

Shannon Anderson

Chief Massasoit's Role in the Mayflower Pilgrims' Story

It is common knowledge that cooperation between the Pilgrims and the natives they encountered contributed greatly to their success in establishing a new colony in the New World. Though Squanto, for his ability to speak English and assistance in cultivating crops in unfamiliar soil, is generally acknowledged as the most valuable asset to the settlers, Sachem (chief) Massasoit played an incomparable role in maintaining peace between the Pilgrims and natives. Massasoit Ousamequin was a key player in early relations between the Pilgrims and the native people belonging to the Wampanoag Nation, particularly the Pokanoket tribe which inhabited the area the Pilgrims came to know as Plymouth Rock.

Massasoit, Chief of the Wampanoag, was a loyal friend and ally to the English settlers that arrived at Plymouth Rock on the Mayflower. First coming into contact with the Pilgrims in spring of 1621, Massasoit made clear the tribe's peaceful intentions by way of Squanto, who fared as a messenger on that important day. The Pilgrims, who had been setting off loud cannons and guns to celebrate their successful harvest, caught the attention of Massasoit and his brother, who came and stood atop a hill overlooking Plymouth "attended with a guard of fiftie [sic] armed men," until everything was straightened out and negotiations began (Johnson).

At the time the pilgrims first arrived in 1620, the Wampanoag had recently suffered a loss of nearly two-thirds of their population, estimated at 45,000 people, after the arrival of new diseases that accompanied new European settlers. Massasoit, recognizing the vulnerability of his people, was excited by the prospect of gaining new allies, so he began negotiations for a peace treaty with the first governor of the Plymouth colony, John Carver (Johnson). The treaty entailed peace between Massasoit's men

and the Pilgrims, promise of aid and support in wartime, and conditions for peaceful trade (Cline). The existence of the treaty itself served as a form of protection for the Wampanoag, who sought protection from the threats of the neighboring Narragansett tribe, who were planning to take advantage of the Wampanoag Nation in its weakened state. Much to Massasoit's delight, the Narragansett's fear of English weaponry, which the Pilgrims possessed, dissuaded them from attacking the Wampanoag, easing some of the intertribal danger for the time being ("Profile").

Later, when Pilgrims Edward Winslow and Stephen Hopkins trekked for days to reach the Pokanoket tribe, Massasoit led cordial discussions reaffirming peace, reminding the Native Americans not to visit the Pilgrims on their own accord simply for food and entertainment, and recognizing the Pilgrims' desire to repay the respective families for the corn they took upon first arriving at Plymouth Rock (Johnson). Such professional yet genial behavior was extremely valuable for the Pilgrims, who were thinking long-term about their uncertain future in the New World and needed to establish solid, trusting relationships with the native people. Massasoit himself played an important role in ensuring the Pilgrims could rely on natives to support them in times of crisis, and vice-versa. This give-and-take relationship is exactly what the settlers needed in their struggle to establish a new colony.

In 1623, Massasoit fell dangerously ill and went blind. Winslow paid him a visit, reportedly providing him with medicine, water, and chicken broth until he fully recovered (Johnson). Massasoit, grateful for Winslow's altruistic actions, revealed to the Pilgrims a plot against them by the Massachusetts tribe, which was then stopped in its tracks by the Pilgrims, directed by Myles Standish, accompanied by some of Massasoit's own men (Johnson). This cooperation and teamwork exemplifies the incredible feats the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag could accomplish through their peaceful agreement, spearheaded by Massasoit, a man who was vital to maintaining their harmonious

relationship. Illustrating the sense of community the treaty created for both groups, this instance in particular could not have been possible had it not been for Massasoit's dedication to the people he vowed to look out for.

Massasoit's loyalty to the relationship between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag helped the Pilgrims to see the success they did in the New World. Massasoit held steadfast to the influential treaty he helped create and signed in 1621 until his death in 1661, maintaining his status as a well-respected chief and peacemaker. Massasoit came to the Pilgrims in a time of great need: for trade allies, for security, for friends. Without the open arms of Massasoit and the rest of the powerful Wampanoag tribe, the Pilgrims' first few chapters in America would most assuredly have turned out very differently.

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