

Weetamoe Key Figure In Area's Indian Life

Weetamoe, Queen of the Pocasset Indians, and one of the key figures in the terrible King Philip War, is undeniably the most fabulous woman this area has ever known.

The story of her life is classically dramatic. It has everything—romance, glamor, intrigue, action, adventure, tragedy.

Weetamoe herself ranks with the most exciting women of the world—in courage, in beauty, in diplomacy, in intelligence, in passion, in heartbreak and in defeat.

Corbitant's Daughter

Born and educated to barbaric royalty, she was the daughter of Corbitant, chief of the Pocasset Indians, and lieutenant to Massasoit, ruler of the Wampanoags.

Her empire was the primeval Pocasset territory of the Pokanoket nation, including what is now Swansea, Somerset, Fall River and Tiverton.

She ruled a tribe decimated early in the 19th century by small pox, but estimated to include 300 warriors at the time of her ascendancy.

Her influence was made to extend into the nation of the fierce Narragansetts, and her counsels meant war instead of peace for the English colonists—death instead of life for hundreds of settlers.

It was Weetamoe who stood by Philip in his hour of decision; it was Weetamoe who backed him in battle; it was Weetamoe who was true to him unto death.

Much-Married Pagan Queen

Brought up in the conventional Indian belief that there were "many inconveniences that a man should be tied to one woman," she was a much-married pagan queen, having at least five known husbands.

Her most powerful political-marital alliance was to the ill-fated Alexander (Wamsutta), son of Massasoit, who succeeded his father as had of the Wampanoags.

As his queen, she acquired even larger influence over the tribe; as an Indian woman of charm and intelligence, she had the ability to inspire her warriors' unswerving fidelity and fealty.

For unexplained reasons, she used various aliases during her short lifetime. For the "marriage of her youth," undertaken with an Indian known as Weequequinequa in 1651, she was Nammumpaum. When she married Alexander in 1656, she was Tatapanum.

She Weds Narragansett

She was married briefly to another warrior called Quiquequan-chett, but her last two marriages again were of convenience and political significance.

A warrior from King Philip's army, Petownonowit, was her fourth choice. His conferences with Capt. Benjamin Church proved unfortunate for the Indians, however, and when his loyalty failed him at the outbreak of the war, Weetamoe divorced him.

Her fifth and last husband proved her best consort. He was Quinnapin, by birth a royal Narragansett affiliated with the "war party" within his own nation. By choice, he was a captain in Philip's army. With Weetamoe and Philip, he stood as a third power, in the warfare they patterned.

Princess Is Educated

Petownonowit, Weetamoe's fourth husband. The war was prematurely set off by the horrible massacre at Swansea on June 20, 1675.

Branding her husband a traitor, Weetamoe divorced him, and rushed to join Philip at the head of her Pocasset Army.

The first action following the massacre was at Puncatest, in Southern Tiverton. The Indians had the edge, with superiority of numbers, and the English had to be evacuated by boat from defeat.

King Philip War Underway

Still at the head of her Pocasset legions, Weetamoe fought alongside Philip in the next battle in the Great Pocasset Swamp, where part of central Fall River now is located.

Fleeing a desperate English attack, the Indian queen and her royal brother-in-law made their way North through the tangled green forest that is now the Watuppa Reservation, down the present Mowry Trail to Mother's Brook and across the Taunton River.

The blood bath was on, and there was more action South of Taunton. Then Weetamoe, together with her new warrior-husband, Quinnapin, marched over the Rehoboth plain toward Narragansett territory.

Their mission was to incite that nation to unite with them. Philip turned Westward.

Queen Persuades Narragansetts

Weetamoe's gifts of diplomatic intrigue and native cleverness paid off. Under the influence of herself and her Narragansett husband-warrior, the Narragansett "war party" gained full control of the nation by the end of October, 1675.

The Narragansetts issued their famous defiance to British demands. They refused to surrender the Wampanoag "refugees."

Massacres swept the vicinity until the English marched into the country. Weetamoe's husband was second in command of the Narragansett Indians at the Great Swamp Fight which took place near Kingston, R. I.

But—the Indians were defeated.

She Rejoins Philip

And Weetamoe set out to meet Philip returning from his ravaging attacks on Western Massachusetts settlements.

Quinnapin, meanwhile, led his men in an attack on the Town of Lancaster (Mass.), and one of the many prisoners taken included Mary Rowlandson, the minister's wife. It was Mrs. Rowlandson, sold to Quinnapin as a slave for his wife, Weetamoe, who chronicled the life of the Indians during her captivity, a period which marked the waning of their military power.

What was hailed as a great Indian victory took place at Sudbury in April, 1676. But Mrs. Rowlandson described her Indian masters as returning home without the same triumphant rejoicing they evidenced on other occasions.

Queen in War Dance

The quietness was ill-omened. Weetamoe, the Indian queen, recognized the danger signals. A great war dance was scheduled, which was led by the Pocasset ruler and her Narragansett consort, with King Philip counted only among the observers.

Quinnapin was splendidly garbed in a white linen robe, bordered with lace and decorated with silver. He wore a wampum turban

Princess Is Educated

Weetamoe's father, Corbitant, was thoroughly suspicious of English designs on Indian power and territory, thus differing completely from his superior chief, Massasoit, who wisely managed to preserve peace and harmony between the white men and his people for nearly 50 years.

Doubtlessly, Corbitant thoroughly inculcated in his young princess-daughter his own strong, but shrewdly-veiled anti-English sentiments, while simultaneously stressing the value of skilled and cunning diplomacy.

Alexander Dies Mysteriously

The unfortunate death of Alexander, from a mysterious and sudden ailment, at Duxbury clinched her hatred of the settlers. He had been forced to go to that town after arrest "for plotting against the colonists."

Weetamoe believed he had been poisoned by the white men, and from that moment on became an implacable, formidable and active foe.

Philip (Metacomet) married to Weetamoe's sister, succeeded his brother, Alexander, to the sachemship of the Wampanoags, returning to Mount Hope, the ancient tribal government seat, for the beginning of his leadership.

Weetamoe retired quietly to her home in Pocasset, quietly and firmly intent on avenging Alexander's death.

A visionary politician, ruthless and clever, Philip's ruling conviction was that the white settlers were interlopers on lands rightfully belonging to the Indians.

Weetamoe Backs Philip

Carefully and deliberately, he laid methodical plans to prevent further loss of Indian liberties and territory. In this, he was passionately encouraged by Weetamoe, both in memory of Corbitant and in revenge of Alexander.

His plot was simple: Annihilate all white people in the land.

But his plans were discovered by the English and confirmed by

ver. He wore a wampum turban and white, silver - ornamented stockings. A wampum tunic was belted to his waist.

Weetamoe, with colored face and powdered hair, wore a long, ornamented blanket, accented with bracelets, earrings and necklaces. Her stockings were red—and her shoes were white.

Accompanied by the hypnotizing rhythm of a brass drum beat, they danced . . . the war dance of their ancestors . . . of the days before the white men.

They must have been temporarily successful in turning the tide of fortune for the Indians because Philip seemed to carry destruction into the very heart of the colonies.

Other Indians Bow Out

The success was short-lived, however. Attempting to ally the Mohawks as successfully as Weetamoe and Quinnapin had won the Narragansetts, his strategy slipped, and he incurred Mohawk enmity instead of active cooperation.

Misfortune followed, with the capture of his most powerful Narragansett friend and chieftain by the English and the subsequent execution. Other friendly Indian tribes became cold to the cause, and the final blow came when Queen Awashonks of the Seconet Tribe detached her warriors from Philip's army and, under the spell of Captain Church, united with the English.

Weetamoe Alone Is True

Of all the leaders, only Weetamoe, widow of Alexander, daughter of Corbitant, wife of Quinnapin, remained staunch and true.

Discouraged, in July of 1676, Philip and Weetamoe, with what remained of their depleted forces, attempted to return to Mount Hope and Pocasset. Intercepted at Bridgewater by Captain Church on Aug. 1, they were defeated, losing a great many of their remaining followers.

Among prisoners taken during this battle were Philip's wife and Weetamoe's sister. Philip, who apparently loved his wife dearly, was

desolate. Informed of her capture, he is reported to have said:

"My heart breaks; now I am ready to die."

Hunted now, stalked at bay like a wild animal in her own forest empire, Weetamoe fled through the still-uncharted woodlands, guarded by 26 faithful tribesmen.

The Queen Is Betrayed

Her proud and lonely Indian heart was set on returning to her own

SOURCES

The article on Weetamoe is based on information obtained from "Weetamoe: A New England Queen of the Seventeenth Century" by Virginia Baker; "Weetamoe: Squa-Sachem of the Pocassets" by Arthur S. Phillips; "King Philip's Last Hunt" from "In Old New England" by Hezekiah Butterworth and Fowler's "History of Fall River."

homeland, and four days later she really did arrive at Swansea, on the shores of Mattapoisett (Gardners Neck), where she could look across the blue waters to her own lovely, sparkling Quequechan and the cool green of her Pocasset kingdom.

But she was betrayed by one of

her own. An Indian, seeking amnesty for himself, conducted the English to her hideout. Courageously, her 26-man bodyguard stemmed the attack long enough for Weetamoe to start to cross the Taunton River on a hastily-constructed raft.

But the weariness was too much for the 44-year, young-old queen. Within reach of her precious and native shores, Weetamoe, the Indian queen who had staked her life on Indian victory, drowned.

Her body was recovered by white people, who marvelled at the beauty and symmetry of the beautiful Indian woman. Dismembered, the proud head of the Squaw-Sachem of the Wampanoags and the Pocassets was exhibited in Taunton.

Her Courage Remembered

The death of her brother-in-law, King Philip, soon followed. And the Indian cause, here, as it was to be elsewhere throughout the country, was lost.

But—the white settlers, the conquerors, remembered Weetamoe. Her name lives on, as does her spirit, and the quality of courage with which she lived so intensely.



—Photo by Bill Howard

WEETAMOE AND THE FALL RIVER STORY: A scene from the historic spectacle, portraying Fall River's past, shows Weetamoe, wife of Alexander, protesting negotiations for the Freeman's Purchase, part of her Pocasset territory, sold by herself and her husband, Alexander. The Indian queen's marital disagreements with her husband stemmed from his willingness to sell her lands too cheaply.