

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty

Blood on the Blackstone, Part 7 – The Warrior Sachem

“Peirce’s Fight” was one of the bloodiest and most important battles of King Philip’s War, and it was fought right here on our own Blackstone River. This is Part 7 of a series about the battle and its aftermath. You can catch up on earlier chapters at www.blackstonedaily.com/ourriver.htm.

Like all memorable battles, Peirce’s Fight was a mortal clash between two opposing factions, each under the command of a military leader.

On one side, a colonial militia of 50-70 soldiers and scouts led by the man whose name will forever be tied to the battle, Captain Michael Peirce of Scituate, Massachusetts. On the other, a furious horde of 600-900 Indians, mostly Narragansetts, with Nipmucks, Cowesets and Wampanoags filling out their ranks.

By means of a ruse, the Indians lured Peirce and his men into an ambush. Native warriors were strategically deployed so that once engaged, the white men found themselves flanked on both sides of the river with no possibility of retreat. Hopelessly surrounded, Peirce and his party made their stand. One by one, they were cut down, dead.

There has never been any question that the Indians followed a premeditated battle plan that day. As George M. Bodge wrote in *Soldiers in King Philip’s War* (1906), “There is no doubt that Capt. Peirce was out-generalled, as well as vastly outnumbered, and, like the brave man that he was, he fought it out till he fell, with his brave men around him.”

Less certain is the identity of the Indian “general” who orchestrated the attack. Historians have long speculated about Peirce’s Indian counterpart. Obviously he was skilled in the art of forest warfare. He manipulated Peirce down to the river’s edge, where the river itself would hinder the soldiers’ movements even as his own warriors surrounded them. But who was he?

Most histories credit the victory to Canonchet, warrior-sachem of the Narragansett Indians.

Sachem (sā-chəm) was an Algonquin title given to tribal chieftains. The Narragansetts had six sachems spread throughout the “Narragansett Country” of Rhode Island and parts of Connecticut. They included Pessacus, Canonchet’s uncle; Ninigret, sachem of the eastern Narragansett or Niantic Indians; Quaiapen, a female sachem whose stone fort lay in the woods near Wickford; Pomham, sachem of the territory now occupied by Warwick; and Quinnapin, who was Canonchet’s cousin.

Canonchet (or Nanuntenoo, as he was also called) was recognized as the warrior-sachem and leader of the tribe. He reputedly rose to this position one year before the war broke out.

“In the year 1674 Canonchet held a great dance,” recorded William Harris, a neighbor and rival of Roger Williams, “which among the Indians is a kind of religious ceremony wherein they customarily give away all the money they have and bid those to whom they

give it to go and pray for them. So accordingly out they go and make a kind of shout that signifies as much, and their women dance around in a ring. At the above-mentioned dance were all but a few of the Indians from far and near. At that time it was decided that Canonchet should be the leader in the plot against the English ...”

He was a natural choice to lead his people. Approximately 34 years old at the time of Peirce’s Fight, Canonchet was the youngest son of the deceased Narragansett sachem Miantonomi. Physically in his prime and endowed with both a keen mind and an unbreakable spirit, he was the embodiment of Narragansett tribal power. In *Flintlock and Tomahawk*, Douglas Edward Leach describes him as “the sturdy young warrior-sachem Canonchet, a man with a proud fighting heart, and a relentless foe of the English.”

In the aftermath of the United Colonies’ surprise attack on the Narragansett swamp fort (December 19, 1675, three months before Peirce’s Fight – see Part 1), Canonchet and his surviving tribesmen reportedly took refuge in the frozen woods of Mishnock Swamp, at what is now Coventry, Rhode Island. Reverend Increase Mather wrote that the displaced Narragansetts were left so destitute that they were forced to subsist on ground nuts. However, there are indications that Canonchet’s men returned to the charred ruins of the fort and may have salvaged quantities of corn and fish which had escaped the fire.

Four days after the Great Swamp Fight, the Narragansetts sent ambassadors to Richard Smith’s trading post at Wickford, where the English soldiers who survived the swamp fight were quartered. This is thought to have been an attempt by the Indians to delay a follow-up attack and also an opportunity for them to appraise the condition of the colonial forces, many of whom had been seriously wounded in the battle.

On December 28th, Plymouth Governor Josiah Winslow, who led the assault on the Narragansett fort, set free a Narragansett squaw taken during the battle. He gave her a message for Canonchet – an offer of peace, contingent upon the surrender of all Wampanoags who might be among his people. It was the same demand that Canonchet had refused throughout the summer and fall. “No, not a Wampanoag, nor a paring of a Wampanoag’s nail,” he had sworn.

The squaw never returned to Smith’s trading post, but on December 30th, a Narragansett messenger came in. He relayed his sachems’ thanks for the proffer of peace, but also admonished the English. He “complained we made War upon them, and gave them no notice,” wrote Reverend William Hubbard. “The Messenger that was sent was fairly dismissed with the express mention of what Terms they must expect if they desired a Peace.”

On January 5th, Canonchet sent the English a peace offering -- not Wampanoags as they had demanded, but a little English girl of only three or four years old. She had been captured near Warwick. The Indians who delivered her remained at Smith’s until January 8th, when they were “sent back, and told what they must trust to.”

In the meantime, on January 7th, two more Narragansetts came forward, ostensibly to “make way for a Treaty of Peace.” Was this another attempt to delay the English while the Narragansetts put their fighting force back together?

The Indians complained that Canonchet had misinformed his people about the terms regarding the surrender of Wampanoag fugitives. They claimed they had not given over the Wampanoags because Canonchet had tricked them into believing “That they were not

by the former Treaty to have delivered up the Wampanoogs, or Philips Indians, until the said Canonchet's brother, one of the Hostages at Hartford was released."

But the English saw through the charade. Hubbard explained, "This was a mere Pretence, for he and they too, better understood the Particulars of the Agreement . . ." According to Hubbard, when the colonials raided the Narragansett fort, they found an open copy of the treaty in one of the wigwams, therefore "they could not be ignorant of the Articles of the Agreement."

On the 8th, a Niantic Indian messenger arrived at Smith's trading post. He carried a letter from Robert Stanton, an interpreter, who had written on behalf of the aging sachem Ninigret, "signifying the Reality of the Said Ninigret his Friendship to the English, and the Streights of the Enemy." Ninigret further warned, "that young insolent sachem Canonchet, and Panoquin [Quinnapin], said they would fight it out to the last Man, rather than they would become Servants to the English."

After so many back-and-forth attempts in the name of peace, it began to seem to both sides that the other's offers were insincere. The final overture was made on January 12th. Pessacus, one of the Narragansetts' older sachems and the uncle of Canonchet, sent a messenger to the English asking for "the Space of a Month longer wherein to issue the Treaty."

But Governor Winslow's patience ran out. The sachem's request so provoked him that he resolved "to have no more Treaties with the Enemy, but to prepare to assault them, with Gods Assistance, as soon as ever the Season would permit."

The Governor got his wish. About the second week in January, winter suddenly and unexpectedly released its grip on New England. "A fortnight or 3 weekes since it was bitter cold," Boston minister Increase Mather recorded in his diary on January 28th. "Now it is like April (some that have been in the country above 40 years 50 years professing they never knew the like at the time of year)," he added.

The mid-winter thaw melted the deep forest snow that had frustrated the English in their desire to pursue the remaining Narragansetts and finish them off once and for all. After weeks of being stranded at Smith's trading post, Winslow could finally make preparations to advance on the enemy.

By the 27th troop reinforcements from Plymouth and Connecticut had arrived at Wickford, along with some friendly Mohegan Indians. Freshly equipped and provisioned, Winslow's command was ready to embark. He and his troops marched from Wickford on the morning of the 28th.

But it was not timely enough. Some Indian prisoners had been captured prior to Winslow's departure, probably by one of the horseback scouting parties that routinely patrolled the countryside. The prisoners informed the English that "the Enemy were gone, or going into the Nipmunk Country" of central Massachusetts.

Canonchet had bought the time he needed to slip away.

The Narragansetts' escape was confirmed by messengers from Providence. On the 27th, while Winslow still making preparations, the Narragansetts had launched an early morning assault on the village of Pawtuxet. Details of the attack appear in an account written by Boston merchant Nathaniel Saltonstall:

The winter now being broken up, and the Snow and Ice all gone, our Army, consisting in all of 1600 Men, began their March to the Rocks, where the Indians were fled for protection; but in their Way they had Intelligence that 300 Indians had been at

Pawtuxit, an English Plantation on the Narraganset Bay, where they burnt Mr. Carpenter's Corn and Hay, and all his Houses except his Dwelling-house, which likewise they had set on Fire, but it was again quenched by some English that were in it. They likewise drove away with them 180 Sheep, 50 Head of large Cattle, and 15 Horses. Besides they took much Cattel from young Mr. Harris, and killed a Negro-servant of his.

Winslow and his battalion started north from Wickford. Shortly before leaving, Winslow had recruited the famous Indian fighter Captain Benjamin Church to join the mission. Church, who was wounded in the Great Swamp Fight, had originally gone to Smith's trading post to formally take his leave of the General but somehow allowed himself to be talked into joining the hunt for Canonchet, notwithstanding that his wounds had not completely healed.

The Winslow expedition soon crossed into Warwick, domain of the sachem Pomham. "Winslow moved forward through the Narragansett country burning the wigwams and seizing supplies where they were to be found, capturing here and there a few Indians stragglers, the sick and the old, women and children, whose strength had failed them," write George W. Ellis and John E. Morris in *King Philip's War* (1906).

The troops camped five miles outside Providence on the evening of January 28th. Benjamin Church's memoir of the war describes a brief battle and the capture of an Indian, afterwards executed, at an "Indian town, where there were many wigwams" and "an icy swamp." Possibly this occurred at Pomham's village.

The march resumed the following morning. During the night of the 29th, some of the Plymouth soldiers deserted, but not enough to materially affect the mission. Following the Narragansetts' trail, Winslow and his soldiers trekked into the northwest corner of Rhode Island, aiming for the Connecticut border.

Canonchet and his people were evidently moving too quickly to be concerned about covering their tracks. In their wake they sometimes left grim evidence of their passage. "As they marched after the Enemy," Hubbard wrote, "they found a good house burned, with a Barn belonging to it." And at an unspecified location 25 miles north of Mr. Smith's and 10 miles north of Providence, "They perceived also that the Enemy dealt much in Horse-flesh, meeting with no less than sixty Horses Heads in one place."

The fugitive Narragansetts crossed into Connecticut and raced towards Massachusetts. For days Winslow's troops hounded them, sometimes drawing so near they could see the Indians fleeing in the distance. At one point, the colonials managed to catch up with a small portion of the group. "Our soldiers in their Pursuit came upon their Reer, killed and took about seventy of them," Hubbard reported, "yet could never come to charge them, for they would presently betake themselves into Swamps, and not two of them run together, so as they saw it was an endless work to proceed further in the Chase of such an Enemy."

But Winslow persisted, despite that his army's rations were nearly exhausted. The deeper his forces penetrated into the Nipmuck Country, the sorer the hardships became. "... they pushed their way over frozen streams and swamps or along the exposed uplands, foraging for whatever they could procure," write Ellis and Morris. "Their camps were pitched in the snow under the shelter of a hill or in the woods, and they warmed their numbed bodies over the open fires. Still they pressed on, footsore, wet and hungry, in pursuit of the Narragansetts ever retreating before them and out of reach ..."

Soon the reality of the situation could not be avoided, and the English themselves were constrained to “deal much in horseflesh.” They killed and ate many of their own mounts. For this reason, Winslow’s pursuit of Canonchet has ever since been known as “The Hungry March.”

By early February, Winslow’s company had tracked the Narragansetts for more than sixty miles. They followed their elusive quarry into the Massachusetts woods between Marlborough and Brookfield. But upon coming to the “Road toward Connecticut,” Winslow halted. He instructed the Plymouth and Massachusetts men to turn east and start for Boston, while the Connecticut troops and Mohegan scouts were told to repair to their own colony. Winslow knew that “for want of Provision for themselves and their Horses,” he had no choice: the chase must be abandoned.

Now at liberty in the woodlands of central Massachusetts, Canonchet and his people joined forces with Nipmuck Indians already prosecuting the war for Philip. Quinnapin, one of the six Narragansett sachems and husband to Philip’s sister-in-law Weetamoo, participated in a merciless raid on Lancaster, February 10th, in which Mary Rowlandson and her child were taken captive. It is reasonable to assume other Narragansetts had a hand in it as well.

Hubbard described the Narragansetts’ new alliance in the following manner:

... the Narhagansets having been driven out of the Country, fled through the Nipnet [Nipmuck] Plantations, towards Watchuset Hills meeting with all the Indians that had harboured all Winter in those Woods about Nashaway; they all combined together against the English, yet divided their Numbers, and one half of them were observed to bend their Course towards Plimouth, taking Medfield in their way, which they endeavoured to burn and spoil, Feb. 21, 1675, as their Fellows had done Lancaster ten Days before.

The sudden appearance of the Narragansetts in Nipmuck Country imposed a heavy burden on already weakened food supply. “Such was the condition of the hostiles, when, in the dead of winter, several thousand Narragansetts, destitute of supplies, poured in upon them,” write Ellis and Morris. “The already slender resources of the Nipmuck tribes were immediately exhausted, and though the trees were bare and the ground deep with snow, raids upon the English villages for the purpose of securing food became imperative.”

The worsening food crisis must have been a focus of concern at a great Indian war council convened near Squakheag (Northfield, Massachusetts) on March 9th, just two weeks before Peirce’s Fight. At this historic conference, Philip and Canonchet looked each other in the eye for the first time since the war started. Narragansett sachems Pessacus, Pomham and Quinnapin were also on hand. Other distinguished Indians included “Sancumachu of the Pocumtucks, Annawan, several other chiefs of the Wampanoags, Queen Weetamoo and representatives of the various tribes of the Nipmucks, dressed in all the glory of wampum and deerskin.”

Successful raids in central and western Massachusetts may have emboldened the Indians to believe that they would enjoy some degree of freedom in that territory, at least enough to plant fields for the coming season. “There is little doubt that the confederated tribes determined to drive the English from the Connecticut valley, and to hold it,” Bodge writes in *Soldiers in King Philip’s War*.

“After locating his people in safe retreats,” Bodge continues, “Canonchet with a large party of his warriors, returned towards his own country, in order to recover some of the large quantities of corn secreted there, and especially for seed-corn to plant the English fields, from which they had driven the owners. A large raiding party from the various tribes came southward also. It is probable that the two companies were not far from each other, when Capt. Peirse arrived at Rehoboth, and they probably united in his destruction ...”

If Bodge’s surmise is correct, it would serve to explain why Indians of different tribes were mixed in among the Narragansetts who ambushed Peirce.

There is an old tradition in the Blackstone Valley that on the eve of the battle, Canonchet and his warriors retired to a favorite haunt of the Indians called Quinsnicket, which is said to mean “a rock house” or “stone huts.” The site is located in a tranquil glade of the Moshassuck River valley, off of Breakneck Hill Road in what is now the town of Lincoln, Rhode Island, formerly part of Smithfield.

“The name is now attached to a huge mass of rocks which caps the hill just back of the ‘Butterfly Factory,” Providence antiquarian Sidney S. Rider wrote in 1904. “It overhangs other rocks, thus forming a sort of room or space which it covers. Tradition says that beneath this rock, or in this rock house, slept Nanuntenoo, otherwise Canonchet, the night before he destroyed Captain Peirce and all his soldiers.

“It may be true, for certainly it might have been,” Rider observed. “On the green sward to the southward of this immense rock, he may have lighted his council fire and planned the fatal ambushade. [At] Quinsnicket the bountiful hand of nature had brought together everything which could delight the eye of the Indian – a magnificent view; security from enemies; luxuriant foliage; rare plants; and the waters of the bright Moshassuck for his beverage.”

Quinsnicket was part of a large tract of forested land acquired by the State of Rhode Island in 1909; which in turn became Lincoln Park. For this reason alone, Quinsnicket has survived to the present day.

In 1908, Edwin C. Pierce, a lineal descendant of Captain Michael Peirce, referred to Quinsnicket in the text of an address he gave at a ceremony to honor his fallen ancestor:

As the ambushade was near Quinsnicket, there can be no doubt that Canonchet with perhaps seven hundred warriors of the brave and now utterly desperate Narragansett nation had made this rocky fastness his base of operations. There, under the overhanging rock of the hilltop, the savage Chieftain held his council fire and the plan for the ambushade was laid. The sortie of the colonials from Rehoboth on Saturday must have been reported to Canonchet, and he must have judged that encouraged by their success, the English would continue their advance and accordingly he prepared to ambush, overwhelm and annihilate them ...

Of course, there’s just one little problem with Mr. Pierce’s colorful scenario:

There’s reason to believe that Canonchet, warrior-sachem of the Narragansetts, was never at Peirce’s Fight ...

NEXT: CANONCHET CONTINUED

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