



FRIENDS
OF THE LAKE

Lillinonah's Leap

Reprinted From:

Legendary Connecticut

Traditional Tales from the Nutmeg State

By David E. Philips

When the English colonies in New England were very young, there was hardly an Indian between the Hudson and the Penobscot Rivers who did not know about Chief Waramaug, the great sachem of the Pootatuck tribe of western Connecticut. Not only was he respected far and wide for his courage, wisdom and charismatic leadership, but also admired by all for his magnificent hilltop headquarters overlooking the Housaronic River, not far above the present town of New Milford. Called "Waramaug's Palace," the structure was said to have been at least twenty feet wide and a hundred feet long, a "long hours," indeed, and unquestionable the largest Indian building ever constructed in New England.

Made from bark and logs which had to be carried for many miles (mostly up hill) on the backs of the artisans who built it, Warmamaug's Palace was famed both for its architectural grandeur and its ornate interior decoration. It is said, for example, that the wall of the cavernous main council chamber were covered with colorful painting of the chief, member of his family, his councilors and judges, while smaller apartments were adorned from floor to ceiling with pictures of all the beasts, birds, reptiles and insects to be found in the land of the Pootatucks. The best Indian artists, many loaned to Waramaug by the chiefs of distant tribes, labored for months to complete the unique administration building and museum of primitive art.

As proud as Waramaug was of his imposing palace, he was even prouder of the light of his life, his lovely daughter, Lillinonah. Taught from birth to cultivate those virtues most revered by her father – compassion for one's fellow man, loyalty to family and tribe and sensitivity to the beauties of Nature – Lillinonah was, at the age of eighteen, a young woman whose humanity matched her grace and beauty. From near and far the young braves came, as moths to the flame, to pay homage to Lillinonah – and perhaps win her



FRIENDS OF THE LAKE

hand in marriage. But first, of course, each had to pass muster with old Waramaug, and that was no simple matter.

Not it happened that on a cold and wintry day, as Lillinonah was out wading in the woods high above the swift rapids of the Housatonic, she came upon a handsome young white man wandering aimlessly through the forest, stumbling occasionally and falling to his knees before rising once more and continuing on. It was obvious to the Indian maiden that the man was sick with cold and fever, weak of body and confused of mind. With pity in her heart for the suffering stranger, she offered to assist him back to the village of the Pootatucks, where he might find rest and treatment for his illness. When the white man nodded his assent, she slowly walked him to her home, though he had to lean heavily upon her for support, lest he collapse in the effort.

Although the elders of the village did not approve and did nothing to help her, Lillinonah nursed the stricken Englishman through all the rest of the long, cold winter, seldom leaving his side. As spring came to the encampment of the Pootatucks, he was well along the road to recovery, thanks to the care of his attentive nurse and the good medicine which she had provided. With the blossoming of the mountain laurel on the banks of the Housatonic, love, too, bloomed in the house of Lillinonah. As the beautiful daughter of Waramaug gazed with undisguised affection into the eyes of the man whose life she had saved, she saw that he returned her adoration with unaffected ardor.

When summer came, the two young lovers finally decided that they must go to Chief Waramaug, for a love as deep as theirs must be consummated by marriage. The great sachem's reaction, however, was as they both expected: he was very angry. With all the eligible Indian suitors for miles around still beating a path to her door, how dare Lillinonah ask for his blessings on a union with a white man, an unknown stranger whose culture was so different from her own? Was it not true that the paleface despised the Indians, regarding them as little better than the savage beasts of the forest? No, said Waramaug, never would he sanction Lillinonah's marriage to such a man.

But Lillinonah refused to eat or drink. Her once lovely face turned sallow and she began to shrink before the very eyes of her distraught father. As summer waned, the once beautiful daughter of Waramaug became a pale shadow of her former self, so great was her pain and powerful her will. Finally, although he still regarded marriage between his daughter and a white man as a burden almost too heavy to bear, Waramaug relented.



FRIENDS OF THE LAKE

Reluctantly, he consented to the marriage of his beloved Lillinonah to the man she had found lost in the woods on that long ago winter's day.

Before the marriage could take place, the betrothed couple agreed, the fair young man should return to his own people, to let them know that he was still alive and well, and to tell them of his plans to wed Lillinonah and live for the rest of his life in the company of the Pootatucks. Both lovers realized that his people would urge him not to go back to his lovely Indian princess. They would remind him that there were plenty of young English women in the colonies just looking for a husband as attractive as he was. What right had he to wed a dusky maid from a foreign and inferior race? But he promised Lillinonah that no argument would ever persuade him to break his vow to marry. After one final winter with his own people, he would return to Lillinonah – in the early spring. Sadly, he took his leave.

The autumn passed, and winter, too, and as the first green began to show in the hickory and oak along the Housatonic, Lillinonah bedecked herself with the wild flowers of the forest as she waited in happy anticipation for her lover's return. But summer came and went, the reds and yellows of autumn showed bright on the trees, and still the young Englishman had not come back to the land of the Pootatucks. Lillinonah no longer sang a joyous song. There were no more flowers in her hair. Wan and listless, she wandered through the woods, her eyes red-rimmed from weeping, searching and hoping against hope that she had not been forgotten.

Chief Waramaug watched sadly as once more his daughter's health began to fail and her usually happy disposition to run morose under mounting waves of despondency. Perhaps, he thought, he might bring her back from the brink of depression if he could only interest her in a young man of her own race. So, unknown to Lillinonah, Waramaug arranged a marriage for her with Eagle Feather, one of the brightest, most promising braves in the Pootatuck tribe. Surely, such a fine youth as he, could give Lillinonah something to live for.

But word reached Lillinonah of her father's arrangement with Eagle Feather – and she reacted immediately. Down on the shore of the Housatonic River, now rapid and swollen with the heavy rains of autumn, she climbed into a canoe and shoved off into the teeth of the roaring current. As the canoe was carried faster and faster toward the turbulent



FRIENDS OF THE LAKE

waters above the dangerous falls of the river, Lillinonah tossed away her paddle and sand back in the bottom of the canoe to await her fate.

Then, high on a crag jutting over the river just above the cataract, she saw him! Her lost lover had not forgotten. Even above the roar of the water she heard him call her name. She stood in the canoe, waved her arms and screamed for help. Though he knew his chances of saving his beloved were slim at best, the young Englishman did not hesitate for a moment. He leaped from the overhanging bluff and plunged into the whitened water, just as Lillinonah's canoe struck a rock in the middle of the river and capsized, spilling her into the frothy current. Swiftly as he could, he swam to her side and clasped her body to him. Alas, neither realized that it was already too late. Still wrapped in loving embrace, the doomed pair disappeared into the boiling falls and were crushed to death as they were hurled to the rocks in the broad pool below.

They say that when the battered bodies of the star-crossed lovers were finally found, they were still locked in each other's arms. Noble, even in deepest mourning for his lost Lillinonah, Chief Waramaug ordered that his daughter and her white lover be buried side by side, contrary to Indian tradition, on the top of a hill overlooking the narrow gap of the Housatonic River now known as Lover's Leap. And when old Waramaug finally joined his ancestors many decades later, legend says that he, too, was laid to rest near the ill-fated couple.

Though the tragic life of Lillinonah ended centuries ago, her legend will never be forgotten. Any Connecticut map will show that the wide portion of the Housatonic River which stretches for miles below the narrow rapids where the lovers met their deaths is, to this day, still called Lake Lillinonah.