

*The Mayflower Pilgrims, Massasoit, and the Wampanoag*

November 21st, 1620, a group of weatherworn settlers took their first long-awaited step onto the savagely beautiful land that would later be known as the United States of America. They had tirelessly battled through the drawn-out and hellish voyage, and were exhausted to the very marrow of their bones, and yet their spirit remained untarnished, emblazoned with determination and the intoxicating lure of religious freedom. Yet unbeknownst to them, another society was already occupying the Land of the Free - an extensive, blooming society nestled in the natural contours of the land, one that had existed in harmony with the earth for 12,000 years. The dynamics of the two communities shaped the reality of colonial society, imbuing it with unease, hatred, curiosity, passion, diversity, and desire. Without their conflict and alliance, America as we know it could not exist.

Misconceptions about the Native American society, the Wampanoag, persist even to this day, obscured by years of clouded or skewed information. Despite common belief, Wampanoag society was vast, developed, and multi-faceted, with a matrilineal system of property and egalitarian values far beyond its time<sup>1</sup>. Far from being the dauntingly snarled wilderness depicted in many textbooks, the landscape in which the Wampanoag lived, and in which the colonists settled, had actually already been tamed by years of careful Native American cultivation. Reportedly, the “great eastern forest was an ecological kaleidoscope of garden plots, blackberry rambles, pine barrens, and spacious groves of chestnut, hickory, and oak”<sup>2</sup>. The Wampanoag had complete mastery of the land of which they fought - and eventually shared - with the Pilgrims. The neighboring Wampanoag society also had a profound impact upon the budding colonial community. Often, the native people were described in very flattering

terms by the colonists, who called them “taller” and “more robust”, as well as “beautiful of stature of build”<sup>2</sup>. Astonishingly, many colonists sought to escape the hard and thankless toil of the English way of life, defecting in alarming numbers to the tribe. It was such a problem that guards were posted to ensure that colonists were staying well within their own settlements.\*

However, despite the highly evolved culture of the Wampanoag and the envy it inspired, the two communities clashed often and harshly. Upon first arrival, the Pilgrims dug up ears of corn from the natives’ ground, walked into their houses and took items of cultural importance, and dug up graves of the dead in the hopes of finding riches<sup>3</sup>, inspiring great outrage from the native community, as well as violent attacks on both sides. The collective anger and resentment within the two societies was quickly reaching a boiling point, with seemingly no resolution in sight - that is, until the intervention of Massasoit, the *sachem*, or leader, of the Wampanoag nation.

Massasoit was a revolutionary figure in American history; without him, the Plymouth colony may very well have failed utterly. When the Pilgrims were on the edge of starvation, misery, and the throes of certain death, their dreams of a new civilization fading in the biting winter cold, Massasoit stepped in and helped them to recover, along with the help of Squanto, the English-speaking godsend who showed them the basics of living off the land. Most importantly, Massasoit forged imperative political ties with the leaders of the colonists.<sup>4</sup>

The clash of the two communities, along with their uneasy alliance, is a tale fraught with a wide range of emotions, from utmost joy and aspiration to deepest sorrow and resentment. While one people lost its land, another gained a future. Yet the two forces made peace at their celebration of the harvest, the Thanksgiving feast, a tradition which persists still today as a testament to unity, perseverance, determination, and friendship. Their interaction can tell us much about the subtle nuances, power shifts,

\* Note: These were some of the problems of the Wessagusset Colony, or Weston's Colony, a short-lived settlement founded in the summer of 1622 near present-day Weymouth, MA, by unattached young men from England who were not Pilgrims or Separatists. These men were extremely ill-prepared for colonial life, and as a result the Wessagusset Colony was soon disbanded, prior to the summer of 1623.

and paradigms of modern society, proving that this momentous event - the official settling of the United States of America - is a vast and fascinating piece of history, one that cannot be summed up from one viewpoint or another. Surely, the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe, and their much-changing relationship, have played an unforgettable role in creating modern-day America.

-- Jessica McGowan

Works Cited

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