

King Philip's War

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Before the French and Indian War over trading rights and territory in the expanding colonies, before colonial America's Revolutionary War with Britain, before the young republic's second fight for independence in the War of 1812, was another war. That early colonial war in New England helped to set the tone for the rest of colonial and, indeed, American development, and set precedents for Native American relations, expansion, and threats to American independence and autonomy. This war, although the bloodiest in American history, claiming more lives per capita than any struggle before or since, is largely ignored in the classroom and by history books. This war is King Philip's War.

While the average American school child may never heard of King Philip's War, and the average American adult may have nothing but the most fleeting memory of ever having discussed the conflict, any American who has been to kindergarten knows the story of the first Thanksgiving. Although it is largely debunked by the time a student reaches high school, the mythical image of happy, clean Pilgrims and proud, tall Native Americans in buckskin with feathers through their hair, sitting around a long wooden table, holding and shaking hands over their shared thanksgiving feast, bowing their heads together in prayer in a lush, colorful autumn setting, it is not entirely false. The settlers of the Plymouth Colony did celebrate a harvest festival with the Wampanoag tribe in 1621. Relations between the two groups were friendly at this time, and the Wampanoag, under the guidance of the sachem, or chief, Massasoit, provided the early settlers with food and helped them learn to farm and survive in their new environment. This relationship deteriorated rapidly, however, and reached a point of explosion some fifty odd years later.

During Massasoit's sachemship, the Wampanoag maintained peaceful, albeit strained relations with the Plymouth colonists. The Wampanoag tribe was decimated by European diseases, contracted from contact with the French and with the English, a sort of latter-day Columbian exchange. Wampanoag health also deteriorated from the introduction of European alcohol. The Native Americans had no immunity to or experience with the beverage, making them highly susceptible to alcoholism.

The Wampanoag and Plymouth colonists experienced numerous cultural clashes, many concerning land ownership. The Wampanoag were unfamiliar with the idea of owning land, thinking of land as a communal resource. When the Plymouth settlers paid the Native Americans for land, the Wampanoag considered this a usage fee, and did not understand that the Puritans expected full ownership of the land. This became a larger problem as the Puritan population began to grow and strengthen, and required new land for farming on a regular basis. When Roger Williams, a banished Puritan dissenter, established friendly relations with Massasoit, and Massasoit began to sell land to Williams, the Plymouth settlers were concerned, and wanted an exclusive land purchasing relationship with the Wampanoag.

Religion was another source of great unrest between the two groups. The Plymouth settlers had left England seeking a place to practice a purer form of Christianity. Endowed with a sense of divine right, considering their society what John Winthrop called a "city upon the hill," a chosen people, the Puritans considered the nature-based religions of the Wampanoag and other Native Americans to be savage and even sacrilegious. When most Wampanoag resisted the Puritan missionary attempts, the

Puritans found excuse to demonize the Wampanoag as sub-human enemies, not as culturally differing equals.

In 1660, Massasoit died, marking the end of peace between the Plymouth colonists and the Wampanoag. His son Wamsutta, “Alexander,” took over as sachem. In 1662, the Plymouth colonists summoned Wamsutta to Plymouth because they were angry that he had sold land to Roger Williams for Rhode Island. Wamsutta died after being forced to travel to Plymouth on foot while suffering from a fever. Wamsutta had been treated like a criminal, not a respected king, and the Wampanoag were angry.

Metacom, or “King Philip” became sachem. The Plymouth colonists capitalized on his inability to read English and tricked him into signing a contract that gave Plymouth complete control over the Wampanoag land. Restrictions on Wampanoag autonomy became more and more strict. Finally, in 1671, Metacom formally relinquished all of his power to the Plymouth assembly. The Wampanoag accused Metacom of cowardice. Tension further escalated when John Sassamon, a Christian Indian who had close ties with both the Wampanoag and Plymouth colonists, was murdered. The Wampanoag were accused of this crime and punished for it, but there is still no consensus about who actually committed the crime.

War officially began in 1675. The Wampanoag engaged in a two- week war dance at Metacom’s home. Metacom knew that they could not defeat the colonists without an alliance with other tribes. Although many colonists assumed that this alliance actually existed, the Wampanoag were unable to band with other dispossessed and dissatisfied Native Americans to create a unified Native American resistance. The Nipmucks from central Massachusetts did join with Metacom’s forces, however, to create

a formidable resistance. Wampanoag warriors began raids on colonists' farms. These raids turned violent when Native Americans killed English cattle, and a farmer shot a Wampanoag.

The Wampanoag and Nipmuck besieged and burned Brookefield. The colonists were saved by an opportunely timed rainstorm. They forced the colonists to leave Deerfield, and massacred the colonists at Bloody Brook. The colonists answered by attacking the Narragansett, who had declared that they had no intention of joining the war on either side. Over 500 people, the majority of whom which were women and children, were killed by the colonists at the Great Swamp Massacre. This was an unprecedented attack aimed at the innocents of war, not at the warriors. The Narragansett joined the Nipmuck and Wampanoag. The colonists launched a surprise attack on the main Wampanoag/Nipmuck camp on the Connecticut River. Most of the warriors were killed, and the few remaining fled.

Metacom was among the remaining warriors. He returned to his tribal home at Swansea, and continued small- scale raids on neighboring farms. Metacom was shot, and King Philip's War was effectively ended with the death of its namesake in 1676. Metacom's body was quartered, and only his head and one hand were saved.

King Philip's War, though a victory for the colonists, resulted in almost 2500 deaths on the colonists' side alone. The war was punctuated by surprise attacks, massacres, and inhumane slaughter of unarmed women and children on both sides, instead of more orderly or equal battles and contests. This style of warfare, bloody and sometimes conscienceless, can be seen throughout American history, especially extending into the Revolutionary War. In King Philip's War, the colonists set a

precedent in their dealings with Native Americans and non-Christians. The colonist held little respect for the rights, customs, traditions, or lands of the Wampanoag, even though they may not have survived at all in New England without initial assistance from the Wampanoag. The Plymouth colonists proved that their alliances, ethics, treaties, and even respect for human rights dissolved as soon as their expansion was threatened. This attitude became typical of colonists' and later citizens' dealing with Native Americans. Violence and cultural conflict with Native Americans was just beginning and only took a brief hiatus before erupting again in New England during King William's War. As Americans' "manifest destiny" led them to explore and inhabit the whole country, Native Americans were violently pushed further and further westward and eventually placed on reservations. The colonists' behavior in the historically neglected and under-addressed King Philip's War and the events preceding it foreshadowed their future styles of warfare, interaction with Native Americans, expansionary tendencies, and even independence.

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