

OUR RIVER by Joe Doherty Blood on the Blackstone, Part 5 - Escape From Peirce's Fight

“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 5 of a series about the battle and its aftermath. You can catch up on earlier chapters at www.blackstonedaily.com/ourriver.htm.

The final week of March, 1676 heaped one catastrophe after another upon the New England colonies. A litany of lamentations rose from the people, who, with each new Indian attack, had fresh cause to fear that God had turned a blind eye to their distress. Not only were Rehoboth and Providence burned that week (see parts 3 and 4), but also the settlements of Marlborough, Massachusetts and Simsbury, Connecticut. At Longmeadow, Mass., a caravan of colonists under military escort was brazenly ambushed while en route to Sunday services, leaving a town selectman, two women and two children dead.

Horrifying as these incidents were, none cast a greater pall on the citizenry than the defeat of Captain Michael Peirce and his troops on the morning of Sunday the 26th. Peirce, a seasoned military man, had more than 60 soldiers in his command – almost all that remained of Plymouth Colony's fighting force – and they had been wiped out in a matter of hours. That the Indians could so handily annihilate a company of that size did not bode well for the colonies' chances in the war.

News of Peirce's demise reached Boston by sunset. “Sunday the 26th of March was sadly remarkable to us for the Tidings of a very deplorable Disaster brought unto Boston about 5 O'clock that Afternoon, by a Post from Dedham,” wrote Boston merchant Nathaniel Saltonstall.

On Monday the 27th, Reverend Noah Newman of Rehoboth sent particulars of the tragedy, including a list of the dead, to his friend Reverend John Cotton in Plymouth, who in turn appears to have shared the information with the Council of War in Boston. On April 1st, the Council dispatched this missive to Major Thomas Savage on patrol near Springfield:

... upon last Lorday Capt Peirce with about 100 English & Indians Ingaged with a great body of them about 5 miles from Secuncke near Mr Blackston the consequent of w^{ch} fight was y^t Peirce was slaine and 51 more with him & 11 Indians y^t Assisted him their escaped of y^e whole company not above 7 or 8 English & y^e rest the enemy tooke all y^r arms and two horse loads with provisions

This message echoes some of the information in Newman's letter, but at the same time introduces a new element: the possible existence of multiple survivors. Newman knew of only one survivor – Thomas Man.

But at least two other English soldiers and perhaps as many as four friendly Indians “lived to tell the tale” – one even “lived to fight another day,” literally. They snatched their lives from the hands of hostile Indians, “not without Wonderful difficulty, and many wounds,” Saltonstall wrote.

Their stories have become local legends, but the men behind them have eluded historians almost as effectively as they dodged Indians on that grievous Sunday morn 331 years ago. When Reverend William Hubbard published his history of the war in 1677,

he included some of the survivors' tales, but recorded only one of their names in print. A revival of interest in King Philip's War during the nineteenth century led a few historians to ferret out what little information about the survivors still existed, but by that time much of it was irretrievable, especially in the case of the friendly Indians who accompanied Peirce's regiment.

Most of what we know about the fate of the Peirce expedition -- Peirce's pursuit of the Indians pretending to be injured, the unforgettable tableau of the circle of soldiers fighting for their lives, the anecdotal stories of clever escapes -- we owe to the survivors. Only as they began to share their accounts of how the tragedy unfolded did the public come to revere the story of "Peirce's Fight."

For too many years the details of who these men were, how they avoided death and capture, and what became of them afterwards, have lay scattered among the pages of antique histories, town documents and the like. They are an integral part of the story of what happened on the Blackstone River (at what is now Central Falls) the morning of March 26, 1676, and are presented here as such.

Captain Amos of Massapee

On September 21, 1689, two brave veterans of King Philip's War made a stand against hostile Indian forces at Falmouth, Maine, on the rim of Casco Bay. Thirteen years had passed since Philip's War had ended. Though the two men never fought side-by-side in that long-ago conflict, they had fought for the *same* side. And now fate had united them again in defense of the English colonies.

One of the men was a legendary Indian fighter, Colonel Benjamin Church, who in August 1676 led the company that captured and executed the rebel Wampanoag sachem Philip, symbolically ending the war bearing his name.

The other was a well-known Indian, Captain Amos, who in March 1676, miraculously emerged alive from the bloody riverside battle that became known throughout New England as Peirce's Fight.

Captain Amos's exploits first drew attention in 1677, when the story of how he survived Peirce's Fight was recounted in William Hubbard's history of King Philip's War. But the services Captain Amos rendered for the English actually began prior to the Peirce expedition. Around the time Peirce was gathering his men at Plymouth, Amos and a party of friendly Wampanoags (presumably from the Christian Indian village of Massapee, or Mashpee, where Amos is said to have belonged) were commissioned to hunt down an enemy Indian named Tatoson believed responsible for a murderous attack on Clark's Garrison outside Plymouth on March 12, 1676 (see Part 1).

"To encourage greater exertion on the part of the friendly Indians," wrote Samuel G. Drake in 1836, "it was ordered that in case they captured or brought in either Tatoson or Penchason, they might expect for their reward, for each of them four coats, and a coat apiece for every other Indian that shall prove merchantable."

But Tatoson proved a wily quarry. In the company of another Indian chief named Penchason, he fled to Elizabeth Island and then vanished into the Nipmuck Country of Massachusetts, where he joined with Philip. Captain Amos and his men pursued them probably for several days before the trail went cold. Upon their return to Plymouth,

where they joined the Peirce expedition. Said to be twenty in number, Captain Amos's band of "Cape Indians" marched off with the doomed English commander.

Why would Captain Amos and his men agree to hunt other Indians on behalf of the English? Today's Mashpee Wampanoags "are not particularly interested in Philip and some even consider him a 'renegade,'" writes Jill Lepore, author of *In the Name of War*. Perhaps similar sentiment existed in Captain Amos's day, or as Christian converts they felt a spiritual tie to the English. Or maybe they were simply trying to recoup the bounties they missed by Tatoson's escape.

Whatever the inducement, their participation in Peirce's Fight cost them dearly. Eleven friendly Indians were initially reported dead. Reverend Newman later confirmed that the bodies of five Indians (presumably Amos's men) were found on the battlefield and buried. As to the rest of Captain Amos's party, contemporary accounts suggest that at least four -- including Amos himself -- relied on their wits and cunning to safely slip past hundreds of armed Narragansetts.

"It is worth the noting, what Faithfulness and Courage some of the Christian Indians with the said Capt. Peirce shewed in the Fight," wrote William Hubbard. "One of them, Amos by Name, after the Captain was shot in his Leg or Thigh, so as he was not able to stand any longer, would not leave him, but charging his Gun several Times, fired Stoutly upon the Enemy, till he saw that there was no possibility for him to do any further good to Capt. Pierce, nor yet to save himself if he stayed any longer."

Crouched beside his lifeless commander, Amos quickly surveyed the scene. In the smoke and din of battle, the tight ring of soldiers (see Part 2) had begun to lose its cohesion. Men staggered and collapsed, crying out as lead balls and arrows ripped through their bodies. Others abandoned the formation, crashing headlong through the brush, hoping by some prayer to get out alive. The battle was lost, now it was up to each man to save himself by any means.

"Perceiving the Enemy had all blacked their Faces, [Amos] also stooping down, pulled out some Blacking out of a Pouch he carried with him, discoloured his face therewith, and so making himself as like Hobamacko [an Indian evil spirit] as any of his Enemies: he ran amongst them a little while, and was taken for one of themselves, as if he had been searching for the English, until he had an Opportunity to escape away among the Bushes," Hubbard writes.

Of the four friendly Indians said to have come through the battle, Captain Amos was the only one ever identified by name. While we know the details of *how* the others survived, their identities remain anonymous to this day.

"What were Captain Amos's other acts in this war, if any, we have not learned," wrote Indian historian Samuel G. Drake in 1836, "nor do we meet him again until 1689. In that year he went with Col. Church against the eastern Indians and French, in which expedition he also had command of a company ... In the fight at Casco, 21 September, eight of the English were killed and many wounded. Two of Captain Amos's men were badly wounded, and Sam Moses, another friendly Indian, was killed."

Friendly Indian Number Two

The sheer simplicity of this friendly Indian's escape is probably what has made it the most well-known story of survival from Peirce's Fight. It has been recited in a number

of books over the years, and as early as 1790 Noah Webster (of dictionary fame) had the climactic scene rendered as an engraved illustration for his *Little Reader's Assistant*, a children's book of "moralizing tales."

The incident seems to have occurred up from the riverbank as one of Amos's men was running for his life. With an enemy warrior in dogged pursuit, the friendly Indian ducked behind a large rock or boulder. There he stood stock-still for several tense moments, aware that his foe had not run past but in fact had stationed himself on the opposite side of the boulder and was waiting to shoot him the instant he raised his head.

How long the stalemate lasted, nobody knows. But the friendly Indian must have understood that the longer it went on, the greater the chances that one of the enemy's compatriots would come along and help decide the contest in grisly fashion. "...in the end he saw nothing but certain death," wrote Samuel G. Drake, "and the longer he held out the more misery he must suffer."

Then came an inspiration. The friendly Indian took off his cap and propped it on the end of a stick (some versions say the end of his gun). Slowly he raised the stick until the peak of the cap rose above the top of the rock.

The enemy Indian fired, blasting a hole through the empty hat.

The friendly Indian sprang from his hiding place "and boldly held up his Head and discharged his own gun upon the real Head, not the Hat of his Adversary, whereby he shot him dead upon the Place, and so had liberty to march away with the spoils of the Enemy," wrote William Hubbard, in whose history this story first appeared.

Friendly Indian Number Three

If a tree falls in the forest, does it make a good shield?

At first glance this third tale of Indian ingenuity reads like a variation of the second: One of Amos's men, hounded by an enemy pursuer, "nimble got behind the But-end of a Tree newly turned up by the Roots, which carried a considerable Breadth of the Surface of the Earth along with it (as is usual in these Parts, where the Roots of the Trees lie very fleet in the ground) which stood up above the Indians' Height in the Form of a large Shield."

In this instance, like the last, the Indian stalking him assumed the opposite side of the obstruction: "the Enemy-Indian lay with his Gun ready to shoot him down, upon his first dissenting his Station."

But this friendly Indian made no attempt to decoy his adversary: "boring a little hole through his broad Shield, he discerned his Enemy, who could not so easily discern him.

"A good musketeer need never desire a fairer Mark to shoot at," wrote Hubbard.

The friendly Indian fired point-blank, sending his opponent's soul to the house of the Cautantowwit, while he himself, in the words of Drake, "fled in perfect safety."

Friendly Indian Number Four and the English Soldier

Each of these episodes illustrates what Hubbard called "the Subtilty and Dexterousness of these Natives." But the fourth and final one is unique because the friendly Indian saved an unnamed English soldier while saving himself. Had the Indian and white man joined forces to effect any other plan of escape, we might infer that in the

crucible of battle they became blind to the color of each other's skin. But it was the Indian's keen awareness of their differences that made this plan work.

As the enemy closed in, the Indian instructed the Englishman to run for the woods; he would follow close behind with his hatchet upraised (that the soldier agreed to this desperate gambit says something about the peril of their position). "The friendly Indian being taken for a Narraganset, as he was pursuing with an uplifted tomahawk the English soldier, no one interfered, seeing him pursue an unarmed Englishman at such great advantage," Drake wrote. "In this manner, covering themselves in the woods, they escaped."

Samuel Linnell and John Mathews

Carefully preserved in the special collections of the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, lies a fragile document vital to our understanding of Peirce's Fight. Dated March 27, 1676, it is the actual letter written by Reverend Noah Newman one day after the battle and carried by horseback messenger to Reverend John Cotton in Plymouth.

In Newman's own hand, the letter describes Peirce expedition's overwhelming defeat: "But it pleased the Sovereign God so to order it, y^t they were inclosed wth a great multitude of the enemy w^{ch} hath slaine 52 of o[ur] Engl: and 11 Indians."

The letter also lists the English soldiers killed in Peirce's command:

"The account of their names is as follows: From Scituate 18 of w^{ch} 15 slaine (viz) Cap^t Peirce; Sam[torn] Benj: Chittington, John Lathrope, Gershom Dodson, Sam Prat, Thom: Savery, Joseph Wade, Will: Welcome, Jer: Barstow, John Ensign, Joseph Cowwen, Joseph Perry, John Perry, John Rowse. Marshfield 9 slaine: Thomas Littell, John Ems, Joseph White, John Burroughs, Joseph Phillips, Sam: Bump John Low Mor[illegible] John Brance. Duxborough 4 slaine: John Sprague, Benjamin Soa[illegible] Thomas Hunt, Joshua Phobes – Sandwich 5 slaine: Benj: Nye[] David Bessey, Caleb Blaike, Job Gibbs, Stephen Wing – Barnstable 6 slaine: Luift. Fuller, John Lues, Eliezir C[torn], Sam Lennet, Sam Childs, Sam Boreman. – Yarmouth [] John Mathews, John Gage, Will Gage, Hen: Gage, Hen: Gold. Eastham 4 slaine: Joseph Nessefield, John Walker, John M [torn], Nathaniel Williams. of Rehob: slaine 4: John Read, Benj. [torn], John Fitch Jun^r, John Meller Jun^r, & Thomas Man is returned wth a Sore wound."

From Scituate, 15 dead. Marshfield, 9 dead. Duxbury, 4 dead. Sandwich, 5 dead. Barnstable 6 dead. Yarmouth, 5 dead. Eastham, 4 dead. Rehoboth, 4 dead. A total of 52 English dead. And one known survivor.

"There Sir you have a sad account of the Continuance of Gods displeasure against us ..." Newman wrote.

But Reverend Newman did not have the last word. After the letter left his custody, someone, probably the recipient, Reverend John Cotton, made corrections to the document. Two of the names – "Sam Lennet" and "John Mathews" -- were underlined and a handwritten note added, which reads: *Since the writing of this letter John Mathews & Sam Linnit are found alive ...*

Samuel Linnell (also spelled Linnet or Lennet) of Barnstable was 20 years old when he joined Captain Michael Peirce's regiment. How this young man bore up under fire during the battle is not a matter of record but we can guess that his youthful strength and

reflexes served him well – after all, he escaped the field of combat with his life while nearly every man around him perished.

Linnell did not come away entirely unscathed, however – he had a close brush with a musket ball, and this we know from a deposition given by one Ebenezer Goodspeed on November 13, 1742, 64 years after Peirce’s Fight: “Sam’l Linnell was out in Pearces Fight, so called and he and the said Sam’l Linnell was the only English man of Barnstable that returned from that fight, and he showed me his hat where it was shot through after his return from said Pearces Fight.” Given the great span of years, Goodspeed was probably just a boy when Sam Linnell came back to Barnstable larger than life and impressed him with his bullet-riddled hat.

It is worth observing that a hat “shot through” figures prominently in two of the stories associated with survivors of Peirce’s Fight. Whether the two stories might have a common origin -- for example, was it really Sam Linnell who outfoxed his would-be assassin with the hat trick but was recast as a friendly Indian in later versions of the story? -- is anyone’s guess.

In 1733, at the age of 78, Samuel Linnell received a grant of land as payment for his service in Peirce’s Fight. That land, part of what was known then as Narraganset Township No. 7, was situated in what is now Gorham, Maine.

John Mathews likewise received a land grant in Narraganset Township No. 7. We know little of Mathews’ background or service except that he too hailed from the Cape and was one of five men recruited for the Peirce expedition from the town of Yarmouth. Mathews, Henry Gold and the three Gage brothers -- John, Will and Henry – had all marched off to Rehoboth together. Only Mathews came back alive.

Reverend Newman listed both Linnell and Mathews men as “slaine,” yet together with Thomas Man, they boosted the number of confirmed English survivors of Peirce’s Fight to three.

But were there more? There is a cryptic line in Reverend Newman’s letter which hints at that intriguing possibility: ““The account of their names is as follows: From Scituate 18 of w^{ch} 15 slaine ...,” etc.

Was the Reverend stating that Scituate had supplied 18 soldiers but he could confirm only 15 of them as dead? What became of the other three? An alternate interpretation is that 18 men from Scituate had been killed but only 15 could be positively identified – however, this explanation seems unlikely, because it would raise Newman’s stated total of 52 English killed to 55.

We will probably never learn exactly what Mr. Newman intended by those words, just as we may never be able to explain how or why he mistakenly counted Samuel Linnell and John Mathews among the dead – and all for the same reason: we don’t know what intelligence he had at his disposal when composing his list of casualties.

Hubbard’s history relates that a party from Rehoboth ventured out to the battlefield only hours after the fighting ended. Did these brave souls take an inventory of the dead and deliver that information to Newman back at the garrison? It’s possible, but is it realistic to believe that they identified more than 50 dead faces after a violent, bloody engagement, especially when almost all of the soldiers came from the South Shore and the Cape, and were no doubt strangers to the Rehobothites?

A more plausible scenario is that Mr. Newman composed a roster of the men in Peirce’s regiment before they set out from his garrison that morning. Those who didn’t

return by the next day, he marked off as dead. There's nothing in the historical record to suggest he employed this method, but it would explain why Thomas Man, who returned to Rehoboth, is named as a survivor, while Linnell and Mathews, who did not -- yet still lived -- were counted among the dead.

This explanation is not perfect, for if Newman had worked off a roster alone, he probably would have marked the full complement of 18 from Scituate as "slaine" (*a la* Linnell and Mathews) rather than making the cryptic 18-15 distinction. But it may have merit still. Perhaps Newman's list of casualties was derived from a combination of a roster and visual confirmation by those who visited the battle site.

Of course, we are left to wonder what became of the three unaccounted-for men. For the moment we will set the question aside, with a promise to return to it at a future point in this series.

The long and mysterious road home

One of the great failings of all the early histories of King Philip's War is that none tell us how or where the survivors of Peirce's Fight found safe haven after escaping from the bloodbath at the riverside.

Reverend Newman's letter (quoted in the previous section) informs us that Thomas Man made it back to Rehoboth in wounded condition. But whether Man was found clinging to life on the battlefield or traversed five miles of wilderness alone and on foot, Newman neglects to say. In fairness, he had weightier concerns on his mind at the time -- more than 50 men had just been slaughtered and he expected the same Indians to besiege his own village within hours (which they did -- see Part 3).

Based on Newman's letters, it appears almost certain that no other survivors backtracked to Rehoboth. In fact, the Reverend seemed wholly unaware that other survivors existed, even as he worried about the possibility that some might still be roaming lost in the forest three weeks later. On the 19th of April he wrote, "I know not but some might wander & perish in y^e woods being strangers."

His fears were not unfounded. As Cape Cod residents, Samuel Linnell and John Mathews may have been at a considerable disadvantage trying to negotiate the local terrain. The Blackstone Valley was thickly wooded and sparsely populated in those days. Indian trails offered the temptation of easier passage to the larger settlements but also posed a risk of deadly encounters with hostile natives. On the other hand, blindly trudging through woods and swamps could lead to disorientation and injury.

In 1958, historian Douglas Edward Leach, author of *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War*, made this unprecedented claim regarding the aftermath of Peirce's Fight and the return of the survivors:

"Scarcely a handful of English and Indian survivors staggered into Woodcock's to announce the disaster."

Woodcock's garrison house was located in Attleborough, along the old "Bay Road" from Boston to Providence. John Woodcock, a former Rehoboth man who once kidnapped an Indian baby to collect on a debt, built the house as a tavern or "Ordinary" in 1669 but later fortified it as a garrison. During King Philip's War, it provided all the functions of a wilderness fort.

“Woodcock’s garrison was a well-known place of rendezvous in the great Indian war,” wrote John Daggett in his *History of Attleborough* (1894), “and was probably for some years the only house, excepting its immediate neighbors, on the ‘Bay Road’ between Rehoboth and Dedham, though this was then the main road from Rhode Island, Bristol and Rehoboth to Boston ... It was a famous place on this road – a convenient public house for travelers as well as a well-known station in Philip’s War. It witnessed many a military force on its march to the defense of the colonists, and such often halted and encamped there on their route overnight, and sometimes longer while waiting for additional forces.”

If the English and Indian survivors of Peirce’s Fight were able to cross back to the east side of the river and head northwest, it’s possible that they found their way to Woodcock’s within a day or so. From there, word of their return could have been quickly dispatched to Boston, explaining how the Council of War might have known of multiple survivors within just five days of the battle.

The problem is that Leach doesn’t cite a source to substantiate that any of the Peirce expedition survivors, let alone a handful, “staggered into Woodcock’s” -- leaving us to wonder whether it was merely a clever surmise on his part or an actual historical fact. None of the contemporary histories of the war establish ties between Peirce’s Fight and Woodcock’s garrison. Nor do early histories of Attleborough and Rehoboth.

Flintlock and Tomahawk is thought by many to be the definitive history of King Philip’s War. Although Leach’s assertion that survivors of Peirce’s Fight fled to Woodcock’s is thus far unsubstantiated and is not supported by any of the contemporary histories, it does have the ring of plausibility. Also it should be noted that Leach examined hundreds, perhaps thousands, of books and documents in the course of his research, including many unpublished period documents in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society – handwritten notes from commanders in the field, correspondence between the colonies, etc. It may be that he had a primary source to back his claim, but for some reason neglected to cite it. If so, hopefully it will someday come to light.

As a sidenote, Woodcock’s was attacked by Indians in April or May 1676. In Daggett’s *History of Attleborough*, we find a tradition that John Woodcock’s son, Nathaniel, was laboring in a cornfield with some workmen when Indians fired a fatal shot from woods close by. The workmen dashed to the garrison, leaving young Woodcock’s body in the field. “The Indians, to gratify their spite against the family, cut off the son’s head, stuck it on a long pole, which they set up on a hill at some distance in front of the house and in full view of the family, to aggravate their feelings as much as possible.”

“Woodcock’s Garrison” can still be seen today at 362 North Washington Street in North Attleboro, however the brown stone-ender is not the actual garrison used during King Philip’s War. The present structure dates back to about 1720 and stands hard by the site of the original Woodcock’s. Nearby is a small colonial graveyard in which Nathaniel Woodcock and other victims of King Philip’s War lie buried.

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