

SIMSBURY AT THE TIME OF KING PHILIP'S WAR

By Rebecca Furer, 2021

A rich river valley and a ragged mountain range run through what today is Simsbury, Connecticut. Along the winding river (now called the Farmington River) are meadows, marshes, and places where wild hops once grew. The area was known as Massacoe to the Algonquin-speaking people who lived there, fished in the river, hunted in the vast pine forests, cultivated corn, beans, and squash in their gardens, and created complex forms of governance and kinship. The first English residents moved to the area from Windsor in the 1660s in search of more land and natural resources for making pine tar. Taking control of the land, they built homes, planted crops, and constructed fences to contain livestock.

In 1675, fighting broke out in Massachusetts between the English and the Wampanoag, who were led by Metacom (or Metacomet)—also called “King Philip” by the English. There were other Indigenous peoples aligned with both sides. King Philip’s War (1675-1676) was fought primarily over land and fair treatment under English laws, but also over whether the English would dominate the region. Most of the fighting took place in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, but there were also conflicts in Connecticut.

At the time, Simsbury was considered the “western frontier” by the English in Connecticut. It had forty houses spread out over seven miles on both sides of the Farmington River. There was no bridge, just a shallow ford where people crossed the river on foot or horseback. A small militia protected the isolated settlement.

In late August 1675, there were reports of a group of Native men shooting at an English man on the road between Hartford and Simsbury. Because of this, the Connecticut Council of War instructed English residents of Windsor to patrol the road between Simsbury and Windsor. English officials knew that Metacom and his men were skilled at using the natural environment to their advantage.

“Captain Church inquired of some of the Indians⁺... how they got such advantage... of the English in their marches through the woods? They told him, that the Indians gained great advantage... by two things: [they] always took care in their marches and fights, not to come too thick together; but the English always kept... together; [so] that it was as easy to hit them as to hit a house. The other was, that if at any time they discovered a company of English soldiers in the woods, they knew that they were all, for the English never scattered, but the Indians always divided and scattered.”

(Benjamin Church, Thomas Church, and Samuel Gardner Drake. *The History of King Philip's War*, p. 108-109.)

In October 1675, the Connecticut government, fearing a raid, ordered residents to evacuate the town, taking with them whatever food and belongings they could.

“This Court orders that the people of Simsbury shall have a week’s time to secure themselves and their corn...”

(Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, v.2, p. 269)

When there was no immediate attack, residents returned. Then, on March 3, 1676, the Council of War ordered that

“... the people of Simsbury do remove themselves and what estate they can remove, to some of the neighbouring plantations* for their safety and security.”

(Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, v.2, p. 412)

Carrying what they could, most of the English residents fled to Windsor. Most of the Native residents moved west, towards the Housatonic River.

On March 26, 1676, a group allied with Metacom and probably moving south from Westfield or Springfield, Massachusetts, burned the abandoned town to the ground. But the tide was turning in favor of the English. By the summer, many of Metacom’s followers had been captured and Metacom himself had been killed. The English displayed Metacom’s head on a pole in Plymouth, Massachusetts for the next 25 years. In an interrogation, a Mohegan/Narragansett man named Menowniatt identified seven men from different tribes who were responsible for the burning of Simsbury and various other acts of war against the English.

Stories about the attack have lingered in the town’s memory for centuries. According to legend, Metacom sat in a cave on the nearby mountain and watched Simsbury burn. Although there is no historical evidence that Metacom was in the area at the time, the names “Mount Philip” and “King Philip’s Cave” have stuck to the spots. The full mountain range, which starts in Branford and New Haven, Connecticut, and runs into Massachusetts, is known today as the Metacomet Ridge.

+ “Indian” was the term used to identify Indigenous or Native people at this time.

* “Plantation” was how the colonial government referred to individual settlements at this time.