

# Weetamoe, Best Known

Weetamoe, queen of the Pocasset Indians, is famous in the annals of Fall River's history primarily because of the tragic way she died.

Undoubtedly her wretched death on the banks of the Taunton River is the stuff from which romantic legends are made. But Weetamoe's life is equally as interesting as her death, particularly now that outstanding women are beginning to assume their rightful places in American history.

As ruler over the tribe which occupied Fall River territory in the 17th century, Weetamoe was probably the first female leader in this area. And she was by no means a shrinking violet, subservient-type woman, but a strong-willed, spirited and proud individual.

Today's so-called permissive society might be surprised to learn that Weetamoe is known to have had at least five husbands. She might even be considered a bit of a swinger, if it were not for the fact that it would be unfair to apply 20th century American standards to a 17th century Indian queen.

But if she was fickle about her male consorts, she was steadfast in her loyalty to her people and in her ill-fated but heroic efforts to stem the tide of white encroachment on Indian territory.

According to Arthur S. Phillips, who wrote a paper entitled, "Weetamoe, Squa-Sachem of the Pocassets," for the Fall River Historical Society in 1933, Weetamoe inherited her intense dislike of the colonists from her father Corbitant.

As chief of the Pocassets, Corbitant was always trying to overthrow Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoags. Both the Pocassets and the Wampanoags were members of the Pokonoket Nation, but the Wampanoags were the ruling tribe

and the Pocassets were second in power.

Corbitant disagreed with Massasoit's policy of maintaining friendly relations with the colonists so he could use their alliance to protect his nation from the Narragansetts, who were pressing on all sides.

Phillips believed that Weetamoe adopted her father's warlike attitude and that this attitude was fostered later by some warlike Narragansett Indians she harbored in her tribe.

In his view, from infancy Weetamoe recognized the colonists as the enemies of her race and its destiny and believed they should be overpowered.

"As a clever dissembler she upheld the reputation of her race, and we find no overt act of hers that tended to logical colonial development," he stated.

Weetamoe and her younger sister, Wootonekamuske (the wife of King Philip), were probably born at Gardners Neck (then known as Matapoisett) in Swansea, since that was Corbitant's principal place of residence. It was also an important camp for Weetamoe, but according to Phillips, her main camp was along the banks of the Quequechan River in this city's "presumably near Hartwell Street where the skeleton in armor was found."

Weetamoe was born in 1633 and was quite young when she succeeded her father and became squaw-sachem of the Pocassets.

According to an account by a colonist who talked with Corbitant, the Indian leader accepted the principles of the Ten Commandments, with the exception of the one against adultery. Corbitant felt that there were "many inconveniences that a man should be tied to one woman."

Because she had "many husbands, she divorced them at her pleasure and,

at the time of her death, she was one of the three wives of Quanopin," Phillips assumed that Weetamoe agreed with her father's philosophy on marriage.

For a written narrative about Weetamoe from a person who observed her for some time, historians have relied heavily on an account by a Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a minister's wife, who was captured by the Indians early in King Philip's War and was made a servant to Weetamoe.

Describing Weetamoe in April, 1675, little more than a year before she died in her 44th year, Rowlandson wrote:

"My master (Quanopin, Weetamoe's last husband) had three squaws living sometimes with one, and sometimes with another — one was Weetamoe, with whom I had lived and served all this while. A severe and proud dame she was, bestowing every day, in dressing herself, near as much time as any of the gentry of the land — powdering her head and painting her face, going with her necklaces, with jewels in her ears, and bracelets upon her hands. When she had dressed herself, her work was to make girdles of wampum and beads."

Otis Olney Wright, in his "History of Swansea," felt that Rowlandson's account was "somewhat entertaining" in that it was "spiced with hatred, and perhaps a little of female jealousy." He pointed out, too, that Rowlandson and Weetamoe were enemies.

When Weetamoe sold the Freeman's Lands (Freetown and part of Fall River) in 1659, a portion of the purchase price was her indebtedness to John Barnes, a Plymouth merchant, for items of personal adornment.

"We should not suppose that these elaborate toilets were prepared solely for her personal

satisfaction," wrote Phillips, "but rather to heighten her dignity and attractiveness as incident to her superior position and in connection with her warriors and male associates. In these matters Weetamoe was very successful, and her divorces and marriages were more speedy than most liberal courts of today would allow."

Little is known about Weetamoe's first marriage, but her second husband was Wamsutta (also known as Alexander), the son of Massasoit and the elder brother of King Philip.

As Wamsutta's wife, Weetamoe (who used several other names, among them Tattapanum and Namumpum) was squaw-sachem of the Pokonoket nation.

Their union was most likely political, since it joined the two most powerful Pokonoket tribes under a single sachem. From all accounts, Weetamoe and Wamsutta didn't live in harmony. While she was opposed to dealing with the colonists, he was anxious to sell her lands to them.

In fact, in 1662 Weetamoe and another Indian went to Plymouth Court to complain against Wamsutta for selling Sakonnetneck, which they said belonged to them. Wamsutta took ill and died a few days after he was summoned to court, and some historians believe that Weetamoe thought he had been poisoned by the colonists.

After Wamsutta's death, Weetamoe married a mild-mannered member of her own tribe whom she soon tired of. Her next husband was Peter or Petownonowit. He was friendly to the English and gave information to the colonial troops during King Philip's War. Ultimately he either deserted Weetamoe or was expelled from her army and joined the colonists.

# in Death, Led Full Life

Quanopin, Weetamoe's fifth and last husband, was, according to Phillips, the most interesting character connected with her career. A Narragansett Indian at least 10 years younger than she, Quanopin commanded Weetamoe's army during King Philip's War (1675-76).

He has been described as a "young lusty sachem and a very rogue" who some times drank to excess. But despite his faults, Phillips said he showed himself to be a bold and fearless leader.

Philip's War spelled the total destruction of Indian power in Plymouth Colony and Rhode Island. Among its more prominent victims were Philip himself, who was shot to death by one of Capt. Benjamin Church's men at Mount Hope, Quanopin, who was captured and turned over to Rhode Island authorities who sentenced him to death, and of course, Weetamoe.

In August of 1676, Phillips said that Weetamoe returned to Gardners Neck with her warriors, who had been reduced to

only 26 men.

According to Wright, 270 other warriors had either deserted her or been slain and one of the deserters informed the colonists of her whereabouts.

A band of 20 colonists volunteered to capture her. Wright said they came upon her party by complete surprise and captured all the Indians except Weetamoe.

But Weetamoe did not survive for long. One historian described her death this way:

"Intending to make an escape from the danger, she attempted to get over a river, or arm of the near nearby upon a raft, or some pieces of broken wood; but whether tired and spent with swimming, or starved with cold and hunger, she was found stark naked, in Mattapoissett, South Swansea, not far from the water side which made some think she was first half drowned and so ended her wretched life."

Historians have found much to admire in Weetamoe. Phillips, for example, said that she

was "consistently a heroine," a woman of "great ability" and a queen who, on account of her personal charms, demanded and received obedience from her chieftains. Although she hated the English, he wrote, "She was true to her inheritance in the belief that her tribal destiny was inconsistent with English destiny."

Wright described Weetamoe as a woman of much energy, faithful in her cause and desirous of her subjects' welfare. According to him, she was considered "as potent a prince as any around her," and her "disposition was amiable until soured by misfortune and injury."

Weetamoe's only crime, said Wright, was her attachment to Philip and his cause, "for which she was hunted from place to place with unrelenting hatred, a price was set on her head and whole tribes were destroyed for harboring or allegedly harboring her."

Both Wright and a more famous writer, Wash-

ington Irving, deplored the fact that the colonists didn't simply bury Weetamoe. Instead, Wright said they "indulged in taunts over the body, cut off the head, and after carrying it to Taunton, set it upon a pole."

Irving gave the following account of the tragedy:

"But persecution ceased not at the grave. Even death, the refuge of the wretched, where the wicked commonly cease from trembling, was no protection to this outcast female, whose great crime was affectionate fidelity to her kinsman and her friend.

"Her corpse was the object of unmanly and dastardly vengeance. The head was severed from the body and set upon a pole, and was thus exposed at Taunton, to the view of her captive subjects. They immediately recognized the features of their unfortunate queen, and were so affected at this barbarous spectacle, that we are told they broke forth into the most horrid and diabolical lamentations!"



The death of Weetamoe is depicted in this romanticized mural by the late John Mann in the auditorium of the Matthew J. Kuss Middle School, formerly the Technical High School. The impressive scene shows the dead body of the queen of the Pocassetts lying on the shore of the Taunton Rive, surrounded by her mourning tribesmen.