

Phineas Pratt's Account

of the Wessagussett Plantation

Introduced and redacted by Marcia Stewart.

In 1662, Phineas Pratt petitioned the General Court for relief of his impoverished condition, citing his courage and sufferings at the time of the very first plantation in Massachusetts Bay, when he was among the party settled by Mr. Weston at Wessagusset, 1622-1623. Perhaps old Pratt embellished a bit, but his story is substantially corroborated by Gov. Bradford's book and other accounts. After 40 years of telling his tale, he had surely developed a fine narrative style. The story of his battle of wits with the wily Indian, Pexsouth, and of his epic marathon through the snow to warn the Plymouth pilgrims are the elements of an exciting tale, and it won Pratt the Colony's gratitude when the Court granted him a 300 acre property on the Merrimac in response to his petition.

A DECLARATION OF THE AFFAIRS OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE (that first) INHABITED NEW ENGLAND

IN THE TIME of spiritual darkness, when the State Ecclesiastical of Rome ruled and over ruled most of the nations of Europe, it pleased God to give wisdom to many, kings and people, in breaking that spiritual yoke. Yet, notwithstanding, there arose great strife among such people that are known by the name of Protestants in many cases concerning the worship of God. But the greatest and strongest number of men commonly prevailed against the smaller and lesser number. At this time the honored States of Holland gave more liberty in cases of religion than could be enjoyed in some other places. Upon which divers good Christians removed their dwellings into the Low Countries (the Netherlands).

Then one company that dwelt in the City of Laydon (the Brownists of Leiden, Netherlands), being not well able outwardly to subsist, took counsel and agreed to remove into America, into some port northward of Virginia. The Dutch people offered them divers conditions to supply them with things necessary if they would live under the government of their State, but they refused it. This they did that all men might know the entire love they bore to their King and Country; for in them there was never found any lack of loyal obedience. They sent to their friends in England to let them understand what they intended to do. Then divers friends disbursed some moneys for the furthering of so good a work.

It is furthermore to be understood that, in the year of 1618, there appeared a blazing star over Germany that made the wise men of Europe astonished there.

Speedily after, near about that time, these people begun to propose removal. They agreed that their strongest and ablest men should go to provide for their wives and children. Then coming into England, they set forward in two ships, but their lesser ship sprung a leak and returned to England. The bigger ship (the Mayflower) arrived at Cape Cod, 1620, it being winter, then called New England but formerly called Canidy (Canada). They sent forth their boat upon discovery. Their boat being returned to their ship, they removed into the bay of Plimoth and begun their plantation by the River of Pettuxet. Their ship being returned and safely arrived in England, those gentlemen and merchants, that had undertaken to supply them with things necessary, understanding that many of them were sick and some dead, made haste to send a ship with many things necessary. But some indiscreet men, hoping to encourage their friends to come to them, wrote letters concerning the great plenty of fish, fowl and deer, not considering that the wild savages were many times hungry, that have a better skill to catch such things then the Englishmen have. The adventurers, willing to save their moneys, sent them weakly provided of victuals, as many more after them did the like, and that was the great cause of famine.

At the same time, Mr. Thomas Westorne (Weston), a merchant of good credit in London, that was then their treasurer, that had disbursed much of his money for the good of New England, sent forth a ship for the settling a plantation in the Mathechusits Bay, but wanting a pilot we arrived at Damoralls Cove (Damaris Cove near Monhegan, ME). The men that

belong to the ship, there fishing, had newly set up a may pole and were very merry. We made haste to prepare a boat fit for coasting. Then said Mr. Rogers, Master of our ship, "here are many ships, and at Munhigin, but no man that does undertake to be your pilot; for they say that an Indian called Rumhigin undertook to pilot a boat to Plimoth, but they all lost their lives." Then said Mr. Gibbs, Masters Mate of our ship, "I will venture my life with them." At this time of our discovery, we first arrived at Smithe's Islands, first so called by Capt. Smith, at the time of his discovery of New England, and afterwards called Islands of Shoals. From thence to Cape Ann, so called by Capt. Mason; from thence to the Mathechusits Bay. There we continued 4 or 5 days.

Then we perceived, that on the south part of the Bay, were fewest of the natives of the country dwelling there. We thought best to begin our plantation, but fearing a great company of savages, we being but 10 men, thought it best to see if our friends were living at Plimoth. Then sailing along the coast not knowing the harbor, they shot of a piece of ordnance, and at our coming ashore, they entertained us with 3 volley of shots. Their second ship was returned for England before we came to them. We asked them where the rest of our friends were that came in the first ship (the Mayflower). They said that God had taken them away by death, and that before their second ship came, they were so distressed with sickness that they, fearing the savages should know it, had set up their sickest men with their muskets upon their rests, and their backs leaning against trees. At this time, one or two of them went with us in our vessel to the place of fishing to buy victuals. Eight or nine weeks after this, two of our ships arrived at Plimoth — the lesser of our three ships continued in the country with us.

Then we made haste to settle our plantation in the Masachusetts Bay — our number being then near 60 men. At the same time there was a great plague among the savages and, as they themselves told us, half their people died thereof. The natives called the place of our plantation Wesaguscasit. Near unto it is a town of later time called Weymoth.

The savages seemed to be good friends with us while they feared us, but when they saw famine prevail, they began to insult, as appeareth by the sequel; for one of their Pennesses, or chief men, called Pexsouth, employed himself to learn to speak English, observing all things for his bloody ends. He told me he loved English men very well, but he loved me best of all.

Then he said, "You say French men do not love you, but I will tell you what we have done to them. There was a ship broken by a storm. They saved most of their goods and hid them in the ground. We made them tell us where it was. Then we made them be our servants. They wept very much. When we parted them, we gave them such meat as our dogs eat. One of them had a book he would often read in. We asked him what his book said. He answered, 'It saith, there will be a people like Frenchmen come into this country and drive you all away,' and now we think you are they. We took away their clothes. They lived but a while. One of them lived longer than the rest, for he had a good master who gave him a wife. He is now dead, but hath a son alive."

"Another ship came into the Bay with much goods to truck. Then I said to our Sachem, 'I will tell you how to have all for nothing. Bring all your canoes and all our beaver and a great many men, but no bows nor arrow, clubs nor hatchets, but knives under the skins that are about our loins. Throw up much beaver upon their deck, sell it very cheap, and when I give the word, thrust your knives into the French men's bellies.' Thus we killed them all. But Monsieur Ffinch, Master of their ship, being wounded, leapt into the hold. We bid him come up, but he would not. Then we cut their cable and the ship went ashore and lay upon her side and slept there. Ffinch came up and we killed him. Then our Sachem divided their goods and fired their ship, and it made a very great fire."

Some of our company asked them, how long ago was it that they first saw ships? They said they could not tell, but that they had heard men say that the first ship they saw seemed like a floating island, as they supposed broken off from the mainland, wrapped together with the roots of trees, with some trees upon it. They went to it with their canoes, but seeing men and hearing guns, they made haste to be gone.

But after this, when they saw famine prevail, Pecksouth said, "Why do your men and your dogs die?"

I said I had corn for a time of need. Then I filled a chest, but not with corn, and spread corn on the top, opened the cover and when I was sure he saw it, I put down as if I would not have him see it.

He said, "No Indian so (selfish)! You have much corn and Englishmen die from want!"

Then they, having intent to make war, removed some of their houses to the edge of a great swamp near to the pale (palisade) of our plantation. After this, early one morning I saw a man going into one of their houses, weary with traveling and sore of foot. Then I said to Mr. Salsbery, our surgeon, surely that savage hath employed himself for some intent to make war upon us. Then I took a bag with gunpowder and put it in my pocket, with the top of the bag hanging out, and went to the house where the man was laid upon a mat. The woman of the house took hold of the bag and said, "What is this bag?"

I said, "It is good for savages to eat," and struck her on the arm as hard as I could.

Then she said, "Matchit (evil) powder! English men much matchit! By and by Abordikis bring much men, much sannups, and kill you and all Englishmen at Wessaguscus and Patucket (Plymouth)." The man that lay upon the mats, seeing this, was angry and in a great rage, and the woman seemed to be sore afraid.

Then I went out of the house, and said to a young man that could best understand their language, "Go ask the woman, but not in the man's hearing, why the man was angry and she afraid."

Our interpreter, coming to me, said, "These are the words of the woman — The man will tell Abordikis what I said, and he and all Indians will be angry with me."

This Pexsouth said, "I love you."

I said, "I love you as well as you love me."

Then he said in his broken English, "Me hear you can make the likeness of men and women, dogs and deer in wood and stone. Can you make?"

I said, "I can see a knife in your hand with an ill-favored face upon the haft."

Then he gave it into my hand to see his workmanship, and he said, "This knife cannot hear, it cannot see, it cannot speak, but it can eat! I have another knife at home with a face upon the haft as much like a man as this is like a woman. That knife cannot hear, cannot see, cannot speak, but it can eat! It hath killed much French men, and by and by this knife and that knife shall marry, and you shall be there!" That knife he had kept at home, so he said, as a memento from the time they had killed Monsieur Ffinch. As the words went out of his mouth, I had a good will to thrust it into his belly.

He said, "I see you are much angry."

I said, "Guns are longer than knives."

Some time after this, their sachem came suddenly upon us with a great number of armed men, but their spies seeing us in readiness, he and some of his chief men turned into one of their houses a quarter of an hour. Then we met them outside the pale of our plantation and brought them in. Then I said to a young man that could best speak their language, "Ask Pexsouth why they come thus armed."

He answered, "Our Sachem is angry with you."

I said, "Tell him, if he be angry with us, we be angry with him."

Then said their Sachem, "Englishmen, when you came into the country, we gave you gifts, and you gave us gifts. We bought and sold with you, and we were friends. Now tell me if I or any of my men have done you wrong."

We answered, "First tell us if we have done you any wrong."

He answered, "Some of you steal our corn, and I have sent you word, times without number, and yet our corn is stolen. I come to see what you will do."

We answered, "It is one man which hath done it. Your men have seen us whip him diverse times, besides other manner of punishments, and now here he is bound. We give him unto you to do with him what you please."

He answered, "That is not just dealing. If my men wrong a neighbor Sachem or his men, he sends me word and I beat or kill my men, according to the offense. All Sachems do justice to their own men. If not we say they are all agreed and then we fight. And now I say you all steal my corn."

At this time, some of them, seeing some of our men upon our fort, began to start, saying, "Matchit pesconk!" That is — naughty guns. Then, looking round about them, they went away in a great rage. At this time we strengthened our watch until we had no food left. In these times the savages often times did creep upon the snow, and jump out from behind bushes and trees to see whether we kept watch or not. Times I, having rounded our plantation until I had no longer strength, then going (at day's end) back into our court of guard, I did see one man dead before me, and another at my right hand, and another at my left dead for want of food. O, all ye people of New England that shall hear of these times of our weak beginning, consider what is the strength of the arm of flesh or the wit of man. Therefore, in the times of your greatest distress, put your trust in God.

The offender being bound, we let him loose because we had no food to give him, charging him to gather groundnuts, clams and mussels as other men did, and steal no more. One or two days after this, the savages brought him, leading him by the arms, saying, "Here is the corn. Come see the place where he stole it." Then we kept him bound some few days.

After this, two of our company said, "We have been at the Sachem's house, and they have near finished their last canoe that they may encounter with our ship. Their greatest care is how to send their army to Plimoth because of the snow."

Then we prepared to meet them there (at the Sachem's house). One of our company said, "They have killed one of our hogs." Another said, "One of them struck at me with his knife." And others said, "They threw dust in our faces."

Then Pexsouth said unto me, "Give me powder and guns, and I will give you much corn."

I said, "By and by ships will bring men and victuals."

But when we understood that their plot was to kill all Englishmen when the snow was gone, I would have sent a man to Plimoth, but none were willing to go. Then I said, "If Plimoth men know not of this treacherous plot, they and we are all dead men. Therefore, if God be willing, tomorrow I will go."

That night a young man, wanting wit, told Pexsouth early on the morning. Pexsouth came to me and said to me in English, "Me hear that you go to Patuxit. You will lose yourself. The bears and the wolves will eat you. But because I love you, I will send my boy Nahamit with you, and I will give you victuals to eat by the way and to be merry with your friends when you come there."

I said, "Who told you so great a lie, that I may kill him!"

He said, "It is no lie — you shall not know." Then he went home to his house.

Then came five men armed. We said, "Why come you thus armed?"

They said, "We are friends. You carry guns where we dwell, and we carry bows and arrows where you dwell." These attended me 7 or 8 days and nights. Then they, supposing it was a lie, were careless of their watch near two hours in the morning.

Then said I to our company, "Now is the time to run to Plimoth. Is there any compass to be found?"

They said, "None but those that belong to the ship."

I said, "They are too big. I have born no arms of defense this 7 or 8 days. Now if I take my arms, they will mistrust me."

They said, "The savages will pursue after you and kill you, and we will never see you again."

Then I took a hoe and went to the Long Swamp near by their houses and dug on the edge thereof as if I had been looking for groundnuts, but seeing no man, I went in and ran through it. Then looking round about me, I ran southward till three of the clock, but the snow being in many places, I was the more distressed because of my footprints. The sun being beclouded, I wandered, not knowing my way, but at the going down of the sun, it appeared red. Then hearing a great howling of wolves, I came to a river. The water being deep and cold and many rocks, I passed through with much ado. Then I was in great distress — faint for want of food, weary with running, fearing to make a fire because of them that pursued me. Then I came to a deep dell or hole, there being much wood fallen into it. Then I said in my thoughts, this is God's providence that here I may make a fire. Then having made a fire, the stars began to appear and I saw Ursa Major and the polestar, but far and beclouded.

The day following, I began to travel, but being unable, I went back to the fire. At day's fall the sun shined, and about three of the clock I carried on to that part of Plimoth Bay where there is a town of later time called Duxbery. Then passing the water on my left hand, I came to a brook and there was a path. Having but a short time to consider, and fearing to go beyond the plantation, I kept running in the path. Then crossing the James River, I said in my thoughts, now am I as a deer chased by the wolves. If I perish, what will be the condition of distressed Englishmen? Then finding a piece of a... (A brief passage here is so damaged as to be incoherent). I carried them under my arm, saying in my heart, God hath given me these two tokens for my comfort, that now he will give me my life for a prayer.

Then running down a hill, I saw an Englishman coming in the path before me. Then I sat down on a tree, and rising up to salute him, I said, "Mr. (John) Hamden, I am glad to see you alive!"

He said, "I am glad and full of wonder to see you alive! Let us sit down. I see you are weary."

I said, "Let us eat some parched corn."

Then he said, "I know the cause (why you are) come. Masasoit has sent word to the Governor to let him know that Abordikis and his confederates have contrived a plot hoping (to kill) all Englishmen in one day."

The next day, a young man named Hugh Stacye went forth to fell a tree, and saw two (Indians) rising from the ground. They said Abordikis had sent to the Governor that he might send men to truck for much beaver

(The short passage that follows is damaged to illegibility.)

Providence to us was great in those times, as appeareth after the time of the arrival of the first ship (the Mayflower) at Plimoth. The aforementioned Masasoit came to Plimoth and there made a covenant of peace. An Indian called Tisquantom came to them and spoke English. They asked him how he learned to speak English. He said that an Englishman called

Capt. Hunt came into the harbor pretending to trade for beaver, and stole 24 men and their beaver, and carried and sold them in Spain. From thence with much ado he (Tisquantom) went into England, and from England with much ado he got to his own country. This man told Massasoit what wonders he had seen in England, and that if he could make the English his friends, then his enemies that were too strong for him would be constrained to bow to him. But since some that came in the first ship (the Mayflower) have recorded already that which concerned them, I leave it.

Two or three days after my coming to Plimoth, 10 or 11 men went in a boat to our plantation, but I being faint was not able to go with them. They first gave warning to the Master of the ship, and then contrived to make sure of the lives (or deaths, rather) of two of their (the Indians') chief men, Wittiwomitt, of whom they boasted no gun could kill, and Pexsouth, a subtle man. These being slain, they fell upon others where they could find them. Then Abordikis, hearing that some of his men were killed, came to try his manhood, but as they were jumping out from behind bushes and trees, one of them was shot in the arm. At this time an Indian called Hobermack, that formerly had fled for his life from his Sachem to Plimoth, proved himself a valiant man in fighting and pursuing after them. Two of our men were killed that they took in their houses at an advantage. At this time, Plimoth men were instruments in the hands of God for saving their own lives and ours. They took the head of Wittiwomitt and set it displayed on their fort at Plimoth.

(A passage has been destroyed. The Swan, with the full company from Wessagusset, sailed to seek food down the coast in Maine, after...) nine of our men were dead with famine, and one died on the ship before they came to the place where, at that time of the year, ships came to fish --- it being in March. At this time, ships began to fish at the Islands of Shoals, and I, having recovered a little of my strength, went to my company. Near about this time began the first plantation at Pascataqua. The chief thereof was Mr. David Tomson at the time of my arrival at Pascataqua. Two of Abordikis' men came thither and, seeing me, said, "When we killed your men they cried and made ill-favored (ugly) faces."

I said, "When we killed your men, we did not torment them to make ourselves merry."

Then we went with our ship into the Bay and took from them two shalop-loads of corn, and of their men prisoners there at a town of later time called Dorchester. The third and last time (we fought) was in the Bay of Agawam. At this time, they took for their castle a thick swamp. One of our ablest men was shot in the shoulder. Whether any of them were killed or wounded, we could not tell. There is a town of later time near unto that place called Ipswich. Thus our plantation being deserted, there came into the country Capt. Robert Gore (Gorges) with six gentlemen attending him, and divers men to do his labor, and other men with their families. They took possession of our plantation, but their ship supply from England came too late. Thus was famine their final overthrow. Most of them that lived returned for England.

The overseers of the third plantation in the Bay was Mr. Wollaston and Mr. Rosdell. These, seeing the ruin of our former plantation, said, "We shall not pitch our tents here, lest we shall do (end up dead) as they have done." Notwithstanding that these gentlemen were wise men, they seemed to blame the overseers of the former plantations, not considering that God plants and pulls up, builds and pulls down, and turns the wisdom of wise men into foolishness. These called the name of their place Mt. Wollaston. They continued near a year as others had done before them, but famine was their final overthrow.* Near unto that place is a town of later time called Brantry (Braintree). Not long after the overthrow of the first plantation in the Bay, Capt. Lovit (Christopher Levett) came into their country. At the time of his being at Pascataway, a Sagamore or Sachem gave two of his men, one to Capt. Lovit and another to Mr. Tomson, but one that was there said, "How can you trust these savages. Call the name of one Watt Tylor, and the other Jack Straw!" — after the names of two of the greatest rebels that ever were in England. This 'Watt Tylor' said that when he was a boy Capt. Dormer found him on an island in great distress.