Introduction

In Early America, no one thought of snow, ice, or cold in averages. Falling snow spread a blanket over fields; packed snow provided pathways for travel; and loose snow recorded the movements of wildlife. Ice formed unevenly from freshwater or saltwater, hardening first over ponds and streams and then over lakes and rivers, and only rarely over harbors and bays. From the first snow or the first freeze, people’s thoughts turned to the many worlds that cold created.¹ Colonial historians usually refer to the first frost as a limitation signaling the end of the agricultural year, but for indigenous people in northeastern North America, freeze-up and snowfall represented new beginnings.² Wabanakis from the Merrimack River

to Passamaquoddy Bay encountered European colonists in the warmer months but largely wintered on their own during the seventeenth century, protected in part by their knowledge of snowshoeing. Wabanakis were among many indigenous societies that used the same word for “year” and “winter,” registering respect for the experience that each cold season afforded and putting emphasis on the advent of snow and ice as special markers of time.

In the seventeenth century, Wabanakis went out and made their own winter seasons, traveling inland and northward, toward (not away from) locations where snowfall came early and the snowpack would be deep and stable. Because of Wabanaki choices about how to winter, early English colonists knew very little about indigenous winter ways to their north, but wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries eventually forced settlers to recognize Wabanaki winter knowledge and power. In Wabanaki territory, which stretched through New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and beyond, most families’ winter homes remained secure until the early eighteenth century.

Colonialism had a natural history in each place and time where it took root— and where and when it did not. After 1620, English settlers continued to stay through the winter in the Northeast, but they clung mostly to lowland areas where snowfall was lighter and freeze-up less common, and their year-round hold on territory remained in doubt at key moments throughout the seventeenth century. In one sense, the very notion of settler colonialism on this continent was based on a novel and contested European assumption that newcomers would stay for the winter, occupying some lands year-round, rather than returning home after a season of trading or fishing, as so many had done in the sixteenth century.

English promoters imagined colonization as “planting,” with an explicit


ideology that justified dispossession through agricultural improvement.4
In fact, though, colonists spent much of the year not planting but overwintering. In the early seventeenth century, English colonists who arrived in the American Northeast suffered through notoriously difficult first winters. English colonists came to the Northeast with hardly any cultural or religious traditions related to snow, and their winter vocabulary focused mostly on frost and ice. Meteorologically and ecologically, American winter conditions were unfamiliar for English migrants because they came from a small island with milder winters. They knew next to nothing about the kinds of extensive and varied winter landscapes that existed across northeastern North America. Underestimating American winters, they did not come fully prepared to tend crops and animals or store supplies over many months of cold and snow.5 In many parts of the Northeast, winter conditions and indigenous resistance continued to inhibit and delay colonization. Plants froze. Livestock found no fodder. Wolves seemingly killed animals for no reason in severe winters. Long after 1620, European settlers, animals, and plants became vulnerable over that attritional season. Cycles of war, sickness, and food shortage caused English colonists to abandon settlements as late as the turn of the eighteenth century.

For much of the seventeenth century, winter was a season of power and independence for indigenous peoples of the American Northeast. In northern New England, snowshoes were essential to Wabanaki winter life (Figure I.1). Wabanaki families traveled to snowy, forested areas to pursue beaver trapping, moose hunting, and other subsistence activities in the winter months.6 In southern New England, snow cover was not as

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An indigenous technology, snowshoes facilitated long-distance winter mobility across elevation gradients from coastal lowlands to interior uplands. Crafted within families, each pair of snowshoes was designed based on expected snow conditions, a person’s weight, and the kinds of winter activities to be carried out. An individual would recognize his or her snowshoes based on the size and shape of the frame, the patterns in the weave, the type of toe hold, the tufting, and many other details. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Wabanakis and other Native Americans traveled by snowshoe for weeks or months each year, so the best snowshoes from this period tended be used up, not preserved. Instead, what was passed from generation to generation were the skills to make snowshoes and navigate winter lands. See also “Maine Indian Snowshoes,” SGG.
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deep or long-lasting, but snowshoeing extended at least as far south as Nipmuc and Massachusett territories in the seventeenth century. Below that snowshoe line, deer hunting and the trapping of small furbearers in winter remained important for many Mohegan, Pequot, Niantic, Narragansett, and Wampanoag families. At snowy, forested upland sites away from the coastal villages, planting grounds, and fishing sites of spring and summer, families avoided winter storms, accessed ample fire-wood, and used snow for tracking and ice for travel. With generations of experience with cold weather, indigenous communities viewed themselves as well equipped to cope with winter. The arrival of European colonists and their dependent animals in the region initially bolstered that sense of competence. Outside the narrow scope of colonized spaces, indigenous communities thrived through many of the same winters that caused distress to settler communities and their livestock. Indigenous sovereignty rested in part on subtle knowledge of America’s winter ecologies, and the most common Native American complaints had to do with mild or dry winters with too little snow, rather than the opposite. Indigenous power and well-being in the Northeast often surged with cold, snowy weather, whether in peacetime or war.


Without snowshoes, an indigenous technology, early English settlers simply could not see the fullness of American nature in winter. Lacking the capacity to range through the varied winter environments of the Northeast, English colonists retained a traditionally negative view of snowy landscapes. One exception, the positive notion that snow insulated soil, underscored how English settlers understood winter’s virtues mainly in relation to the growing season. French missionaries, fur trappers, and soldiers adopted snowshoes earlier in the seventeenth century, and the French colonial archive shows that French newcomers with this Native technology learned more quickly about what we now call winter ecology, or the complex relationships between living beings within a cold but dynamic physical environment. For English settlers, that process was delayed until the turn of the eighteenth century, a lag that had both strategic and everyday consequences.

English colonists’ failure to see snowy landscapes in positive terms had mixed consequences for Native communities of the Northeast. In the seventeenth century, English officials understood that prime furs were harvested by trappers in winter, but colonial authorities consistently underestimated the ability of winter landscapes to sustain indigenous families. English leaders construed as trivial the seasonal subsistence rights retained by Native American individuals and communities in deeds and treaties, recognizing the rights only when convenient and undervaluing the winter lands they expropriated. On the other hand, English colonists’ limited appreciation of indigenous winter livelihood strategies and the practical inability of most English soldiers to access traditional winter lands also left room for indigenous families to live independently without many colonial disruptions for the colder half of the year. Some Native families struggled with disease or food shortage, especially during the epidemics of 1616–19 and 1633–4 and later in wartime, but they had a tradition of winter resilience and showed remarkable adaptive capacities when free to access a

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9 English ignorance about the positive ecology of winter falls within an area of study that historian Londa Schiebinger and others have called agnotology, or the history of the making and unmaking of ignorance. See Robert N. Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
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wide range of seasonal resources. In colonial cities like Boston, though, enslaved or indentured Native individuals suffered in winter in unprecedented ways.10

Wabanakis whose winter territories lay north of New England settlements drew power from deep and long-lasting snows during periods of global cooling. Winter knowledge was crucial to struggles for power over large territories during the first four Anglo-Wabanaki Wars (Figure I.2). During King Philip’s War, also known as the First Anglo-Wabanaki War (1675–8), some Wabanaki families used winter as a buffer and avoided the devastation suffered by many Native communities farther south. During and after that conflict, some Nipmuc, Massachusett, Narragansett, and Wampanoag fighters and refugees found temporary safety within Wabanaki winter lands. Others who allied with English forces deepened their experience on winter expedititions northward against Wabanakis. In subsequent wars, Wabanakis reserved winter as a season of subsistence and only occasionally planned winter raids against New England towns. As one French leader observed, indigenous families looked forward to the time when “the snow was firm enough for them to take to the woods for their hunting,” and that season of stable snow cover lasted longer in the late seventeenth century.11

Wabanakis pressed their winter advantages against English colonizers from the 1670s through the first years of the 1700s, a period that roughly matches a pattern of global cooling sometimes called the Late Maunder Minimum. These frigid spells represent notably cold segments of the Little Ice Age (c. 1300–1850), a long but unstable cooling trend.12 Across

11 Joseph Robineau de Villebon to Count Pontchartrain, “Journal of what has happened in Acadia from October 13, 1691, to October 25, 1692,” AESC 34.
North America, indigenous societies exercised power over their European counterparts in these same decades, a period of rebellion against colonial peoples. For instance, in the early modern period, indigenous peoples in the Americas demonstrated resistance through various means, including alliances and warfare. This period, characterized by European expansion and contestation, saw the emergence of indigenous leadership and strategies to defend their territories and ways of life.

rule. Boston merchant Samuel Sewall frequently noted the relative permanence of cold, ice, and snow during these years: what he called “constant continuance of cold weather” and “constancy of the Snow lying on the ground.” Associated with these cold conditions was what John Bridger, official surveyor of the woods, called in 1706/7, “difficult traveling by reason of the snows and Indians.” It is impossible to separate English reactions to the weather from their responses to Wabanaki actions in these years. Wabanaki resistance contributed to a belated and unnerving sense of “unsettlement,” which became particularly acute during the winter.

Frigid weather opened opportunities for Wabanakis to use their winter knowledge against English colonists. During the Second Anglo-Wabanaki War (1688–99), Wabanakis on snowshoes committed winter attacks against English towns, exacerbating the existing sense of crisis among colonists in New England. Under their own leadership, or with limited assistance from French allies or suppliers, Wabanakis inflicted devastating winter raids on English towns in 1689–90, 1691–2, 1696–7, and 1697–8. The combination of severe winter weather and violence was one reason that Cotton Mather entitled his history of the war Decennium Luctuosum, or “sorrowful decade.” At the outset of the Third Anglo-Wabanaki War (1703–13), Wabanakis carried out further winter strikes, sometimes with French and Native allies, including the massive action...
against Deerfield on February 29, 1703/4. One of the captives taken in that raid, Reverend John Williams, later published a narrative with long passages about travails in the snow with Wabanaki captors. While being held in Canada in January 1705/6, Williams received a letter from Boston merchant Samuel Sewall, his friend, who affirmed a faith that God was on the side of the English, not just against Wabanakis but against the season itself: “our Champion is upon his March for the removal of the horrid effects of Winter; which refreshes us in our present straits.” Wabanakis became the single greatest driver of English adaptation to winter at the turn of the eighteenth century, as colonists fretted about their security from famine, disease, and war. Colonists eventually came to view Native American power to subsist and thrive in winter as a problem, and settlers learned more about snowy landscapes through captivities and early military expeditions targeting Wabanaki subsistence grounds.

After two generations, English settlers finally adapted, learning how to use snowshoes for long-distance travel. In response to widespread concern about Wabanaki power during the Third Anglo-Wabanaki War, English leaders instituted snowshoe companies to patrol Wabanaki winter hunting grounds. The threat of Wabanaki winter raids and the unnerving phenomenon of Wabanaki winter independence compelled the English to adopt the indigenous technology of snowshoes as an integral component of seasonal military strategy. The winter patrols contributed to a cultural shift in New England, as colonists made snowshoes theirs for the

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