

WHEELER'S DEFEAT, 1675: WHERE?

BY LUCIUS R. PAGE.

VERY soon after his crushing defeat by the Indians, August 2, 1675, Captain Thomas Wheeler wrote a "Narrative of the Lord's Providences in various dispensations towards Captain Hutchinson of Boston and myself, and those that went with us into the Nipmuck Country, and also to Quabaug, alias Brookfield," etc. This Narrative, having become scarce, was republished in 1827, in the *New Hampshire Historical Collections*, ii. 5—23. It has recently been again published in the *History of North Brookfield*, pp. 80—89. From this "Narrative" I quote a passage relative to the place where he was defeated:—

"The said Captain Hutchinson and myself, with about twenty men or more, marched from Cambridge to Sudbury, July 28, 1675; and from thence into the Nipmuck Country; and finding that the Indians had deserted their towns, and we having gone until we came within two miles of New Norwitch on July 31, (only we saw two Indians having an horse with them, whom we would have spoke with, but they fled from us and left their horse which we took,) we then thought it not expedient to march any further that way, but set our march for Brookfield, whither we came on the Lord's day about noon. From thence the same day (being August 1,) we understanding that the Indians were about ten miles north west from us, we sent out four men¹ to acquaint the Indians that we were not come to harm them, but our business was only to deliver a message from our Honoured Governour and Council to them, and to receive their answer, we desiring to come to a Treaty of Peace with them, (though they had for several days fled from us,) they having before professed friendship and promised fidelity to the English. When the messengers

¹ One of these men was Ephraim Curtis.

came to them they made an alarm and gathered together about an hundred and fifty fighting men, as near as they could judge. The young men amongst them were *stout* in their speeches and surly in their carriage. But at length some of the chief Sachems promised to meet us on the next morning about 8 of the clock upon a plain within three miles of Brookfield,¹ with which answer the messengers returned to us. Whereupon, though their speeches and carriage did much discourage divers of our company, yet we conceived that we had a clear call to go to meet them at the place whither they had promised to come. Accordingly we with our men accompanied with three of the principal inhabitants of that town marched to the place appointed; but the treacherous heathen, intending mischief, (if they could have opportunity,) came not to the said place, and so failed our hopes of speaking with them there. Whereupon the said Captain Hutchinson and myself, with the rest of our company, considered what was best to be done, whether we should go any further towards them or return, divers of us apprehending much danger in case we did proceed, because the Indians kept not promise there with us. But the three men who belonged to Brookfield were so strongly persuaded of their freedom from any ill intentions towards us, (as upon other bounds [grounds?] so especially because the greatest part of those Indians belonged to David, one of their chief Sachems, who was taken to be a great friend to the English,) that the said Captain Hutchinson who was principally intrusted with the matter of Treaty with them was thereby encouraged to proceed and march forward towards a swamp where the Indians then were. When we came near the said swamp, the way was so very bad that we could march only in a single file, there being a very rocky hill on the right hand, and a thick swamp on the left. In which there were many of those cruel blood-thirsty heathen who there waylaid us, waiting an opportunity to cut us off; there being also much brush on the side of the said hill, where they lay in ambush to surprise us. When we had marched there about sixty or seventy rods, the said perfidious Indians sent out their shot upon us as a shower of hail, they being (as was supposed) about two hundred men or more."²

¹ Near the head of Wickaboag Pond.

² Narrative pp. 6-8.

In this assault eight men were killed outright, including the three Brookfield men, and five more were wounded, one of whom was Captain Hutchinson, who died about a fortnight afterwards. Having mentioned the names of the killed and wounded, Captain Wheeler continues his Narrative thus:—

“Upon this sudden and unexpected blow given us, (wherein we desire to look higher than man the instrument,) we returned to the town as fast as the badness of the way and the weakness of our wounded men would permit, we being then ten miles from it.”²

A difference of opinion exists concerning the place where the tragical assault was made,—whether in a defile about two miles northward from Wickaboag Pond, on the easterly side of Sucker Brook, and near the line between West Brookfield and New Braintree, or on the easterly side of the Winnimisset Meadow in that part of New Braintree which was formerly included in Hardwick.

During the last summer, by invitation of the President of this Society and accompanied by several of its members, I had an opportunity to explore both of these places. In my judgment there is little to choose between them, so far as their external appearance is concerned. Both answer reasonably well to Wheeler’s description, due allowance being made for the changes wrought by drainage and cultivation in the last two hundred years. The question of location must be settled, if settled at all, by other considerations. And I bespeak your patience while I state very briefly some of the reasons why I believe that Winnimisset, rather than Sucker Brook, was the place of Wheeler’s defeat.

Winnimisset had been visited by Ephraim Curtis twice in the preceding July, and his reports are preserved in the Massachusetts Archives. In his first report, dated July 16, 1675, he says,—“these Indians have newly begun to settle themselves upon an island containing about

² Narrative, p. 10.

four acres of ground, being compassed round with a broad miry swamp on the one side, and a muddy river with meadow on both sides of it on the other side, and but only one place that a horse could possibly pass, and there with a great deal of difficulty by reason of the mire and dirt."¹ At his second visit, he reported, July 24, 1675, that he "found them at the same place where they were before."² And he subsequently testified:—"The third time that I was sent out with Captain Hutchinson, and by his order went and treated with the Nipmug Indians in a swamp about eight miles from Quabouge," &c.³ This last visit was on the first day of August, when Wheeler says, "we sent out four men to acquaint the Indians that we had not come to harm them," and no intimation is given that this was not the swamp "where they were before." On the next day, Wheeler says, "when we came near the said swamp, the way was so very bad that we could march only in a single file, there being a very rocky hill on the right hand, and a thick swamp on the left"; he adds, "we had marched there sixty or seventy rods" before the assault was made. And he gives no intimation that the swamp which he was then approaching was not the same which Curtis had three times visited, and where he understood they were on Sunday, the immediately preceding day, viz., "about ten miles" from the garrison-house in Brookfield.

To recapitulate:—On the first day of August, when at Brookfield, on the summit of Foster Hill, Captain Wheeler understood that "the Indians were about ten miles north west from us,"—and Curtis, on the same day, actually found them "in a swamp about eight miles from Quaboag." As the distances were estimated, not measured, this difference is not material. On the next day, the Indians having failed to meet them, the English party marched from the plain near the head of Wickaboag Pond "towards a swamp

¹ Mass. Arch., lxvii., 214-216.

² Ibid., lxvii., 222.

³ Ibid., lxvii., 254.

where the Indians then were,"—apparently the same swamp which they occupied on the preceding day; and they "came near the said swamp" before they found the difficult pass, where they "could march only in a single file." Having thus "marched there about sixty or seventy rods," they were assaulted by the Indians. "Upon this sudden and unexpected blow," says Captain Wheeler, "we returned to the town as fast as the badness of the way and the weakness of our wounded men would permit, we being then ten miles from it,"—just as far as he supposed himself to be from the Indians on the previous day, when he was at Brookfield.

Two other places are described in the History of North Brookfield, pp. 33, 34, bordering on Ware River, supposed to have borne the same name, and to have been occupied for similar purposes. One of these places is about a mile above that which is described by Curtis, and the other is about two miles further north, on the Woodbury place in Barre. I shall have occasion to speak of them again. But at present I need only say, that, on the eventful morning of Wheeler's defeat, the Indians were at the lower Winnimisset, if there were three such places; and that the authorities which I have quoted indicate that the assault was made near that place. That Captain Wheeler's narrative was so understood by his contemporaries is manifest by the testimony of Hubbard, who wrote in 1677, two years after the event, that a party of soldiers, scouring the woods soon after the conflict, "did the next day march up to a place called Meminimisset by the Indians, where Captain Hutchinson and Captain Wheeler were assaulted."¹ And Hutchinson, writing a hundred years later, says the party was ambushed at "a place called Meminimisset, a narrow passage between a steep hill and a thick swamp."²

¹ Hubbard's History of the Indian Wars in New England, 1677; Drake's Edition, pp. 98, 99. Meminimisset, Meminimissee, Menamesick, Menimesseg, Menameset, Wenimesset, and Winnimisset, are among the various forms in which this name has been written by different authors.

² Hutchinson's Hist. Mass., i., 292.

Some recent writers, however, have supposed that, although the Indians were confessedly at Winnimisset in the morning of that calamitous day, yet the English troops were assaulted on the border of another swamp much nearer Wickaboag Pond, namely, in the Sucker Brook valley, near the New Braintree line. This theory is advocated by the Rev. J. H. Temple, in his *History of North Brookfield*, pp. 92-118, in the most skilful argument which I have seen on that side of the question. Yet I am constrained to say that he has not convinced me of its truth. In considering this theory, a table of approximate distances, measured upon the maps, may afford some aid:—

From the garrison-house, on Foster Hill, to Wickaboag Pond, about	2½ miles.
From the Pond to New Braintree line, about	2½ “
From the Pond to Winnimisset Island, about	6½ “
From the Pond to supposed battle-ground, about	5½ “
From the garrison-house to supposed battle-ground, about	8 “

In opposition to the Winnimisset theory it is urged that “the place is too near the native village site,” only about a mile distant: “Indian strategy, in laying ambushes and making assaults, always provided for a safe line of retreat, in case of disaster, and for a wide chance to give sufficient notice to those in his wigwams to escape with their utensils and provisions.” p. 96. However true it may be that such is “Indian strategy,” in case of warfare or open hostility, it should be considered, in the present case, that the parties were at peace. Hostilities had not yet begun between this tribe of Indians and the English, whose messengers gave ample assurance that they came on an errand of peace. The Indians had no reason to believe there would be any fighting unless they themselves began it. Why not then take a position near their habitation, so that they could easily return, if they kept the peace,

at the same time having no intention to make an assault, unless they were certain of victory? They took no risk, and had no need to make provision for escape.

To obviate a similar objection on the other side, that the Sucker Brook valley is too near Foster Hill to meet the conditions of the case, being only five miles instead of ten miles distant, it is suggested by Mr. Temple, that Captain Wheeler and his shattered party retreated by a circuitous route, "which took them *via* North Brookfield centre to near South Brookfield village, where they would strike the old country road that led directly to the town and Sergt. Ayers' Inn. This would make a march of 'ten miles,' as estimated by Wheeler." p. 97. But it should be observed that Wheeler does not say that he marched ten miles, "by a circuitous route," or otherwise, in returning to the town, but he does distinctly say that he was "then ten miles from it," when he began his retreat.

To the further objection that if Wheeler's horsemen travelled ten miles while the Indians had only five miles to run over a good trail, the town might have been destroyed before the arrival of its defenders, it is suggested again that "the Indians would be busy, in torturing—perhaps burning the wounded, and scalping and stripping the slain, and assorting and dividing the plunder, long enough to account for the three or four hours' time which elapsed after the retreat and till they were met by Curtis and Young." p. 97. But it surely would not require much time to scalp the eight men who were killed; and as to the wounded, Captain Wheeler names five who escaped; but he gives no intimation that a single wounded man was left alive on the field.¹ And even if any of the eight men, reported killed, were still breathing when the retreat began, I apprehend that their sudden death by the tomahawk would be much more in accordance with Indian cus-

¹ One Indian, George, was taken prisoner, as will hereafter appear, but he soon escaped, apparently having been neither wounded, tortured or burned.

tom than slow torture or burning, which would hinder pursuit of the fugitives. It also seems very unlikely that they should waste much time in "assorting and dividing" the arms and clothing of the eight men killed, when the town lay within their reach, with much richer and more abundant plunder.

The "relation of James Quannapaquait, allias James Rumny Marsh beeing one of the chtian Indians belonging to Natick; taken the 24th of Jan^{ry} 1675⁶" has been supposed to furnish evidence that the conflict was in the Sucker Brook defile. Having been sent out as a spy, with another friendly Indian, he stated, on his return, that he left Cambridge on the 30th day of December, 1675, and soon afterwards arrived "at a place called Menemesseg, w^{ch} is about 8 miles north where Capt. Hutchison & Capt. Wherler was woounded & sevel men wth them slayn (in the begining of August last) as these indians informed them." I copy from the History of North Brookfield, pp. 112, 113, not having seen the original "relation" in the Connecticut Archives. James is supposed to have obtained this information at the upper Winnimisset, in Barre; and it is said that "measuring southward from the upper Indian village site, on the Woodbury place, eight miles on the Indian trail, the scale touches a point in the Sucker Brook valley, near the dividing line between New Braintree and Brookfield, and about five miles from the old Brookfield town site." p. 95. In regard to this "relation" I observe that in the printed copy, and doubtless in the original also (as the copy purports to be *verbatim et literatim*), the distance between the two places is indicated not by a word, but by an Arabic numeral. The two numerals, 8 and 3, are so similar in form that I vehemently suspect the copyist mistook the one for the other, and that the numeral in the original manuscript is actually 3 instead of 8. If this be the fact, the "relation" by James corresponds with Wheeler's "narrative," indicating a point three miles south

of the Woodbury place, and ten miles northerly from Foster Hill. But if the numeral is really 8, then the two accounts contradict each other; in which case I should have less confidence in the hearsay testimony of James, that the place of conflict was in the Sucker Brook valley, "about five miles from the old Brookfield town site," than in the positive statement of Wheeler, on his personal knowledge, that he was "ten miles from it," when he began his retreat.

One more witness remains to be examined. A "manuscript narrative of George, a christian Indian, taken prisoner in the ambushment of Capt. Hutchinson, etc." is quoted in Hutchinson's *Hist. of Mass. Bay*, i. 293, 294, in which he says that "upon Friday being the 5th of this instant (August) Philip and his company came to us at this swamp, six miles from the swamp where they killed our men." It has been assumed that George was one mile above Winnimisset when Philip arrived, and that he referred to the Sucker Brook valley as the "swamp where they killed our men." The argument is this: "As the 'remains' attest, the 'stronghold' and 'store-town' of the Indians at this time was the second of the Menamesets—where prisoners would naturally be kept, and where Philip with his broken band would naturally resort for safety and food. Measuring southward on the Indian trail aforesaid, the 'six miles' touches the same point as the 'eight miles' named by Quanapohit touched, viz. near the dividing line between New Braintree and Brookfield." p. 95. My estimate of the probabilities is somewhat different. It is to be observed that George does not say he was then at Winnimisset. He gives no name to the swamp; but he merely says it was "six miles from the swamp where they killed our men." Again, he makes a mistake in the date; Friday was the sixth day of August, "the Lord's day" being "August 1."¹ The Indians retreated from Brookfield "towards the break-

¹ Narrative, p. 6.

ing of the day, August the fifth"¹ and Philip did not visit them until the next day, Friday, the sixth of August. It seems to me not very probable that they remained in their known dwelling-place more than twenty-four hours, awaiting an attack by the English cavalry; on the contrary, it does seem probable that, according to their usual custom, they speedily sought concealment and safety elsewhere. Such was their conduct, six months later, when, having destroyed Lancaster and retired to this same Winnimisset, Mrs. Rowlandson tells us that, apprehending an attack by an armed force, then gathering at Brookfield, they suddenly left that place, and "went as if they had gone for their lives for some considerable way;" and, after a short rest, "like Jehu, they marched on furiously,"² until they had put Miller's River between them and their pursuers. So in this case: fleeing from Brookfield before day-light on Thursday morning, there is a violent presumption that before Friday evening they were at least "six miles from the swamp where they killed our men," leaving Ware River behind them, as an obstacle against pursuit. And as a matter of fact, it is understood that, two days later, "on Sunday the 8th, a force marched northward to the Menamiset country, but found no Indians."³

That there was an Indian village about "six miles" from Winnimisset, we are informed by Mrs. Rowlandson, who tells us that when she was visited at Winnimisset by her son Joseph, he said that "he was among a smaller parcel of Indians, whose place was about six miles off."⁴ I know not precisely where that "place" was; it may have been on the border of Pottapaug Pond, in Dana, which bears traces of Indian occupancy, is about six miles from Winnimisset, and near the track by which the Indians would naturally retreat if, as many suppose, they "fled northerly

¹ Narrative, p. 20.

² Indian Captivities, p. 30.

³ Narrative, p. 102. See also Judd's History of Hadley, p. 140.

⁴ Indian Captivities, p. 27.

to Paquayag, now Athol, and other places in that neighborhood."¹ Or it may have been at Nichewaug (Petersham), which is on the same route, and at not much greater distance. According to the well-known custom of the Indians, it seems altogether more probable that Philip visited them at this "place," wherever it was, than that he and they should have ventured to remain, two whole days, at their known dwelling-place, or not more than one mile from it, within easy reach of an armed force by whom they had been already repulsed and might confidently expect to be pursued.

On the whole, in consideration of the ascertained facts and reasonable probabilities in the case, I still adhere to the opinion which I publicly expressed,² half a century ago, that Captain Wheeler suffered his disastrous defeat on the easterly side of the Winnimisset meadows, at some point within the distance of one mile southerly from the homestead on what was formerly known as the Fay Farm, in New Braintree.

¹ Judd's History of Hadley, p. 140.

² Centennial Address at Hardwick, 1838, p. 6.

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