

The 1621 Peace Treaty: A Failure of Diplomacy that Had Long Been Ignored

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When the Pilgrims first arrived on the Mayflower in November of 1620, their unexpected encounter with the Wampanoag people became a diplomatic issue that foreshadowed similar encounters between English settlers and Native Americans. An influential peace treaty was made between the Plymouth Colony and the Wampanoag in 1621, which was the longest treaty made between European and indigenous people that remained unbroken throughout the lives of its signatories [Mark, 2020]. The 1621 Peace Treaty represented a successful starting point of diplomacy between the first group of European immigrants to this region and the Wampanoag people, which aimed to establish a peaceful relationship between these two parties. However, this diplomacy was not successful because the treaty was broken. This failure of this treaty can be traced to differences in the languages, cultures, and interests of the two sides, which viewed its diplomatic goals in different ways. While the Wampanoag people regarded it as a means for maintaining peace, the Pilgrims saw the treaty as a confirmation of land rights [Mark, 2021]. Therefore, it was nearly impossible for the two parties to form an agreement in the long term. The differences in diplomatic understanding triggered further conflicts, which eventually led to the failure of the diplomacy between the Plymouth Colony and the Wampanoag Confederacy.

I. Introduction: Wampanoag People and Early Colonial Interactions

In the beginning of the 1600s, the Wampanoag Confederacy was the most powerful tribe in present-day New England. However, beginning in 1610 CE, the arrivals of European traders brought change and disease to the indigenous people, which had a negative effect on the population of Wampanoag.

II. Problems Arise: Issues That Led to the Creation of the Treaty

The arrival of the Pilgrims reflected their desire to escape the religious persecution of King James I of England in the early 17th century. It was said that "...they resolved to go into Low-Countries, where they heard was freedom of Religion for all men..." [Bradford, 137]. The Plymouth Colony was first established on the coast of Massachusetts in 1620 CE as the first English settlement in the modern-day New England area. Nonetheless, Pilgrims were not welcomed by the indigenous Wampanoag Confederacy, whose leader, Massasoit, saw Europeans as threats due to the diseases they brought. Nonetheless, disease had severely reduced the population of the Wampanoag, and in order to change this, Massasoit sought help from these newly arrived Pilgrims by using diplomacy to make them his ally [Mark, 2020] — "he thinks we [Pilgrims] may be some strength to him, for our pieces are terrible unto them" [Heath, 58]. Meanwhile, the Pilgrims also found it difficult to settle in the region [Pulsipher, 2007]. Specifically, they were planning to arrive in the late summer of 1620 CE but were delayed due to the fall weather. They eventually arrived in December of 1620 CE, which led them to miss a crucial period for planting crops, causing half of the population to die because of disease and malnutrition [Mark, 2020]. To make matters worse, the settlement had not been built up, and people were still living on board the Mayflower with little food. It was said that "...they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found not cities to dwell in, both hungry and thirsty, their souls were overwhelmed in them..." [Bradford, 95]. Given the challenges both groups faced, the 1621 Peace Treaty was considered mutually beneficial in the beginning. While the help

given by Wampanoag Confederacy could save lives of these Pilgrims, the support from these Pilgrims would also help Wampanoag recover its population loss, which could help them regain their former status [Mark, 2020].

III. 1621 Peace Treaty: Context and Terms

Massasoit was not willing to make first contact with the Pilgrims by himself [Mark, 2020]. Therefore, Samoset, a prisoner who agreed to go as an envoy in exchange for his freedom, was sent to negotiate with the Pilgrims [Mark, 2020]. After Samoset had reported the friendliness of Pilgrims, it came to the moment of signing the treaty. This meeting was documented in Mourt's Relation, which was a first-hand account of the Plymouth Colony's history published by two colonists William Bradford and Edward Winslow in 1622 CE. This source was written from the Pilgrims' perspective, and the detailed process was described as, "...our messenger made a speech unto him [Massasoit], that King James saluted him with words of love and peace, and did accept of him as his friend and ally, and that our governor desired to see him and to truck with him, and to confirm a peace with him, as his next neighbor. He [Massasoit] liked well of the speech and heard it attentively... After salutations, our governor kissing his hand, the king kissed him, and so they sat down... then they treated of peace which was:

1. That neither he nor any of his should injure or do hurt to any of our people.
2. And if any of his did hurt to any of ours, he should send the offender, that we might punish him.
3. That if any of our tools were taken away when our people were at work, he should cause them to be restored, and if ours did any harm to any of his, we would do the like to them.
4. If any did unjustly war against him, we would aid him; if any did war against us, he should aid us.
5. He should send to his neighbor confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong us, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of peace.
6. That when their men came to us, they should leave their bows and arrows behind them, as we should do our pieces when we came to them.
7. Lastly, that doing thus, King James would esteem of him as his friend and ally." [Heath, 56]

After the treaty was signed, Massasoit sent Squanto, who could speak English, to live with the Pilgrims and teach them how to grow crops. Squanto also acted as the interpreter to help establish "friendly relationships and trades with the natives throughout this region" [Mark, 2020]. These details illustrate the first steps taken toward establishing a peace relationship among the two sides involved in the treaty [Mark, 2020].

IV. Diplomacy in 1621 Peace Treaty

The treaty could be considered successful in the short term because it created peace. As evidenced by the Mourt's Relation, "the government & people hear had notice that Massasoit their friend was sick & near death. They sent to visit him, and with all sent him such comfortable things as gave him great content and was a means of his recovery" [Bradford, 157], the Pilgrims had even helped sick Massasoit to cure.

However, the treaty was eventually broken by King Philip's War in 1675 CE. The growing misunderstandings over the terms listed in the treaty, which were driven by differences in languages, cultures, and interests, was the most significant factor that influenced the demise of the agreement.

V. The Failure of Diplomacy in 1621 Peace Treaty

The treaty was first signed through the envoy Samoset who knew English and helped translate and convene the two parties, "we [the Pilgrims] were not willing to send our governor to them, and they unwilling to come to us, so Squanto went again unto him, who brought word that we should send one to parley with him..." [Heath, 55]. The use of different languages increased the probability that the two sides would be able to communicate efficiently. As a result, it was difficult for the parties to trust each other. For example, after the treaty had been signed, the Pilgrims "kept good watch" of Massasoit and his people, "but there was no appearance of danger" [Heath, 57].

In addition to language, cultural barriers prevented the Pilgrims and Wampanoag people from having the same understanding over the concept of land division. While the indigenous people "saw it [the transaction with English] as a rental agreement, not a sale... and continued to plant crops and hunt on land 'sold' to the English because they still considered it their own" [Mark, 2021], the English believed they owned the lands from the Wampanoag, due to their current occupation and the 1621 Peace Treaty [Mark, 2021]. Long before the treaty was signed, when the Pilgrims were told by Samoset that the indigenous people who once lived there "died of an extraordinary plague" [Heath, 51],

they assumed the land became where “there is none to hinder our possession, or to lay claim unto it” [Heath, 51]. Thus, the Pilgrims were surprised to see the continuous planting and hunting behaviors of indigenous people, which, they thought, was an act of “stealing” [Heath, 68]. Furthermore, the Pilgrims had long been interested in developing trading in the region, but “markets there was none to go too, but only the Indians, and they had no trading commodities” [Bradford, 152]. In response, the Pilgrims waited for the new arrivals of people from Europe in order to enlarge their settlements and develop trading [Bradford, 153]. However, these newly arrived immigrants then took more and more land from Wampanoag people, who then became discontented [Mark, 2021]. Contrary to what Wampanoag people felt, in a letter sent to the new arrived people, the Pilgrims believed that “the Indians that dwell there about were they who were owners of the corn which we found in caves, for which we have given them full content, and are in great league with them...” [Heath, 86], and for the Pilgrims, their act of living onto the land was “lawful”, since

“their [indigenous people] land is spacious and void, and there are few and do but run over the grass...they are not industrious, and neither have art science, skill or faculty to use either the land or the commodities of it, but all spoils, rots, and is marred for want of manuring, gathering, ordering...the land lay idle and waste, and none used it, though there dwelt inhabitants by them, so is it lawful to take a land which none useth, and make use of it” [Heath, 91-92].

Moreover, the Pilgrims deeply believed that “the emperor... hath promised and appointed us to live at peace where we will in all his dominions, taking what place we will, and as much land as we will, and bringing as many people as we will...” because “he hath found us just, honest, kind and peaceable, and so loves our company” [Heath, 93]. However, the 1621 Peace Treaty signed between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag did not give immigrants any right to occupy the lands of Wampanoag people. The treaty only stated that “King James would esteem him as ally and friend” [Heath, 56]. But the Pilgrims claimed this treaty was a subjection attempted by the Wampanoag people. Massasoit was described as someone who “hath acknowledged the King’s Majesty of England to be his master and commander... under his hand to Captain Standish” and that this “accomplishment” was due to “a manner by friendly usage, love, peace, honest, and just carriages, good counsel... so we and they may not only live in peace in that land and they yield subjection to an earthly prince, but that as voluntaries they may be persuaded at length to embrace the Prince of Peace, Christ Jesus, and rest in peace with him forever” [Heath, 92]. These claims were baseless and were simply made from the Pilgrims’ own understanding about the treaty, without a reached consensus made with the Wampanoag. None of the terms in the treaty mentioned “subjection”, and terms described in the treaty only indicated that two sides promised to help each other and together defend the threats posted on them [Heath, 56]. On the other side, the Wampanoag thought it was a fair peace treaty which aimed to solidify a peaceful relationship between the two sides, but in the worldview of Pilgrims, they believed it was a reached compromise [Heath, 92]. As a result, this disagreement over the interpretation of land rights, led by the differences over how the two sides perceived the 1621 Peace Treaty, further exacerbated the conflicts between them [Mark, 2021].

VI. The End of 1621 Peace Treaty

After the death of Massasoit in 1661 CE, Wamsutta, the son of Massasoit, became the chief of the Wampanoag. However, after he was called to the Plymouth Colony to answer charges about the unfair land deals, he was found dead immediately upon his return. He was then succeeded by Metacom, who claimed that Wamsutta was poisoned by the Pilgrims [Mark, 2021]. This ignited existing tensions from the Wampanoag, who already experienced discontent over their understanding of land ownership. Soon after, King Philip’s War broke out, effectively revoking the 1621 Peace Treaty signed between the Plymouth Colony and the Wampanoag Confederacy. But the real causes had been sowed from the very beginning, “the English made promises to the natives they had no intention of keeping and, just as with the understanding of land rights, this concept of making deals without any intention of honoring them was foreign to Native American culture and, ultimately, was the immigrants’ most powerful weapon.” [Mark, 2021]

VII. Conclusion: Why Does This Matter?

When people categorize diplomacy, they often simplify it as issues that are dealt with between countries. However, this understanding often overlooks diplomatic actions made with groups within a country, including indigenous people. In December 2021, the Wampanoag people eventually won a victory that allowed them to regain “a substantive control of roughly 320 acres around Cape Cod” [Hedgpeth, 2022], which was taken after the arrivals of Pilgrims. As a result, there’s no doubt that the 1621 Peace Treaty was indeed an approach of diplomacy between the Plymouth Colony

[immigrants from Europe] and the Wampanoag Confederacy [indigenous people who had long been inhabited on the land] that still has merit and political standing today. This topic is worth investigating due to its lack of a primary historical record—only two primary sources have been found that documented the details of this 1621 Peace Treaty [Mark, 2020]. Therefore, it was especially difficult to evaluate this event from an unbiased perspective. While American history generally focuses its attention to the eventual failure of the treaty, it often ignores the fact that there are few pieces of evidence that substantiate the first-hand accounts of the Wampanoag people. Most Wampanoag accounts were only collected in Mourt's Relation and Of Plymouth Plantation. Further complicating this, the Wampanoag people used a language other than English, and left no written records for us to understand the details of the diplomacy from their perspective. In addition, the complexity of diplomacy and the importance of understanding the culture of the parties involved was shown in the Pilgrim's record which indicated two opposing understandings of land rights. In conclusion, due to the eventual breaking of this treaty, the differences in understanding the terms listed in the treaty, and lack of direct evidence from the Wampanoag people, diplomacy in the 1621 Peace Treaty could be considered a failure.

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