

King Philip's War in 1675 Broke Indian Rule of Land

Any historical celebration would be incomplete unless we recalled the real forefathers of this country—the American Indian.

Their first appearance in this land is strictly a matter for conjecture. Some have said they were here a thousand years before the appearance of the first white men. Others have stated lengthier and lesser times.

But for the sake of our purposes, we are only concerned with their history from the time the Dutch sailors first sailed up Narragansett Bay to the junction of the Barrington and Warren Rivers. Here they traded with the Wampanoags, who were the mightier and more attended-to tribe of the Pokonoket nation, of which Fall River's first residents, the Pocassetts, were a member.

The time of this first meeting of white men with area Indians has not been definitely ascertained. It is believed to have occurred shortly before 1616.

In that year, a plague broke out which greatly reduced the numbers of the Wampanoags and later played an important part in that tribe's politics.

The resultant condition of the Wampanoags provided the more powerful Narragansetts to the north with an ideal time to seek annexation of this thorn-in-the-side tribe and its great chieftain, Massasoit, who was regarded as chief sachem of all Indians in southeastern Massachusetts.

The Wampanoags were then beaten and forced to become subservient to their rivals for some years.

In 1620, Massasoit's Indians watched unseen the arrival of the Mayflower. Later, through the advice of Squanto, an Indian who had some time before been captured

by the English, taken to England and returned to his native land, Massasoit made overtures to the Pilgrims.

Massasoit Signs Treaty

With far-sighted vision, he saw a chance to throw off the Narragansett's yoke by completing a treaty of friendship and mutual aid with the newcomers.

After preliminary exchanging of gifts, Massasoit went to meet them and negotiated the treaty which was observed in good faith for the remaining years of the sachem's life. The pact was a renunciation of the Narragansetts for the Indians and an insurance of safety from the Indians for the English.

The first crisis for Massasoit and the English developed some time later, when Edward Winslow and Stephen Hopkins, accompanied by Squanto, paid a visit to Massasoit. While there, an ambitious younger sachem kidnapped Squanto in the hope of crippling the communication between the Indians and their friends.

A more loyal man, Hobomok, stole back to the British to lead Myles Standish to the hidden lair and thus effect the return of the invaluable savage by booming gun fire.

Massasoit Captured

At the same time, it was learned Massasoit was captured by a band of Narragansetts. A simple demand from the English surprisingly called the latter tribe's bluff and the Indian chief was returned, to be soon followed by the submissal of the Narragansett tribe as subjects of King James.

The Narragansetts, then settled down by the side with the Wampanoags in peace for almost a decade.

In March, 1623, Massasoit took

seriously sick, becoming blind and losing his senses. Winslow and a John Hampden, immortalized by the village Hampden in Gray's "Elegy," hastened to Pocanoket (Bristol) and effected the complete recovery of the chief with his medicines and cordials. This act further cemented Massasoit's loyalty.

In appreciation, he informed the pair of a large Indian plot by the Massachusetts Indians which Standish readily subdued.

He also allowed the English to set up a trading post at Sowams, near the junction of the Barrington and Warren Rivers which helped check the advancement of the Dutch up Narragansett Bay.

English Advance

At this time, the English were advancing further inland and Massasoit and his Indians came to know more of them. One of them, Roger Williams, was a close friend of the great sachem before the latter became the "Pioneer of Religious Liberty" in America.

Much good has been said of history's great Indian chief. And so it was a sad moment in Pilgrim history when this man, who made the arrival of the English so much more comfortable and pleasant in this savage country, died, probably in 1661 or 1662.

Alexander the Great (Wamsutta) succeeded his father to the throne but his reign lasted only for a short time. He resided at Mount Hope (two miles east of Bristol in that town) and married Weetamoe, the potent squaw sachem of the Pocassetts who were residing in Fall River, Swansea, Somerset, and Tiverton lands.

Philip's Plans

He was followed in reign by Philip of Macedon (Metacom) who, at the start, held no great affinity towards his father's friends. Massasoit's younger son had long fostered a hatred for the English assumption of what was formerly complete Indian land. It presented

a great ethical problem which one historian summed up as follows:

"Indeed it is questionable whether, in competition between races of higher and lower civilization, when the former intrudes upon the lands of the latter, justice, in its strictest sense, is ever possible."

Philip, nevertheless, made plans to raise the dwindling status of the Indian. He saw a unified Indian attack against the British as the only resort.

War Begins

In the year of 1675 the war began.

A knoll at Lakeville, near Assawampsett Pond atop which is King Philip's Lookout, is believed to be the site of an act which precipitated the war one year before Philip had planned.

Here resided John Sassamon, an

Indian preacher who had studied at Harvard and assisted Rev. John Elliot in translating the Bible. In gratitude for his secretarial work, Philip had given the Indian some land in the neighborhood. Later, he suspected him of notifying the English of his plans and sent out three men to murder him.

The trio were seen by an Indian, friendly to the British, were apprehended by them and later two were hanged. In probable rage, Philip is said to have hastened his plans. He directed operations from Mount Hope.

After warning his white friends, one of whom was Hugh Cole after whom the Swansea river is named, to take refuge, Philip commenced the campaign.

First Battle

The first important battle took place on July 8, 1675, when 15 men

under Capt. Benjamin Church besieged the 300-Indian village of Puncatees, now the south part of Tiverton. After six hours of action, Church's group was saved by a sloop from Gold or Golding's Island, south of Howland's Bridge.

Ten days later, the combined warriors of Philip and Weetamoe engaged the English in the Pocasset swamp (Tiverton) and were forced to flee across the Taunton River.

On the 31st of July, the following year, Church fell upon Philip et al between Taunton and Bridgewater. Many Indian prisoners were taken and, six days later, Weetamoe was found dead on the westerly side of the Slade's Ferry Bridge.

Indian Informer

After Church had successfully pursued Philip and his warriors to

Pocasset and then over the Howland's Bridge ferry to a swamp near Mount Hope, an Indian named Alderman came to the English to inform them of the hidden Indian's whereabouts, in vengeance for the murder of his brother who had proposed peace with the white enemy.

It was in the succeeding action, that Philip was killed by Alderman and the chief's followers routed in the last major action of the war.

Sixteen days later, one of Philip's chief captains was captured and that helped to signal the end of this famous conflict which inflicted terrible losses and destruction to both sides.

Thereafter, the white settlers enlarged their domination of the

country and the Indian was subjected to what the Pilgrims had been upon arrival—a small component race in this vast country.

Indians Get Land Back

In 1945, some 270 years after the termination of the King Philip War, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts returned a parcel of land, 277½ acres, in the Freetown-Fall River State Forest to the lineal descendants of the Watuppa Indians of the Pocasset branch.

The reservation was opened for 12 lineal descendant families who were given jurisdiction over these lands.

(Credit: a paper by R. F. Haffenreffer Jr. read to the Fall River Historical Society and Phillips History of Fall River by Arthur Sherman Phillips.)