

## **Philip's War: America's Most Devastating Conflict**

by Walter Giersbach

King Philip's War (1675-76) is an event that has been largely ignored by the American public and popular historians. However, the almost two-year conflict between the colonists and the Native Americans in New England stands as perhaps the most devastating war in this country's history. One in ten soldiers on both sides were wounded or killed. At its height, hostilities threatened to push the recently arrived English colonists back to the coast. And, it took years for towns and urban centers to recover from the carnage and property damage.

The war is named for King Philip, the son of Massasoit and chief of the Wampanoag nation. In his language, his name was Metacom, Metacomet, or Pometacom. In 1662, the court at Plymouth Colony arrogantly summoned the Wampanoag leader Wamsutta to Plymouth. Major Josiah Winslow (later Colonel) and a small force took Wamsutta, Philip's brother, at gunpoint. Soon after questioning, Wamsutta sickened and died and his death infuriated the Wampanoag nation.

Upon the death of his brother, whom the Indians suspected the English of murdering, Philip became sachem and maintained a shaky peace with the colonists for a number of years. Friendship continued to erode over the steady succession of land sales forced on the Indians by their growing dependence on English goods, and Plymouth's continued unyielding policy toward Native leaders, it is reported by the Connecticut Society of Colonial Wars ([www.colonialwarsct.org](http://www.colonialwarsct.org)) and other sources.

Suspicious of the Indians remained, and in 1671, the colonists questioned Philip, fined him and demanded that the Wampanoag surrender their arms, which they did.

### **War Flames Are Ignited**

In January 1675, the Indian John Sassamon died at Assawampsett Pond, about 15 miles north of present-day New Bedford. Sassamon was literate and a Christian convert. He may have been acting as an informer to the English and was murdered, probably at Philip's instigation. Increase Mather, writing after the war, suggested he was killed "out of hatred for him for his Religion, for he was Christianized, and baptiz'd, and was a Preacher amongst the Indians...and was wont to curb those Indians that knew not God on the account of their debaucheries". [1]

Events moved quickly, and on June 8 Sassamon's alleged murderers were tried and executed at Plymouth. Three days later, Wampanoags were reported to have taken up arms near Swansea, about 15 miles from Providence.

By the mid-17th century, settlements had been established throughout southeast Massachusetts. "Though there were many events that led to the war, the attack on the settlement on the banks of the Kickemuit River may be attributed to the growing perception that Indian land had been increasingly encroached upon by settlers, leaving cornfields overrun by settlers' livestock and traditional hunting grounds inaccessible. In fact, since the arrival of the English at Plymouth Rock in 1620, land under Native control had been reduced from all of Southeastern Massachusetts to merely the area of the Mount Hope peninsula." (A map and local points related to the war can be found at <http://members.cox.net/drweed/kingphilip.htm>.)

Less than a week later, authorities in Rhode Island, Plymouth, and Massachusetts attempted negotiation with Philip, and sought guarantees of fidelity from the Nipmucks and Narragansetts. However, before the end of the month, Wampanoags made a sudden raid on the settlement of Swansea on the Taunton River. On June 26, Massachusetts troops marched to Swansea to join Plymouth troops.

When news of the attack on Swansea reached Boston, the Massachusetts Bay Colony quickly came to the aid of The Plymouth Colony. An example of the orders of the General Court is the following: "To the Militia of the Town of Boston, Cha. Camb. Watertown, Roxbury, Dorchester, Dedham, Brantrey, Weymouth, Hingham, Maulden—You are hereby required in his Majesty's name to take notice that

Govr & Council have ordered 100 able shouldjers forthwith impressed out of the severall Towns according to the proportions hereunder written for the aid and assistance of our confederate Plymouth in the designe afoote agst the Indians, and accordingly you are to warne and proportions to be ready at an hours warning from Capt Daniel Henschman who is appointed Captain and Commander of the Foote Company that each shouldjers shal have his armes compleat and Snalsack ready to march and not faile to be at the randevous."

In the coming days, Wampanoags attacked Rehoboth and Taunton, eluded colonial troops, and left Mount Hope for Pocasset. Meanwhile, the Mohegans of Connecticut traveled to Boston and offered to fight on the English side.

Other raids followed; towns were burned and many whites—men, women, and children—were slain. Unable to draw the Indians into a major battle, the colonists resorted to similar methods of hit-and-run warfare in retaliation, and antagonized other tribes. The Wampanoag were joined by the Nipmuck and by the Narragansett (after the latter were attacked by the colonists), and by that summer of 1675 all the New England colonies were involved in the war.

While English encroachments on Native American land may be a general cause of the war, three cultural points are worth noting as incendiaries that inflamed the English:

- The English, many of whom were veterans of Europe's Thirty Years War, were introduced to guerrilla warfare by necessity. Indians fought from behind trees and, according to a poet of that period, "every stump shot like a musketeer / And bows with arrows every tree did bear." [2] Worse yet, the new continent featured dark forests and swamp lands that made it impossible to maintain orderly battle lines. "To the colonists, swamps were hideous and dangerous places, thae most foreign and un-English land in all the New World. The word itself, *swamp* only entered the English language with the first reports from North America in 1624. [3]

- English houses had evolved from wattle and daub huts to framed structures by the mid-17th century, and the loss of "English houses" was a major crisis of the war. The loss of property was, at that time, often counted first before the loss of human life.

- And, the English had insurmountable differences with the Native Americans. They were deeply suspicious even of Indians who had learned to read and write English. Further, nakedness signaled both cultural and spiritual depravity. In other words, the Native Americans were not "civilized." Adding indignity to injury during the war, the Indians sometimes stripped dead men and women of their clothes, leaving them lying prominently naked.

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On July 8, Wampanoags attacked Middleborough and Dartmouth. On the 14th, Nipmucks attacked Mendon. In the quickly changing tide of alliances, the Narragansetts signed a peace treaty with Connecticut on July 15th, while a Massachusetts envoy attempted to negotiate with the Nipmucks.

On July 19th, Philip and his troops escaped an English siege and fled Pocasset for Nipmuck territory. In a matter of a few days, the Nipmucks attacked Massachusetts troops and besieged Brookfield about 10 miles west of present-day Worcester.

Most Natives who had converted to Christianity—called "Praying Indians" or "Christian Indians"—fought with the English or remained neutral. The English, however, did not always trust these converts and interned many of them in camps on outlying islands. Also, some Native communities on Cape Cod and the Islands did not participate in the war. On Aug. 13, the Massachusetts Council ordered Christian Indians confined to praying towns—a dark foretaste of America's suspension of civil liberties in later wartimes. But the carnage was continuing: On Aug. 22, a group of unidentified Indians killed seven colonists at Lancaster, Mass. Perhaps in retaliation, on Aug. 30, Capt. Samuel Moseley arrested 15 Hassanamesit Indians near Marlborough for the Lancaster assault and marched them to Boston.

The war was spreading to the West, and on Sept. 1, Wampanoags and Nipmucks attacked Deerfield, Mass. Massachusetts forces under the command of Capt. Moseley attacked the town of Pennacook. By the 12th of the month, colonists had abandoned Deerfield, Squakeag, and Brookfield.

Warfare continued throughout the fall months. The Narragansetts signed a treaty with the English in Boston. Massachusetts troops were ambushed near Northampton. Pocumtucks attacked and destroyed Springfield.

For their part, the Colonists retaliated forcefully. The Massachusetts Council relocated Christian Indians to Deer Island in Boston Harbor and repelled Indians from Hatfield. And Commissioners of the United Colonies ordered a united army to attack the Narragansetts at the Great Swamp. The Christian Indians may have been perceived as a possible threat, but they were also the enemy to the hostile Indians. Before the end of 1675, the Nipmucks had taken captive Christian Indians at Magunkaquog, Chabanakongkomun, and Hassanamesit, including James Printer. Printer was not only a literate Christian Indian from Cambridge, he took the surname of the trade he pursued.

A University of Massachusetts study notes, "During September, 1675, bands of warriors roamed the Connecticut River valley, attacking villagers as they worked in the fields or traveled between villages on business. Unlike the English who were accustomed to fighting fixed battles on open plains, Amerindians fought from concealed spots and attacked small groups. This 'American' way of fighting would be a problem for the British during the next century also. The colonists used these same guerilla tactics, which they learned fighting the Amerindians, to fight against the British troops in the American Revolutionary War." [5]

The Indians, it was said, were warrior societies. Despite the imbalance of arms, since they lacked cannon and depended upon the English or French for muskets and powder, they were effective against European military formations. Colonial militia, which quickly adopted the Indian's style of guerrilla or insurgency warfare, were better able to deal with Indian tactics than the English officers, some of whom had fought under Cromwell in England.

The new year of 1676 saw Philip weakened—somewhat. In January, he and his band traveled further west to Mohawk territory, seeking, but failing to secure, an alliance. The winter months saw pitched battles as the Narragansetts attacked Pawtuxet; Nipmucks attacked Lancaster then Medfield. As Philip and the Wampanoags returned and attacked Northampton, the Massachusetts Council debated erecting a wall around Boston; assaults were taking place within ten miles of Boston.

Fighting continued in March, as Nipmucks attacked Groton; Longmeadow, Marlborough, and Simsbury were attacked; Nipmucks attacked English forces near Sudbury. Then, Indians attacked Rehoboth, and Providence was destroyed.

### **The Massacre at Cumberland**

One of the bloodiest massacres—and darkest moments for the English—occurred at Cumberland, R.I.

On Sunday morning March 26, 1676, after receiving word that a party of the enemy lay near Blackstone's house at Study Hill in Cumberland, Capt. Michael Pierce marched from Rehoboth, leading a company of 63 English and 20 friendly Wampanoag Indians. Pierce was born about 1615 in Bristol, England, and emigrated to America in about 1645. He settled in Hingham, Mass., in 1646, moved to Scituate the following year, and was commissioned a Captain by the Colony Court in 1669.

Upon reaching a ravine near Attleborough Gore on the Blackstone River above Pawtucket Falls, his company were ambushed by about 500 to 700 Narragansett led by chief sachem Canonchet. According to an account related by Hon. Edwin C. Pierce of Providence, the English retreated across the river to set up a defense on the west bank (now part of the City of Central Falls), but were attacked by a blocking force of about 300 Indians. Pierce formed his men into a circle and they continued to fight in ever decreasing numbers for about two hours, until only a few remained. Pierce was killed early in the battle. A few of the Wampanoags managed to escape by disguising themselves as attackers. Nine English were captured and taken to a spot in Cumberland, now called Nine Men's Misery, where they were tortured to death.

Arriving too late, a relief force found and buried the bodies of the nine. A few days later, Canonchet was captured and executed.

These were the essentials of the battle. A more personal and detailed account of the massacre of Pierce's party by the Indians gives us a flavor of the emotion felt by the English:

"Sunday the 26th of March was sadly remarkable to us for the Tidings of a very deplorable Disaster brought unto Boston about 5 a Cloak that Afternoon, by a Post from Dedham, viz., that Captain Pierce (of) Scituate, in Plimmouth Colony, having Intelligence in his Garrison at Seaconicke, that a Party of the Enemy lay near Mr. Blackstones, went forth with 63 English and twenty of the Cape Indians, (who had all along continued faithful, and joynd with them;) and upon their March, discovered rambling in an obscure woody Place, four or five Indians, who, in getting away from us, halted, as if they had been lame or wounded. But our Men had pursued them but a little Way into the Woods, before they found them to be only Decoys to draw them into their Ambuscade: for on a Sudden, they discovered about 500 Indians, who in very good order, furiously attacqued them, being as readily received by ours. So that the Fight began to be very fierce and dubious, and our Men had made the Enemy begin to retreat but so slowly that it scarce deserved that Name, when a fresh Company of about 400 Indians came in; so that the English and their few Indian Friends were quite surrounded, and beset on every Side. Yet they made a brave Resistance, for about two Hours: during all that Time they did great Execution upon the Enemy, whom they kept at a Distance, and themselves in Order. For Captain Pierce cast his 63 English and 20 Indians into a Ring, and fought Back to Back, and were double-double Distance, all in a Ring, whilst the Indians were as thick as they could stand, thirty deep. Overpowered with those numbers, the said Captain, and 55 of his English and ten of their Indian Friends were slain upon the Place; which, in such a Cause, and upon such Disadvantages, may certainly be stiled 'The Bed of Honour.' However, they sold their worthy Lives at a gallant Rate; it being affirmed by those few that (not without wonderful Difficulty, and many Wounds) made their Escape, that the Indians lost as many Fighting Men, (not counting Women and Children,) in this Engagement, as were killed at the Battle in the Swamp, near Narraganset, mentioned in our last Letter, which were generally computed to be above three Hundred." [6]

### **The Turning of the War**

The battles were not all in favor of the Natives. An early history records that on May 18, "At North Hampton, Hadly, and the Towns thereabout, two English Captives, escaping from the Enemy, informed that a considerable body of Indians (30) seated themselves not far from Pacomtuck, and that they were very secure: so that should Forces be sent forth against them, many of the Enemy would (in probability) be cut off, without any difficulty."

Peskeompscut, the Indian name for present-day Turners Falls on the Connecticut River, was a favored site for fishing with the local tribes. The narrow river at that time plunged over a 40 to 50 foot drop. In May 1676, warriors, women, children and old people were gathered there to catch and cure fish.

"Months of war with the English had used up their limited food stores. While some people fished, others went down river to the abandoned fields at Deerfield where they planted seed. With luck they would be able to harvest a crop in the late summer. Warriors organized cattle raids on the nearby English settlements." [7]

Local colonists, some from Springfield 30 miles south, and a few garrison soldiers, responded to the call. By May 18, 150 men and boys assembled in Hatfield. Capt. William Turner led the group past Bloody Brook and the edge of Deerfield, where they crossed the Deerfield River. Then they wound through about two miles of unbroken forest, crossed the Green River, and then pushed on to Mount Adams which was within a mile of the falls.

The history continues, that the English "sent to their neighbors in Conn. for a supply of men, but none coming, they raised about an hundred and four score out of their own towns, who arrived at the Indian Wigwams betimes in the morning, finding them secure indeed, yea all asleep without having any Scouts abroad, so that our Soldiers came and put their guns into their Wigwams before the Indians were aware of them, and made a great and notable slaughter amongst them. Some of the souldiers affirm, that they numbred above one hundred that lay dead upon the ground, and besides those, others told about an hundred and thirty, who were driven into the River, and there perished, being carried down the Falls."

The much-needed victory immediately turned sour. Turner's attack had alerted other Indians camped along the river. One groups crossed the river below the falls and took up a position across the trail leading to Deerfield. Capt. Turner apparently had not thought about securing his retreat, reasoning that the attack had been successful and several hundred of the enemy had been slain at the cost of only one English life.

Then, they heard from a captive that Philip was coming. The English party was torn by indecision. Which route should they take in retreat? The Hatfield force broke into small groups, some insisting on one route, others taking a different path back to where the horses had been left. A few fortunate men managed to get to their horses just before the warriors got to them. Other settlers were forced to push homeward on foot.

Warriors followed the panicking English, inflicting casualties whenever possible. Capt. Turner was killed as he tried to cross the Green River. Of the 150 English participants, at least 40 were killed on the retreat. Some got separated from the main body and had to find their way alone; a few were successful while others never returned.

Fear was contagious, as this account shows:

"An English Captive Lad who was found in the wigwams spake as if Philip were coming with a thousand Indians which false report being famed among the Souldiers, a panick terror fell upon many of them, and they hasted homewards in a confused rout: In the mean while a party of Indians from an Island (whose coming on shore might easily have been prevented, and souldiers before they set out from Hadly were earnestly admonished to take care about that matter) assaulted our men; yea, to the great dishonor of the English, a few Indians pursued our Souldiers four or five miles, who were in number near twice as many as the Enemy. In this disorder, he that was at this time the chief Captain, whose name was Turner, lost his life, he was pursued through a River, received his fatal stroke as he passed through that which is called Green River, etc. as he came out of the Water he fell into the hands of the Uncircumsised, who tripped him (as some who saw it affirm) and rode away upon his horse; and between thirty and forty more were lost in this Retreat. The power of the Indians was broken in this battle."

### **War's End, and the Aftermath**

By mid-year, the war had turned. The Narragansett were completely defeated and their chief,

Canonchet, had been killed in April. The Wampanoag and Nipmuck were gradually subdued. In June, Indians attacked Hadley but were repelled by Connecticut soldiers. Massachusetts issued a declaration of amnesty for Indians who surrendered. And by July, Maj. John Talcott and his troops begin sweeping Connecticut and Rhode Island, capturing large numbers of Algonquians who were transported out of the colonies as slaves throughout the summer.

On July 4, Capt. Benjamin Church and his soldiers begin sweeping Plymouth for Wampanoags. Two weeks later, nearly two hundred Nipmucks surrendered in Boston. Capt. Church was finally successful in capturing Philip's wife and son. An Indian soldier named Alderman in the service of Capt. Church killed Philip after his hiding place at Mt. Hope (Bristol, R.I.) was betrayed. Philip's body was drawn and quartered and his head exposed on a pole in Plymouth. Increase Mather wrote,

"Captured, King Philip was taken and destroyed, and there was he (like as Agag was hewed in pieces before the Lord) cut into four quarters, and is now hanged up as a monument of revenging Justice, his head being cut off and carried away to Plymouth, his Hands were brought to Boston.

"We should not be surprised that the colonists, often hard pressed to win these all-out assaults, developed not only a fear of Indians but a hatred as well. Treating with the Indians as equals, or even as pseudo-equals was quite beyond their comprehension or in most cases their abilities. This problem conflicted with the general imperial policy to improve relations, especially in peace time."

### **A Land in Desolation**

The war, which was extremely costly to the colonists in life and property, resulted in the virtual extermination of tribal Indian life in southern New England and the disappearance of the fur trade. The New England Confederation then had their way completely clear for white settlement.

Rhode Island found itself the victim of a war it had neither instigated nor declared, and suffered as much as its Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth neighbors. Providence lost 72 homes and was deserted by most of its inhabitants. Warwick was burned to the ground except for one stone house, while places like Wickford and the ancient settlement of Pawtuxet were utterly destroyed. By March 1676, the area south of the Pawtuxet River had been largely deserted by the English, and by the war's end only the village of Portsmouth and the town of Newport had been spared the ravages of King Philip's War.

Connecticut's military played a crucial role in the war, and the colony escaped assault with the exception of Simsbury, which was abandoned and burned to the ground. The colonists of Connecticut did not suffer much from hostile Indians, excepting some remote settlers high up the Connecticut River. "They furnished their full measure of men and supplies, and their soldiers bore a conspicuous part in that contest between the races for supremacy," according to the Society for Colonial Wars.

In all, more than half of New England's 90 towns were assaulted by native warriors. For a time in the spring of 1676, it appeared to the colonists that the entire English population of Massachusetts and Rhode Island might be driven back into a handful of fortified seacoast cities. Between 600 and 800 English died in battle during King Philip's War. Measured against a European population in New England of perhaps 52,000, this death rate was nearly twice that of the Civil War and more than seven times that of World War II. The English Crown sent Edmund Randolph to assess damages shortly after the war and he reported that 1,200 homes were burned, 8,000 head of cattle lost, and vast stores of foodstuffs destroyed. One in ten soldiers on both sides was injured or killed.

Nathaniel Saltonstall noted in 1676, the Indian attacks left "in Narraganset not one House left standing. At Warwick, but one. At Providence, not above three. At Potuxit, none left.... Besides particular Farms and Plantations, a great Number not be reckoned up, wholly laid waste or very much damnified. And as to Persons, it is generally thought that of the English there hath been lost, in all...above Eight Hundred."

The outcome of King Philip's War was equally devastating to the traditional way of life for Native people in New England. Hundreds of Natives who fought with Philip were sold into slavery abroad. Others who might be rehabilitated, especially women and children, were forced to become servants locally. As the traditional base of existence changed due to the Colonists' victory, the Wampanoag and other local Native communities had to adapt certain aspects of their culture in order to survive.

It is curious that such a conflict is little remembered today, not because of its bloody devastation but for the extent that such a great proportion of the population—English and Native American alike—was affected. Jacques Arsenault, writing for the University of Georgetown (<http://www.georgetown.edu/users/arsenauj/kpw.html>), indicates this is because many of the realities of King Philip's War do not fit the classical myth of America as the Land of the Free. He states, "The final reason for the poor understanding of King Philip's War is that the events of the war really don't fit into American Mythology. The evidence of King Philip's resistance to an encroaching colonial population would not sit well with peaceful images of the first Thanksgiving, or with the vision of the founders of our nation gathering together to create a nation of freedom, equality and liberty."