly disappearing, Mason turned to Uncas for his perspective on the situation. “I then enquired of Onkos, what he thought the Indians would do? Who said, The Narragansetts would all leave us, but as for Himself He would Not leave us: and so it proved: For which Expressions and some other Speeches of his, I shall never forget him. Indeed he was a great Friend, Did great service.”85

Williams and Mason were successful diplomats on the New England frontier, but Uncas himself was a sly politician himself. Realizing that the English presence in Connecticut would be a sustained and growing one, Uncas made no secrets concerning his loyalties towards his new European neighbors. Just as Mason selected Uncas as his connection to natives, Uncas picked Mason

84 Orr, History of the Pequot War: The Contemporary Accounts of Mason, Underhill, Vincent and Gardener, 29.
85 Ibid, 25.
as his vehicle to access the English presence in Connecticut. Mason was the ideal cultural bridge for Uncas, for despite his many promotions that would follow his campaign against the Pequots, John Mason refused to become intimately intertwined in the elite circles of colonial New England. Mason did not share the desire of most other elites to smother Indian influence. Governor John Winthrop Jr. and the Reverend James Fitch also claimed to be Indian protectors in New England. These two individuals, however, differed greatly from both Williams and Mason, for Fitch and Winthrop Jr. both treated the natives as subordinates and forced them to follow English law.86 Moving from Dorchester to Saybrook and then to Norwich underlines Mason’s preference for undeveloped frontier settlements. Mason remained near the edge of European settlement in more regular contact with native communities than any other colonial leader besides Williams.

With time Mason was adopted by Uncas as a “protector” of his people. Much like Roger Williams, Mason thrived in this new role which benefited all parties included. In his well known work *A Key into the Language of America*, Williams explains that the Natives of New England often times had “protectors, under Sachims, to whom they also carry presents, and upon any injury received, and complaint made, these protectors will revenge.”87 As a “protector,” Mason both represented the Mohegans in diplomatic relations with the English and acted as a military shield against any threat to Uncas and his people. For his services Mason earned the respect of the Mohegans and received many gifts, including substantial tracts of land. Uncas, in addition to the ambassadorial services rendered by Mason, also enjoyed an increased level of respect and trust among the English.

Wendy St. Jean should be credited with uncovering much of the available information directly dealing with John Mason’s role as a Mohegan guardian. St. Jean posits that Mason assumed the position of the “squirrel king.” Mason fits perfectly into the model of the squirrel king outlined by Thomas Nairne, an early eighteenth-century English trader. This individual was responsible for making “up all breaches between the two nations, to keep the pipes of peace, and in case of war, to send the people private intelligence to provide for their own safety.”

According to St. Jean, the squirrel king was an adopted individual who had at some point proved loyalty and ability as a warrior to a tribe. From his experience with Mason in the Pequot War, Uncas made the decision to adopt Mason as the sentinel of his people. For Mason, Williams, or any individual adopted as a squirrel king their goal, “was to promote his adoptive kin’s interests among his own people.”

From the European perspective, the relationship between Mason and Uncas could be described as a patron-client arrangement. In the hierarchical society of seventeenth-century New England, gentlemen often helped men below their status improve their social vertical mobility in exchange for loyalty and agreed upon favors. Through the connections established by the patron-client relationship, men were able to improve their position within society. In the case of Mason and Uncas, both men benefited from their close interaction. Mason, was awarded tangible items such as land in addition to increased social standing and the influential label of “Indian expert.” Despite claims by Mason that Uncas was a dear friend and colleague, Uncas was subordinate to Mason in this close relationship. It was Mason who ultimately decided whether or not dealings with the English concerning land were “fair.” As was the case with most commissioners, Mason would attend meetings concerning the Pequot, represent

them, and, in general, insure “tearmes of amity with the English.” Uncas realized that without Mason acting as a liaison between his people and the colony, they were at the mercy of English encroachment and the imperial avalanche that would ensue. From first hand experience during the Pequot campaign Uncas understood that Mason’s protection was critical, for most Europeans the “immediate need was to learn enough about the natives and the land to be able to classify, utilize, and ultimately, dominate both.”

Once his position as squirrel king was established, Mason immediately began to protect the Mohegans. As mentioned, following the Pequot War the surviving Pequots were divided among the victors. Eighty Pequots were handed over to Mohegan authority. Despite close kinship and blood ties that existed between the Pequots and Mohegans, these captured individuals made several attempts to escape the authority of their hated rival. With each attempt the escapees were returned to Uncas by English forces. “When Uncas’s new Indian subjects complained of his tyranny, Mason defended Uncas’s right to tribute and other royalties.”

In his efforts to protect the Mohegans, Mason insisted that Miantonomo be executed. Miantonomo, a Narragansett sachem involved in a similar relationship with Roger Williams as Uncas and Mason enjoyed, was a long time enemy of Uncas. Believing Miantonomo to be a threat to Uncas, Mason told the magistrates of the United Colonies that the Narragansett leader had commenced a campaign for a pan-Indian movement against the English. With the bloody memories of earlier native conflict such as the Virginia massacre of 1622 and the belief that surprise attacks by natives had peppered the New England

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countryside until this point, United Colony officials took no chances and apprehended Miantonomo.\(^{93}\)

Mason not only defended Uncas and the Mohegans against other Indian groups, but also against his fellow Englishmen. Disagreements over territory were prevalent in the Americas long before the first Europeans arrived. Due to sacred and subsistence attachments to the environment, no other resource was valued as much as land. As the friendship between Mason and Uncas matured, John Mason began to make demands for the Mohegans that clearly elevated their social position above other Indians. Thanks to the diplomatic work of Mason, the Mohegans were granted exclusive hunting rights in the land that formerly belonged to the Pequots. Other neighboring tribes were outraged at this blatant display of favoritism. Roger Williams wrote John Winthrop Jr. in September of 1648 to complain that “Capt. Mason lately requested me to forbid the Narigansetts to hunt at Pequt, and to assure them of his visiting of them if they did so.”\(^{94}\)

In the 1650s Mason was given a parcel of land inside the boundaries of Mohegan territory by Uncas as a gesture of respect and trust. Mason proceeded to found the city of Norwich. While many examples exist throughout colonial North America where Indian villages acted as a buffer for European settlements against attacks from enemy Natives, in this instance Norwich protected the Mohegans from their rivals. “In 1657 Narragansetts complained to Connecticut officials that Englishmen living near Uncas’s fort had frustrated their attacks on Mohegans.”\(^{95}\) Enraged, Narragansett warriors shot eleven bullets into the residence of Mason and even boasted erroneously that he was dead.

Assassination attempts on Mason did nothing to discourage his close friendship with Uncas. Further privileging Uncas and the Mohegans over other Natives, the public records of Connecticut state that “It is Ordered, that no

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\(^{94}\) LaFantasie, *The Correspondence of Roger Williams*, 248.  
Inhabitant within these liberties shall suffer any Indean or Indeans to com into their howses, except the Magistrats or Traders, who may admitte of a Sachem if he com not wth aboue 4 men; Only Vucas who hath bine a friend to the Englishe may com wth 20 and his brother wth 10.96 In the seventeenth century New England frontier the home acted like a buffer between one’s family unit and the “dark,” untamed wilderness. For many European settlers the dense forests of North America was a forbidden place. “For centuries, Europeans had drawn maps in their minds that set field against forest, order against disorder, light against darkness.”97 Of all the liberties assigned to Uncas, allowing only Uncas to enter into the residences of settlers with 20 men epitomizes the trust that Mason and the other Connecticut magistrates had for the Mohegan sachem. Uncas was able to invade the home and privacy of Englishmen, an act forbidden to the vast majority of Indians.

In return Uncas granted Mason more and more power. Becoming reliant on selling their surplus lands in exchange for European goods forced Uncas and his son Oweneco to allow Mason to sell Mohegan real estate. Through a series of deeds beginning in 1659 Mason and the Mohegans entered into a tangled land agreement. “If the Mohegans lost title to their lands, the Masons would also forfeit their profit, and so sachem and settlers were engaged in a mutually beneficial arrangement to secure property for their descendants.”98 This land agreement was the climax of a guardianship and friendship that had spanned several decades. The Mason family along with Uncas and his Mohegans had successfully erased the culturally ascribed boundaries through a symbiotic relationship. One camp was not civilized while the other was savage. Instead these two loyal friends constructed a diplomatic system that protected each other and was based on a foundation of trust.

In 1672 John Mason died. Immediately, colonial official began to orchestrate a plan to strip Uncas and his people of the territory that Mason had worked so diligently to protect. Valuing his tribe’s freedom and resources caused Uncas to scramble for a new protector. After attempting to cultivate a relationship that mirrored his friendship with John Mason with several influential English settlers, Uncas turned to John Mason’s descendants. Ultimately, Samuel Mason, the son of the deceased Mason, attempted to assume his father’s influential trustee position. No matter how much effort was spent by both Samuel Mason and Uncas the relation that once existed could not be duplicated. Samuel Mason lacked the influence that his father possessed with Connecticut colonial officials. Although he did the same duties as his father, “colonists were refusing to acknowledge Samuel Mason’s authority as the Mohegans’ guardian.”99 In 1683 Uncas died, leaving his legacy of Mohegan preservation with his son Oweneco and Samuel Mason. Settlers continued to spill into Connecticut and further pressure colonial officials for access to the lands belonging to the Mohegans. With time, hunting and planting grounds that were thought to be protected from encroachment were settled. Slowly the Mohegans faced the fate of the tribes that had refused to adopt an English protector like Mason.100

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99 Ibid, 384.
Conclusion

Doubtful, conniving, ruthless, and savage are all adjectives scholars have used to describe John Mason when they presented the Pequot War as a European genocidal campaign against natives. In their attempts to depict Mason as an Indian-hater, scholars such as Francis Jennings, Richard Slotkin, Ronald Karr, and Alfred Cave have oversimplified the commander of the English forces during and after the Pequot campaign of 1637-38. Just as the Pequot War writ large has been painted as a one-dimensional conflict between English settlers and natives, so too has John Mason been simplified. Relationships involving John Mason were much more complex than credited by many scholars. Simultaneously Mason vilified the Pequots and embraced the Mohegans and their leader Uncas, a group that a few short years earlier belonged to the despised Pequots. While carrying a grudge against the Pequot tribe for the rest of his life, Mason also acted as a diplomat for the Mohegans insuring “fair” agreements regarding their resources, when negotiating with the English settlers during his remaining years.

In his article “The Search for a Usable Indian” Richard Johnson submits that “the enduring characterization that pits white man against Indian has a satisfying simplicity that has too often obscured a more complex reality.” What obscures reality in the case of John Mason is the image created by many historians framing him as a universal Indian-hater. In truth, Mason was both an enemy of the Pequot and a loyal friend of the Mohegan, a tribe indistinguishable to the Pequot in all aspects except leadership. This investigation into these bifurcated images of Mason allows us to begin to appreciate the many tiers of interaction that took place in seventeenth-century Connecticut. Through the brief Pequot War we witness diplomacy and contact between the Dutch, the

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English, the Pequots, the Mohegans, and various other surrounding native
groups. The colony of Connecticut in the early decades of the 1600s was a
dynamic environment influenced by the contact of several cultures. In his
seminal study *The Middle Ground*, Richard White investigates the Great Lakes
region and the interaction that took place there. According to White, “The
middle ground is the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in
between empires and the nonstate world of villages.”102 Similar to the
interaction in the Great Lakes region discussed by White, John Mason operated
on a system of cultural reciprocity and interaction. Seventeenth-century
Connecticut is a story of cultural accommodation, assimilation, conquest, and
persistence.

Along with the large scale cultural interaction taking place between
natives and settlers, key individuals such as Uncas displayed the competence
and diplomatic understanding that natives possessed. Uncas knew that by
befriending John Mason, a well-respected member of colonial Connecticut
society, he bettered his people’s chance of surviving the onslaught of European
imperialism. As posited by Michael Leroy Oberg, Uncas deliberately positioned
himself close to Mason in a conscious effort to ensure Mohegan existence. In
addition, the image of the Indian as a savage, unable to understand the
“civilized” European perspective, is erased by Uncas. While Mason relied on the
Mohegan for military reasons and improved social status, Uncas and his
followers employed Mason to maintain, if not to better, their position in colonial
Connecticut as a respected and powerful tribe willing to live in harmony with
the English. From the colonist perspective, “Uncas was the perfect Indian: he
helped English colonists settle the land, fought against his, and their, native
enemies, and then, with the rest of his people conveniently disappeared.”103

102 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-
In 1889 a statue of John Mason was erected at a nearby location where he had lead English troops and Indian allies against the Pequots at Mystic fort. Later moved to Windsor in 1996, the statue continues to act for many as a constant reminder of the hundreds of Pequot men and women that had been slain over three centuries before. While the controversy surrounding both the statue, and the legacy of John Mason himself is far from over, those that are so critical of Mason should further investigate his past. John Mason was much more than an Indian-hating Englishman who terrorized and attempted to exterminate Pequots for several decades in the seventeenth-century. John Mason was also a protector of native rights and resources. John Mason simultaneously represents loyalty to his fellow settlers and to Uncas and his Mohegan people. John Mason is among the few exceptional individuals that took the ambitious task of protecting a surrounding Indian group through diplomacy despite the great personal, social, and political risk. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, John Mason allows the historian to take a valuable glimpse into the many complexities of seventeenth-century native-settler relations. In sum, understanding John Mason allows for improved appreciation of the many identities that colonial participants had to balance. Through an investigation of John Mason one can better comprehend the matrix of interaction that existed between the settlers of New England and the surrounding Indian tribes.
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