

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty

Blood on the Blackstone

Part Two: Peirce's Fight

From Part One: While patrolling the woods north of Pawtucket Falls on Sunday morning, March 26, 1676, Captain Michael Peirce and his troops discovered a group of four or five Indians who appeared to be wounded. When the Indians made a break towards the Pawtucket (now Blackstone) River, Peirce decided to follow, either unaware or unconcerned that they were leading him into an ambush. The full text of Part One, "The Peirce Expedition," can be found in the July-August issue of Journeys or online at <http://blackstonedaily.com/ourriver.htm> Here now is Part Two, "Pierce's Fight."

On the west side of the Blackstone, in what is now the city of Central Falls, a high ledge of native bedrock overlooked the river and the lands beyond. From atop this ancient rise, it is said, Narragansett Indians monitored Captain Michael Peirce's every move that fateful Sunday morning. They watched Peirce and his troops depart the Rehoboth garrison. They watched the line of more than 70 men begin their march towards Pawtucket Falls. Forewarned of the soldiers' approach, the Indians had sufficient time to position their warriors and dispatch decoys to lead the English into a snare. By the time the white men realized their predicament, escape would be all but impossible ...

Peirce and his men attempted to close the gap between themselves and the small party of "wounded" Indians. Did the pursuit end abruptly at the river's edge or did the decoys lead Peirce's troops across the shallows to the west bank? We may never know the exact sequence of events. But probably within a matter of minutes, the woods along the river exploded in a pandemonium of war cries and musket fire. "For on a sudden," wrote Boston merchant Nathaniel Saltonstall in a letter to a friend in England a few months later, "they discovered about 500 Indians, who, in very good order, furiously attacked them, being as readily received by ours."

Some historians believe the ambush occurred only *after* Peirce and his men crossed to the west side of the river. Others concede the possibility, but based on closer study think it more likely that the attack began on the *east* bank of the river and shortly carried over to the west bank. All agree, however, that at some point Peirce and his men crossed the Blackstone.

The most convincing scenario was presented in 1889 by James O. Whitney, M.D., of Pawtucket, who described himself as “having been conversant, for over forty years” with the Many Holes area. Whitney observed that the landscape had greatly changed since Peirce’s time; once virgin woodlands, it had since been industrialized by Home Print Works and two municipal pumping stations. The tracks of the Boston and Providence Railroad also cut a path through. But traces of the old terrain were still to be found.

In a paper presented the same year to the Rhode Island Historical Society, Whitney drew attention to a 40-acre body of water just over the Attleboro line called Cranberry Pond (not to be confused with Cranberry Pond in nearby Lincoln, R.I.). This pond, which still exists, was formed by the erection of a dam sometime in the 19th century. But in Peirce’s day, it was one of the “Many Holes” that gave the area its unusual name.

Whitney wrote, “This hole or hollow, was probably a small pond in its lowest part in 1676, unless in very dry seasons, yet it could have sheltered hundreds of Indians from the view of the whites as they came from the garrison ... The land all about and between the two Pumping Stations, which are half a mile apart and east of the Blackstone, is hill and dale, and therefore well calculated for Indian warfare ... The chief ravine, through which the Indians emerged from this shelter, to surround Pierce and his men, it is easy to understand, was the bed of the rivulet, which higher up, is called to this day the ‘Sweetin Brook’ ...

“Hidden in and among these Many Holes they emerged from their shelter and either forced Pierce across the Blackstone or he was decoyed across by his cunning foes, to the west side, where not a doubt, the severest of the action took place,” Whitney concluded. To bolster his claim, he quoted Leonard Bliss’s 1836 history of Rehoboth: “It commenced on the east side of the river (the Blackstone) but the severest part of the action was on the west, immediately on the bank of the stream.”

With the Indians blocking all avenues of escape on the east bank, Peirce may have immediately ordered his men to cross the stream and establish a line of defense on the opposite bank, perhaps hoping the river would slow or deter the enemy. One tradition, mentioned in Saltonstall’s 1676 letter and later repeated in John Daggett’s 1834 history of Attleborough, is that Peirce at first tried to repel the assault and actually forced the Indians to retreat somewhat. But given the reported number of Narragansett warriors and the swiftness of the attack, it seems unlikely that Peirce was able to gain any advantage, even for a short time.

The place where Peirce and his men forded the river is said to be near the railroad bridge on Branch Street in Pawtucket. Whitney writes, “Captain Pierce and his little command crossed the Blackstone, no doubt, where or near where it is crossed by the Boston [Railroad] cars but above rather than below that point ...”

They rushed across the icy river, trying to keep their footing sure and their powder dry. No doubt some tried to run through the shallows as musket balls and arrows whistled past their heads; no doubt some fell dead or mortally wounded in the water before they reached the far shore. The more experienced fighters, like 65-year-old Peirce and his friendly Indians, may have backed across the river, firing and reloading their flintlocks while never letting the Narragansetts out of their sights.

But the beleaguered soldiers would find no refuge on the other side of the river, no haven. Only the unthinkable – a *second* Indian ambush.

“... a fresh company of of 400 Indians came in,” Saltonstall wrote, “so that the English and their few Indian friends were quite surrounded and beset on every side.”

In 1908, Edwin Pierce, a lineal descendant of Captain Michael Peirce, envisioned the scene:

On the west bank there was an open, or at least not heavily wooded, plain, in which his men would be out of arrow shot from the hills and where they could at least make a better defense than was possible in the ravine ... It seems probable that in order to make the decoys successful, the warriors on the west side lay in ambush a good distance from the river, so that the colonials were able to cross the river, probably not without loss, and gain the open space where they proposed to make their stand. While the enemy was swarming down the ravine and across the river in hot pursuit, a band of at least three hundred Narragansett rushed upon the colonials from their concealment on the west side, so that the colonials were now completely surrounded.

The Narragansetts' retribution was at hand. Blood for blood. Now the slaughter at the Great Swamp three months earlier would be avenged. The Indian warriors cut down in the snow by English guns, the mothers, children and elders burned alive in their wigwams as English soldiers watched -- this day belonged to them.

“No sooner was [Peirce] on the western side,” historian Samuel G. Drake wrote in 1836, than the Indians “like an avalanche from a mountain, rushed down upon him.”

To the colonial soldiers, it must have seemed as if all the hosts of Hell had boiled out of a crack in the earth. Amid the smoke from the muskets and the acrid smell of gunpowder, hundreds of Indians advanced on them from all sides. An undulating wall of ferocious faces painted jet black. Eyes utterly stripped of mercy. In their hands and at their sides the Indians probably brandished an assortment of deadly weapons, some traditional, others gotten from the English in trade before the war or taken from dead English bodies after the war broke out: bows, war clubs, flintlocks, carbines, pikes, hammers, knives, swords ...

“This was a most trying moment,” Daggett recorded, “but there was no flinching – no quailing. Each [soldier] knew that in all human probability he must die on that field, and that too, under the most appalling circumstances – by the hand of a merciless enemy who sought their extermination. But bravely and nobly did they submit to their fate. Each one resolved to do his duty and sell his life at the dearest rate. At such a time, the awful war-whoop of the Indians would have sent a thrill of terror into the hearts of the bravest men ...”

Peirce and his troops had only one hope left. Before leaving the Rehoboth garrison house that morn, Peirce had sent a messenger to Providence asking Captain Andrew Edmunds and his troops to join him in an attack on a large party of Indians near Pawtucket Falls. If Edmunds had kept that appointment, he and his soldiers were probably somewhere within earshot of the battle and should already be racing to Peirce’s aid.

Did Peirce exhort his men not to forsake hope? Did he command them to stand their ground until reinforcements arrived? Some historians suggest Peirce may have fought his way slightly north along the riverbank before taking the brunt of the attack, closer to where a marker (on High Street, Central Falls) now commemorates the battle. But the earliest sources place him at the river’s edge: Reverend William Hubbard wrote in 1677, “he drew down towards the Side of the River, hoping the better by that means to prevent their surrounding of him, but that proved his overthrow, which he intended as his greatest advantage.”

When Peirce shouted his next order, he had no idea he would be setting the stage for one of the most memorable battle scenes of King Philip’s War. It has never been rendered by artist or engraver in any published work, yet as soon as you read it you will have a picture in your mind as clear as if it had been painted on canvas.

“At this critical juncture,” wrote Daggett, “Captain Pierce made an exceedingly judicious movement, He formed his men into a circle, back to back, with four spaces between each man – thus enlarging the circle to its greatest extent – presenting a front to the enemy in every direction, and necessarily scattering their fire over a greater surface, whilst the Indians stood in a deep circle, one behind another, forming a compact mass, and presenting a front where every shot must take effect.”

The Narragansett were known for targeting commanding officers, so it is not surprising that Peirce was among the first to fall. He slumped to the ground, “shot in his leg or thigh, so he was not able to stand any longer,” says Hubbard. As soon as Peirce went down, Captain Amos, one of the friendly Indians helping the English, pulled close to his commander’s side and “would not leave him, but charging his gun, fired stoutly upon the enemy ...”

As Peirce lay dying, he may have resigned himself to the probability that help would not be coming, or at least would not arrive in time to save his men. Reeling from pain and blood loss he may have wondered if Captain Edmunds' party had been ambushed too, or if his messenger had been killed en route to Providence ...

Mercifully, Peirce would go to his grave never knowing the truth. The messenger had reached Providence safely, but upon arrival discovered that everyone was at church. As Drake tells it, "...the Messenger by whom the Letter was sent, arriving at Providence after the Forenoon Service had commenced (for it was Sunday) waited till that was over before delivering it. As soon as Captain Edmunds had read it, he impatiently exclaimed 'It is now too late,' and sharply reprimanded the Bearer for neglecting to deliver the Letter at once."

Other accounts say the messenger attended church services himself before delivering the letter, while still others suggest he didn't fully understand the urgency of his mission or that he waited out of fear of disrupting the congregation.

"Whether through sloth or cowardize is not much material," William Hubbard observed, cutting right to the point, "this message was not delivered to them to who it was immediately sent."

The Plymouth men fought fiercely, but the numbers opposing them were too great. One by one they collapsed on the riverbank, dead or bleeding. Each time a new victim fell, those still standing drew closer together and the circle shrank. It appears that near the end the formation was abandoned and the remaining men fought or fled as best they could, leaving the attackers free to move in and finish off the wounded with war clubs or edged weapons.

The two sides clashed for upwards of two hours, or so the histories say: "Yet they made a brave resistance for above two hours, during which time they did great execution among the enemy, whom they kept at a distance and themselves in order." (Saltonstall, 1676) But it seems unlikely the battle lasted that long, especially since Peirce's troops were said to be outmanned by more than 10-1. With those kind of odds, Peirce and his men would have been wiped out in minutes.

The uneasy fit between the reported number of Indians and the reported duration of the battle has led modern historians to question whether there were really 900 Indians on the Blackstone that day. Did Saltonstall exaggerate the number of Indian combatants to

make Peirce appear more heroic? It's possible. Maybe the story came to him second- or third-hand, with each teller adding more Indians. Whatever the truth, *all* accounts agree that Peirce and his men were vastly outnumbered. On that point there is no dispute.

The Indians left the English bodies where they lay, grim testimony to what had transpired. Not until later that afternoon did a rescue party from Rehoboth venture out to the battlefield. Hubbard noted: "by accident only some of Rehoboth understanding of the danger, after the evening exercise (it being on the Lords day, March 26, 1676) repaired to the place; but then it was too late to bring help, unless it were to be Spectators of the dead Carkases of their friends, and to perform the last office of love to them."

The Rehoboth contingent may have been led by Reverend Noah Newman, for as early as the next day he had prepared a list of the dead and sent it by messenger to Plymouth so that news of the tragedy could be shared with the soldiers' families.

Visiting the battle site so shortly after the attack was a dangerous proposition. Who could say the Indians weren't close by, savoring their victory? It was probably late in the afternoon by the time the Rehobothites arrived. They would have seen little movement ... maybe a ruffle of wind in the trees and grasses at the water's edge. They would have heard only the timeless voice of the river and perhaps the chatter of crows and other carrion birds gathering for a feast.

The Indians had moved on. But to where?

It's safe to assume that the Rehoboth volunteers wasted no time guessing. As quickly as possible they would have taken inventory of the dead and hastened back to the safety of the garrison. While many of the slain were probably concentrated in the area where Peirce made his last stand, others must have been scattered around the riverbank, some in the river itself. With night coming on, it is doubtful any burials were attempted that day. There are no reports that bodies were transported back to Rehoboth, either.

Reverend Newman included the list of the dead in a letter sent to Reverend John Cotton the following day, March 27th. He reported a total of 63 slain – "52 of our Engl: & 11 Indians," referring to the friendly Indians in the Peirce expedition. "It is a day of ye wicked's triumph," Newman lamented.

Mr. Newman didn't mention that more than 10 men were still unaccounted for. In all likelihood their bodies still reposed by the river somewhere, yet to be found. But the Reverend may have privately kindled the hope that at least some had survived the battle and escaped into the woods.

Could anyone have lived through that bloodbath? Was there the slightest chance that one or more of Peirce's troops had slipped past hundreds of raging Indians to fight another day?

Newman had reason to believe the answer to both questions was yes. It's little more than a note, but at the bottom of his long list of the dead, Mr. Newman recorded that Thomas Man of Rehoboth, apparently one of the five local men recruited to serve as Peirce's guides, "is returned with a Sore wound."

If Thomas Man survived the ordeal, perhaps others had too ... but where were they? Newman privately worried some might be wandering in the unfamiliar woods, wounded and without food or shelter against the cold.

Another possibility must have occurred to him, but had implications so dark that he may have tried to put it out of his mind the instant the question formed: *Had the missing men been taken captive by the Indians?*

In the tumultuous days and weeks ahead, much more would be learned of the bloody battle on the Blackstone River that became known as "Pierce's Fight."

NEXT: PART THREE

SEEING THE SITES: The "high ledge of native bedrock" (or at least a portion of it) still exists today and can be visited. "Dexter's Ledge" stands in Jenks Park, Central Falls. It forms the base of the Cogswell Memorial Clocktower. There are stairs you can climb to reach the top of the ledge and take in the view. Things have changed greatly since 1676, but it will still give you a sense of the role the ledge played in the story of "Peirce's Fight."

No one can truly say exactly where "Peirce's Fight" was waged, but the general vicinity of Pierce Park and Riverwalk on High Street, Central Falls, is the traditional location. The rear of the park verges on the river (watch out for poison ivy) and if you crane your neck you can see the railroad bridge downstream, which marks the approximate point where Peirce's troops crossed. There is a memorial plaque in the park (try to ignore the profanity spray-painted on it) and another memorial plaque directly across the street in Macomber Field.

Not very long ago, you could drive across the river and turn down Branch Street in Pawtucket, which takes you beneath the railroad bridge for a closer view of Peirce's crossing point. Unfortunately, Branch Street has been closed to traffic for the last two years.

Keep an open mind as you visit these sites. Progress has left its mark. Even in 1889, Whitney wrote, "Since my remembrance even quite a fraction of Dexter's ledge has been

blasted away and the ravines filled, for building purposes. 'Many Holes' will have been filled ...' Whitney didn't foresee graffiti, but there's plenty of that too, unfortunately.

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