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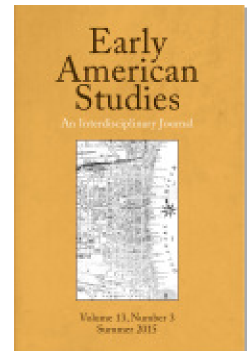
Andrew C. Lipman



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Murder on the Saltwater Frontier
The Death of John Oldham

ANDREW C. LIPMAN
Syracuse University

ABSTRACT This article considers the larger material and political contexts of the 1636 murder of John Oldham aboard his boat by Narragansett-allied Indians, an event that was one of the causes of the 1636–38 Pequot War. Oldham's slaying illustrates how the contested region between New England and New Netherland was a "saltwater frontier" where the primary arena of cross-cultural exchange was the coastline and its nearshore waters, not the land. Natives and colonists relied on each other's maritime technologies and knowledge. At the same time the tricky logistics of their encounters made this zone uniquely perilous. Oldham's Indian killers were also motivated by an intense trade rivalry between Native powers. A series of events caused them to harbor suspicions of Oldham and inspired them to commit small-scale piracy during his murder. The article concludes that the ensuing Pequot War should be seen as a naval war that turned into terrestrial war, reflecting the English desire to shift the frontier off the water and onto dry land.

When Indian and European mariners took to the seas off the northeastern American coast in the early seventeenth century, the two greatest hazards they faced were the weather and each other. John Gallop was certainly wary of squalls and strangers when he sailed from the Connecticut River in July 1636 to trade with native peoples on Long Island. The English skipper had only four men with him on his thirty-foot bark, two of whom were his own "little boys." As he neared a harbor between Long Island's eastern forks, "a

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sudden change of the wind" forced the colonist to steer a new course to Block Island, which lay some fourteen miles to the east.[1]

After several hours crossing through open ocean, perhaps Gallop was heartened to spot another European craft by the clay cliffs of Block Island: "a small pinnace" that he recognized as belonging to his friend John Oldham. But relief soon turned to dread as Gallop realized that the vessel's deck was swarming with Indians, while a canoe paddled away "full of Indians and goods." As the colonist sailed closer, the native men did something surprising: they hoisted the pinnace's sails and set a northerly course for the mainland. Gallop gave chase, firing rounds of duck shot across the other boat's deck and attempting to ram its sides with his bark's bow. By the time he finally caught and boarded the stolen craft, he had killed almost a dozen Indians. Once aboard, Gallop found his fears confirmed. There, half-hidden in a worn fishing net hanging off the boat's rail, was a naked man's body, his limbs half-severed, his head "cleft to the brains" and almost severed from the neck.[2] The man's face was so bloodied that Gallop had to wash it clean before he "knew it to be Mr. Oldham's."[3]

In spite of the confusing, chaotic nature of the crime scene, the murder of John Oldham turned out to be an open-and-shut case. Thanks to reports from Native informants, English colonists learned that Oldham's murderers were Narragansett, Eastern Niantic, and Manisses Indians. The Manisses lived on Block Island and, along with the mainland Eastern Niantics, were subordinate allies of the Narragansetts, who lived along the bay that bears their name. A minor chief or sachem named Audsah was the supposed ringleader of the party that killed Oldham. Audsah had either fled the scene before Gallop arrived or escaped Gallop's wrath by refusing to leave the cargo hold of Oldham's pinnace, which Gallop had to let drift away during his return voyage to the mainland. Within a year of Oldham's shipboard slaying and watery burial, justice was apparently served: the Narragansett sachem Miantonomi put Audsah to death.[4]

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1. John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649,* ed. James Savage, entry for July 20, 1636 (New York, 1972), 1:189. Winthrop described Gallop's craft as "a bark of twenty tons." The length estimate is based on the equation shipbuilders used to calculate tonnage. See William A. Baker, *The Mayflower and Other Colonial Vessels* (Annapolis, 1983), 14, 95–101.

2. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 20, 1636, 1:189–90.

3. Thomas Cobbet, "A Narrative of New England's Deliverances" (1677), *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 7 (1853): 211.

4. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 26, 1636, 1:193. John Winthrop to Henry Vane, May 12, 1637, in Allyn B. Forbes et al., eds., *The Winthrop Papers, 1498–1654,* 6 vols. (Boston, 1929–92), 3:412.

Audsah and his compatriots who died at Gallop's hands were the first of several hundred Indians to be killed, dismembered, or enslaved over the next two years in a war started by English colonists ostensibly looking to avenge Oldham's murder. Along with the Pequot slaying of Captain John Stone aboard his bark in 1634, this second seaborne murder would become the principal casus belli claimed by Puritan governors when they launched a series of assaults against Indians near Long Island Sound beginning in 1636, culminating in their devastating campaign against the Pequot people in 1637. Given its importance in the larger history of English and Indian relations, Oldham's demise is a well-known event. Still, historians have spilled more ink on the earlier murder of Stone, which is the typical starting point for scholarly narratives of the Pequot War.[5] Though the deaths of both Stone and Oldham are important moments in any account of the war's immediate causes, Oldham's slaying can tell us more about the war's larger material, economic, and political contexts.

But this is not a whodunit. This inquiry makes no attempt to finger a new culprit, nor does it try to reopen the decades-old debate over the causes of the Pequot War. The focus is first on the scene of the crime and then on the motives of the murderers. Reconstructing the logistics and reasons behind the bloodshed makes this story resemble the arc of a hard-boiled detective novel: a dramatic opening murder sends the investigator deep into a bewildering, shady world of violence and intrigue. The clues scattered in accounts of Oldham's demise guide us through a region that historians mistakenly divide into discrete colonial and Native territories rather than imagine as a single shared zone centered on waterways and watercraft. For though scholars have long discussed early Indian and European encounters at the edge of the sea, they typically understate the intertwined, interdepen-

5. Alfred A. Cave, "Who Killed John Stone?" *William and Mary Quarterly* 49 (July 1992): 509–21. Cave was responding to the argument made by Francis Jennings and echoed by others that Stone's killers were Western Niantics, a group of Pequot tributaries. Cave suggests that perhaps two attack parties, one Pequot, the other Western Niantic, were responsible for Stone's death. For the Western Niantic argument, see Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1975), 190–94. The most thorough discussion of Oldham's death to date is found in Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 206–9; for other extended treatments, see Samuel Gardner Drake, *The History and Antiquities of the City of Boston; The Capital of Massachusetts . . .* (Boston, 1854), 197–201; Neal Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500–1643* (New York, 1982), 216–19; Alfred A. Cave, *The Pequot War* (Amherst, Mass., 1996), 104–9.

dent nature of the maritime space that bound Algonquian, English, and Dutch villages together.

Geologically and politically, this shoreline was unique. Glacial deposits from the last ice age formed an east-west chain of islands stretching from the mouth of the Hudson to Cape Cod. The waters between these sandy "outer lands" and the mainland created a continuous, semiprotected passage for travel along the coast.[6] Algonquian canoes had navigated these sounds and straits for many centuries, but by the late 1620s English and Dutch sails had also become a common sight. From a European perspective, these waters had strategic value: they were the gateway to the Connecticut and Hudson Rivers. Colonial traders prized these estuarine highways to inland, fur-rich Indian peoples; colonial farmers coveted the river valleys' fertile soils. For Indians, this coast took on new importance at the same time. Increasingly, Algonquians moved their villages shoreward to be closer to foreign traders hawking cloth and tools. Crowding near shellfish banks also brought Indians closer to the raw material for minting wampum beads, the shared currency for intercultural trade in the Northeast.[7] As the place where rivaling native and colonial powers converged in search of trade and territorial gains, the coastal setting of Oldham's murder was filled with hidden currents as menacing as the darkest alleys of any film noir.[8]

Given that so many of the cross-cultural encounters in this region occurred on the water or at the water's edge, words like "border*land*," the currently in-vogue term for contested spaces, along with the other terrestrial metaphors that scholars have coined—"the middle *ground*," "the native

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6. Dorothy Sterling, *Outer Lands: A Natural History Guide to Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, Block Island, and Long Island* (New York, 1978), 9–20.

7. Lynn Ceci, "The Effect of European Contact and Trade on the Settlement Pattern of Indians in Coastal New York, 1524–1665: The Archeological and Documentary Evidence" (Ph.D. diss., CUNY Graduate Center, 1977).

8. Several recent works emphasize Anglo-Dutch relations as a key factor in the colonization of this region. See Benjamin Schmidt, "Mapping an Empire: Cartographic and Colonial Rivalry in Seventeenth-Century Dutch and English North America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (July 1997): 549–78; Faren R. Siminoff, *Crossing the Sound: The Rise of Atlantic American Communities in Seventeenth-Century Eastern Long Island* (New York, 2004); Katherine Grandjean, "Reckoning: The Communications Frontier in Early New England" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2008). Focusing more exclusively on New Netherland, Donna Merwick also highlights the "alongshore" nature of Dutch-Munsee relations in *The Shame and the Sorrow: Dutch-Amerindian Encounters in New Netherland* (Philadelphia, 2006), esp. 2–32.

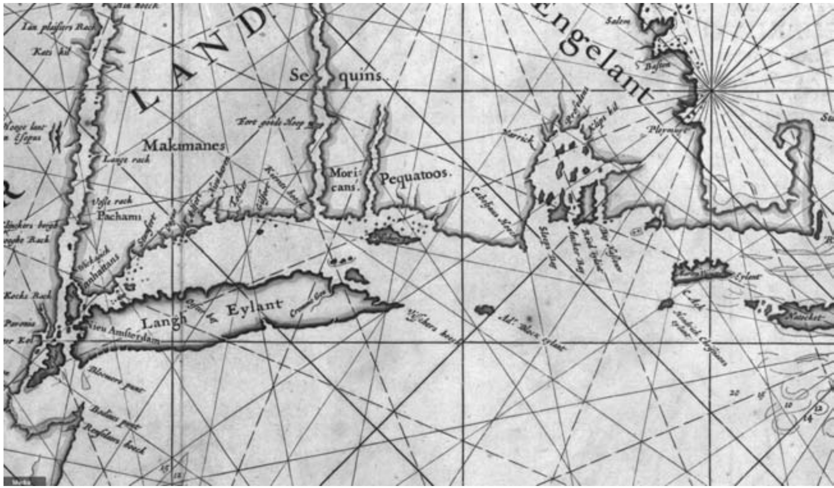

Figure 1. The North American mainland and outlying islands from the Hudson River to Cape Cod, a coastal zone that was contested by Algonquian, English, and Dutch powers from the 1610s to the 1670s. Block Island, the site of John Oldham's murder, is the island lying directly east of Long Island. Detail from a map attributed to Joan Vinckeboons, *Pascaert van Nieu Nederland, Virginie en Nieu Engelant* (Amsterdam, 1660). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

ground," "the divided *ground*," and even "the *woods*"—seem jarringly earthy.[9] The phrase "saltwater frontier" is meant to evoke the fluid, shifting, and stormy quality of colonial and Native relations in the area. The oxymoronic pairing of these two words is intentional. Following the lead of Stephanie

9. For an overview of the utility of Herbert Eugene Bolton's term "borderland," see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 814–41; the "ground" trope can be traced to Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991); followed by Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia, 2006); Alan Taylor, *The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution* (New York, 2006). James H. Merrell offers a more "bewildering" view of intercultural spaces as the real and metaphorical forests between native and colonial settlements in *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999). On the persistence of the term "middle ground," see the forum "The Middle Ground Revisited," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (January 2006): 3–96.

Smallwood, who uses *saltwater* to evoke the Atlantic experiences of enslaved Africans, the term here is a reminder that Indians in this region were not passive, land-bound people reacting to the arrival of active, seaborne Europeans. They too could be "peoples in motion" in a maritime world.[10] *Frontier* is meant to evoke a "zone" of cultural encounters, not to serve as a callback to the Frederick Jackson Turner's oppositional, erosive vision of colonial-Native interaction.[11] Put another way, this was both a contested region of porous boundaries and an integral part of the seventeenth-century Atlantic world.

Focusing on the details and possible motives behind Oldham's 1636 murder offers new insights into how colonists and Indians navigated this intercultural space. At the center of this lurid tale is a fact that historians have long known but seldom discussed: the Pequot War, one of the most infamous frontier wars in all of American history, began at sea.[12]

Floating encounters between Algonquians and Europeans had been going on for a century before John Oldham went to a watery grave. But just as historians sometimes overlook Indian mobility on the water, many colonial-era Europeans did not consider Natives to be nautical peoples.[13] In a 1585

10. Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from African to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 8 ("peoples in motion"); for another approach to looking at non-European maritime peoples in the Atlantic world, see Kevin Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers in the Atlantic World," *Journal of American History* (March 2006): 1327–55. For other examples of scholars using coastal metaphors to describe cultural encounters, see Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Honolulu, 1980); Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago, 1985); White, *Middle Ground,* ix–x.

11. On redefining *frontier* to mean a "zone," see Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar, "Comparative Frontier History," in Thompson and Lamar, eds., *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa Compared* (New Haven, 1981), 7; James H. Merrell, "'The Customes of Our Countrey': Indians and Colonists in Early America," in Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Strangers within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire* (Chapel Hill, 1991), 117–56; Kerwin Lee Klein, "Reclaiming the 'F' Word, or Being and Becoming Postwestern," *Pacific Historical Review* 65 (May 1996): 179–215.

12. Katherine Grandjean has also highlighted the maritime dimensions of the war in general and Oldham's murder in particular in "Reckoning," 24–44; see also Horace P. Beck, *The American Indian as a Sea-Fighter in Colonial Times* (Mystic, Conn., 1959), 20–23; Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 214.

13. Chaplin, *Subject Matter,* 212–13.

treatise encouraging the colonization of North America, Richard Hakluyt the elder anticipated that the English's prowess on the water would always give them a clear advantage over Natives. He imagined that in any moment of confrontation in a hostile territory, colonial ships could simply stay offshore and "annoy" the Indians who would be helpless to stop them, "by reason that we are lords of navigation and they not so."[14] If "navigation" meant the ability to cross oceans, then the English and Dutch were indeed "lords" and the Indians "not so." Surely that is what Thomas Morton meant when he more precisely observed that Indians "have not the use of navigation, whereby they may trafficke as other nations."[15] But the definition of "navigation" was just beginning to take on global connotations in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Writers started to distinguish between "common" navigation, meaning coastal piloting and relative positioning with the age-old techniques of local knowledge and dead reckoning, and "grand" navigation, meaning sailing courses out of sight of land with the aid of charts and global positioning devices such as compasses, sextants, and astrolabes.[16] If the term "navigation" is used to refer to a broad spectrum of marine wayfinding and technology, the details surrounding the Oldham case demonstrate that such brazen claims of European superiority simply do not hold water.[17]

What John Oldham knew (and the elder Hakluyt did not) was that Indian and colonial mariners were each mutually dependent on the other's skills and technology. When the doomed colonist set his course on that blustery day in 1636, two Narragansett men sailed with him, probably giving him pointers on navigation and acting as his translators. Block Island, their destination, is a pear-shaped island that sits thirteen miles south of

14. Richard Hakluyt the elder, "Inducements to the liking of the voyage intended towards Virginia in 40. and 42. degrees of latitude, written 1585," in John Brereton, *A Briefe and true Relation of the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia . . .* (1602; repr., Ann Arbor, 1966), 27.

15. Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan; or, New Canaan containing an abstract of New England, composed in three bookes* (London, 1637), 40 (quotation), 55.

16. J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (London, 1963), 83–84.

17. The term *wayfinding,* first used to describe indigenous navigation techniques in the Pacific, has since become a popular term for geographers, cognitive scientists, urban planners, and architects interested in intuitive and vernacular methods of spatial exploration. See David Lewis, *We, the Navigators: The Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific,* 2nd ed. (Honolulu, 1995); Reginald G. Golledge, "Human Wayfinding and Cognitive Maps," in Golledge, ed., *Wayfinding Behavior: Cognitive Mapping and Other Spatial Processes* (Baltimore, 1999), 5–45.

the mainland and lacks a natural harbor. It was a tricky trading spot for even a practiced colonial sailor, so hiring Indians offered Oldham a demonstrable advantage over his European competitors.[18] Gallop, the man who discovered Oldham's still-warm body, had no Indian guide with him and was blown off course when a surprise shift of wind made it impossible for him to approach Long Island from the northeast. Meanwhile, a dozen miles to the east, Oldham's native wayfinders could have seen that change as both a predictable pattern and as a spiritually charged gift. The local shift of northerly winds to the southwest during sunny days, which colonists later called the "sea turne," was a phenomenon that Narragansetts had known about for centuries and called "*sowwânishen.*" "This is the pleasingest, warmest wind in the climate," wrote the colonial observer Roger Williams in 1643, "most desired of the *Indians*" because it brought "faire weather" and was a favorable blessing from the *Sowwaníu,* the mythical land to the southwest where "the gods chiefly dwell" and "hither the soules of all their Great and Good men and women goe."[19]

Oldham's two guides were following in the long tradition of seagoing Indians trading on their rich cartographic, linguistic, and cultural knowledge. The historic records are littered with examples of Indians offering and being forced to serve as pilots, rescuers, and translators on colonial craft and sometimes even traveling back to Europe.[20] John Winthrop in particular was an avid collector of stories of the Native people who served as the

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18. When Giovanni da Verrazzano came upon Block Island and named it Luisa in 1524, he "did not anchor there because the weather was unfavorable"; in 1636 John Underhill offered a description of the difficulty of making landfall on Block Island, where the "the su[r]fe of the Sea being great, hindered us." Verrazzano, "Translation of the Cèllere Codex," trans. Susan Tarrow, in Lawrence C. Wroth, ed., *The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano, 1524–1528* (New Haven, 1970), 137; Underhill, *Newes from America; or, A New and Experimentall Discoverie of New England* . . . (1638; repr., Lincoln, Neb., 2007), 4–6, 5 (quotation).

19. Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America; or, An help to the Language of the Natives in that part of America called New-England* . . . (1643; repr., Bedford, Mass., 1997), 86; emphasis in original. See also William S. Simmons, *Cautantowwit's House: An Indian Burial Ground on the Island of Conanicut in Narragansett Bay* (Providence, 1970), 52–55.

20. Samuel Drake, "Origin of the Indian Wars," in Drake, ed., *The Old Indian Chronicle: Being A Collection of Exceeding Rare Tracts* . . .(Boston, 1867), 6–17; Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History* . . . , 2 vols. (Boston, 1892), 1:13–44; Leonard A. Adolf, "Squanto's Role in Pilgrim Diplomacy," *Ethnohistory* 11 (Summer 1964): 247–61; Beck, *The Indian as Sea-Fighter,* 13–19; Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence,* 53–55.

colonists' de facto Coast Guard. The Puritan diarist took note of the Indians on Cape Cod who found the castaway Richard Garrett and his frostbitten family in December 1630, warmed them, fed them, retrieved their lost shallop, and summoned help from Plymouth. In 1635 Winthrop recorded the tales of the Long Island Natives who rescued a Dutch shipwreck survivor after five days adrift and brought him safely to Manhattan, and the Nausets who discovered a shallop that swept away from Plymouth and returned it two weeks later.[21] Still, not all shipwreck stories involved heroic Indians. When a bark broke up on the shores of Long Island near Manhattan in 1636, the colonists who came looking to salvage its lost goods were "sett upon" by Indians who seemed to be jealously guarding the beached hull as they plundered its cargo.[22]

Natives' coastal knowledge could be remarkably expansive and sometimes trumped that of the most intrepid Christian seamen. When a party of Indians sailing a European-made shallop met Bartholomew Gosnold's bark *Concord* near the Isle of Shoals in 1602, they "with a piece of chalk described the coast thereabouts" extending all the way to Placentia in Newfoundland, a village that lay some nine hundred miles to the east.[23] On a 1606 voyage to Penobscot Bay, the colonial entrepreneur Ferdinando Gorges valued his kidnapped Native guides' navigation advice over "the opinion of our best Sea-men of these times," for he "understood the Natives themselves to be exact Pilots for that Coast, having been accustomed to frequent the same, both as Fishermen and in passing along the shoare to seek their enemies."[24]

Though Oldham's Narragansett guides were culturally distinct from the Indians in the Gulf of Maine who had aided Gosnold and Gorges thirty years earlier, their lives were similarly centered on the sea. Saltwater fishing was an everyday activity. Archaeologists have found ample evidence that fish and shellfish were staples of the coastal Algonquian diet—one study of human remains from precontact Nantucket indicated that the islanders got

21. Winthrop, *History,* 1:39–40, 167–68, 174.

22. Jonathan Brester to John Winthrop Jr., June 18, 1636, *Winthrop Papers,* 3:270–71, 271 (quotation); Winthrop, *History,* entry for March 30, 1636, 1:182–83.

23. Gabriel Archer, "The Relation of Captain Gosnold's Voyage to the North Part of Virginia," Virtual Jamestown Project, University of Virginia, http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/jamestown-browse?id=J1005.

24. Ferdinando Gorges, "A Briefe Narration of the Originall Undertaking of the Advancement of Plantations into the Parts of America," 1st ed. (1658), in James Phinney Baxter, ed., *Sir Ferdinando Gorges and His Province of Maine,* 3 vols. (Boston, 1890), 2:10.

approximately 60 percent of their calories from seafood.[25] In his *Key* to the Narragansett language, Williams recorded words for fifteen species of fish, nine points of wind, seven different makes of canoes, six stages of the tides, and four kinds of European craft. Narragansetts also had numerous nautical verb constructions, including: "*Sepagehommaûta*/Let us sail," "*Wauaúpunish*/Hoyse up," "*Touwopskhómmke*/Cast anchor," and "*Kspúnsh*/Tie it fast." Williams even reported seeing "thirty or forty of their Canowes fill'd with men, and neere as many more of their enemies in a Sea-fight."[26] When the Pequot War broke out, Indians relied primarily on canoes to ferry their warriors, captives, and refugees to and from the fighting. During the conflict their dugouts sometimes proved superior to English boats for crossing local waters. As a Mohegan flotilla went "sailing down the River of Connecticut" together with a group of colonial allies in small craft, the English "fell several times a ground, the water being very low," while the Mohegans, "not being wonted to such Things with their small canoes," soon became "impatient of Delays."[27] Still, Algonquians only rarely took to the sea "to seek their enemies"—the bulk of their ocean journeys were dedicated to trade and diplomacy.

Coastal Algonquian polities were constellations of villages that often straddled the waters between the "outer lands" and the mainland, and thus were bound together by regular canoe travel. The men accompanying Oldham to Block Island had probably made this same sail dozens of times before in canoes known as *mishoòn.* These craft bore little resemblance to the light birch-bark canoes that are often associated with Indians from the eastern woodlands. Carved from the massive trunks of oak, sycamore, pine, chestnut, and tulip trees, these oceangoing dugouts were closer in appearance to the craft used by Pacific islanders or natives of the Pacific Northwest.[28] Winthrop heard reports of "canoes so great as one will carry eighty men" on Long Island Sound; Williams, who spent more time aboard these craft, offered a more conservative range for crew size, noting that smaller *mishoonêmese* "will not well carry above three or foure," but the heftier *mishîttouwand* could hold "twenty, thirty, forty men," meaning that the biggest

25. Kathleen J. Bragdon, *The Native People of Southern New England, 1500–1650* (Norman, Okla., 1996), 62–63 (Nantucket study), 110–12, 116–17.

26. Williams, *Key,* 85–86, 108–10 (quotations), 111–17.

27. John Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War: Especially of the memorable Taking of Their Fort at Mistick in Connecticut in 1637* (Boston, 1736), 1.

28. On tree types, see Williams, *Key,* 107–8; John A. Strong, *The Algonquian Peoples of Long Island from Earliest Times to 1700* (Interlaken, N.Y., 1997), 43.

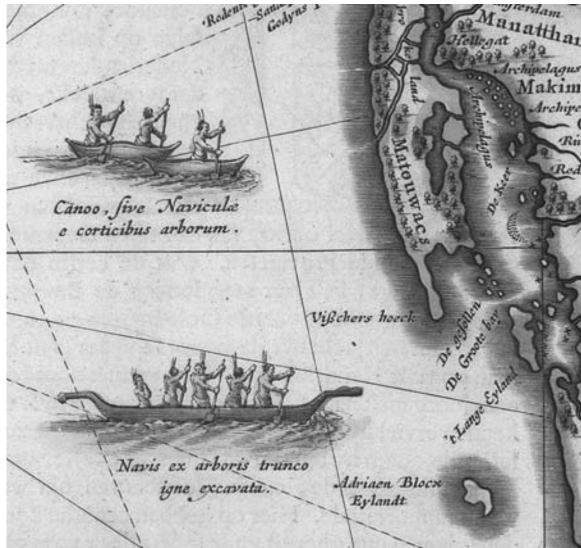

Figure 2. Images of bark-sided *mishoòns*, and a dugout *mishíttouwand,* described in the Latin captions as "Cänoo, or small boats made from tree bark" and "Boat made from a tree trunk hollowed with fire." Detail from Willem Janszoon Blaeu, "Nova Belgica et Anglia Nova" (Amsterdam, 1635). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

canoes easily topped fifty feet in length.[29] Trade with Europeans had probably increased the average size and total number of Algonquian dugouts—before the introduction of sharp metal hatchets, each tree had to be felled and carved with a labor-intensive process of burning, chopping, and scraping with stone and shell tools.[30] At each end, the body of a *mishíttouwand* narrowed into a protruding point that colonists called "the nose" or "the

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29. Winthrop, *History,* entry for October 2, 1632, 1:112 ("many canoes so great"); Williams, *Key,* 107 ("will not well carry") Winthrop offered evidence that peoples nearer to Massachusetts had canoes that could hold over thirty men, taking note of the time "The Tarentines, to the number of one hundred, came in three canoes"; Winthrop, *History,* entry for August 8, 1631, 1:59. Assuming a tight seating space of sixteen inches per person, a canoe that held forty seated men would be at least fifty-three feet long, whereas Winthrop's rumored eighty-passenger canoe would surpass one hundred feet, making it about the same length as the *Mayflower.*

30. Williams, *Key,* 106–7; Bragdon, *Native People,* 105–6; Strong, *Algonquian Peoples of Long Island,* 43–44.

Beak Head," which could break through waves and reduce chop.[31] Indian crews used oars as their primary means of propulsion, but for longer voyages they outfitted their dugouts with sails called *sepâkehig.* Williams observed: "Their owne reason hath taught them to pull of[f] a Coat or two and set it up on a small pole, with which they will saile before a wind ten, or twenty mile, &c."[32] Using their oars as rudders and leeboards, Indians could probably steer a reasonably precise course in a *mishíttouwand,* provided the wind was blowing in the general direction of their destination. An open-water passage such as the thirteen-mile return trip from Block Island to the mainland was a relatively painless affair with the help of a well-trimmed *sepâkehig* and a well-timed gust of *sowwánishen* at the stern.

Riding on their fellow sailor's pinnace, Oldham's Indian companions would certainly recognize that his vessel was more complicated than theirs. Built of lightweight pine (the term *pinnace* derives from the Latin *pinus*), his craft was probably about twenty feet long and six or seven feet wide, with a deck and a single mast. This kind of craft, which one historian described as "little more than decked ship's boats" was a close cousin of the Dutch *pink.* Along with the smaller, open-decked shallops and the larger, two-masted barks like the one sailed by John Gallop, pinnaces were among the primary workhorses of coastal traders.[33]

The physical contrast between a native canoe and a colonial pinnace was perhaps not as great as a modern reader might think. Though the European craft could point closer to the wind than an Indian boat, it was likewise equipped with oars for unfavorable winds and calm seas. The Manisses dugout that Gallop witnessed fleeing Oldham's vessel "full of Indians and goods" was almost certainly the longer of the two craft. That one *mishíttouwand* had ferried the fourteen Indians who remained aboard as well as the unknown number who fled, and it also had additional room for both export and import cargo, meaning that the canoe's length probably dwarfed that

31. Lion Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," ed. Andrew Newman, *Early American Studies* 9, no. 2 (2011): 478 ("the nose"); Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War,* x ("Beak Head"). *Beakhead* was the English name for a decorative protrusion at the bow of many European craft that served a similar function. See Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance,* 68; Baker, *The Mayflower,* 174.

32. Williams, *Key,* 108.

33. Baker, "Vessel Types in Colonial Massachusetts," in Frederick S. Allis, ed., *Seafaring in Colonial Massachusetts* (Boston, 1980), 3–15; Richard David, *Hakluyt's Voyages* (Boston, 1981), 23 ("little more").

Figure 3. Images of Native and European watercraft from an anonymous Dutch engraver's fanciful view of what Manhattan looked like in 1628. The canoes at the bottom center and bottom right are clearly copied from the Blaeu map. The dugout that ferried Oldham's killers was at least three or four times longer than the largest canoe shown here. Oldham's pinnace was probably similar in size to the small craft on the bottom left with its oars out and its sail struck. John Gallop's bark was the approximate size of the two-masted craft the middle right. Detail from "t' Fort nieuw Amsterdam op de Manhatans" in Joost Hartgers, ed., *Beschrijvinghe van Virginia, Nieuw Nederlandt, Nieuw Engelandt* . . . (Amsterdam, 1651). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

of the "small pinnace" by at least ten feet.[34] The advantages of Oldham's vessel rested in its width, height over the water line, enclosed cargo hold, and fixed sail, all features that gave it greater range and stability than a dugout. The larger sort of pinnace with a more complex rig could even cross the Atlantic.[35]

Despite the advantages of European craft, colonists also tacitly acknowledged the benefits of using "canows" for nearshore transport by buying and stealing dugouts from their Native neighbors and fashioning their own after

34. Winthrop, *History,* entry for May 20, 1636, 1:189 (quotation); Baker, *The Mayflower,* 75–94.

35. Baker, *The Mayflower,* 75–82.

Indian methods.[36] The traveler John Josselyn observed that "the *English*" used old-growth pines "to make large *Canows* of 20 feet long, and two and a half over, hollowing them with an Adds, and shaping them like a Boat."[37] Another colonist observed English-made canoes of identical dimensions and observed that in Salem "there be more Cannowes in this towne than in all the whole Patent; every household having a water-ho[r]se or two."[38] In 1630 John Winthrop's son Henry drowned near Salem shortly after the Winthrop fleet arrived in Massachusetts Bay. According to an undated Winthrop family account, he died while swimming to claim an abandoned Indian canoe.[39]

The newly arrived foreigners had to admit that they often lacked the skills that Indian watermen had developed in their frequent small-craft travel. The colonist William Wood marveled that native rowers "will venture to Seas, when an *English* Shallope dare not bear a knot of sayle; scudding over the overgrown waves as fast as a winde-driven ship."[40] Dutch and English alike admired how Indians could "swim a mile, yea two or more," and observed that "From the youngest age" Indians "swim like ducklings," skills that were particularly impressive given that most Europeans could not swim at all.[41] Roger Williams often hitched rides aboard Narragansett canoes and sometimes believed himself to be "in great danger." Once, when he "questioned safety," one of his Native friends calmly reassured him by saying, "Feare not, if we be overset I will carry you safe to Land."[42] The man soothing his white-knuckled passenger is a reminder that to Indians, Europeans could sometimes seem unseaworthy companions.

Algonquians also recognized the advantages of European-built vessels. In 1602 the English explorer Bartholomew Gosnold met a party of Indians

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36. Baker, "Vessel Types in Colonial Massachusetts," 14; Chaplin, *Subject Matter,* 214.

37. John Josselyn, *A Critical Edition of* Two Voyages to New-England, ed. Paul J. Lindholdt, (Hanover, N.H., 1988), 46–47; emphasis in original.

38. William Wood, *Wood's New England's Prospect* (1630; repr., Boston, 1865), 48.

39. John Winthrop's diary, entry for July 2, 1630, *Winthrop Papers,* 2:265n2.

40. Wood, *Wood's New England's Prospect,* 102; emphasis in original.

41. Williams, *Key,* 109 ("swim a mile"); Adriaen van der Donck, *A Description of New Netherland,* ed. Charles T. Gehring and William Starna, trans. Diederik Goedhuys (Lincoln, Neb., 2008), 96 ("from the youngest age"). On early modern European attitudes toward bathing, swimming, and immersion in water in general, see Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven, 2009), 15–25; Dawson, "Enslaved Swimmers and Divers," 1329–34.

42. Williams, *Key,* 109 ("in great danger").

who were sailing a Biscay shallop "with mast and saile, an iron grapple, and a kettle of Copper" off the coast of what is now Maine. Through "some words and figures [the Indians] made," the English learned that the natives had recently traded with "some Barks" of "John [or Juan] de Liz," probably a Basque fisherman and trader who was the likely source of the shallop.[43] Throughout the Gulf of Maine, Native peoples became regular consumers of European craft. Five years later and over three hundred miles to the northeast, George Popham and Ralegh Gilbert spotted another Indian-operated "bisken shallop" off Nova Scotia.[44] Two decades later John Pory observed that the Indians in the area regularly bought shallops from the French, "which they can manage as well as anie Christian."[45] Other colonists saw evidence that native boatbuilders were inspired by their European brethren. In a 1638 visit to Boston Harbor, John Josselyn witnessed "an *Indian*-Pinnace sailing by us made of *Birch-bark,* sewed together with the roots of *spruse* and white *Cedar* (drawn out into threads), and trimmed with sails top and top gallant very sumptuously." This curious craft was not unique, and Josselyn later remarked that though "Ships they have none," the Natives of Massachusetts Bay "do prettily imitate ours in their *Birchen-pinnaces.*"[46]

By the time of Oldham's last voyage, this saltwater frontier had developed into a fluid zone of cultural exchange where Indian and European seafarers could be both mutually dependent and mutually admiring. Yet offshore encounters could easily turn hostile. Colonists sometimes preferred to take their Indian pilots captive rather than pay them, and Indians sometimes decided to burn or sink colonial vessels rather than sail them.[47] After a quarrel with a French ship in 1619, a group of Massachusett Indians attacked in canoes, "at such advantage that they killed manie of them [and] burned their shipp then riding at Anchor" in Boston Harbor, and took five men as captives.[48] Similarly, a group of "Eastern [Maine] Indians" mur-

43. Brereton, *A Briefe and true Relation,* 4–5 (quotations); Archer, "The Relation of Captain Gosnold's Voyage to the North Part of Virginia."

44. George Popham and Ralegh Gilbert, "The Relation of a Voyage unto New England," in George Parker Winship, ed., *Sailors' Narratives of Voyages along the New England Coast, 1524–1624* (Boston, 1905), 157.

45. John Pory, "A Coppie of a parte of Mr. Poreys Letter to the Governor of Virginia," in Champlin Burrage, ed., *John Pory's Lost Description of Plymouth Colony in the Earliest Days of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), 49.

46. Josselyn, *A Critical Edition of* Two Voyages to New-England, 23 ("an *Indian*-Pinnace"), 102 ("ships they have none"); emphasis in original.

47. See Beck, *The American Indian as a Sea-Fighter,* 16–23.

48. Morton, *New English Canaan,* 22–23.

dered the Englishman Henry Way and four crew members aboard his shallop in 1632.[49] The exchange of maritime information and technologies did not always lead to calm intercultural seas. Rather, it was often during those interdependent moments spent bobbing offshore that frontier relations were most tippy and tempestuous.

An investigation of the circumstances surrounding Oldham's death cannot overlook the previous murder of John Stone, the other incident that the English claimed as grounds for the Pequot War. The Stone case aptly illustrates how coastal engagements in particular were fraught with perils for all participants. On a trade mission to the Connecticut River in 1634, the notoriously unscrupulous Stone took two Pequot men hostage, "bound them, and made them show him the way up the river." That night two groups of Pequots and Western Niantics raided Stone's camp and sneaked aboard his ship to free the captives. Once aboard, the rescuers brained Stone with his own hatchet and killed the rest of his men. In the fracas the Indians accidentally ignited a store of gunpowder, causing the vessel to "suddenly bl[o]w up into the air" and then sink. Later English inquiries revealed that the Indians' revenge may have had multiple motives: the raiders were not simply attacking Stone to rescue the hostages; some claimed they had also mistaken him for a Dutchman and thought that destroying his vessel was a just response to the recent Dutch murder of a Pequot sachem.[50]

A few points from this story demonstrate the inherent dangers of a maritime contact zone. First, Stone's ignorance of the Connecticut's waters was a major cause of his death. His hostage taking was of course the more direct cause, but it is not hard to see how nautical insecurity informed the kidnapping. The reason Stone needed a pilot was to avoid running aground, as becoming stuck on sandbank would have made him a convenient target for any Native plunderers looking for an easy score. This raises a related point: Stone's bark was both a shell of safety and an instrument of his demise. The same deeper hull that allowed him to sail farther than any canoe was a liability in shallow, estuarine waters with hidden sandbanks and

49. Winthrop, *History,* entry for May 14, 1632, 1:79.

50. Winthrop, *History,* entry for November 6, 1634, 1:148 (quotations); Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War,* viii–ix; Cave, "Who Killed John Stone?" On confusion between the Dutch and English (a claim that some colonists dismissed as a thin excuse, but seems quite plausible given that Stone was headed toward a Dutch fort, not an English one), see Underhill, *Newes from America,* 10–11.

unfamiliar tides. And the Indians who raided his craft turned the structure into a trap, as it is unlikely that either Stone or his men could swim. The light, flammable vessel's vulnerabilities were further demonstrated when a simple accident turned it into a floating pyre. The details of this one incident and many other saltwater interactions belie the problematic colonial boasts that Indians lacked "navigation." For even though Stone was a practiced seafarer, he seemed almost lubberly in these waters compared to the pilots he abducted and the canoe-borne rescuers who sent him and his bark to the river's bottom.

Colonial apologists for the Pequot War would later lump the Stone incident with the Oldham affair despite the fact there were serious differences between the two slayings.[51] The major problem behind the Puritan decision to blur the crimes together was that the Pequots' hands were conspicuously clean of Oldham's blood. The colonial vilification of the Pequots becomes even more suspect when one considers that Stone was not, like Oldham, a local man with established relationships with both Indians and colonists in the region.[52] Instead, he was a reckless intruder, a Virginian whose final voyage up the Connecticut was the last episode of an epic booze-soaked rampage up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Months before Pequots bludgeoned him to death, Stone had narrowly escaped being hanged for his drunken attempt at piracy in Manhattan and for his drunken attempt at adultery in Boston, and both the Dutch and the English had banished him from their ports.[53] The obvious question lingering about Stone's death is not "Why did the Pequots kill him?" but, rather, why had a wronged sea captain, an almost-cuckolded husband, or a colonial executioner failed to kill the rogue first?

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51. Most astonishingly, one of the young witnesses to Oldham's death would later misremember the killers as Pequots; Cobbet, "A Narrative of New England's Deliverances," 211–12. See also Mason, *A Brief History of the Pequot War,* viii–ix; William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1646,* ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York, 1952), 292; William Hubbard, *The History of the Indian Wars in New England from the First Settlement to the Termination of the War with King Philip, in 1677 . . . ,* ed. Samuel G. Drake (1865; repr., New York, 1969), 1:38, 2: 7–11; Increase Mather, *Early History of New England; Being a Relation of Hostile Passages between the Indians and European Voyagers . . . ,* ed. Samuel G. Drake (Boston, 1864), 114–16.

52. Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 189–90, 194–95; Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence,* 210–11, 218.

53. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 268–70; Winthrop, *History,* entries for June 2 and September 12, 1633, 1:104, 111.

By contrast, the Oldham murder is not easily attributed to the Englishman's bad behavior or to a case of mistaken identity, though aggressive actions by either him or his killers cannot be ruled out as causes. The results of colonists' investigations into this slaying were contradictory, and no one explanation for the crime is fully satisfactory. But first it helps to consider the larger currents of change that Oldham sailed through on his way to Block Island. Tidal shifts in the exercise of power and the flow of resources across the saltwater frontier help explain the ensuing bloodshed.

Oldham, his Narragansett pilots, and his Manisses assassins were all major players in a bustling coastal trade in furs, goods, and grain that was facilitated by an intercultural currency of shell beads that the English called *wampum* and the Dutch called *zeewan*.[54] Those small white and purple shell cylinders were a major lure in drawing Oldham to Block Island on that windy day, as was Indian corn: the English colonies in the region could produce only meager grain harvests, and their very survival depended on local Indians' willingness to sell their surplus maize.[55] The traffic in zeewan had intensified old rivalries and inequalities between and within Indian powers. Sachems started jockeying for control of the finest deposits of clams and whelks that served as raw material for beads, and they tried to create exclusive trade agreements with their European partners. The trade also heightened tensions among Europeans, as the Plymouth and Massachusetts colonies were constantly trying to gain an edge over each other and the traders of the Dutch West India Company, who had the longest established presence in the region.[56]

Over his long career spent hawking European goods, Oldham became a

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54. *Wampum* was an abbreviation of *wampumpeag,* which meant "white strings," whereas *zeewan* meant "scattered." See Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence,* 277n14; Lynn Ceci, "Wampum as a Peripheral Resource," in Laurence M. Hauptman and James D. Wherry, eds., *The Pequots in Southern New England: The Fall and Rise of an American Indian Nation* (Norman, Okla., 1990), 52–58.

55. Wampum and corn were the only major trade commodities that the Manisses had to offer; as islanders, their supply of furs was inherently limited. As Katherine Grandjean points out, surplus maize was a dear commodity at this exact moment, as a 1635 hurricane had devastated the already insufficient colonial yields. She argues convincingly that hunger for corn (not just, as Francis Jennings, Neal Salisbury, and Alfred Cave would have it, greed for land and wampum) was a major factor driving English aggression. See Grandjean, "Reckonings," 60–65.

56. Bragdon, *Native People,* 179–81; Ceci, "The Effect of European Contact and Trade"; Ceci, "Wampum as a Peripheral Resource," 48–63; David Murray, *Indian Giving: Economies of Power in Indian-White Exchanges* (Amherst, Mass., 2000), 116–40.

familiar and well-liked figure among the Narragansetts. In 1634 the tribe's chief sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi sold him the entire thousand-acre island of Chippacursett in Narragansett Bay "upon condition, as it should seem, that he would dwell there near unto them."[57] The offer was less generous and convivial than it might seem at first blush: the Narragansetts were engaged in a heated trade war with their Pequot neighbors, and they offered Oldham the island as a bribe to secure his loyalty and keep him from peddling his wares to their enemies. As the two largest powers in the region, the Pequots and the Narragansetts looked to expand their respective orbits of subordinate villages. Canonicus and Miantonomi enjoined their lesser partners, such as the Manisses, to send them regularly canoes full of wampum, corn, and finely woven mats as tributary offerings. Though these hierarchical power relations dated back to before the fur trade, the influx of new consumer goods and competition within sachemships for that market heightened tensions between "chief" sachems and their allies.[58] Most notably, the Mohegan sachem Uncas, who had once been a loyal partner of the Pequots, broke from them and began to assert his independence.[59] This strife within Indian polities set the stage for Oldham's fall from grace. Audsah, the man charged with leading the assassination, resembled Uncas in that he was a rogue actor bucking the old rules of authority and alliance. The plan to kill Oldham seemingly arose out of this climate of political instability and economic jealousy.

Much of what we know of the motives behind the murder comes from a single informant, the only conspirator to speak to colonists.[60] Ten of the fourteen perpetrators who were left on the pinnace when John Gallop arrived on the scene "leaped overboard and were drowned" in the watery mêlée. Two others (one of whom was probably Audsah) hid belowdecks on the captured pinnace and escaped when Gallop let the craft drift away. One other man surrendered, but he was swiftly executed by Gallop. The spared

57. The island is now known as Prudence Island. Winthrop, *History,* entry for November 5, 1634, 1:147 ("Chippacursett," size); Williams to Winthrop, October 28, 1637, in *Winthrop Papers,* 3:503 ("upon condition"), 504n1.

58. Cave, *The Pequot War,* 49–68.

59. Eric S. Johnson, "Uncas and the Politics of Contact," in Robert S. Grumet, ed., *Northeastern Indian Lives, 1632–1816* (Amherst, Mass., 1996), 29–32.

60. Jennings conspiratorially assumes that four other surviving witnesses (the two non-Indian members of Oldham's crew along with his two Narragansett guides) spoke with Winthrop, but that Winthrop suppressed their testimony because it "would have impeded the Bay government's purposes"; Jennings, *The Invasion of America,* 208–9n18.

perpetrator was hastened to Massachusetts Bay, where he claimed that "all the sachems of the Narragansett, except Canonicus and Miantonomo, were the contrivers of Mr. Oldham's death; the occasion was, because he went to make peace, and trade with the Pekods last year." He also fingered the two native pilots as accomplices, an awkward accusation as those two men were also in Massachusetts Bay as envoys of the Narragansetts.[61]

Yet the claim of a far-reaching conspiracy sits uneasily with another statement made by the same man in the most detailed eyewitness account. That vivid telling came from young John Gallop, one of the two "little boys" aboard his father's bark, who shared his memories with the Ipswich preacher Thomas Cobbet some four decades later. (In a grim echo of Oldham's fate, the younger Gallop would also die at Narragansett hands during King Philip's War.) The senior Gallop had claimed that once he captured the first culprit (the informant), he had to throw the second surrendering Indian "bound into [the] sea" on the rationale that he had "no place" to hold the two men separately and did not want to risk letting them untie each other.[62] But the younger Gallop remembered things differently, recalling that his father and his mate briefly weighed the danger of keeping a second captive, but "without f[u]rther debate, they chopt of[f] his head, and heaved his carkasa overboard." It appears the elder Gallop substituted a bloodless drowning for this decapitation when relaying his story to other colonists. The younger Gallop also claimed that upon witnessing this sudden beheading, the original captive "confessed to them, that He was theyr sachem whom they had killed, and that it was he who stirred up the block Islanders to take that English vessel and cramb [murder] the men in it."[63]

This bit of news undermines the claim from the same man that Oldham's assassins were a broad faction within the Narragansett alliance acting on a rumor that the Englishman had betrayed them for the Pequots.[64] The duel-

61. Winthrop, *History,* entries for July 20 and 26, 1636, 1:190–91.

62. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 20, 1636, 1:190.

63. Though the younger Gallop seemed to be sharing an embarrassing detail that his father had elided, other aspects of his account are problematic. The boy supposedly heard his father swearing, "ah Brother Oldham, is it thee, I am resolved to avenge thy blood," over the colonist's body. He also recalled that the murderers themselves were Pequots. The latter claim was demonstrably false, while the dramatic oath seems like an embellishment inserted by either Gallop or Cobbet to echo the same hindsight narrative that avenging Oldham was the noble cause behind the Pequot War. Cobbet, "A Narrative of New England's Deliverances," 211–12.

64. Absent any other reasons, Francis Jennings and Alfred Cave both wondered if the Narragansetts belatedly blamed Oldham for spreading a recent epidemic, but

ing claims could be reconciled if the decapitated man was simply one of the several under-sachems involved. But the informant himself clearly feared for his life in both situations. He seemingly attributed the plot to a wide cast of other actors: the man who was tossed overboard, all but the most powerful mainland sachems, and their two envoys. The expansive list of culprits makes the most sense when seen as the informant's scrambling strategy to lay the blame anywhere but on his own head. Even the Puritans in Boston would come to doubt that a major faction among the theretofore calculating and diplomatic Narragansett leaders would risk colonial ire by slaughtering their most valued trading partner.[65]

These discrepancies make all claims by this man suspect and illustrate how a constant cycle of misinformation drove all stages of the Oldham affair. Yet for all the problems with the informant's story, one omission stands out: he never once claimed the slain Englishman behaved provocatively or aggressively aboard his pinnace. This was quite unlike the Indian accounts of Stone's murder, and it suggests that there was at least some degree of premeditation behind the killing. If the victim could be blamed, why did the informant fail to mention it? All the other Indians who spoke to colonists similarly refrained from faulting Oldham, and all claimed that multiple culprits were responsible. Thus, the informant's claim that there was a preexisting plot to kill Oldham seems fairly credible. It would appear that the trader did nothing that day to trigger his own death.

Other details of the informant's tale had a faint ring of truth. Oldham had indeed recently traveled to Pequot country, but he was acting on behalf of Massachusetts leaders and was collecting the gifts meant to settle the matter of Stone's death, not dealing behind the Narragansetts' backs.[66] Narragansett leaders further corroborated the conspiracy claims when they reported that a cabal of sachems was responsible, though the group was smaller than the informant alleged. Williams suspected that only one of Oldham's pilots was involved. Some of the culprits whom Winthrop identified as "under-sachems" were the Manisses or Eastern Niantics, who perhaps, like the Mohegans, had grown tired of being junior partners. But the chief sachems soon cracked down on the rogue actors. Acting swiftly to smooth things over with the Puritans, the younger Narragansett headman

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they largely dismissed the idea. See Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 207–8; Cave, *The Pequot War,* 106–8.

65. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 26, 1636, 1:191.

66. Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 470–71; Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 207.

Miantonomi led a flotilla of "seventeen canoes and two hundred men" to Block Island "to take revenge."[67] Later he would execute Audsah, who had apparently taken shelter among the Eastern Niantics.[68]

As Narragansetts sought retribution for Oldham's murder, they and other Indians also attempted restitution for the secondary crime of theft. With the help of an Eastern Niantic sachem, Miantonomi redeemed "one hundred fathom of wampum and other goods of Mr. Oldham's" to send to the Bay colony. Perhaps most remarkably, William Bradford noted that Oldham's "vessel was strangely recovered from the Indians by another that belong to the Bay of Massachusetts."[69] The redeemer of the stolen pinnace was probably Cutshamakin, a Massachusett man who had become a key intermediary in the area and liaison to colonists and Indians alike.[70]

The fact that the craft had not been sunk or dismantled raises the possibility that outright piracy was another reason for the murder. To be sure, the native assassins who commandeered the pinnace had not mastered European seamanship. John Gallop Jr. remarked on "theyr contrary handling of theyr sails," and another colonial account noted that the pinnace's sails were at first "unskilfully managed."[71] But they were not totally clueless about how to work the craft, either. The elder Gallop related that the Indians "set up sail" and "drove towards the main." In the awkward naval battle that followed, Indians "stood ready armed with guns, pikes and swords" on the deck preparing to defend their prize before multiple rounds of duck shot caused them to "gate under hatches."[72] If stealing the craft was part of their motive, it might unlock the mystery of why the assassins let Oldham's crew live: to help them master the pinnace's lines and gear.

Not all of Oldham's belongings returned to English hands. Lion Gardiner had noticed that the slain trader had fifty pounds in gold pieces with him and later observed that "Narragansets had it and punched holes into it and put it about their necks for Jewels and afterward I saw the du[t]ch have

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67. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 30, 1636, 1:191.

68. Roger Williams to the governor of Massachusetts, May 13, 1637, in *Winthrop Papers,* 3:412.

69. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 166.

70. Cutshamakin crossed through Eastern Niantic territory with the scalp of a Pequot in late summer of 1636, putting him in the right place and time to redeem the pinnace. On Cutshamakin, see Winthrop, *History,* entry for August 24, 1636, 1:195; Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 474.

71. Cobbet, "A Narrative of New England's Deliverances," 211 ("theyr contrary"); Underhill, *Newes from America,* 2–3 ("unskilfully managed").

72. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 20, 1636, 1:189–190.

sum of it which they had of the Naragansets at a small rate."[73] Oldham's body had been found "stark naked," leading one colonist speculate that the Manisses had killed him to "cloth[e] their bloody flesh with his lawful garments."[74] For the English, when Indians stripped a male colonist's body, the act was a final humiliation, a threat to both their Christianity and masculinity.[75] For Indians, stripping was a possessive, dominant act, not unlike the ritual practice of beheading and amputating the hands and feet of a slain foe, something Oldham's killers also attempted. The Englishman's clothes may have also found a second life as *sepâkehig* (sails). A year later, when Pequots raided the English village of Wethersfield, on the Connecticut River, colonists witnessed them "put poles in their Conoos, as we put Masts in our boats, and upon them hung our English mens and womens shirts and smocks, instead of sayles."[76] Material gain was one more reason to slay the man who had once been a valued friend.

It would be hard to pin a single motive on that party of disgruntled Manisses, Niantics, and Narragansetts. Rather, some combination of mistaken resentment toward the Englishman, redirected dissatisfaction with their own sachems, and covetousness of the trader's wampum, wares, gold, clothes, and pinnace drove their actions. However sordid the murder was, the colonial-led reaction was grossly disproportionate—Gallop alone killed more than ten men at the scene of the crime, Miantonomi executed at least one more on the Puritans' behalf, and a party of Englishmen raided the Manisses villages on Block Island in 1636. As the Indians hid from the colonists, the frustrated soldiers "burnt their houses, cut downe their corne, [and] destroyed some of their dogges in stead of men."[77] And yet the leveling of two villages and the killing of a dozen natives to avenge one colonist would soon seem like a restrained response compared to the vicious English campaign against the Pequots that climaxed with the holocaust at Mystic just ten months later.

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73. Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 482. Winthrop, *History,* entry for August 24, 1636, 1:195.

74. Winthrop, *History,* entry for July 20, 1636, 1:190 ("stark naked"); Underhill, *Newes from America,* 3 ("cloth[e] their bloody flesh").

75. Ann M. Little, "'Shoot That Rogue, for He Hath an Englishman's Coat On!': Cultural Cross-Dressing on the New England Frontier, 1620–1760," *New England Quarterly* 74 (June 2001): 261–67.

76. Underhill, *Newes from America,* 16.

77. When the English sent a force of colonists to raid Block Island later that summer, only a single Indian died (at the hand of an Indian interpreter); the colonists had to take out their anger on an empty village. Ibid., 6–7, 7 (quotation).

The tale of the far more sordid Puritan conspiracy behind the war has been explored elsewhere at length. Following the lead of Francis Jennings, scholars have detailed the ways that the English intentionally conflated the murders of Oldham and Stone and then scapegoated, vilified, and provoked the Pequots, drawing them into a war that featured terrifying acts of collective punishment. Examining Oldham's murder serves as a reminder that the English chose to go to war with the Pequots, just as they easily could have chosen to go to war with the Narragansetts. But the fact that the Puritans had to choose also demonstrates their comparative weakness. Colonists could not risk a war with two sizable Indian powers at the same time, and it did not make sense to pick a fight with the smaller of the two. The Pequots had more villages, more wampum, more corn, and more enemies than the Narragansetts. And they sat in a more strategic location at the mouth of Long Island Sound and near the mouth of the Connecticut, making them a particularly tempting target. War with the Pequots would help the English extinguish the Dutch West India Company's easterly claims in a way that war with the Narragansetts would not. To pull off this cynical conquest, Jennings and others argue, Puritans willingly forgot the true details of Oldham's murder while feigning anger over the death of the hated drunkard and pirate John Stone.[78]

As his pinnace drew near the shores of Block Island on that July day, Oldham was, as a pulp novelist might put it, in over his head. The waters around him were filled with the deadly riptides of commercial rivalries, internal power struggles, and silent conspiracies. His death would bring about some major demographic and political shifts in the saltwater frontier. Through the first three decades of the seventeenth century, sailing merchant-adventurers like Oldham had defined English and Dutch interests in the region, not the seasick families and preachers who occasionally tagged along with them.[79] For the English, the balance of power between the original colonizing population of trading men and the second wave of farming

78. Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 177–227; Salisbury, *Manitou and Providence,* 183–235; Cave, *The Pequot War,* 69–166. Grandjean argues that English weakness and their poor food supply were other central motives for their aggression in "Reckonings," 60–65.

79. Bernard Bailyn emphasizes the importance of these men, whom he describes as "almost to a man outcasts from the respectable world of the English middle class"; Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1955), 13 (quotation), 13–15.

families had been tipping since the spring of 1630. That was when the eleven-ship Winthrop fleet arrived in Massachusetts Bay and opened up a flood tide of Puritan migration that would continue for a decade.

Oldham's biography mirrored this transition. He had been a rabble-rouser and "a Mad Jack in his mood" when he first came to Plymouth in 1623. He was eventually banished and had to leave in a final humiliating walk through a "lane of Musketiers . . . to receave a bob upon the bumme by every musketier."[80] But over next decade he would remake himself into an upstanding saint with a farm in Watertown on the Charles River. Powerful men like John Winthrop trusted him to deliver their mail, and countless other colonists came to depend on his regular purchases of surplus corn from coastal Indians.[81] He would unwittingly aid the godly elites even in death, as the Puritan victory in the Pequot war helped establish Massachusetts Bay as the most powerful colony in the Northeast.

The saltwater frontier did not dry up in the aftermath of the Pequot War—far from it. The contested region from Cape Cod to the mouth of the Hudson would retain its literal and figurative fluidity well into the 1670s, when the Dutch West India Company finally abandoned its claims in North America and coastal Algonquians were brought into near-total political subjugation in the aftermath of King Philip's War. Still, looking at the seventeenth century as a whole, the Pequot War stands out as an unusually potent event that, like a raging storm, violently reshaped the coastline overnight. The two groups of players who found their political landscapes most transformed were the Pequots and the Dutch.

The Pequots, who had no part in Oldham's death, would nonetheless discover that his murder enabled a shadowy alliance between their disgruntled Native rivals and the rising Puritan trade syndicate looking to put an end to the threat of Indian naval attacks and to snatch the best trading harbors from their Dutch competitors. The Pequots were not patsies; they were complicit in creating this stormy world. They had simply underestimated just how far the Puritans would go to make an example of them and claim new footholds on the wampum-rich shores of Long Island Sound and the fertile soils of the Connecticut River valley. The Pequots, however,

80. Morton, *New English Canaan,* 119–20 (quotations); Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 148–57.

81. For further discussion of Oldham's godly rehabilitation, which William Bradford alleged was brought about when a scary passage at sea caused the trader to rediscover his religious commitment, see Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 165–66; Jennings, *Invasion of America,* 206–7; Grandjean, "Reckoning," 47–48, 57–58.

immediately assumed that maintaining a watery defense would be key to fighting the English.[82] Even before Oldham died, one Connecticut colonist reported a rumor that Pequots had made plans for "cutting off of our Plymouth Barke," but were foiled, "for as soone as those bloody executioners arose out of Ambush with their canoes, the[y] deserned her under sayle with a fayre winde returning Home."[83] As a party of Englishmen made their way to Pequot country that August, Williams informed Winthrop, "The Pequts heare of your preparations etc. and comfort them selves in this that a witch amongst them will sinck the pinnaces by diving under water and making holes."[84] Many of the early skirmishes of the war were Pequot attacks on English vessels. Ultimately, the English had to acknowledge that they could not beat the Pequots as long as the fighting stayed on the water. In the lead-up to the attack on Mystic, the force of ninety Englishmen first sailed by in plain sight of the Pequots' coastal villages, "deluding the *Pequeats* thereby," before landing to the east and marching two days to surprise them by approaching from land.[85] The Pequots, so accustomed to facing seaward to deal with colonists, never saw them coming.

The traders of the Dutch West India Company made the same mistake: they too underestimated the English. As the conflict heated up, the Dutch showed little sympathy toward their fellow Christians—they even bartered with Indians for goods that had been lifted off the bodies of Stone and Oldham.[86] Even when Dutch sailors redeemed two captive English "maids" from the Pequots, their actions were baldly self-interested: they agreed to the task only in return for continued rights to trade with Pequots and demanded ten pounds for their troubles.[87] Puritans remained wary of Hollanders throughout the war. In 1637, shortly before the attack on Mystic,

82. Grandjean makes the salient point that "the Pequot War was a water war" in *Reckonings,* 49–53, 49 (quotation).

83. Jonathan Brewster to John Winthrop Jr., June 18, 1636, in *Winthrop Papers,* 3:270.

84. Roger Williams to John Winthrop, ca. September 1636, in *Winthrop Papers,* 3:298.

85. Underhill, *Newes from America,* 32.

86. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation,* 270 (Dutch purchase of Stone's booty); Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 482 (Dutch purchase of Oldham's gold).

87. Gardiner, "Relation of the Pequot Warres," 478 (ten-pound reward); Underhill, *Newes from America,* 26–27 (redemption of captives). Another party of Dutch traders took the wife of a Pequot sachem hostage, probably to extort a payment in wampum, but before they could collect a ransom, English soldiers "violently" stole the captive. See *Winthrop Papers,* 3:419.

they dispatched twenty men to Fort Saybrook, "to keep the fort, both in respect of the Indians, and especially of the Dutch, who, by their speeches and supplies out of Holland, gave cause of suspicion, that they had some design upon it."[88] Perhaps the colony's Amsterdam administrators later regretted that they had not intervened directly in the fighting. From their perspective, the Pequot War did not happen in a neighboring colony, it happened *within* New Netherland, in familiar waters that they had claimed and mapped, and in which they had trafficked for the last decade. They soon realized that though the Pequots had lost the war, the Dutch had lost the territories they claimed to the east of the Connecticut River. Though the company still publicly professed to hold the coast up to Narragansett Bay, their informant Rutger Huygens conceded in a private 1638 meeting that all claims past the Connecticut River were lost. The deputy directors demanded to know "by what right and under what pretext" the English had snatched their land. "The right," Huygens said resignedly, "is that of the strongest."[89] Might was not the only thing that gave the English their "right"—their war would succeed only thanks to their carefully negotiated and complex alliance with the Pequots' rivals.

Oldham's murder provided a key step forward in Puritan attempts to cordon off a zone of military and commercial dominance within a landless borderland that was far too fluid and shifting for their liking. And the Oldham case vividly illustrates the dangers and uncertainties faced by both colonists and Indians on the saltwater frontier. In his account of the Pequot War, the English colonist John Underhill aptly summed up the perils of navigating the region with a pithy aphorism. "More men would goe to Sea," Underhill mused, "if they were sure to meet with no stormes."[90] It seems a fitting epitaph for John Oldham.

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88. Winthrop, *History,* entry for April 10, 1637, 1:217.

89. Report on the Condition of New Netherland, 1638, in J. R. Brodhead and F. B. O'Callaghan, eds., *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New-York,* 15 vols. (Albany, 1853), 1:107.

90. Underhill, *Newes from America,* 31.