

King Philip's War, New England

1675

King Philip's War began in the summer of 1675 when the chief of the Wampanoags, known as King Philip to the English due his tribal authority and Christian name, opened hostilities against Plymouth colony settlements that were hemming them in at Mount Hope at the northeast end of Narragansett Bay. The Wampanoags caused much damage and misery, but a greater potential danger was from the Narragansetts of western Rhode Island, who threatened colonists to the west on the Connecticut River and to the north in central Massachusetts. Thus, the English decided to force the issue of Narragansett loyalty. When the Narragansetts refused to comply with the colonists' demands, the United Colonies decided to attack them first.

On December 19, 1675, 1,100 colonists, including some Indian auxiliaries, under the command of the governor of Plymouth colony, Josiah Winslow, was led by an Indian defector named Peter through a frozen swamp to a secret palisaded village of at least 1,000 Indians. The Indians had built individual wigwams for each family group within the fort and filled them with food supplies for the entire winter, but they had not quite completed their defenses. Peter led the colonial forces to a spot where the defenses were incomplete. The attacking troops poured in only to be driven back initially by strong defensive fire. Regrouping, they advanced again. This time they gained ground and commenced hand-to-hand combat. The colonists prevailed, burning the wigwams with their terrified inhabitants and food supplies. Over three hundred warriors and three hundred noncombatants died in the attack. The colonists lost twenty dead and two hundred wounded. The threat of the Narragansetts had been removed.

Captain Benjamin Church of the Plymouth colony believed that the way to defeat these Indians was to wear them down. The greatest blow to the Narragansetts at the Great Swamp Fight had been the loss of food, not life. Church's future strategy was to keep the Indians moving until they surrendered because their women and children were starving. To do this, Church relied on volunteers of colonials and Christian Indians who scoured the swamps of the Plymouth colony looking for King Philip and the Wampanoags. On August 12, 1676, Church caught up with him in the swamps of Mount Hope, near Swansea, Massachusetts. Philip was killed by one of the Indians. Church had Philip's head

cut off and sent back to Plymouth for public display. In September, Church accepted the surrender of Annawan, Philip's war leader. So ended King Philip's War.

This was the first major victory of the English colonists over the Indians of southeastern New England. It was a test of the New England confederation of United Colonies that consisted of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, and Connecticut. Although not a member of the confederation, many Rhode Islanders fought against the Indians with the United Colonies.

It was also the end of the Indian threat to any part of southern New England. Many Indians who surrendered were sold as slaves to the West Indies, others moved west or became Christianized and marginalized within the English society. The Indian threat had been real. In proportion to population, King Philip's War inflicted greater casualties upon the white settlers than any other war in American history. The American settlement line had been pushed back over twenty miles, thirteen towns in Massachusetts and Rhode Island had been almost destroyed, and six, including Springfield and Providence, were partially burned.

It should be noted that the Narragansetts were betrayed by an Indian and that Church's forces included Indians. Some Indians, whether because of ancient tribal animosities or for personal reasons such as conversion to Christianity, always served with the colonial forces in the early Indian wars. The economic cost of the War was tremendous. The United Colonies claimed that their war expenses reached the staggering amount of £100,000 sterling and arguments among the colonies soon broke out due to squabbling over former Indian lands.