

TISQUANTUM



Many American schoolchildren grow up learning about one of the most famous interpreters in U.S. history, a Native American man named **Squanto**. They learn about him in a rather sanitized version of the supposed "first Thanksgiving." Most history books explain that this man, whose real name was **Tisquantum**, helped the Pilgrims by serving as a bridge between them and the natives. But few people ever stop to ask why he spoke English.

The answer isn't a pretty one. Tisquantum was a member of the Patuxet, within the larger Wampanoag group. In 1614, Tisquantum, along with 23 other Wampanoag, was **kidnapped** by a British man named Thomas Hunt. Treated like animals, Tisquantum and the others were thrown below deck while the ship made its way across the Atlantic. He was then taken to Malaga, Spain, **to be sold at a slave market**. Some Spanish friars intervened and stopped him from being sold -- they were tantalized by the prospect of converting him to their religion instead. He eventually convinced them to let him try to return home.

He left Spain for England, where he worked as a shipbuilder, hoping this trade might help him eventually get home. Then, he saw his opportunity to return to America, serving as a guide and interpreter for another European expedition to New England. After five years in Europe, he made his way back home in 1619, but it was too late. **His family and Patuxet tribe members were dead**, killed by diseases the Europeans brought with them. With no family or Patuxet community left to return to, he continued working as an interpreter. It

was during this time that he is reported to have helped the Pilgrims survive during their first winter.

In 1621, Tisquantum interpreted peace negotiations between the English and the Wampanoag. **A year later, he died.** Some speculate that he was poisoned on purpose by the Wampanoag as punishment for helping the English, but no one will ever know for certain.

Like too many interpreters to count, past and present, **Squanto is remembered in a binary, black-and-white kind of way** -- as either a savior or a traitor, depending on who is doing the remembering. As interpreters, we can remember him in a different way, one that is more reflective of his complex story -- as a **human being** put into the difficult position of straddling two cultures and languages, while also fighting for his very survival.

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Issue #18