

The Dark Times

The Times of the Abanaki 1740 to 1816

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The period of 1740 to 1816 was a period of change for the entire world. Revolutionary ideas swept across the world, both old and new. This was true for the tribe of Amer-Indians called the Abanaki. Unfortunately, these changes often had a devastating effect on the Abanaki people. The devastating changes were brought about directly by the European conquest of the New World. The wars, diseases, territorial conquests, all leading to a depletion of the Abanaki population, were caused by the French and English colonists. This period of time, from 1740 to 1816, is one of the darkest times in Abanaki history.

To fully understand that, one must first get an understanding of Abanaki life before 1740. The name Abanaki came from the Algonquin word meaning 'people of the dawn.' The Abanaki's territory stretched from the modern day Massachusetts border to Lake Champlain and across Maine into the southern part of the Canadian Maritimes. The Abanaki Confederation included the Androscoggin, Kennebec, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot tribes among others in that region. The Abanaki were a semi-nomadic people. They traveled up and down the river valleys they inhabited in search of food. They generally stayed the winters in inland towns and villages before journeying to the ocean in search of fish and other seashore products each summer.

This lifestyle was changed, however, by the French and English colonists that began to occupy the coastal regions. The interactions between Abanaki and colonists were at first peaceful; however, loss of population, mostly by disease, caused rifts between the French, Abanaki, and English. This led to many conflicts before 1740, mostly raids carried out by all parties. The year 1740 saw a very different way of life for the Abanaki; gone were the summer lands on the ocean, gone too were peaceful relations between the Abanaki and the colonists.

One of the reasons 1740 to 1816 can be considered one of the darkest in Abanaki history is the fighting and bloodshed that accompanied Abanaki resistance to European conquest. King George's War was the first in the period. The war between the French and British began in 1744. Most of the Abanaki sided with the French; however, both the St. Francois and Pigwacket sided with the British and sought refuge in Boston. King George's War accomplished little besides leaving all parties ready for another war. That came in 1755 with the French and Indian War. This was another war between the French and English colonists with Native peoples siding with each country. The Abanaki, who had retreated into Quebec during the King George's War, participated in the French raids of New England towns. These raids mostly ended, however, with the sacking of St. Francois. In 1759 Major Robert Rogers led a party of colonial rangers to the Abanaki town of St. Francois. There he burned the entire town to the ground. He estimated the Abanaki dead at around 200, although French numbers suggest a much lower death toll. Although the war was effectively over with the British capture of Quebec in 1759, treaties were never signed until 1770. This was the last war the Abanaki would fight on the side of the French.

The beginning raids of the French and Indian War by the Penobscot led to one of the greatest, or one of the worst, testaments of the atrocities committed upon the Abanaki during this period. That is the Phips Proclamation of 1775. This proclamation by Spencer Phips, Governor

of Massachusetts, offered bounties for members of the Penobscot tribe, part of the Abanaki Confederacy. He offered 50 pounds for a live male, or 40 for his scalp. For woman and children, he offered 25 pounds live, or 20 for their scalp. The proclamation did not just tell about the bounty, it encouraged people to hunt the Penobscot: “And I do hereby require his Majesty's Subjects of this Province to Embrace all opportunities of pursuing, captivating, killing and Destroying all and every of the aforesaid Indians”(Phips). He required that the subjects of the crown pursue every opportunity to ‘destroy’ the Penobscot people. However, because of the difficulty, whether intentional or not, to distinguish between a Penobscot and a member of another Abanaki tribe, many members of other tribes were hunted and returned for bounty money.

The end of the French and Indian War also led to the loss of land for the Abanaki. In 1763, with the war over, another rebellion, called the Pontiac Rebellion, led to a proclamation halting expansion beyond the Appalachian crest. The British Indian agent for North America, Sir William Johnson, ruled that this proclamation didn't cover the lands that were claimed by the Abanaki. This ruling forced the Abanaki from the lands they sought refuge in and left them with no homeland. Neither the United States nor Canada wanted them, “After years of passing back-and-forth across the border, Quebec considered them New England Indians, and New England felt they belonged in Canada”(Sultzman). Not being welcome anywhere forced many Abanaki to live in small bands roaming across New England, becoming squatters in their territorial homelands.

The American Revolution did little to change that. Abanaki tribes fought for both sides in the conflict. There was an Abanaki regiment formed in Machias that tried to disrupt British trading on the Maine coast. Penobscot tribesmen served as scouts for the rebellion and attempted

to take some British forts along the Penobscot River. Some members of the Abanaki assisted the British in their raid of the Androscoggin River Valley. The end of the war saw the establishment of three small reservations for some Abanaki tribes in northern Maine. The Abanaki in Canada were given reserves in St. Francois and Bécancour. The war of 1812 saw “the last time the Abanaki went to war”(Sultzman). Bécancour sent two companies that fought on the side of the British.

Perhaps the largest example of the darkness of this period for the Abanaki is the decrease in their population. Although an exact number of Abanaki is impossible to know, it is estimated that their numbers were above 100,000 in the early 1600s. By the American Revolution it had decreased to less than 1,000 people across all of New England.

The disparities in these numbers illustrate just how terrible this period was for the Abanaki people. This significant drop in population was caused by diseases Europeans brought with them that the Native people had no immunity to, the Abanaki getting caught in European struggles leading to warfare, the hunting of Abanaki people by English colonists for bounty money, and finally the loss of their homeland. All of these factors together cause this period of 1740 to 1816 to be one of the worst in known Abanaki history. The commercialized image of MollyOckett is in stark contrast of the reality of life for the Abanaki during this period.

Although people might easily understand that what was done to the Abanaki during this period was a sin and terrible thing, because it is, it is an even greater travesty to not do anything with what we know. We all must seek to forgive, but never allow ourselves to forget. And furthermore, it is even more important that we think about what we are currently doing, in light

of our understanding and remembrance, so that we are not committing just as great an atrocity as the colonists in the past.

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