



Western Massachusetts Genealogical Society, Inc.

Pioneer Valley History Camp 2019: Sowams and King Philip's War

By Joanne Mason

Did you learn about King Philip's War in school? I didn't. In fact, I knew little about it until I read Nathaniel Philbrook's book *Mayflower* several years ago. So, at the recent Pioneer Valley History Camp, held July 27th at Holyoke Community College, I was drawn to a talk by David Weed of the Sowams Heritage Area project. Here, attendees learned about the area, the culture, the war, and the aftermath.

Historians believe that Sowams – the name translates to “south country” – was first populated about 10,000 years before Europeans arrived in “floating islands.” Today, the area sits on the current Rhode Island/Massachusetts border and includes the communities of Providence, East Providence, Barrington, Warren, Bristol, Seekonk, Rehoboth, and Swansea.

The clear, fertile land was inhabited by the Pokanokets, who thrived there for centuries. However, about 90% the Pokanoket population was decimated by disease between 1616 and 1619. When the Pilgrims arrived in 1620, they found the area almost empty of people, but suitable for settling.

At the end of the Mayflower passengers' brutal first winter, Pokanoket Massasoit Ousamequin (Yellow Feather – sometimes spelled Osamequin) visited the newcomers with 60 warriors. (The word Massasoit means “chief of chiefs.” Ousamequin actually presided over a number of tribes; each tribe had its own chief.)

Together, the two sides made an agreement that became the Wampanoag Treaty of 1621. They would not hurt each other, and they would protect each other from enemies. The peace lasted for decades, but over time, more English arrived, squeezing out much of the Pokanoket land and population. Eventually, about 700 remained. Tensions grew.

“The Pokanokets were not only just sick and tired of the English, but really threatened to the point that they thought they would lose their entire culture,” Weed explained.

After Ousamequin's death in 1661, his son Metacomet became the leader. He took the English name Philip and called himself “king” to rank himself with King Charles of England.

King Philip's War began in June 1675 and lasted fifteen months. The Pokanokets were joined by the Narragansett and Nipmuc tribes, and other tribes, like the Mohegans and the Pequots, supported the English. Historian Robert Cray described it this way:

“In terms of population, King Philip's War was the bloodiest conflict in American history. Fifty-two English towns were attacked, a dozen of these were destroyed, and more than 2,500 colonists died – perhaps 30% of the English population of New England. At least twice as many Native Americans were killed. Some historians estimate that the combined effects of war, disease, and starvation killed half the Native population of the region. The war left an enduring legacy.” [Robert E. Cray, Jr., “‘Weltering in Their Own Blood’: Puritan Casualties in King Philip's War.” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 37 (2), Fall 2009.]

Parts of that legacy remain. Today, you can go to the Sowams Heritage Area and visit several points of interest, such as the following:

- [Osamequin Nature Preserve](#) – Barrington, Rhode Island. Curious to know what Sowams looked like at the time of Osamequin? Explore these trails to find out.
- [Burr's Hill Pokanoket Royal Burial Ground](#) – Warren, Rhode Island. Here, you'll find a monument to Massasoit Ousamequin. In the ground beneath the marker sits a crypt containing over 500 Pokanoket artifacts, such as beads, a knife, and an ax head.
- [Myles Garrison Marker](#) – Swansea, Massachusetts. At this site stood the home of Reverend John Myles, a structure that housed troops from Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay at the start of King Philip's War in 1675.
- [Little Neck Cemetery](#) – East Providence, Rhode Island. In this cemetery, you'll find the grave marker of Elizabeth Tilley, who was just 12 years old when she crossed the ocean on the Mayflower. She eventually married fellow Mayflower passenger John Howland and lived to see much of King Philip's War with her own eyes.

The Sowams Heritage Area has an extensive website full of maps, historical facts, and other helpful information to plan your visit. Check it out here: www.SowamsHeritageArea.org.