

Colonial-Indian Relations

By 1640 the British had solid colonies established along the New England coast and the Chesapeake Bay. In between were the Dutch and the tiny Swedish community. To the west were the original Americans, the Indians.

Sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile, the Eastern tribes were no longer strangers to the Europeans. Although Native Americans benefitted from access to new technology and trade, the disease and thirst for land which the early settlers also brought posed a serious challenge to the Indian's long-established way of life.

At first, trade with the European settlers brought advantages: knives, axes, weapons, cooking utensils, fish hooks and a host of other goods. Those Indians who traded initially had significant advantage over rivals who did not.

In response to European demand, tribes such as the Iroquois began to devote more attention to fur trapping during the 17th century. Furs and pelts provided tribes the means to purchase colonial goods until late into the 18th century.

Early colonial-Indian relations were an uneasy mix of cooperation and conflict. On the one hand, there were the exemplary relations which prevailed during the first half century of Pennsylvania's existence. On the other were a long series of setbacks, skirmishes and wars, which almost invariably resulted in an Indian defeat and further loss of land.

The first of the important Indian uprisings occurred in Virginia in 1622, when some 347 whites were killed, including a number of missionaries who had just recently come to Jamestown. The Pequot War followed in 1637, as local tribes tried to prevent settlement of the Connecticut River region.

In 1675 Phillip, the son of the chief who had made the original peace with the Pilgrims in 1621, attempted to unite the tribes of southern New England against further European encroachment of their lands. In the struggle, however, Phillip lost his life and many Indians were sold into servitude.

Almost 5,000 kilometers to the west, the Pueblo Indians rose up against the Spanish missionaries five years later in the area around Taos, New Mexico. For the next dozen years the Pueblo controlled their former land again, only to see the Spanish retake it. Some 60 years later, another Indian revolt took place when the Pima Indians clashed with the Spanish in what is now Arizona.

The steady influx of settlers into the backwoods regions of the Eastern colonies disrupted Indian life. As more and more game was killed off, tribes were faced with the difficult choice of going hungry, going to war, or moving and coming into conflict with other tribes to the west.

The Iroquois, who inhabited the area below Lakes Ontario and Erie in northern New York and Pennsylvania, were more successful in resisting European advances. In 1570 five tribes joined to form the most democratic nation of its time, the "Ho-De-No-Sau-Nee," or League of the

Iroquois. The League was run by a council made up of 50 representatives from each of the five member tribes. The council dealt with matters common to all the tribes, but it had no say in how the free and equal tribes ran their day-to-day affairs. No tribe was allowed to make war by itself. The council passed laws to deal with crimes such as murder.

The League was a strong power in the 1600s and 1700s. It traded furs with the British and sided with them against the French in the war for the dominance of America between 1754 and 1763. The British might not have won that war without the support of the League of the Iroquois.

The League stayed strong until the American Revolution. Then, for the first time, the council could not reach a unanimous decision on whom to support. Member tribes made their own decisions, some fighting with the British, some with the colonists, some remaining neutral. As a result, everyone fought against the Iroquois. Their losses were great and the League never recovered.

Source: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Country Studies/Area Handbook Series sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Army between 1986 and 1998.

<http://countrystudies.us/united-states/history-9.htm>