

The Pequot Wars, Kieft's Wars and the Decade of Conflict (1635-1645)

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During the seventeenth century the lives of Native Americans and Europeans residing in the American northeast became ever increasingly entwined through sustained Native, Dutch and English contact. Rising tensions resulted in several successive conflicts, the likes of which had never been encountered before in the region. The most prominent of which are known today as the Dutch-Pequot War (1633-1634), Pequot War (1636-1637) and Kieft's War (1640–1645). During each conflict Native and European forces adopted their culturally specific military tactics, command structures, equipment, and technologies to combat their enemies. These regional wars are acknowledged as watershed moments for Native, Dutch, and English peoples in the northeast but are typically viewed as unrelated events. This paper considers the entangled relationships between these conflicts paying particular attention to how Native and European combatants modified their culturally and technologically specific tactics during each successive conflict. Furthermore it considers how European colonizers learned from each other's wartime experiences battling the Pequot and how English dominance following the Pequot War may have inspired Dutch policies in New Netherland thereafter. These inter-related military-political events constitute a "decade of conflict" lasting from 1635 to 1645.

European Expansion and the Dutch-Pequot War (1633-1634)

These three conflicts are best understood within the broader cultural, political and economic changes that occurred in the region following the arrival of Dutch traders in 1614. Native peoples introduced Europeans to their sacred white whelk and purple quahog shell beads known as sewant by the Munsee or wampum by eastern Algonquians during their earliest

encounters. The full significance of wampum to Native peoples of the Seventeenth Century is difficult to determine but its use is documented in diplomacy, trade, decorative arts, and funerary practices.¹ Around 1620 Dutch traders understood the trade potential of wampum and treated it as a valuable commodity increasing demand for it throughout the region.

Corresponding with increased wampum demand was Pequot political-military expansion in the Long Island basin. By 1620 the Pequot increased their influence over the region and soon controlled much of the fur and wampum trade through a combination of diplomacy, coercion, and warfare.² Dutch traders increasingly used wampum to procure furs and in 1626 the West India Company (WIC) initiated a trade alliance with the Pequot for the valuable commodity in return for European trade goods.³ For a time the Dutch and Pequot controlled much of the wampum and fur trade resulting in a relatively stable, though potentially volatile situation. In 1628 Isaac De Rasieres shared the significance of wampum with the English at Plymouth in the hopes that the Dutch could profit as the sole supplier of the beads. This attracted English traders to Long Island Sound in search of wampum and by 1630 they appeared in the Connecticut River Valley.⁴ To prevent English encroachment, Jacob Van Curler traveled to Pequot territory in June 1633 and negotiated a deed for land on the Fresh River (Connecticut) with Tatobam, the Pequot's grand Sachem. Thereafter the WIC erected the fortified House of Hope trading post.⁵

It is unclear how the Dutch-Pequot alliance collapsed later that year resulting in war but two seemingly contradictory accounts point to a possible trade dispute. The most frequently cited account states that the Pequot attacked a Narragansett trading expedition near the House of Hope for neglecting to pay tribute to trade with the Dutch.⁶ The second claims that after the Pequot killed Virginian trader John Stone they attempted to trade the pilfered goods to the Dutch and a

quarrel broke out between the two and a sachem was killed in the process.⁷ It appears that the roots of the war may with the Dutch insistence upon a “free trade zone” at their fort.

Little is known about the short lived Dutch-Pequot War (1633-1634) but it was the first between Europeans and Natives in the Long Island Basin. During this conflict the Pequot appear to have fought in large formations, on open ground, as they had against Native opponents. The Pequot employed such battle tactics against the Wangunk in the Connecticut River Valley in the 1620’s. Pequot and Wangunk “sachems agreed to meet and fight in the field, each with his entire force,” fought “several pitched battles” and the Wangunk were defeated and became tributaries of the Pequot.⁸ This type of fighting was similar to accounts of pre-contact Mohawk assaults and is consistent with Champlain’s 1607 description of Native combat.⁹ Glimpses of early Pequot tactics appear in English sources. John Winthrop wrote that during the August 1636 raids against the Manisians and Pequot, English commanders expected them to stand and fight in open order as they had against the Dutch. He stated that English forces “marched after” the Pequot “supposing they would have stood to it awhile, as they did to the Dutch.”¹⁰ During the attack on Block Island, Captain John Underhill wrote that “wee thought they would stand it out with us but they perceiving wee were in earnest, fled.”¹¹

Based on limited European accounts it is clear that the Pequot quickly abandoned tactics which proved ineffective against Dutch “pike and shot” formations honed during the Thirty Years War.¹² Pequot battle tactics which had been so effective against other Natives were less formidable against Dutch arms and armor and were adjusted to negate these advantages. Pequot leaders transitioned from massed forces to smaller fighting units and warriors engaged their enemies just beyond effective musket range (100 to 125 yards) with volleys of arrows fired in

groups of ten or more. The acquisition of firearm technology through trade or capture may have impacted Pequot military tactics as well. Gunpowder was difficult to acquire but if properly munitioned the usage of firearms may contributed to smaller fighting units. As a result of this war Pequot leaders avoided large engagements on open ground, relied on siege strategies, guerilla warfare, and coordinated ambushes to counter superior European armaments.

As the war progressed the Dutch seized the Pequot Sachem Tatobam under the pretense of trade and although a large sum of wampum was paid for his return the Dutch executed their hostage.¹³ The only known Pequot retaliation for this murder occurred in January of 1634 when the Pequot mistook an English vessel, commanded by John Stone and Walter Norton, for a Dutch ship and killed all aboard north of Saybrook Point.¹⁴ Fighting later erupted on the Pequot - Narragansett border relieving pressure from the Dutch. Further exacerbating tensions in the region was an small pox epidemic that originated around Massachusetts Bay in 1633 and spread to the Connecticut River by 1634 decimating already weakened Native communities.¹⁵ It is unclear how or when the war ended but the two sides had restored trade relations by 1635.

The Pequot War and Regional Realignment: (1636-1639)

By the time of the Pequot War (1636-1637) many Pequot warriors were now combat veterans well aware of the capabilities and limitations of European arms and armor. When the Pequot War began in late 1636 the English discovered how Native forces utilized open order tactics, advanced in small groups of a dozen or less, and attacked just beyond effective musket range. English leaders were apparently unaware of these newly developed tactics and when they plotted to invade the Pequot homeland in August 1636 leaders such as Winthrop and Underhill assumed they would fight as they did during the Dutch war.

Stone's killing is usually cited as the event which led to the Pequot war however the conflict was the culmination of decades of conflict in the region. English traders in the region competed with the Dutch for Native clientele as they established settlements at Windsor and Wethersfield in 1633 followed by Hartford and Saybrook Fort in 1635. In July 1636 John Oldham of Wethersfield was murdered by Maniseans off Block Island which provoked Massachusetts Bay Colony to launch a punitive expedition in retaliation. On August 24, 1636 they invaded and burning villages and food stores before proceeding unannounced to the Pequot River destroying more villages after demanding Captain Stone's killers.¹⁶ The Pequot viewed this as an unprovoked attack and immediately assaulted the English at Saybrook Fort.¹⁷

On Block Island and the Pequot River English commanders fully expected to engage Native warriors en masse and on an open field of battle as the Dutch had experienced. To the contrary, English forces experienced little combat. It was not until Massachusetts Bay troops deserted the contingent of soldiers from Saybrook Fort sent to capture corn that the men came under heavy attack. Once the Pequot had the numerical advantage they attacked in groups of ten and remained just beyond effective musket range to fire volleys of arrows at their enemy and immediately take cover while another team of warriors advanced to give fire.¹⁸

Throughout the winter 1636/1637 Pequot forces retaliated with new tactics honed during their war with the Dutch. Pequot-allied warriors laid siege to the English garrison at Saybrook Fort but avoided direct confrontation with English forces. Lieutenant Lion Gardiner's command was constantly assaulted by multiple groups of Native warriors in well-orchestrated ambushes and English casualties quickly mounted. The Pequot assaulted English river traffic as they had during their war with the Dutch and Gardiner made several references to warriors utilizing

firearms against his garrison stating that they “shoot our owne pieces at us.”¹⁹ It is well documented that the Pequot were armed with at least 20 firearms but likely had many more. It is unclear how they distributed or deployed their weapons but Gardiner is clear that his men were shot at by Pequot marksmen and this fact was not lost on Captain John Mason which impacted his decision not to attack the Pequot at present-day Groton Heights. Even though the Pequot secured a nominal supply of firearms they lacked gunpowder which was later confirmed by two English girls captured during the April 1637 attack on Wethersfield who the Pequot pressured to make gunpowder.²⁰

The Wethersfield raid terrified the English on the Connecticut River and on May 1, 1637 the court at Hartford ordered “offensive war ag^t the Pequoitt.”²¹ The Connecticut English mobilized 90 men and around 100 “River Indians” allies which were augmented with twenty Massachusetts Bay soldiers under Captain John Underhill along with some of Gardiner’s veterans.²² English commanders opted against a frontal attack on the Pequot River and adopted a Narragansett-derived battle plan. Through Roger Williams, the Narragansett suggested the English prepare for a month-long campaign beginning with a sneak attack from the east, suggested they surround them in their forts, cut off any route of escape to nearby swamps, and assault the fortified villages in full armor. English-allied forces sailed to Narragansett Bay where Narragansett and Eastern Niantic warriors joined the attack force.²³ The combined force of nearly 400 men assaulted the Pequot fortified village at Mistick on the morning of May 26, 1637 which contained approximately 150 warriors and 250-350 hundred non-combatants.²⁴

The attack on Mistick Fort forced Pequot warriors to fight in close quarters which negated their ability to employ their newly effective tactics and gave English the advantage in

terms of arms and armor. Nonetheless, the severely outnumbered English attackers suffered nearly fifty percent casualties in about fifteen minutes prompting Mason to set the village ablaze. The battle of Mistick Fort became a massacre as Pequot warriors and nearly all non-combatants perished in the ensuing inferno and combat. Hundreds of warriors mobilized from surrounding villages but arrived too late to effect the outcome of the battle. Sassacus and his “captains” launched organized counterattacks against withdrawing English-allied forces who marched four-miles to the Pequot River and their ships.²⁵ The Pequot reportedly lost as many men during this action as they did during the English assault on Mistick and the combined losses impacted Sassacus’s ability to prosecute the war.²⁶ Even so, the Pequot resisted for three more months until a combined force of Connecticut, Massachusetts Bay, and allied Natives (primarily from eastern Long Island) sailed into eastern New Netherland and fought the last battle of the war at the “Pequot Swamp” 20 miles west of Quinnipiac. The English considered the war over when they received news of his death in September.²⁷

The Dutch were unprepared for the speed in which the English solidified their presence in the region by claiming Pequot territory through the conquest and subjugating their former tributaries. The English superseded the Pequot and rivaled the Narragansett and Dutch as the dominant economic and military power in the region. Eastern New Netherland effectively became New England as English colonists flocked to the Connecticut River Valley and beyond.

Kieft’s War And The English Example: (1640-1645)

Dutch leaders in New Amsterdam appear to have gathered their own “lessons” from the English wartime tactics and postwar policies appeared successful. In 1638, Director Willem Kieft arrived in New Netherland and found the colony close to economic disaster thanks in no

small part to new wampum shortages. The WIC issued new “Articles and Conditions” in January 1639 to encourage a vibrant settler population by eliminating company trade privileges, allowing free trade, and allowing a grant of two hundred acres of land to immigrant families. In anticipation of new settlers Kieft secured Native land deeds and sought to improve New Amsterdam’s fortifications. In his search to defray expenses he focused on ways to extract valuable goods from Munsee communities, through force if necessary.²⁸ It is unclear exactly what triggered the dramatic shift in Native policy under Kieft but the new policy appears closely modeled after indigenous tributary practices and was essentially similar to the tribute imposed by the English on Pequot survivors and their former tributaries.

Tensions mounted over Kieft’s contribution policy and few Native groups agreed to pay the tax which in effect would acknowledge Dutch authority over them. The failure to collect “contributions” quickly resulted in violence by 1640 when WIC personnel were assaulted at a Raritan village while attempting to take corn as “contribution.” Kieft responded with military force, ordering a punitive expedition against Staten Island in July 1640 to demand reparations and contribution.²⁹ The resulting massacre was the first of many in what would become known as “Kieft’s War” against the Indians. The heavy-handed response was contrary to WIC policy, and resembled English reprisals against the Pequot in 1636 and the 1639 Connecticut expedition against a Pequot community at Pawcatuck.³⁰ If the intent of the Dutch expedition was to intimidate Native groups into a forced tributary status through deadly force, they failed. Tensions escalated in June 1641 when Raritan warriors retaliated against settlements on Staten Island.³¹ Kieft quickly negotiated military alliances with western Long Island Algonquin groups and offered bounties Raritan heads as the English had done during Pequot War.³²

As Dutch forces battled the Raritan, violence escalated elsewhere in the colony when a Weckquaesgeek Indian killed a Dutchman to avenge some family members fifteen years earlier.³³ Kieft's council authorized a military reprisal against the tribe in March 1642 but Dutch soldiers were unable to locate the enemy. The expedition achieved its goal as the Weckquaesgeek quickly sued for peace after learning of the offensive but they never surrendered the murderer Kieft sought.³⁴ In the winter of 1643 the Dutch were handed an opportunity for revenge when Mohawk or Mahican forces drove the Weckquaesgeek to Manhattan who sought Dutch protection.³⁵ On February 27, 1643 Kieft and his supporters authorized an attack on Weckquaesgeek encampments around New Amsterdam massacring at least eighty.³⁶ Kieft may have expected the massacres to serve as a dramatic lesson similar to Mistick Fort but the killing of unarmed refugees galvanized at least eleven Native communities who attacked New Amsterdam. The Munsee mobilized an estimated fifteen hundred men who inflicted severe casualties on Dutch settlers and property.³⁷

The Dutch were forced to fight a very different war than their English neighbors had six years earlier. Pequot reliance on warriors from tributary tribes hastened their defeat when following the English victory at Mistick the Pequot confederacy crumbled and former allies turned against them, submitted to the English, or became neutral. Munsee forces battling the Dutch were not under a centralized command, as was the case with Pequot-Allied forces, and defeating any one tribe would not end the war. Every Native community, be they Raritan, Hackensack, or Tappan would have to be defeated individually. To further complicate the war effort, Munsee groups were well armed and the Dutch estimated that by 1644 at least four hundred trade-guns had been sold to Natives in their colony.³⁸ As the conflict escalated, English

volunteers were recruited in 1643 including John Underhill, veteran of the Mistick Fort campaign, to lead Dutch-Anglo forces.³⁹ Dutch-Anglo units put Native warriors on the defensive by taking the fight to Long Island and western New England where they targeted food stores and villages.⁴⁰

Infamous massacres at Pavonia, Corler's Hook, and at Pound Ridge produced far different results than Mistick Fort. The 1637 Mistick massacre inflicted such a heavy physical and psychological toll that the Pequot evacuated their country and lost their tributaries. By 1645 the massacres authorized by Kieft incited dozens of Native groups already angered by encroaching settlements and the contribution policy unlike the English who had battled one or two major Native adversaries. Despite recent Dutch-Anglo victories, there appeared to be no end to the war in sight. Native diplomacy achieved what European force could not and hostilities ceased in July 1645 thanks to Mohawk mediators who convinced the Munsee to agree to a cease-fire. "Kieft's War" ended on August 30, 1645 but the damage to New Netherland was done.⁴¹ Many settlers and livestock were killed, much of the outlying settlements were destroyed, and the colony was financially crippled. Kieft's advisory council blamed him for the situation and successfully petitioned for his removal in late 1644.⁴² When the new director-general, Peter Stuyvesant, arrived in 1647 "Kieft's War" had left New Netherlands in ruins.

Conclusion: Entangled Histories and Unintended Consequences

By the end of "Kieft's War" over a thousand Natives had perished along with an unknown number of Europeans. When the conflict ended in 1645 the Dutch found themselves in a precarious situation; New Netherland was financially crippled and too weak to effectively challenge future English incursions in their territory. The Dutch were forced to adopt an

appeasement policy with the Munsee in order to prevent future conflict, whereas Captain Edward Johnson of Massachusetts Bay, writing in 1654, claimed the Pequot War “strook a trembling terror into all Indians round about, even to this very day.”⁴³ The decisive English victory during the Pequot War led to their eventual dominance over the region. Even so, Native resistance had not been eradicated and the Puritans continued to fear another war which materialized in 1675 with a pan-Algonquin uprising known as King Philip’s War.

¹ Kevin McBride, “The Source and Mother of the Fur Trade: Native-Dutch Relations in Eastern New Netherland,” in Laurie Weinstein, ed. *Enduring Traditions: The Native Peoples of New England* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992). Pp. 31-51; John A. Strong, *The Unkechaug Indians of eastern Long Island: a history* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2011). Pp. 24-28.

² For information on Pequot expansion see: Johan De Laet, “New World,” in *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664* J. Franklin Jameson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), Pp. 40-44; Isaack De Rasieres, “Letter of Isaack De Rasieres to Samuel Blommeart” in *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664* J. Franklin Jameson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909), P. 103; Simon Hart, *The Prehistory of The New Netherland Company* (Amsterdam: City of Amsterdam Press, 1959). Pp. 27-28; Kevin McBride, “Fort Island: Conflict and Trade in Long Island Sound,” in *Native Forts of the Long Island Sound Area*, Gaynell Stone, ed. Stoney Brook: Sheridan Books, 2006.P. 256.

³ Nicolaes Van Wassenaer, “Historisch Verhael,” in *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664* J. Franklin Jameson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1909). Pp. 85-86.

⁴ Rasieres, “Letter.” P.87.

⁵ John Romeyn Brodhead, *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York* (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1856) (Hereafter *DRCHSNY*). Pp. I:542-543; William DeLoss Love, *The Colonial History of Hartford* (Hartford: Case Lockwood & Brainard, 1935). Pp. 104-105.

⁶ Alfred Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). Pp. 58-59.

⁷ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* (New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1968). Pp. 191-192

⁸ Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:543.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, “An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Iroquois Assault Tactics Used against Fortified Settlements of the Northeast in the Seventeenth Century” in *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Warfare and Violence in Ethnohistorical Perspective (Autumn, 1999), pp. 777-807; Jon Paramenter, *Iroquoia, 1534-1701: The Edge of the Woods* (East Lansing, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

¹⁰ John Winthrop, James Kendall Hosmer, Ed., *Winthrop’s Journal “History of New England” 1630-1649* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908). P. 189.

¹¹ John Underhill, *Newes from America* (London, UK: Peter Cole, 1637). P. 7.

¹² Keith Roberts, *Pike and Shot Tactics 1590-1660* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2010).

¹³ Alfred A. Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996). Pp. 58-59.

¹⁴ Gilman C. Gates, *Saybrook At The Mouth Of The Connecticut: The First One Hundred Years* (New Haven, CT: Wilson H. Lee Company, 1935). P. 25.

¹⁵ John Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers: Volume III* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1943). Pp. III:171-172; Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500-1643* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982). Pp. 192-193.

¹⁶ Lion Gardiner, *Relation of the Pequot Warres* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Press. 1901). Pp. 8-10.

- ¹⁷ Gardiner, *Relation*. Pp. 8-10; Winthrop, *Journal*. Pp. 100-101.
- ¹⁸ Hosmer, *Winthrop's Journal*. Pp. I:191-192.
- ¹⁹ Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers*. Pp. III: 319-321.
- ²⁰ Edward Johnson, *Wonder-working Providence* (London, UK: Nath. Brooke, 1654). P. 115.
- ²¹ J. Hammond Trumbull, *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* (Hartford: Brown & Parsons, 1850). P. I:9.
- ²² John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War: Especially Of the memorable Taking of their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637* (Boston, MA: S. Kneeland & T. Green, 1736). Pp. 1-2.
- ²³ Mason, *A Brief History*. Pp. 2-3; Glenn LaFantasie, Ed., *The Correspondence of Roger Williams* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963). Pp. I:72-77.
- ²⁴ Philip Vincent, *A True Relation of the Late Battell Fought in New England, Between the English, and the Salvages* (London, UK: M.P. for Nathan Butter, 1637). P. 12.
- ²⁵ Underhill, *Newes from America*. Pp. 32-41; Mason, *A Brief History*. Pp. 6-14.
- ²⁶ Vincent. *A True Relation*. P. 15.
- ²⁷ Winthrop, *Winthrop Papers*. Pp. III: 452-458; Winthrop, *Journal*. Pp.125-126.
- ²⁸ Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. XIII:6; Jaap Jacobs, *New Netherland: a Dutch colony in seventeenth-century America* (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2005). P. 133-134; Rink, *Holland on the Hudson*. P. 216-217.
- ²⁹ Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:150; De Vries, "Voyages." P. 98.
- ³⁰ Underhill, *Newes from America*. Pp. 26-28; Mason, *A Brief History*. Pp. 18-20.
- ³¹ David Pietersz De Vries, "Voyages from Holland to America, A.D. 1632 to 1644" in *Collections of the New York Historical Society*, Second Series, Volume III (New York, NY: D. Appleton and Company, 1853). P. 100.
- ³² Gardiner, *Relation*, P. 21.
- ³³ Unknown. "Journal of New Netherland, 1647," in *Narratives of New Netherland 1609-1664*, J. Franklin Jameson, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909). Pp. 276-277.
- ³⁴ Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:150.
- ³⁵ De Vries, "Voyages." P. 113.
- ³⁶ Unknown. "Journal of New Netherland, 1647," P. 277; Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:151.
- ³⁷ Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York*. Pp. 72-74; Ian K. Steele, *Warpaths: Invasions of North America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994). P. 116.
- ³⁸ The majority were sold to the Mohawk around Fort Orange but the Mahican and Munsee were able to acquire firearms as well. Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:150; Jan Piet Puype and Marco van der Hoeven, *Arsenal of the World: The Dutch Arms Trade in the Seventeenth Century*. (Amsterdam: Batavian Lion International, 1996). Pp. 52-53.
- ³⁹ Unknown. "Journal of New Netherland, 1647," P. 282.
- ⁴⁰ Donna Merwick, *The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). P. 158.
- ⁴¹ Brodhead, *DRCHSNY*. P. I:210.
- ⁴² Jacobs, *New Netherland*. Pp. 140-141.
- ⁴³ Johnson, *Wonder-working Providence*. P. 170.