

Arrows and Snake Skin

At the period when the Mayflower came to anchor in Plymouth harbor, Massasoit exercised dominion over nearly all the south-eastern part of Massachusetts from Cape Cod to Narragansett Bay.

The south-western section of his kingdom was known as Pokanoket, Sowams, or Sowamsett. It included what now comprises the towns of Bristol, Warren, Barrington, and East Providence in Rhode Island, with portions of Seekonk, Swansea, and Rehoboth in Massachusetts.

The Indians were always particular to locate their permanent villages in the vicinity of springs of running water. Its soil is generally fertile and its climate agreeable and healthy, as, owing to its somewhat inland position, it escapes the full rigor of the fierce winds, that, during the winter months, sweep the unsheltered shores of Bristol.

Wampanoag

In the days when the Wampanoags inhabited its territory, it was well timbered, and grapes, cherries, huckleberries, and other wild fruits grew abundantly in field and swamp. Its rivers teemed with fish of many varieties, and also yielded a plentiful supply of lobsters, crabs, oysters, clams, quahaugs, and mussels.

Flocks of wild fowl haunted its marshes; deer and smaller game frequented its woods. Even in those seasons when food became generally scarce, the dwellers at Sowams probably suffered little from hunger in comparison with the inhabitants of many sections of New England less favored by nature. (History of Swansea, Wright)

In the spring of 1621, Ousamequin, the Massasoit (a title meaning head chief) of the Wampanoag Indians, made a treaty with the Pilgrims who settled at Patuxet (in what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts).

Chief Massasoit (ca. 1581- 1661) was born in present-day Rhode Island. As chief sachem of the Wampanoag nation, he befriended the Pilgrims at Plymouth, taught them farming methods, and joined with them in a 1621 thanksgiving feast. He was a cordial host to the original Pilgrim settlers and sheltered Roger Williams during his winter exile in 1636.

Massasoit, who led the Wampanoags for about a half-century, is best remembered for this diplomatic skill and for his successful policy of peaceful co-existence with the English settlers.

The main terms of the treaty: the Wampanoag promised to defend the Plymouth settlers against hostile tribes. The settlers promised to step in if the Wampanoag were attacked.

Three Wampanoag men, who represented Ousamequin, spent much time with the settlers. Tisquantum (also known as Squanto), Samoset, and Hobbamack gave the settlers invaluable tips on survival.



Massasoit

The Plymouth settlers honored the treaty later that summer by coming to Ousamequin's rescue when they thought he had been captured by enemies.

The Pilgrim-Wampanoag Peace Treaty is the document drafted and signed on March 22, 1621 CE between governor John Carver (l. 1584-1621 CE) of the Plymouth Colony and the sachem (chief) Ousamequin (better known by his title Massasoit, l. c. 1581-1661 CE) of the Wampanoag Confederacy.

The treaty established peaceful relations between the two parties and would be honored by both sides from the day of its signing until after the death of Massasoit in 1661 CE.

Although the treaty reads as though it favors the settlers, the provisions were understood as applying to both sides even when not specified. The treaty and peace lasted for more than 50 years.

Narragansett

The Narragansett Indians are the descendants of the aboriginal people of the State of Rhode Island. Archaeological evidence and the oral history of the Narragansett People establish their existence in this region more than 30,000 years ago.

Certain Nipmuck bands, the Niantics, Wampanoag, and Manisseans all paid tribute to the Narragansett tribe. These tribes all resided in areas of Rhode Island at the time of the first European settlement.

Historically, tribal members had two homes; a winter home and a summer home. The winter home would be called a long house in which up to 20 families would live in over the cold winter months.

During the summer, the tribe would move to the shore and construct Wigwams or Wetus, temporary shelter made of bark on the outside and woven mats on the inside. They would dig out large canoes from trees which could hold up to forty men.

Governor Bradford states that the Narragansetts and Pequots grew "rich and potent" by the manufacture of wampum and, presumably, wealth contributed in no small degree towards establishing the prestige of the Wampanoags.

This tribe, properly speaking was a confederation of clans each clan having its own headman who was, however, subservient to a chief sachem.

The Wampanoags, or Pokanokets as they were also called, were originally a populous and powerful people and it is said that, at one period, their chief was able to rally around him no less than 3,000 warriors. (Narragansett Indian Nation website)

Canonicus, Leader of the Narragansett Challenges the Pilgrims

One of the most renowned sachems among the New England tribes was Canonicus, the head of the Narragansetts when the Pilgrim Fathers founded New Plymouth.

He regarded the advent of the white men with a jealous fear; feeling strong, with about five thousand fighting men around him, he sent a challenge to Governor Bradford, of the Plymouth colony.

This was notwithstanding that Massasoit (the chief sachem of the Wampanoags) was the friend of the Pilgrims. (Eminent Americans, Comprising Brief Biographies of Leading Statesmen, Patriots, Orators and Others, Men and Women, Who Have Made American History)

Bradford noted (in November 1621):

After ye departure of [the Fortune in 1621] (which stayed not above 14. days,) the Gover & his assistante having disposed these late comers into severall families, as yey best could, tooke an exacte accounte of all their provissions in store, and proportioned ye same to ye number of persons, and found that it would not hould out above 6. months at halfe allowance, and hardly that.

And they could not well give less this winter time till fish came in againe. So they were presently put to half allowance, one as well as an other, which begane to be hard, but they bore it patiently under hope of supply.

Sone after this ships departure, ye great people of ye Narigansets, in a braving maner, sente a messenger unto them with a bundl of arrows tyed aboute with a great sneak-skine; which their interpretours tould them was a threatening & a chaleng.

The next morning when Squanto returned, the snake skin of arrows was shown to him. "What do you understand these arrows to mean?" asked Captain Standish.

Squanto's eyes flashed with anger. "Arrows say, 'Come out and fight.' Soon many arrows fly in this village. Many white men die."

"Our bullets fly farther than arrows. not afraid," answered Bradford. He threw the arrows upon the ground and filled the snake skin with powder and shot. Handing it to Squanto, he said, "Take that to the chief. Tell him we have done him no harm, but we are ready to fight if he comes." (Stories of the Pilgrims, Pumphrey)

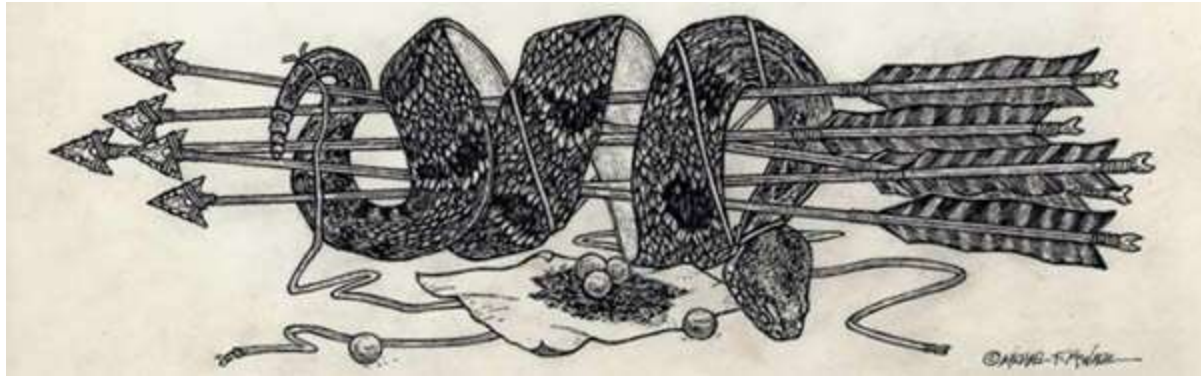
Upon which ye Govr, with ye advice of others, sente them a round answere, that if they had rather have warre then peace, they might begine when they would; they had done them no wrong, neither did yey fear them, or should they find them unprovided. (Bradford)

The Narragansett chief had never seen the like before, and he regarded these substances with superstitious awe. They were sent from village to village, and excited so much alarm, that the sachem sued for peace, and made a treaty of friendship, which he never violated ...

... notwithstanding, he often received provocations that would have justified him in scattering all compacts to the winds. (Eminent Americans, Comprising Brief Biographies of Leading Statesmen, Patriots, Orators and Others, Men and Women, Who Have Made American History)

The Indians had heard of the deadly weapon of the white man. A few of them had even heard its thunder, but none of them had ever touched a gun or seen powder and shot.





The Indians crowded around to see the strange bundle, but not one of them would touch it. The chief would not have it in his wigwam a minute. He ordered Squanto to take it back to Plymouth, but he would not. "There is plenty more there," said Squanto. "When you come you shall have it." Then he turned and left the village. (Stories of the Pilgrims, Pumphrey)

And by another messenger sente ye sneake-skine back with bulits in it; but they would not receive it, but sent it back againe. But these things I doe but mention, because they are more at large allready put forth in printe, by Mr. Winslow, at ye requeste of some freinds.

And it is like ye reason was their owne ambition, who, (since ye death of so many of ye Indeans,) thought to dominire & lord it over ye rest, & conceived ye English would be a barr in their way, and saw that Massasoyt took sheilter allready under their wings.

The chief then called another messenger and told him to take the hated bundle away, anywhere out of his country. So the messenger carried it to another tribe, but they would have none of it. It was passed from one Indian village to another, leaving terror in its path. At last, after many weeks, the snake skin of powder returned unopened to Plymouth.

That was all the Pilgrims ever heard of war with those Indians. But they thought it wise to protect their town better, so a high fence of pointed posts was built all about the town. For many weeks a watchman was kept at the gate night and day. (Stories of the Pilgrims, Pumphrey)

But this made them ye more carefully to looke to them selves, so as they agreed to inclose their dwellings with a good strong pale, and make flankers in convenient places, with gates to shute, which were every night locked, and a watch kept, and when neede required ther was also warding in ye day time.

And ye company was by ye Captaine and ye Govr advise, devided into 4. squadrons, and every one had ther quarter apoynted them, unto which they were to repaire upon any suddane alarme.

And if ther should be any crie of fire, a company were appointed for a gard, with muskets, whilst others quenchet ye same, to prevent Indean treachery.

This was accomplished very cherfully, and ye towne impayed round by ye beginning of March, in which evry family had a prety garden plote secured. And herewith I shall end this year. (Bradford)



Information here is from Bradford; History of Swansea, Wright; Narragansett Indian Nation website; Eminent Americans, Comprising Brief Biographies of Leading Statesmen, Patriots, Orators and Others, Men and Women, Who Have Made American History; Stories of the Pilgrims, Pumphrey; Pilgrim Hall Museum; Plimoth Patuxet.

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young