

Udder Destruction: The Role of the Dairy in the Creation of Conflicts between English Colonists and Native Americans in 17th Century New England

Lindsay Anne Randall©

Many underlying causes for the bloody conflicts between English colonists and Native Americans living in New England during the seventeenth century have been studied at length by scholars. One previously unacknowledged facet of this complicated history is the undeniable role that dairy animals played in creating and perpetuating tensions between the two groups. This area of study has been relatively overlooked by academics, with the notable exception of Virginia DeJohn Anderson who examined the role of cattle at large during conflicts of the seventeenth century in New England through her works *Creatures of Empire* and *King Philip's Herds*.¹ Although looking at the behavior of animals is important in understanding how they created dramatic fractures in relations between the English and native people, such an analysis still obscures an important underlying issue that helped to produce an atmosphere of distrust and hatred. The English dairy and its products played such a significant role in everyday colonial English life that colonists were often willing to ignore or just how extensively their cattle were negatively impacting the lives of native people. When colonists were aware of the havoc being caused by their wandering animals, they were generally unwilling to change the destructive behavior of not only their animals but their own dismissive and harmful attitudes towards native concerns. Through daily engagement with the process of dairying, English settlers placed immense weight on any animal or product that was connected to it and so would make little accommodations for anything that was in direct opposition to the needs of the animals, which could inhibit dairy production.

The majority of the colonists migrating to New England during the seventeenth century were typical English men and women who came from a farming background and were largely familiar with animal husbandry. The agricultural practices of colonial New England were shaped by this yeoman background as well as the locations within England that the majority of colonists came from. Many settlers came from “East Anglia, the West Midlands and the lowland section of Yorkshire”, regions of England where dairy products made from cow’s milk were favored over that of goats or ewes. The transplantation of the English tradition of dairying was a way through which they could reaffirm their English citizenship; the preference for cows and their foodstuffs was a direct link to their former lives and heritage.²

This strong cultural belief that dairying should continue to be a part of their lives while they lived in “New” England turned out to be rather advantageous in terms of their survival in the early years of settlement. The first English settlement, Plymouth Colony, faced a very difficult and perilous first few years, where many in their numbers perished due to starvation. During this dark period the leaders of the colony recognized need for cattle to end the suffering of those living in New England. They wrote to their supporters and friends that remained in England that “the Colonie will never be in good estat”³ until cattle were brought to New England. The leaders knew that such animals would be “a comfortable help to the Colonie”⁴ through their ability to greatly improve the diet of those so low in health living in Plymouth.⁵

When Edward Winslow imported the first cattle to New England in 1624, it marked the end of starvation and uncertainty in the colony and was an important turning point in the success of not only Plymouth Colony but the whole English experiment in New England. The cattle were seen as being so valuable to the Colony’s success that it was ordered that if any person failed in their duty to keep the beasts in good health and safe from harm and any “losse came by

the negligence or default of those entrusted,”⁶ then those responsible would be severely punished and would be forced to “make satisfaction”⁷ to others in the community. This measure was enacted to guarantee that they would always have the animals necessary to ensure the production of the dairy products that were needed to continue to support themselves in such an unfamiliar place. Eventually, more cattle were brought to New England and as expected, dairy products began to supplement a significant portion of the diet of all settlers.⁸

As the numbers of cattle increased over the years, their value “rose to great price”⁹ and in some instances were sold for triple the price of the same animal back in England. While many colonists sought to make larger profits from the sale of the cattle, their religious leaders warned that they would bring “the Lord’s displeasure against them”¹⁰ for focusing overly much on the attainment of wealth and leaving the community to seek it. When the cattle trade in New England collapsed and an economic depression set in, it was viewed by many as the manifestation of the Lord’s displeasure and punishment for becoming materialistic.¹¹

Despite the economic collapse that the colony suffered, butter and cattle continued to be a valuable commodity and an important form of currency in colonial New England. When colonists were required to pay taxes to their governments, they were allowed to give butter, an easily transported and stored item, in lieu of pounds sterling. It was also not atypical for colonists to sue in courts for the settlement of a debt and to request that the payment be done either by “money or cattle.”¹² There are even instances where individuals took out mortgages on their cattle.¹³

The cattle necessary to meet the demands of the dairy and other food production used to support the colonists and their economy meant that the English needed to utilize a significant amount of land. The colonists held the prevailing English notion that the New World was a

“wilderness” and that they were doing good, both for God and Country, if they worked to tame it. The colonists also used their interpretation of the Bible to justify their seizure of land, which native people controlled, for the needs of their animals. The biblical passage “I shall give thee, the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession”¹⁴ was just one of the sections that they used to rationalize such a harmful practice. They also truly believed that taking land from native people was a form of Christian service to native people because they could use their encroachment as a “means to convert them”¹⁵ to Christianity and English ways.¹⁶

It was soon found that keeping pastures for cattle and designating an individual to watch over the beasts consumed too much valuable time and resources. Colonists found that it was easier and more efficient to allow cattle to roam the forests and meadows to forage for food. By allowing the animals to wander unattended, colonists were forcing “the burden of fencing cattle out onto the cultivator”¹⁷ of crops, which included local tribes. This in turn had serious repercussions for any native person living near English settlements. Before the arrival of Europeans Native Americans had no need to construct fencing of any kind around their fields. The absence of such a practice allowed cows the opportunity to trample and eat native cornfields. This was extremely devastating to tribes as the majority of their daily food was comprised of corn. This placed Native Americans in a precarious position where they had to struggle to find ways in which they could make up for the losses or face starvation.¹⁸

In an attempt to gain compensation for the damages sustained by the roaming animals, native people would submit legal complaints to English courts to gain restitution. Native people who had tried to comply with English rules regarding fencing argued that “noe reasonable fence”¹⁹ could keep the animals out of their fields and so they had “sustained great damage in

their corne”²⁰ by the destructive nature of the cattle. The English legal system, however, was extremely biased against Native Americans and was deliberately structured to place undue burden onto native people. This was done through the passage of laws that mandated that all Native Americans were required to fence in their fields. If they failed to do so, or their fences were deemed by the Court to be insufficient, then they would not be allowed to use the legal system to seek restitution for the damages that they had sustained from the foraging beasts, and in some instances were even required to pay a fine for having a poorly maintained fence.²¹

Additionally, before a court would hear a case, native people were required to properly identify which specific animal or animals had been responsible for the destruction of their crops. Identification of the offending animal was nearly impossible due to the behavioral nature of the beasts to wander off after eating their fill. This meant that often the animal was gone before the destruction was even discovered, greatly hindering the ability of Native Americans to conclusively identify the culprit to the satisfaction of the colonial magistrates.²²

Native people were given the right to impound any animal that was discovered to be damaging their crops. These laws, however, were still prohibitive to Native Americans who sought restitution because they either had to spend time creating a pound for the creature or they had to walk the animal a significant distance to the nearest English town. They were also required to give “speedy notice”²³ to the proper authorities. Such time constraints were not uniform throughout New England and served as a matter of confusion for those who tried to follow such directives. If the notification requirements were not met, then the court would argue that they had forfeited their right to compensation for any damages they may have suffered.²⁴

Cattle also sustained numerous accidental injuries while roaming throughout the woods, as they frequently wandered into traps that Native Americans had set for deer and other animals.

Sometimes the cattle were able to be released from the traps with only minor damages while on other occasions the “cattle were soe hurt as the owner was constreyned to kill them”²⁵ because of their injuries. Due to the high value of the cattle, colonists simply disregarded the fact that it was virtually impossible for native people to prevent such harm to the animals and held native people liable for any injury, large or small, that the beasts suffered.²⁶

Ultimately, the English would only accept native accommodation for these animals strictly on their own terms, demanding that Native Americans alter their lifestyle by abandoning hunting and live in a more English manner. Native people saw this as a completely unacceptable solution to the problems that were arising due to these animals and their natural behavior. Tribes in New England, discouraged by the lack of help from colonial leaders, stopped petitioning the colonial government for aid in their persistent problem of English livestock. Since they no longer relied on the colonists and their government to help curb the cattle problem, many indigenous people simply killed any offending beasts that they found. Native people had sought to legally gain satisfactory restitution for all the damages caused by the animals, yet were forced to seek justice outside the legal system due to the indifference and inequality of the courts. The Wampanoag sachem Metacom, who was referred to as King Philip by the English, told the English leaders that the trouble over these animals and their destructive nature, combined with other concerns such as sovereignty and land, helped to make the prospect of war between the two groups inevitable.²⁷

During King Philip’s War many Native Americans who lived around the colonists targeted livestock, particularly cattle, when they attacked English settlements. Cattle that were stolen, killed, or maimed by native people were not done because of “lamentable mischeiffe,”²⁸ but as a form of retaliation. It was recognized that damaging colonial property, especially

property that was so highly valued, was a way in which they could inflict a great deal of fear upon the English. There are numerous accounts of native people externalizing their deep-seeded aggression towards the English by violently attacking cattle.²⁹

One example of how Native people manifested their rage toward the cattle-related injustices can be seen in the account of what some native people did to a particular cow. They “took a Cow, knocked off one of her horns, cut out her tongue and so left the poor creature in great misery.”³⁰ When the English colonists came upon this cow, they were quite horrified at how she had been defiled. This is not a solitary example of this form of psychological warfare. William Bradford noted that Native people would “kill their cattle”³¹ when they attacked English settlements throughout King Philip’s War. Other records show that Native people “killed neer a hundred cattell”³² and “made great spoyle of the cattel”³³ that they encountered during raids. Other documents state that “they have killed and taken away many cattle”³⁴ during the “open hostilitie”³⁵ with the English. Over the course of the war it has been argued that upwards of eight thousand English cattle were slaughtered by Native Americans. While not all of the cattle that were killed by native people during time were cows, these statements still demonstrate the extent to which native people would go to harm the colonist’s livestock, which would have included large numbers of bovines. This technique, which could be considered psychological warfare, conveyed a simple message of fear and vulnerability to their English enemies.³⁶

It is undeniable that the English tradition of dairying served as the catalyst for a chain of events that lead to mounting tensions and the eruption of conflicts between the English colonists and tribes throughout the seventeenth century. The central role of dairying in the survival, cultural continuity, and economy of the colonists combined with their choice to overlook natural cattle grazing behavior, religious attitudes of superiority, and the deliberate obstructionism of

colonial government nurtured an environment where a violent clash of cultures was inevitable. Although conflicts over the actions of cattle were not the sole cause of the deterioration of the relationship between the colonists and native people, they helped to ensure that no peaceful resolution could be reached.

It is important to look at the motives of the colonists behind the animals to see why they were so reticent to curtail the destructive nature of their beasts. However, the manner in which English reliance on dairying dramatically impacted both colonial and native life is not the only way in which this aspect of history can or should be examined. There are still many other aspects to this ordinary activity, such as how English women contributed and shaped the conflicts through their connection to the dairy, that needs to be examined in order to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of such violent interactions between the English and native people living in New England. No matter how this subject is studied, it is important to recognize how the nature of both man and beasts is intertwined and facilitates specific outcomes in history.

Endnotes

¹ It should be noted that in the language of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the term *cattle* referred to various animals such as cows, pigs, goats, sheep, horses, etc. Identifying words such as *kine*, *neat*, *horned*, or *black* were used by the English in their writings to distinguish bovines from the other animals. Unlike Anderson's usage which is all inclusive, the term *cattle* used in this body of work refers strictly to all bovines, both male and female (Snow, "Catle, Kine, and Rotherbeasts," viii, xii).

Male cattle were also integral to the dairy production, whether they were prized bulls or castrated draft animals. Bulls were highly valued because they were used to impregnate female cows, therefore enabling them to produce the milk necessary to create dairy products. The majority of the male calves born during the selective breeding process were castrated and turned into draft animals (Snow, "Increase and Vantage," 32). This methodical practice of breeding the animals to ensure a steady supply of milk, butter, and cheeses tied all cattle to the dairy.

² Jay Anderson, "'A Solid Sufficiency': An Ethnography of Yeoman Foodways in Stuart England" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1971), 13-15, 124, 274-275; Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004), 145, 149; Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "Migrants and Motives: Religion and the Settlement of New England," *The New England Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (1985): 366; Lindsay Anne Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony" (master's

thesis, University of Massachusetts Boston, 2009), 90-93; Darrett Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth; Farms and Villages in the Old Colony, 1620-1692* (Boston, M.A.: Beacon Press, 1967), 4-5.

³ William Bradford and Isaac Allerton, "A Letter of William Bradford and Isaac Allerton, 1623," *The American Historical Review* 8, no. 2 (1903): 298.

⁴ Bradford and Allerton, "A Letter of William Bradford and Isaac Allerton, 1623," 298.

⁵ William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation 1620 – 1647* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 353-354; William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 36; Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 280; Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony," 78-80; George Willison, *The Pilgrim Reader; The Story of the Pilgrims as Told by Themselves and Their Contemporaries Friendly and Unfriendly* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, INC, 1953), 245-246.

⁶ Nathaniel Shurtleff, comp., *Deeds*, vol. 12, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*. (Boston, M.A.: Willaim White, 1855), 13.

⁷ Shurtleff, *Deeds*, 13.

⁸ Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "King Philip's Herds: Indians, Colonists, and the Problem of Livestock in Early New England," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 51, no. 4 (1994): 602-603; Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony," 81-82; Peter A. Thomas, "Contrastive Subsistence Strategies and Land Use as Factors for Understanding Indian-White Relations in New England," *Ethnohistory* 23, no. 1 (1976): 2; Shurtleff, *Deeds*, 9-13.

⁹ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 281.

¹⁰ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, 283.

¹¹ Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 168; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, 281-283; Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*, 279-287; Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony," 84-85, 103-104; Thomas, "Contrastive Subsistence Strategies," 2-3.

¹² Shurtleff, *Deeds*, 77.

¹³ Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 145; Theodore M. Banta, *Year Book of the Holland Society of New York* (n.p.: Knickerbocker Press, 1900), 165; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, N.C.), 95; Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony," 86-88, 97; Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth*, 15-16; Nathaniel Shurtleff, comp., *Court Orders*, vol. 1, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* (Boston, M.A.: Willam White, 1855), 50, 55, 60, 77, 79; Shurtleff, *Deeds*, 77-79, 84, 89, 107, 137 Anne Yentsch, "Engendering Visible and Invisible Ceramic Artifacts, Especially Dairy Vessels," *Historical Archaeology* 25, no. 4 (1991): 135.

¹⁴ Francis Jennings, *1975 The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 83.

¹⁵ Robert Cushman, "Reasons and Considerations Touching the Lawfulness of Removing Out of England into the Parts of America," in *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth, From 1602 to 1625*, ed. Alexander Young (Boston, M.A.: Freeman and Bolles, 1844), 243.

¹⁶ Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 80; Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 604-605; David Grayson Allen, "'Vacuum Domicilium': The Social and Cultural Landscape of Seventeenth-Century New England," in *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston, M.A.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 1: 1; Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, 26; Cushman, "Reasons and Considerations Touching," in *Chronicles of the Pilgrim*; Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, 82-83; Peter Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden, and 'The Problem of Social Costs': 'High' and 'Low' Legal Cultures of the British Diaspora Lands in the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries," *Law & Society Review* 32, no. 1 (1998): 82; Randall, "Dairying in 17th century Plymouth Colony," 95-96, 101-102; Robert Blair St. George, "'Set Thine House in Order': The Domestication of the Yeomanry in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *New England Begins: The Seventeenth Century* (Boston, M.A.: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 2: 162; Laurie Lee Weinstein, "Indian vs. Colonists: Competition for Land in 17th Century Plymouth Colony" (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 1983), 218-219.

¹⁷ Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden," 67.

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- ¹⁸ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 607; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 129-130, 150; Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*, 281; Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, 44; Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden," 66-67; Rutman, *Husbandmen of Plymouth*, 7-18; Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 1*, 6; Nathaniel Shurtleff, comp., *Court Orders*, vol. 3, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* (Boston, M.A.: William White, 1855), 21, 106; Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, comp., *Laws*, vol. 11, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* (Boston, M.A.: William White, 1855), 61, 116-117, 143, 200, 213 Thomas, "Contrastive Subsistence Strategies," 7, 11-12; Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675* (Norman, O.K.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 31-32.
- ¹⁹ Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 106.
- ²⁰ Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 21.
- ²¹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 131-135; Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, 144; Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden," 82 Shurtleff, *Laws*, 15, 117, 203, 213; Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 21, 106, 119-120, 167, 192; Pamela J. Snow, "Catle, Kine, and Rotherbeasts: Cattle and the Plantation of Massachusetts, 1624-1684" (PhD diss., University of Maine, 1998), 64; Weinstein, "Indian vs. Colonists," 191-192.
- ²² Anderson, *King Philip's Herds*, 611; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 131; William Henry Whitmore, comp., *The colonial laws of Massachusetts: reprinted from the edition of 1660, with the supplements to 1672: containing also, the Body of Liberties of 1641* (Littleton, C.O.: F.B. Rothman, 1889), 162.
- ²³ Anderson, *King Philip's Herds*, 611.
- ²⁴ Anderson, *King Philip's Herds*, 611; Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 106, 119-120, 167, 192; Shurtleff, *Laws*, 123, 202-203, 236, 239-240; Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, 192-194.
- ²⁵ Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 82.
- ²⁶ Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 197; Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 608; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 130; Jennings, *The Invasion of America*, 144; Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden," 81-82; Shurtleff, *Court Orders Vol 3*, 82-83; Nathaniel Shurtleff, comp., *Court Orders*, vol. 4, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* (Boston, M.A.: William White, 1855), 190-191.
- ²⁷ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 609-613, 620-621; Thomas, "Contrastive Subsistence Strategies," 14-15; Weinstein, "Indian vs. Colonists," 189 -192, 211-215.
- ²⁸ Nathaniel Shurtleff, comp., *Acts of Commissioners*, vol. 10, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* (Boston, M.A.: William White, 1855), 357.
- ²⁹ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 622-623; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 233-246; Shurtleff, *Acts of the Commissioners*, 357.
- ³⁰ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 623.
- ³¹ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, 330.
- ³² Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 622.
- ³³ Anderson, "King Philip's Herds," 622.
- ³⁴ Shurtleff, *Acts of the Commissioners*, 357.
- ³⁵ Shurtleff, *Acts of the Commissioners*, 357.
- ³⁶ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, 330; Anderson "King Philip's Herds," 622-623; Anderson, *Creatures of Empire*, 233-246; Karsten, "Cows in the Corn, Pigs in the Garden," 82; Shurtleff, *Acts of the Commissioners*, 357.