

Wyandanch Led East End Indians through Time of Violent Change

The trials and tribulations of Wyandanch, Grand Sachem of the Algonquians on the East End of Long Island, would have made a perfect Shakespearean tragedy. The Indian chief had to cope with a dangerous and shifting political scene in the middle of the 17th century. He worked to keep peace between his own people and encroaching English settlers, both dissatisfied with his efforts. He had to defend his tribe against marauding natives from Connecticut and Rhode Island, his own daughter kidnapped in one of the raids. He felt powerless to halt the destruction of traditional Indian culture and saw his people decimated by European diseases. He himself succumbed to plague in 1659, though some historians think he was poisoned. Poison would have been a classical end to the saga of this beleaguered leader.

The Indians on the East End lived fairly well, enjoying the riches of sea and land, until they were sucked into a conflict involving the English, Dutch, and aggressive New England sachems. In 1637 English soldiers massacred the Pequots in Connecticut who had been killing colonists and were exacting tribute from neighboring tribes, including those on Long Island. Realizing that Ninigret, the aggressive sachem of the Niantics, would attempt to fill the void left by the Pequots, and seeing that resistance to the English was futile, the young Montaukett sachem Wyandanch negotiated a pact with 38-year old Lion Gardiner, an English military commander.

