

THE
HISTORY
OF GAMBLING

ROLL THE BONES

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GOTHAM BOOKS

*For Eric H. Monkkonen (1942–2005),
my dissertation advisor, mentor, and friend*

PROLOGUE

The Rainmaker Reborn



June 5, 1637. The Puritans are on the march, and for the Pequot of the Connecticut River Valley, the world is ending.

Pequot translates as "destroyer" in the Algonquian language, and the name underscores that nation's fearsome reputation. Centuries ago, the Pequot and Mohegan had migrated together into Connecticut from the Hudson River Valley, then split into two warring tribes. When not warring with the Mohegan and Narragansett, the Pequot collect tribute from surrounding villages whose residents cringe with fear at the mention of the Pequot and their fierce sachem Sassacus. But as the "Great Migration" of Puritans overflows its original plantings at Massachusetts Bay, the encroachments of the English colonists begin to threaten Pequot dominance of the area. A showdown is inevitable.

An escalating series of kidnappings, raids, and assaults soon leads to open warfare between the Pequot and English. Years earlier, the newcomers had celebrated the first Thanksgiving by feasting on wild turkey and venison with their new Indian neighbors. Now, old friendships are forgotten in the name of expansion, and English guns are matched against the legendary ferocity of the Pequot.

Initially, the Pequot fares well. But by May 1637, English forces led by Captain John Mason had allied with the Mohegan and Narragansett, who had earlier rebuffed a Pequot overture to join a pan-Indian alliance and drive the invaders into the sea. Together, the English and their allies had launched damaging counterattacks and begun to turn the tide against the Pequot.

On that fateful June day, Mason leads 150 Englishmen and sixty Mohegan warriors under the command of the sachem Uncas against the fortified Pequot village at Mystic. After firing their muskets on the palisades, the English burst through the wall into the village itself. Crying, "We must burn them!" Mason touches a firebrand to a wigwam, then leads a retreat from the

village. The English and their Indian allies form a ring around the palisades, watching as flames swiftly overrun the fort "to the extream Amazement of the Enemy, and the great Rejoycing of ourselves," according to Mason. The blaze spreads rapidly that hot and dry morning; the entire village is soon afire. The English indiscriminately shoot at Pequot fleeing the conflagration and cut down with swords those who escape the burning palisades. In less than an hour, as many as seven hundred Pequot men, women, and children perish.

Mason has obliterated a major Pequot village and snapped the will of the Pequot fighters. Over the next few months, the colonists and their Indian allies track down, capture, and kill the remaining Pequot. Captives are dispersed as slaves among surrounding tribes, in English households, and as far south as the Caribbean. The Mohegan kill the terrible Sassacus in August, sending his head to the English at Hartford as a gesture of friendship. The Pequot power is broken.

In the peace settlement of September 21, 1638, the English and their Indian allies agree that the Pequot must never threaten revenge. The victors prohibit any survivors from speaking the Pequot language or even identifying themselves as Pequot. The river that bears their name is renamed the Thames, and their eponymous central village is rechristened New London. The Connecticut countryside, which once reverberated with the sounds of Pequot warriors demanding tribute, fears them no more.

February 6, 2004. A nation has risen from the ashes.

Popular comedian Chris Rock entertains a crowd paying as much as \$110 per ticket at the Fox Theater, a venue that casino icon Frank Sinatra opened in 1993. On this night, Rock is simply one attraction at Foxwoods Resort Casino, a collection of six casinos with 350 table games and 6,400 slot machines, the world's largest bingo hall, over fourteen hundred rooms and suites, twenty-four restaurants (including the aptly named Rainmaker Café), a convention center, a four-thousand-seat arena, and a championship golf course, all rising incongruously out of the once quiet woods near Ledyard, Connecticut.

While the God-fearing Puritans would be aghast at the notion that a 4.7-million-square-foot complex dedicated to pleasure and indulgence had been erected in their former dominion, they would be positively mortified that the Mashantucket Pequot, a resurgent remnant of the tribe they had attempted to wipe from history, owned it. Nearly four centuries after their supposed eradication, the descendants of Sassacus no longer send war parties to neighboring villages to collect tribute; instead, forty-thousand visitors come

to Foxwoods each day, leaving somewhere in the neighborhood of \$67 million in monthly slot losses as tribute. Of this, a cut of about \$16.5 million is forwarded to the state of Connecticut for the privilege of operating the casino.

The Pequot had an improbable journey back from obscurity. Granted two reservations in 1683, the tribe's membership declined precipitously over the next three centuries; by 1910, only three families lived on the Ledyard reservation, which had been reduced to less than two hundred acres. But in 1983, tribal chairman Skip Hayward, assisted by Indian rights attorney Tom Tureen, won the tribe federal recognition over the initial veto of President Ronald Reagan. The sovereign tribe started offering high-stakes bingo in a hastily constructed hall in 1986. This humble start would ultimately yield the world's most profitable casino. In 1992, after striking a compact with the state of Connecticut, the tribe added table games, and in the following year, its slot machines started accepting coins. Since then, the casino has expanded regularly, clogging Route 2 with traffic that was unimaginable a scant decade earlier. Although most visitors hail from New York and New England, travelers from as far as Abu Dhabi, Taiwan, and Singapore arrive weekly for flings at fate. Foxwoods is a truly cosmopolitan island in the New England woods—even the money to build Foxwoods came from Malaysian multibillionaire Lim Goh Tong, owner of that country's monopoly casino, Genting Highlands.

As purveyors of casino entertainment and collectors of tribute, the Pequot are not alone. About ten miles away, their erstwhile mortal enemies the Mohegan operate their own gargantuan gambling/entertainment complex in Uncasville, named for the sachem who sent the head of Sassacus to the English. In a 1994 agreement, the tribes guaranteed the state of Connecticut an annual payment of \$80 million or twenty-five percent of their slot revenue, whichever was greater (invariably, it is the percentage). This pact has lifted the Indian tribes out of poverty, luring millions of supplicants to chance within the palisades of the Pequot and Mohegan, and garnering nearly \$2 billion in tax revenue for the state since its signing. It has brought these Connecticut Indians money and influence. For decades, "friends of the Indian" had labored to bring Indians into the mainstream of American economic life with little result. Where they failed, gambling has succeeded, reversing the course of four hundred years of Anglo-Indian relations.

The story of Connecticut's casinos is remarkable but hardly unusual. Many Americans think that "serious gambling" is confined to the well-known

casino destinations of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, but it is actually nearly everywhere. With a growing assortment of casinos, racetracks, bingo halls, and lottery tickets available at convenience stores in nearly every state, Americans are never far from a chance to take a chance. Gambling is more than a pastime—it is big business. In 2004, Americans lost over \$78 billion on a variety of games of chance. About half of this money went to casinos—both commercial, state-regulated facilities and Indian gambling halls—while the balance was wagered on lotteries, horse- and dog-race betting, bingo, and noncasino card rooms. Gambling's appeal to Americans is nothing if not broad based. In 2004, approximately fifty-four million Americans visited a casino, and countless more bought lottery tickets, daubed bingo cards, and bet on horses and sports. More American adults gamble than abstain.

Even before an unprecedented explosion of legal gambling in the past fifty years, the U.S. has long been a gambling nation. Poker, a game that evolved on the Mississippi River and in the American West, has become one of the world's most popular games, and with the slot machine, Americans brought gambling into the Machine Age. Bingo, an American innovation of the Depression years, has similarly crossed the oceans. The American casino hub, Las Vegas, has displaced Monte Carlo as the world's gambling capital and shows no signs of yielding the honor anytime soon.

Americans are joined by other nations in chasing fortune. Canadians have commercial and charitable casinos as well as a range of lottery and video lottery products. Australians gamble on "pokies," slots, lotteries, race and sports betting, and keno. Macao, a former Portuguese colony, has had a monopoly on casino gambling in China for nearly forty years, and it faces competition from casinos in the Philippines, South Korea, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Casinos span the African continent from Cairo to Cape Town, Latin American nations from Costa Rica to Chile have casinos and slot parlors, and Europe boasts casinos, lotteries, and bookmaking. Gambling is often as easy as buying a ticket: International lottery sales in calendar year 2001 topped \$125.6 billion. In all, over two hundred and fifty jurisdictions throughout the world offer legal gambling of some kind. Casinos, pari-mutuel wagering on horses, greyhounds, and jai alai, lotteries, and other forms of betting together comprise a world betting market valued at nearly \$1 trillion dollars per year. From the tundra of Siberia to the windy shores of Tierra del Fuego, from balmy Mediterranean waters to the Nevada desert, over the oceans and across each continent, gambling unites humanity.

So where did gambling originate, and why has it remained so popular?

The human brain does not yield its secrets easily—while scientists can tell us that gambling activity stimulates certain neuroreceptors, they cannot conclusively say why people find gambling so alluring, let alone why some prefer video poker and others blackjack. But, in the forty-thousand or so years that we have thrown sticks, drawn lots, rolled dice, tossed cards, and pulled handles, humans have left ample evidence of our gambling passion in the historical record. By piecing together these traces, we can reconstruct the evolution of gambling.

Gambling and gamblers have left imprints throughout history in curious, sometimes surprising ways. Games of chance have evolved over many centuries, changing and maturing along with civilization. As new technologies—from block printing to the Internet—have become available, people have used them to gamble. Early mathematics and statistical sciences developed in part to explain the vagaries of chance. Gambling flourished in the neighborhood of Shakespeare's Globe Theater and in the imperial courts of China. European colonial ventures, including the Virginia Company, received financing from lotteries, and the British Stamp Tax, which included levies on playing cards, helped spur the colonials into rebellion against the Crown. The consolidation of German states into Prussia forced the closure of German casinos and led to the establishment of Monte Carlo as a gaming monopoly. Leaders from Julius Caesar to Franklin Roosevelt (who offered Americans a "New Deal") have used gambling metaphors to speak to the people.

The history of gambling has many elements of a high-stakes Texas hold 'em game: cunning calculations, audacious gambits, and reversals of fortune. Always a part of human culture, its evolution never ceases, and at every juncture of history, it seems, the gambler is nearby.