

KING PHILLIP'S WAR

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On the four corners at the intersection of Main St. and Hartford Ave. in Mendon Center, there is a gas station, two family homesteads – one of which has been converted into a real estate office, and a town owned vacant lot. Upon investigating the empty lot, of all the surrounding acreage historically it would prove to be the most interesting parcel: hidden in the ancient sod, is a ton of history.

It was here that in 1668 Mendon's first meetinghouse was constructed, requiring untold labor and hardship by the few inhabitants of the locality. Only seven years later, the structure that must have been the pride of the area, was put to the torch by marauding Indians, intent on driving the White Man from their territory.

During an unexpected and unprovoked attack around July 15th 1675, several residents of the tiny community were murdered, and some buildings burned. This invasion was to be forever recorded in history as the first assault on a frontier settlement by Indians in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in what was to become known as King Phillip's War.

Six months or so later, under the constant threat of attack, the surviving residents of the town abandoned their homes and struggling lives, and shortly thereafter every structure in the town was burned.

Where some historians credit the attack on Mendon to King Phillip, most records (actually, there are few historical records of this time period in Mendon) indicate that in fact it was perpetrated not by the King of the Wampanoags, but rather by the Nipmucks, led by their Sachem (chief) Matoonas.

Only a month or so earlier, the town of Swansea was attacked in like manner by Phillip and his warriors, which heralded the start of one of the bloodiest and most destructive wars ever fought by the United States.

Although one of the shortest conflicts, the toll on the colonies was disastrous. In a little over one year, records indicate that in the Plymouth and Mass. Bay Colonies alone, eleven towns were destroyed and abandoned.

Additionally, in Rhode Island three towns were abandoned with 72 homes destroyed in Providence alone, and that town mostly abandoned. In Connecticut, the town of Simsbury was burned and abandoned, and in Maine, all but three towns were destroyed and deserted.

The loss in human life was incredible given the small population of the country at that time, with nearly a thousand whites killed, and around three thousand native Americans: truly a disastrous affair.

Of course the final and primary cause of the conflict, was a small four-letter word, with giant implications: LAND. The colonists constantly *wanted* land to expand their ever growing communities, and the Indians *needed* to keep their holdings in order to live as they and their ancestors had lived for thousands of years.

Aside from that, pure and simple, it was a clash of cultures, and one that was tragic and unfortunately unavoidable. Not only was the war disastrous for the native

population of New England, but also the conflict was to become a forerunner for like encounters all across the face of the continent for the next 250 years or so.

The events that lead up to the actual conflict began with an uneasy relationship between the early settlers in Plymouth Colony and the Wampanoags. Right from the beginning, it appears that the politics on both sides was a prime consideration in the kinship, and played a part right up to and during the actual conflict.

On the Pilgrims' part, in the first few years survival was the prime concern. They were isolated, over three thousand miles from the nearest help, and struggling just to get a foothold in a hostile environment.

For the Indians, their alliance with the White Man was more to increase their security as they were under constant threat from other hostile tribes in the area.

Under Massasoit, the two societies interfaced, and taught each other the basics of their cultures. When the sachem died in 1660, his elder son Wamsutta (Alexander) assumed leadership of the Wampanoags.

However, Alexander died under mysterious circumstances not long after (some say he was murdered) and at this point Metacom (Phillip) became Sachem.

By now, there were constant problems and bickering between the two groups. The demise of Alexander became a catalyst that raised the level of mistrust to a high level. One of the problems that created animosity, was the understanding of land use.

The colonists in America adopted the same procedures regarding the ownership of property that had existed in England for centuries. As is still today, when an individual held the deed or other legal document stating ownership to a particular parcel of land, then that land was his to use as he wished, and no one else had any rights on that piece.

For the Native Americans however, they couldn't seem to grasp the meaning of private land ownership. Tribes belonging to the same nation, lived in mutually agreed on areas or territories where they wandered from place to place to plant crops, fish or hunt. They considered these areas theirs to use, but no individual owned any part of it. Conflicts arose when one tribe crossed undefined boundaries, and were usually settled by war.

When the Colonists began dealing with the Indians to "purchase" land for their own use (often using devious methods to obtain their goals), the natives still felt that they retained the right to continue to use the plots for their own use. Consequently, conflict became unavoidable.

One occurrence that resulted in friction between not only the Indians and Whites, but between the colonies, was a mandate issued by the governor of Plymouth colony. He forbade the Wampanoags to sell or transfer any of their land to any other colony.

The final chapter in the increasing hostilities between the two peoples ended in June of 1675 when a Wampanoag Christian Indian was murdered, and three other tribal members were accused and executed for the deed. In fact, Phillip himself was suspected to have been implicated in the crime, although he was never charged.

It was never really proven that they were guilty, and Phillip and his band became enraged over the incident. Around July 19, 1675 the Wampanoags left their village at Mt. Hope and descended on the town of Swansea: the war had begun.

For a little over a year, the various tribes in the area rampaged and terrorized the inhabitants of colonial New England. Only after Phillip's death in August of 1676, did the carnage subside.

It would be years before some of the destroyed towns and hamlets were rebuilt, and generations before the animosity between the two groups of combatants would tempered by time.

Following the end of armed hostilities, the early settlers in what was to become New England, slowly recovered as the great flood of immigrants began. Within a few years, most of the abandoned hamlets and towns were re-settled, and the expansion west began.

For the remaining Native Americans in the area, the way of life they had experienced forever was no longer possible, and they either blended into the culture of their conquerors, or were driven from the area.

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