

Book & Sword: A Tale of Two New Englanders

by Wade V. Fullerton

Two men of diverse walks in life changed Anglo-Native diplomacy in New England forever. By the illumination of a candle-lit desk, between 1715 and 1716, an aged Benjamin Church wrote a personal account of his experience in — what he called — King Philip's War (1675–1678). The final publication, *Entertaining Passages Relating to King Philip's War*, reached bookshelves in 1716.

War has casualties, and few were as influential as the death of Rev. John Sassamon. Sassamon was a Praying Indian — a Christian Algonquin man — from Nemasket, Massachusetts. Uniquely, Sassamon was literate: reading, preaching, and translating the Bible to several Native languages. His ability to read, write and speak English made him a valuable asset and a target. While on the road from Marshfield to Nemasket, Sassamon is found dead in Assawompset pond.

Sassamon's murder trial led to three Wampanoag men's executions, suspected for the recent homicide. The verdict to sentence these men to death, in a Plymouth Court, was seen as a direct blow to the political and judicial sovereignty of the Wampanoag tribe in southeastern Massachusetts. Following these troubling events, a raid took place outside of Swansea, Massachusetts, weeks later. The war had begun.

King Philip's War remains the pivotal crisis in 17th-century New England. King Philip, Sachem of the Pokanoket Wampanoag, led a costly revolt against the English colonies in June 1675; by raiding Swansea and Plymouth. Neighboring Sachems, Algonquin political figures, joined the insurgency to resist English expansion. Their goal was to reclaim land and re-establish their political autonomy. Lasting over three years, and expanding into the region of Maine, Massachusetts, the embers of Algonquin resistance burned down to its embers.

Col. Benjamin Church emerges as a dashing frontiersman and hero of the war among English settlers in a different aspect. Although he led a militia of English and Native allies, he was not the enlightened colonizer. Poetically, Rev. John Sassamon embodies a Bible; well versed, inspiring, but tragic and cryptic in memory. Church, the dashing frontiersman, represents a cutlass, the sword he used to murder many of his enemies. Shiny and extraordinary in the pages of history, but a fierce, blunt object in motive and an opportunistic murderer in his actions.

King Philip's War was the bloodiest war per-capita in American history. Homes were burned, people murdered, livestock mutilated, and a hatred cemented. The often cliché phrase, “those who forget their history are doomed to repeat it,” speaks volumes in the sequence of events that was once called The First Indian War. This was before Church names it King Philip's War. Perhaps, it was Church's one final blow to the long-deceased Philip. When Church fell from his horse in 1718, generations pass, and the meaning of early American history changes and fades into the void of historiography. Maybe, one day, to become revived again.