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Harmony Between Two Worlds: The Pilgrims and the Pokanokets

In the early seventeenth century, the areas we know today as southeastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island were inhabited by a large confederacy of Native American tribes known as the Wampanoag. These Native Americans had grown used to seeing ships filled with white men travelling ashore. Several European groups, such as the English, the Dutch, and the French frequently came to map or attempt to settle the land. Settlements proved difficult to establish initially due to such great opposition from Native Americans. However, following a massive plague which began spreading throughout tribes in 1616, the Pilgrims arriving near Cape Cod on the Mayflower were able to establish a foothold in the New World with greater ease than their predecessors. While a lesser presence of Native Americans contributed to the Pilgrims' ability to settle, the group could not have survived without the help of the Pokanokets, a tribe within the Wampanoag nation. The friendly relationship between the two peoples was essential in the establishment and maintenance of the Plymouth Colony in 1620. While there had been aggression between Native Americans and European explorers and settlers previously, and there would continue to be strife in the future as American history progressed, the Pilgrims and the Pokanokets found reasons to live in peace with one another for this brief moment in history.

The Pilgrims arrived to Cape Cod on the Mayflower in November of 1620, just in time for the harsh winter ahead. Within weeks of their arrival, they began falling victim to exposure, malnutrition, and disease. Only 50 of the 102 original passengers survived the first winter (Navin 389). While the Pokanokets were aware of the new presence of the Pilgrims, they took their time in deciding the proper way to approach them. It was not until March of 1621 that they had their first direct contact with the Pilgrims (Jamison). An Indian named Samoset was the first to speak

to the Pilgrims, and to their surprise, he was able to do so in English (Jamison). Samoset informed the Pilgrims of the local Indian tribes, and he told them of an Indian who knew even better English than him who was named Tisquantum (Jamison). Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, had learned English after being captured by explorers and taken to Europe for several years (Adolf 248). Samoset met again with the Pilgrims several days later with Squanto, and the two helped arrange for the Pilgrims to meet the Wampanoag chief, Massasoit. During this meeting, there was friendly entertainment, the exchange of gifts, and the establishment of a peace treaty between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoags (Bradford 1).

The treaty formed between the Wampanoags and Plymouth Colony on April 1, 1621 was one that established peace, a method of serving justice in the case of conflict between the two groups, and an alliance in the case of external conflict. One of the main components of the treaty were that neither group would inflict harm on the other, but if someone of a group did, the other group would get to choose his or her punishment (Jamison). Also, if anything were stolen between the groups it would be restored (Jamison). The third agreement of the treaty was that they would aid one another if an outside group made war against one of them (Jamison). Both the Pilgrims and the Pokanokets benefited greatly from this treaty.

There were several positive outcomes for the Pilgrims. For example, the treaty served as protection from aggressive tribes. With such few numbers of men after the gruelling winter that just occurred and few means of survival, the Pilgrims would have been the perfect target for any Native tribe to attack. Such a tiny contingent, even with its terrifying firearms, could not hope to defeat the nearby Wampanoags under Massasoit (Kruer 94). Fortunately for the Pilgrims, the Pokanokets were not looking for conflict. Another benefit of the treaty for the Pilgrims was that the peaceful relations helped them to navigate their new environment in regards to how they used the resources available to them. Squanto was individually very helpful because he acted as an interpreter and a guide (Adolf 249). He directed them on how to set their corn, where to take

fish, and how to procure other commodities (Bradford 1). He was their pilot to bring them to unknown places for their profit (Bradford 1). On another note, the Pilgrims also had the intention of gaining territory. They viewed Massasoit's agreement as him signing over his territory and giving allegiance to King James (Kruer 96). This proved to be a cultural misunderstanding as Plymouth Colony continued to develop over the next few decades; even so, this element of the agreement contributed to peace between the groups initially. While the Pilgrims benefited greatly from the treaty, the Pokanokets did as well.

The Pokanokets had similar reasons for establishing a treaty with the Pilgrims. The Pokanokets chose to make peace with the Pilgrims because they were also at a time of weakness and had political goals. The Indians that the Pilgrims encountered were not as strong and powerful as they had been in the past, but they were rather devastated by disease, politically divided, and economically crippled because of the epidemic which began in 1616 (Kruer 91). The rampant plague with an extremely high mortality rate decimated the Native American population in New England from the years 1616-1619 (Kruer 88). The illness swept through countless tribes, damaging the overall social structure of the Wampanoag. Leaders could not perform their duties, and families halted their responsibilities to tend to their sick loved ones (Kruer 88). In some cases, they fled their homes seeking refuge from disease (Kruer 88). The Wampanoags had developed an economic system of trade with the English and the French, but with only a tenth of the original number of hunters, they were unable to yield enough beaver pelts and otter skins to maintain it (Kruer 91). Their society was crumbling at its foundation. Another tribe, the Narragansetts, was not so greatly affected by the epidemic, and that group was able to aggressively take advantage of the circumstance to expand their own territory. Massasoit ultimately entered into an expensive and humiliating tributary relationship with the tribe (Kruer 91). In regards to the Pilgrims, the Wampanoag determined that a treaty with them would be more beneficial than an agreement with the Narragansetts. This was because the Pilgrims

demanded less tribute, subjected them to less humiliation, offered more gifts and prestige, allowed a superior level of military protection, and strengthened the Wampanoag's tribute-collecting powers among neighboring tribes (Kruer 95). Ultimately, the treaty with the Pilgrims gave the Pokanokets a friend, an ally, and support in rebuilding their tribal nation.

Although both groups had personal gain from the treaty they established, there was a genuine sense of friendship between the groups. The Pilgrims and the Pokanokets were able to live amongst one another peacefully for roughly half a decade. Without the help of the Pokanokets, Plymouth may have been another Lost Colony. The friendly relations were essential in the survival of the colony, and today we look back with great reverence at how the two entirely different cultures were able to look past their differences to lend one another a hand in a time of hardship.

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