The Pequot War

For a time, the Dutch and Pequot controlled all trade in the Connecticut River Valley. The arrival of English traders and settlers in the Connecticut River Valley in the early 1630s shifted the balance. The arrival of the English in the Connecticut River Valley resulted in intense competition and conflict for control of trade. The Dutch and the English colonists and traders made alliances with different tribes to strengthen their forces and power in Connecticut. In 1633 the Massachusetts Bay Colony began to manufacture wampum, the shell beads that Eastern Woodlands tribes used for currency. Wampum had previously been controlled by the Pequot.

The first major event that led to the Pequot war was the murder of eight Europeans in 1634. John Stone and his crew were attacked near the mouth of the Connecticut River by the Western Niantic, a tribe connected to the Pequots. The reason for the attack was based on an earlier event. Dutch traders had lured a member of the Niantic tribe aboard a Dutch ship and then held him for ransom. When the Pequot paid the ransom they received a corpse in return. John Stone was attacked because he had been committing atrocities as well. He had a habit of kidnapping Western Niantic women and children and selling them into slavery to the Virginia Colony.

Colonial officials were extremely upset at the murders. They ordered the Pequots that the Western Niantic tribe members responsible for the killings should be turned over to them. The Pequot refused.

In 1636, another colonist, John Oldham, was attacked near Block Island. He and his entire crew were killed and the ship was robbed. John Oldham’s murder and the murder of his crew was advertised as a beginning point for the Pequot War.

Within a month John Endicott, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, sent a group of men on a revenge mission to Block Island. It was a small fight with 14 members of the Niantic tribe losing their lives. The village was burned to the ground and crops that had been stored were either destroyed or taken by the colonists. Endicott then traveled to a Pequot Village.
where he demanded the payment regarding Stone’s murder and Oldham’s murder as well. The demand resulted in many of the Pequot escaping through the woods and the loss of their village and crops to fire. Endicott and the other Massachusetts Bay colonists went home.

The Pequots turned their anger on the Connecticut colonists and began a siege on Fort Saybrook. By 1637, the Pequot began attacking colonial towns. Buildings and fields were destroyed, a few colonists were killed, and even two young female colonists were kidnapped, but were eventually returned by Dutch traders.

The Connecticut colony declared war on the Pequot on May 1, 1637. On May 20, 1637, Connecticut colonists attacked the Pequot at a village known as Mystic. Many of the men of the village were gone having traveled to Hartford on a raiding mission. When the colonists attacked Mystic there were mostly Pequot women and children. Approximately 600-700 natives were at Mystic during the attack. Only seven or so were taken prisoner. Only another seven or so escaped. The remainder died.

The actions of the colonists were so shocking to the Narragansett and Mohegan tribes who were along on the raid that they returned home. That was the end of their participation. The idea of “total war” was foreign to Native Americans. They stated that the warfare waged by the English was too furious and too many people were dying. From that point on the Pequot were hunted down, taken prisoner or killed.

On September 21, 1638 the Treaty of Hartford was signed. Pequots who had survived were distributed to the Narragansett, Mohegan, and Metoac tribes as slaves. Some became household slaves belonging to colonists in Massachusetts Bay or Connecticut. Colonists declared the Pequot extinct and took their lands. They even outlawed the word “Pequot”.

The strong show of force by New England colonists assured peace for the next several years. The outcome of this war was so cruel and devastating that no Connecticut Native Americans challenged the colonies again for nearly forty years, when, in 1675, King Philip’s War erupted.

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2 a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town or building, cutting off essential supplies, with the aim of forcing the surrender of those inside
3 An attempt to steal supplies from another tribe