Definition: **King Philip’s War** from Philip’s Encyclopedia

(1675-76) War between English settlers and Native Americans in New England. The Wampanoags, under their chief Philip (Metacomet), rebelled against increasing white aggression. Colonial forces eventually gained the upper hand and wreaked still greater destruction on native settlements. King Philip was killed in 1676.

Summary Article: **King Philip’s War (1675–1678)**

From The Encyclopedia of War

King Philip’s War has been called the bloodiest conflict in American history, based on the proportion of the Indian and English population killed, wounded, or driven from the area. Named for the Indian sachem (leader) who instigated it, the war involved Native Americans and English colonists across much of colonial New England; by its end, the English had established lasting dominance over Indians in the region. While King Philip’s War has often been described as a racial conflict, Indian combatants fought on both sides.

The war seems to have been a last-ditch effort by Indians under the Wampanoag sachem Philip (also known as Metacom) to halt English settlement and challenge colonial power in New England. Indian dissatisfaction with English expansion had led to rumors of war on several previous occasions, most recently in 1671 in Plymouth Colony. Plymouth's response to that scare was to disarm all local Indians and force them to acknowledge their subjection to Plymouth's government. Philip was humiliated by this incident, and contemporary accounts suggest that soon afterward he began recruiting allies to join him in driving the English out of the region. John Sassamon, a Christian Indian, informed the Plymouth government of Philip's plans, and he was later found murdered in a local pond. The English tried three of Philip's men for the crime. All three were found guilty and executed, an action Philip saw as yet another unwarranted English intrusion into Indian affairs. Tensions rose dramatically after the trial; colonists reported armed Indians entering English houses and rifling through their belongings. On June 24, 1675 mischief turned to bloodshed in the Plymouth town of Swansea.

For both Indians and English, the most pressing business after the Swansea violence was to secure allies. Plymouth called on Connecticut and Massachusetts to meet their obligations of mutual defense.
under the United Colonies of New England. Massachusetts, as the largest colony, sent the greatest number of soldiers. Connecticut sent the second largest group and, throughout the conflict, employed neighboring Pequots and Mohegans as well as English as soldiers. The Mohegans, under their sachem Uncas, traveled to Boston to pledge alliance to the United Colonies Commissioners, an offer that was warily accepted. Rhode Island was not a member of the United Colonies and provided no soldiers; it did, however, provide diplomatic support in initial negotiations with the Narragansetts, ships and crews to transport English soldiers when needed, and food and other supplies for battles within the colony. Philip had already recruited Indian allies from the various Wampanoag communities and, over time, he was able to persuade Indians from neighboring tribes, such as the Nipmucks and Narragansetts, to join him.

Philip's recruitment efforts were aided by war-fueled English fear and hatred of Indians. Indian attacks on frontier settlements began shortly after the Swansea incident and proceeded with alarming frequency through the summer and early fall of 1675. Massachusetts and Plymouth suffered the great majority of Indian attacks. While Connecticut suffered significant combat losses, the war left its occupied towns virtually unscathed. Rhode Island, which provided no combatants, fared far worse; Indians burned Providence in March 1676, and some of the most intense fighting of the war took place within the colony. Initially, Indians allied with the English, including Mohegans, Pequots, and men from Christian Indian towns, fought alongside colonial soldiers. However, rising English antipathy for all Indians, friendly or otherwise, led Massachusetts to dismiss the Christian Indians from service. By the fall of 1675, public outcry led the government to exile these same Indians to barren islands in Massachusetts Bay, where many died of disease or starvation.

Similar distrust of Indian friends led to one of the pivotal events of the war: the Great Swamp Fight, which took place in Rhode Island. English messengers had secured Narragansett promises of neutrality shortly after the war's outbreak. Rumors that the Narragansetts might be giving shelter to Indians favorable to Philip led the English to demand that any such enemies be turned over to English custody. When the Narragansetts repeatedly failed to do so, the English declared war on them, attacking their stronghold in Rhode Island in December 1675. This event turned the Narragansetts from somewhat uncooperative neutrals to ardent enemies. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Swamp Fight, the Narragansett sachem Canonchet became the primary leader of the war, taking over for Philip, who had taken refuge in New York with many of his people.

Indian raids continued through the early winter of 1676, including the famous attack on Lancaster, Massachusetts, which led to the captivity of Mary Rowlandson and her children. By early spring, however, the Indians' inability to access their food stores (many of which had been destroyed by the English), the strain of constant mobility, and an unusually severe winter had decimated their forces. Canonchet's capture by Connecticut's Captain George Denison and execution in April 1676 disheartened many Indians and lent strength to those who had always opposed the war. In June 1676 both Massachusetts and Plymouth broadcast a declaration of mercy to any Indians who would surrender, and hundreds began flooding in.

Philip and his people returned to the Plymouth area sometime in the summer of 1676, but the support of surrounding Indians had fallen dramatically. Captain Benjamin Church, famous for employing Indian tactics of ambush and stealth with his mixed Indian and English troops, ran down the remaining hostile Wampanoags in August 1676. On August 12 one of his Indian allies shot and killed Philip, ending the war.

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While violence had ended in southern New England, in New Hampshire and Maine Wabanaki Indians with similar grievances over English encroachment on their land and authority continued attacking English settlements throughout the following year. Peace was finally settled in April 1678.

For the natives of southern New England, King Philip's War was devastating, leading to losses of up to 70 percent of their pre-war population by death or exile from the region, and ensuring that they would never again be able to mount serious resistance to the burgeoning English population. Thus, it was a pivotal turning point in the struggle between English and Indians and continues to play a prominent role in Native American memory and identity. English losses were also substantial—at least eight hundred killed in a population of less than seventy thousand, and dozens of towns attacked or destroyed. Significantly, the war made Massachusetts vulnerable to political attacks by royal representatives dissatisfied with the colony's compliance with British law and authority. Royal investigations of the colony began in 1676, and by 1683 Massachusetts's charter was revoked and its elected government replaced by a royally appointed governor and council.

Scholars and popular historians have devoted considerable attention to King Philip's War in the last twenty years, treating such diverse subjects as the impact of the war on Indian and English authority, society, and identity; the emergence of a unique “American” fighting style mimicking Indian tactics; the character of the colonial militia; and the role of race in the war. Primary accounts of the conflict are also abundant, with over twenty narratives by contemporaries, a rich source base likely to fuel many more studies of King Philip's War in coming years.

SEE ALSO: King William's War (1688–1699).

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