

Bloody Massacre on the Plains

SEVENTEENTH century Portsmouth was pretty well concentrated on the waterfront where dwellings, shops, shipyards and garrison houses were all in close proximity. The area surrounding had been recently cleared for scattered farms forming a kind of primitive suburbia.

This was called the Plains and the land so cheap it had encouraged the poorer or more speculative settlers to establish themselves in spite of the vulnerability to Indian attack. The Plains had their own garrison house but the distances from the surrounding farms to it were so great that a sudden and surprise attack would give opportunity for few to get to safety.

There had not been an Indian scare for some time until the terrible news of the Dover Massacre was brought down the Bay. The settlers in the Plains were especially apprehensive realizing their exposed position. Indians had been spotted, a big war party of more than 50 braves in canoes, but paddling upriver and away from the Portsmouth area.

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HOWEVER, ON THE AFTERNOON of the 25th of June, 1696, many of the settlers saw that their cattle and sheep put to pasture in the surrounding woods came home and for the protection of the barns and pens long before their usual time. Indians had a peculiar habit of injuring and maltreating livestock and livestock seemed to know it was to be expected and avoided them. This was taken as an "Indian sign," but as a fierce thunderstorm broke that evening that was held accountable and the Plains people went to bed reassured.

They were no sooner asleep than the blaze of burning barns and shrill whoops roused the whole scattered community in a panic of fear. The Indians — numbers of them — were upon them. They knew the consequences in terms of torture, wounds, death and bandage far too well. They had been taken wholly off guard. The Indians seen paddling upriver had planned the ruse. After dark they had returned downstream and hidden themselves and their canoes in a swamp.

Men fought with shovels, pitchforks and axes — anything they had to hand while their women and children ran for the garrison house by the light of the burning buildings, only to find the Indians had known that is just what they would do and ambushed every path, killing and capturing many in their panic flight.

WHEN WORD OF THE DISASTER came to the Bank, as the thickly settled commercial port of the city was called, Capt. Shackford rallied his militia band and sent word to all his men to meet him under arms at the big rock east of the Plains, known forever afterwards as "Valor Rock."

They found the Plains a melancholy sight. Five dwellings had been burned to the ground and nine barns with most of their livestock. The fields and paths were strewn with the dead and wounded. Fourteen ranging in age from 76 to four years old were dead and mutilated, including Dinah, John Brewster's negro slave.

Half way between her house and the garrison house they found Mrs. Brewster and picked her up for dead. She had been struck with a tomahawk which had broken her skull and had been scalped, but proved to be still living.

Careful attention and nursing soon restored her health and not long afterwards she gave birth to a lusty child. For the rest of her life she wore a silver plate in her skull and had to resort to a wig to cover the hideous scar of the scalping. Afterwards she was the mother of four more sons and finally died at the ripe age of 81.

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CAPT. SHACKFORD AND HIS men followed the Indians and their captives through the great swamp in the direction of Rye. Four miles away from the Plains, the following day at dawn they in turn surprised the predators. Their four prisoners were placed in front to receive the initial discharge but they were overwhelmed and fled. The captives and all the booty were retaken.

The Indians fled deep into the swamp and regained their canoes. A secondary force was waiting for them on the river but the command to fire was given too soon and the savages altered their course and went far out to sea around the Isles of Shoals.

Because the Indians had been discovered eating their breakfast just as Shackford surprised them the place was later called Breakfast Hill. No one ever discovered what tribe these marauding Indians belonged to, or what course they took from the Isles of Shoals to regain their homes.

No doubt they intended to sweep into the city too but had been delayed by the resistance on the Plains, until too late in the morning for surprise — always an essential of Indian strategy.

Written by the late Dr. George Woodbury, longtime columnist and literary editor of the New Hampshire Sunday News and The Union Leader, and reprinted from the Sunday News.