

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty

BLOOD ON THE BLACKSTONE

Part One – The Peirce Expedition

In the war-torn winter of 1676, an old soldier of Plymouth Colony wrote his will. Dated January 25th, it began:

I, Michael Peirce of Scituate, in the government of New Plymouth in America, being now by the appointment of God, going out to war, against the Indians, I do make this my last will and testament ...

Peirce, who migrated from England in 1645, was 65 years old and a captain in the Plymouth militia.. Whether he had ever faced Indians in war before is uncertain, but he was wise to put his affairs in order. Six months of bloody battles and burned villages had alerted every colonist in New England to the dangers of Indian combat. Since the previous July, Metacomet – the Wampanoag chief the English called “King Philip” – and his forces had attacked settlements from Swansea to Springfield.

And now there was another deadly threat skulking through the fields and forests -- the powerful Narragansett Indians.

The Narragansetts had been pulled into the war a month earlier. On the frigid, snowy afternoon of December 19th, 1675, 1000 troops from the Massachusetts, Plymouth and Connecticut colonies launched an all-out pre-emptive attack on a large Narragansett fort in the Great Swamp of Kingston, Rhode Island.

The United Colonies declared war on the Narragansetts after the tribe refused to hand over Wampanoag women, children and elderly left in its care. Some say honor compelled the Narragansetts to provide safe haven for the Wampanoag’s noncombatants, that this was an ancient tradition among neighboring tribes. But the English saw it as aiding and abetting the enemy. When colonial authorities demanded the Wampanoags be surrendered, Canonchet, the Narragansett sachem, had boldly refused. “No, not a Wampanoag, nor the paring of a Wampanoag’s nail,” he vowed.

The Narragansett fort was utterly destroyed. Buried under the flying snow were the smoldering, broken remains of more than 300 Indians, most of them women, children and

elderly -- the Narragansetts' own and doubtless some of the Wampanoags they were trying to protect. The English had roasted them alive by firing the wigwams in which they hid.

But not all the Narragansetts died that night. Many of their warriors had escaped into the woods, where, in the words of one contemporary historian, they were *"forced to hide themselves in a Cedar Swamp, not far off, where they had nothing to defend them from the cold but Boughs of Spruce and Pine Trees."*

Those surviving Narragansetts, now warmed by the bright flame of vengeance, were the Indians Captain Peirce expected to face in battle.

The Peirce expedition began to assemble on February 8th, when Plymouth authorities decreed that a company of men from the colony's southern towns be pressed into military service. In the days ahead, families in Scituate, Marshfield, Duxbury, Sandwich, Barnstable, Yarmouth and Eastham watched as their menfolk left their farms and fisheries to go fight the Indians. In some cases, the sacrifice was dear. At Yarmouth, for example, three brothers from the same family, John, William and Henry Gage, all in their twenties, answered the call.

Plymouth could ill afford to send out another squadron so soon after the Great Swamp campaign. But circumstances left few options. As historian Samuel G. Drake wrote in 1836, *"The Indians having carried their whirlwind of war to the very doors of Plimouth, caused the sending out of Captain Peirce ... to divert them from these ravages, and destroy as many of them as he was able."*

On February 29th, the new company of soldiers was called to Plymouth township to prepare for a *"further March ... to goe forth under the Command of Captain Michael Peirse and Lieutenant Samuel Fuller."* According to historian George Madison Bodge, *"The force probably got ready sometime in the middle of March."*

If Bodge's estimate is correct, it would mean Peirce and his men were at Plymouth when Indians destroyed Clark's garrison house about two miles outside the village center on March 12th. Eleven women and children were killed and one boy left for dead as Indians made off with their food, money and ammunition.

After the incident at Clark's, Plymouth may have been tempted to keep Peirce's company stationed in the village as a security force. But a potentially greater danger loomed on the western threshold of the colony: Many Indians were said to be congregating at Pawtucket, on a river of the same name that would one day be known as the Blackstone ...

In the last week of March, Captain Peirce led some 70 soldiers out of Plymouth to seek and destroy the enemy. A few may have worn armor, perhaps helmets or breastplates, but most were probably clad in buff coats and hats. For weapons, they likely carried flintlock muskets and swords. Traditionally, the colony also supplied its soldiers with gunpowder, bullets, and a ration of tobacco. Two horses outfitted with provisions may have accompanied the group.

Among the file were approximately 20 friendly Indians from Cape Cod. Their leader, a Wampanoag from Barnstable named "Captain Amos," was said to have refused to follow Metacomet. The use of Indians in English war parties had been unthinkable in the first months of the war -- no one trusted them -- but when it became clear that Indians could easily outmaneuver the English in the forest, the English relented and began to add friendly Indians to their expeditions to serve as scouts. Captain Amos was the appointed guide for Peirce's company.

"He had a large company," writes Drake, "consisting of 70 men, 20 of whom were friendly Indians. With these, no doubt, Peirse thought himself safe against any power of the Indians in that region."

The band of soldiers started west. At Taunton, they picked up the Old Seacunke Road and headed for the outpost of "Rehoboth Common," in what was then Seekonk territory and is now the village of Rumford in East Providence, R.I. The plan was to use a garrison house there as a base of operations for a reconnaissance of the area around Pawtucket Falls.

Pawtucket had long been a favorite haunt of the Indians. Here the river met tidewater; here they could fish for salmon, shad and alewives. Shallows above and below the falls offered a convenient river crossing and easy access to points north and east of Narragansett Bay. It was a natural refuge for Indians on the run, a place to rest and regroup ... or to coordinate attacks against Plymouth Colony.

Peirce and his men arrived at Rehoboth on Saturday, March 25th. Details of the day's events are sketchy. What we know from historical accounts is that they proceeded into the woods east of the river and in the vicinity of Attleborough Gore (present-day Cumberland) had their first encounter with about fifty hostile Indians.

Reverend Noah Newman, who kept the garrison house at Rehoboth, described the skirmish in a letter two days later to Reverend John Cotton of Plymouth:

"Upon the 25th inst., Capt. Peirce went forth with a small party of his men and Indians with him, and upon discovering the enemy, fought him, without damage to himself, and

judged that he had considerably damnified them. Yet he, being of no great force, chose rather to retreat and go out next morning with a recruit of men ...”

The phrase “judged that he had considerably damnified them” suggests Peirce believed he had killed or wounded a number of Indians in the fray.

Peirce and his party withdrew, probably to Reverend Newman’s garrison house. A garrison was the colonial version of a frontier fort. Built of heavy timbers, often with the second floor overhanging the first, it was the safest place for colonists in the event of an Indian attack.

The Rehoboth garrison doubled as a parsonage for Mr. Newman, the local minister. Destroyed long ago, it is said to have stood on or near the site of the present Newman Church and Common at the corner of Newman and Pawtucket Avenues in Rumford.

That evening, preparations for the next day’s patrol were hastily made. Captain Peirce requested additional recruits from Rehoboth. He would get at least five, probably with Reverend Newman’s help. In his letter to Reverend Cotton, Newman described the new recruits as “pilots from us that were acquainted with the ground.”

The Christian Indians probably stood guard outside the garrison house that night while Peirce, Lieutenant Fuller and the other soldiers enjoyed Mr. Newman’s hospitality. It’s fair to assume the men broke bread and exchanged news of the war. Newman himself was something of a war correspondent. He periodically dispatched letters back to Plymouth with details of Indian activity on the borderlands of the colony. Occasionally he took a more active role: the previous August, he had personally carried supplies to troops fighting Indians at Nipsachuck swamp in Smithfield, Rhode Island.

Possibly Peirce and Newman discussed *another* swamp fight that evening -- the Great Swamp Fight of three months earlier.. Some historians have claimed that Captain Peirce played a role in that terrible confrontation, but there appear to be no Plymouth Colony records to substantiate the claim. The tradition seems to have originated with Samuel Deane’s 1831 *History of Scituate* – alas, Deane himself cites no primary evidence that Captain Peirce was ever among the Plymouth forces at Great Swamp.

Although Peirce’s presence remains in question, his lieutenant, Samuel Fuller, had a direct connection to the Great Swamp Fight: he was the son of Captain Edward Fuller, surgeon-general of the Plymouth Colony forces. Captain Fuller is listed in the Plymouth records as one of the regimental officers present at the Great Swamp. He was there when soldiers torched the wigwams full of Indian women and children.

Now the younger Fuller might be just hours away from facing the wrath of Indians whose children and families his own father had helped to kill.

Sunday, March 26th. The Lord's Day. On a morning when other colonists would repair to meeting houses to pray for an end to the "dangerousness of the times," Peirce's militia checked its equipment and prepared to march.

Captain Peirce likely conferred with the Rehoboth "pilots" who had just joined the expedition. One of these, a fellow named Benjamin Buckland, must have presented an intimidating appearance – he was said to have an "unusually large frame" and a "double set of teeth all around."

Peirce decided his command should head towards the Pawtucket (Blackstone) River and the scene of the previous day's skirmish. Before leaving the safety of the garrison, however, he took a crucial precaution: tradition has it that Peirce sent a messenger (probably on horseback) to Captain Andrew Edmonds in Providence, requesting that Captain Edmonds and his troops rendezvous with him near Pawtucket Falls, to assist in attacking a large party of Indians there.

With the messenger "timely" dispatched, Peirce and his men moved out.

In 1904, one of Captain Peirce's descendants, Edwin Pierce, described the company's approach to the river:

Early on Sunday morning the colonials marched from Rehoboth ... They doubtless proceeded across the Seekonk plain and skirted the east bank of the Blackstone until they reached a point on the river above Pawtucket Falls where the river was fordable, the territory at that point being then called the Attleborough Gore. The territory on the west bank of the river is now in Central Falls. There can be no doubt as to the spot because at no other place on the river could a large body of men approach a ford. At this point the ford was approached through a ravine having a wide level ground on either side of which rose a wood-crowned hill ...

Most historians believe Peirce and his comrades crossed into an area once known as "Many Holes," a wooded tract of ravines and hollows near the present Cumberland-Attleborough line. Here they spotted a small group of Indians fleeing at a short distance.

" ... and upon their march, discovered in some rambling, woody place 4 or 5 Indians, who in getting away from us halted as if they had been lame or wounded," Reverend Newman wrote the following day.

Peirce took off in pursuit, perhaps thinking they were some of the Indians he wounded the day before. If Captain Amos or another of his Indian scouts warned him to use caution, that it might be a trap, Peirce either turned a deaf ear or believed his forces could

repel any foes who might be lying in ambush. He and his men charged forward through the bare trees and underbrush, so intent on the adventure ahead, they seem to have paid no heed to what was unfolding on the trail behind:

Silent as wolves, dozens of Narragansett warriors emerged from hiding. They had waited until their decoys lured the English towards the river, then stealthily started down the path after the white men, cutting off all chance of retreat.

“One of the most desperate Fights of the War,” as Drake deemed it, *“and perhaps the most Bloody,”* was about to begin ...

NEXT: PEIRCE’S FIGHT

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