

Sriharsha Gonuguntla, Ballwin

By 1621, more than a hundred years had passed since Columbus had landed in the Bahamas. Europe was scrambling for control over the new world, yet North America was largely free of a colonial presence. It was in this context that the Mayflower set sail. The passengers of the ship, the Pilgrims, were separatist Puritans who desired to make a new home across the Atlantic, free from the Church of England. As one of the earliest colonizing groups in the region, the Pilgrims faced monumental odds of survival. The New England winters were brutal, the soil was rocky and hard to farm, and disease ran rampant. These conditions took their toll, drastically cutting down the Pilgrims' numbers. After the first winter, the Pilgrims were on the brink of failure and desperately needed help.

The Wampanoag tribe, led by the great Sachem ("chief") Massasoit, were native to the Plymouth Bay area. As an established group with a population of more than 22,000, they were agricultural experts and were well versed in hunting and fishing. They enjoyed a robust governmental system and an established culture backed by matrilineal tradition. Yet, the Wampanoag faced many of the same obstacles the Pilgrims did. The Great Dying, a product of European arrival, had recently decimated more than half of their population. In addition, the threat of conflict with neighboring tribes such as the Narragansetts was always looming.

On the surface, these groups had nothing alike, yet in their problems, they were similar. Thus, an alliance would be mutually beneficial. Massasoit and the Wampanoag could provide the Pilgrims with much-needed supplies and survival education, while the Pilgrims could provide the Wampanoag a possible military advantage with their firearms. Ultimately, it was the Wampanoag that made contact first. Massasoit himself traveled to the Plymouth Settlement to negotiate a possible treaty between the two groups. Through the efforts of translators Squanto and Samoset, the effort was a success and laid out terms of non-aggression, penalized theft between groups, and required meetings between the groups be unarmed. Crucially, the Wampanoag would also help the Pilgrims farm. This treaty marked the beginning of a 60-year friendship between the two groups. The first Thanksgiving, in 1621, was largely a diplomatic event aimed at celebrating and bolstering this new alliance. Reflecting the friendship between the two groups, Massasoit was present at William Bradford's wedding in 1623.

This alliance was tested in the spring of 1623 when Massasoit grew dangerously sick and lost much of his vision. Edward Winslow, a prominent Pilgrim leader, was

sent to help Massasoit. Winslow gave him a little bit of medicine and scraped out the inside of his mouth which had swollen up preventing him from eating or drinking anything. Then he gave Massasoit some water and more medicine. Soon, Massasoit regained his eyesight and his condition improved. Winslow made a chicken broth soup for Massasoit, and within a couple of days, Massasoit had his appetite back and eventually recovered. Another test came when Massasoit revealed to the Pilgrims a conspiracy plot by the Massachusetts Indians to attack them, an act that would have likely destroyed the colony. In response to this crisis, a combined force of Pilgrims and Massasoit's men, led by Myles Standish, took up arms and put an end to this plan.

Massasoit played a monumental role in the early success of the Plymouth colony. His efforts to collaborate with the Pilgrims in crucial areas of food and defense provided them much-needed respite in harsh new land. If Massasoit and the Wampanoag hadn't offered an alliance, the Pilgrims would quite possibly have died out.

Despite Massasoit's efforts, the alliance between the settlers and the Wampanoag ultimately didn't last. Property rights, for one, constantly caused conflict. The Wampanoag had no concept of personal property, while the settlers built fences around theirs. With the death of Winslow, Bradford, and Massasoit in 1655, 1657, and 1660, old feelings of mutualism began to disintegrate. By 1675, Massasoit's son Metacomet had launched King Philip's War, and Native Americans as a whole were no longer seen as equals by the settlers. The war foreshadowed two centuries of fighting as American pushed farther and farther west, displacing hundreds of other tribes and confining them to reservations. Sadly, friendship between the settlers and Native Americans became the exception as opposed to the rule. Massasoit and the Pilgrim's friendship, however, provides a shining example of what could have been and inspires us, even to this day, to do better.

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