

## The Wampanoags' Thanksgiving

Every year, Thanksgiving celebrations teach that the English or “Pilgrims” of Plymouth Colony and local Native Americans made friends, held a great feast, and thereby permitted United States history to proceed. These stories rarely address who the Natives were, why they were so friendly, and what happened to them later. The story of the Wampanoag people, the Natives of this story, reveals the struggles for power at the heart of American history.

The Wampanoags were in a crisis when the *Mayflower* appeared in the late fall of 1620. Between 1616 and 1619, an unidentified European epidemic disease had devastated them, wiping out at least half of their population. The Narragansett people to the west took advantage of the Wampanoags' weakness to force them to pay an annual tribute (or tax) of corn, shell beads, and furs, and surrender valuable land. When the *Mayflower* arrived, the great Wampanoag leader, or chief, Massasoit faced a momentous choice: should they seek the help of these strangers against the Narragansetts?

The question was challenging because though the Wampanoags wanted English weaponry, they already knew the English to be treacherous. European sailing ships had been visiting the Wampanoag coast periodically since 1524, and at least once a year since 1602. Sometimes, the Wampanoags traded their fur and food for the strangers' goods. The Wampanoags particularly wanted the Europeans' metal knives, hatchets, and swords, arrowheads, and guns. The Wampanoags, like the rest of Native America, did not make their own metal tools. Yet this opportunity came with a steep cost. Too often, the explorers took Wampanoag people captive. Sometimes, the purpose was to train the captives as interpreters and guides. At other times, it was to sell them as slaves. Remarkably, two of these captives managed to return home after years in London with a knowledge of the English language and English society. One of them, named Squanto, would become the interpreter between the Wampanoags and the Pilgrims.

Massasoit, a Wampanoag chief, decided to ally with Plymouth not because his people were simply friendly or misunderstood who the English were but because he wanted the newcomers' weapons and soldiers to help his people fight off the Narragansetts. Many of his people warned that this decision was a mistake. They wanted to wipe out the Plymouth colony before it became a threat worse than the Narragansetts. But Massasoit held firm. In the short term, his gamble was worth it. With English help, the Wampanoags regained their independence and became rich in English goods.

Yet, in the long term, they lost nearly everything. The survival of Plymouth, with the Wampanoags' help, led to the creation of the neighboring colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. By the 1660s, colonists outnumbered Native Americans in New England. Once the English had the advantage, they turned on their Wampanoag allies, seizing their land and forcing them into servitude.

Consequently, in 1675–1676, the Wampanoags, Narragansetts, and several other Native American tribes allied against the English under the leadership of Massasoit's son, Pumetacom, or King Philip. They lost this war terribly and, with it, control of their own homeland. The Wampanoags and Narragansetts survive in southern New England to this very day, but on just tiny portions of their former territory under the rule of the United States. We all should understand that, for them, loss and subjugation are the legacy of the First Thanksgiving.

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