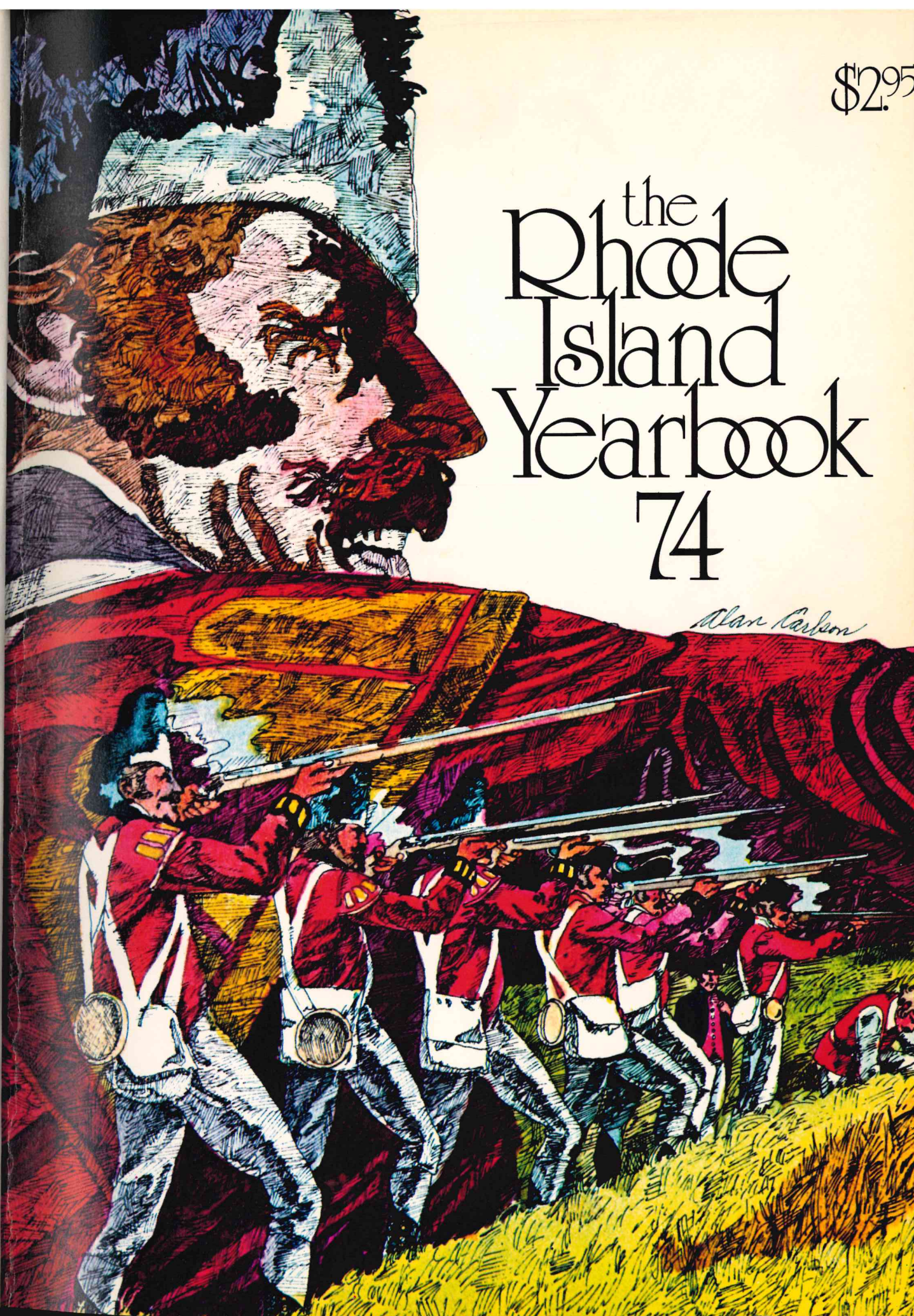


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Alan Carlson





Pierce's Fight

by George F. Walden

Rhode Island had been at peace with the Indians for thirty-nine years. This was due largely to the efforts and good will of Roger Williams. Rhode Island was the only colony that could boast such a record. But circumstances, as they have a habit of doing, conspired against this long standing rapport and now the smallest of the colonies found itself involved in an Indian war. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, as was its habit had disregarded the sovereignty of Rhode Island sending militia over the borders at will, in violation of the King's

Charter. It was just such an expedition that encountered the Narragansett Sachem Canochet with a war party returning from raiding activity in the area of Springfield. The battle that followed is the subject of this story. It is important, at this point, to provide some background.

Certain questions require answering. Why, one might ask, were these, until now peaceful, Narragansetts raiding?



Pierce's Fight....

The chain of events is traceable to the activities of Metacomet, the second son of Massasoit, Sachem of the Wampanoag. Metacomet, called King Philip, was angered when first his father and then his older brother, Wamsutta, called Alexander, were murdered by the English colonists.

He began to talk openly of driving the English from Massachusetts. He attempted to unify the New England tribes behind him in this cause. The fear that these activities created among the colonists was, in itself enough to cause their very antagonistic, in fact blatantly hostile attitude. But when Metacomet deeded a large portion of his holdings to Roger Williams, who wasn't particularly popular in Massachusetts, he had gone far enough. He became a hunted man.

It was in this hunt that the Massachusetts colony had dispatched a force of militia to seek out Metacomet and return him to the authorities.

The rumor that Metacomet was being sheltered by Canochet, of the Narragansetts, in their winter camp was the cause of a request that Metacomet be surrendered. Canochet replied that Metacomet would not be given up, "*Not even a pairing of a nail*". The indians were not ones to explain much even when asked directly. In this case Metacomet was not even in the Narragansett camp, though some of his Wampanoags were. Canochet, with characteristic pride, didn't choose to reveal this to the Massachusetts colony, but rather, decided to make use of the opportunity to enhance his position both in his own and the other tribes.

The Massachusetts English, by using a traitorous Wampanoag, discovered the location and secret access route to the Narragansett winter quarters in the *Great Swamp*. The indians, secure in their makeshift fort, and believing their camp inaccessible, were completely surprised by the English attack. Hundreds of them ended their lives in the battle that followed. Many were women, children and old men, who by indian traditions did not engage in warfare. These, particularly, died horribly as they, still in their huts, were burned alive by the English. Canochet and many of his warriors escaped but the strength and power of the Narragansetts had been dealt a death blow.

Captain Michael Pierce was one of the English officers at this battle known as the *Great Swamp Fight*. Canochet, the once peaceful Narragansett would have his revenge.

the day before the battle March 25th

Canochet, in his desire for vengeance was fully aware that his tribe was now merely a shadow of their former selves but he was resolved that the murder of his people would not pass without retribution.

His warriors began raiding from Springfield well into the environs of Plymouth. It was in response to these raids that Captain Michael Pierce was sent out. His mission was to disperse the indians thought to be gathering near the falls of the Blackstone River.

Captain Pierce was born in England around 1611 and had immigrated to the Plymouth Colony in 1645. He settled in Scituate, Massachusetts and there remained. In 1669, at the age of 54, he was commissioned "Captain" by the Massachusetts Colonial Court. As the successor to Miles Standish he was the logical selection to defend the colony.

He left Plymouth with his detachment and some friendly Wampanoags and marched to the town of Rehoboth, recently the victim of some raiding activity. Arriving early on the morning of March 25, Pierce discovered that, as was expected, there had been some very recent indian activity in an area known as Quinsniket. Activity had also been noted in the area of the Reverend William Blackstone house. Blackstone was a reclusive scholar who had, like Roger Williams, always gotten along with the indians.

Pierce sent out a small party to scout the indian positions. In the vicinity of what is now Rumford R.I., they surprised and engaged a band of Narragansetts. The fight was intense but very brief with the indians withdrawing quickly and in some disorder. The scouting party, even though they felt confident, had sufficient sense not to pursue without the aide of their full detachment. They therefore fell back upon the main body and reported the fight to Captain Pierce. Pierce, advised that the indians had withdrawn towards the Blackstone house, resolved to recruit additional men from the town and set out after them.

That night, whether as a result of natural prudence or some premonition of evil, Michael Pierce wrote his will. He prefaced it with the words "*I, Michael Pierce, being now by the appointment of God, going out to war against the indians, do make this my last will and testament.*"

The indians were the originators and developers of guerilla warfare. Canochet was not so easily beaten as he would have the English believe. The

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party that Pierce's scouts encountered was an advance party of Canochet's main force. They were sent to perform just as they had, i.e., to lure the English into foolishness by creating a false feeling of confidence inspired by an apparent victory. It was the aim of Canochet to deceive the English into believing that he had little strength and that the preceding engagement had done some damage to his will to fight. With this in mind, Canochet issued his instructions to his warriors.

On the morning of March 26, Pierce and his detachment of 63 soldiers and 20 Wampanoags left for Quinsniket from what is now East Providence. At the earliest practical moment Pierce dispatched a messenger to Providence to summon Captain Andrew Edmonds and his troops to a rendezvous on the west shore of the Blackstone near the falls. Pierce rightly felt that after he had combined with Edmonds his strength would be more than sufficient to accomplish his mission.

It was Sunday morning and, as fate would have it, Captain Edmonds and his troops were in church. Sunday worship was inviolable. The messenger had to wait. Worship, in those days was, even more than inviolable, lengthy, and in this case more than four hours long. As it turned out, this was to seal the fate of Captain Pierce and his men. With this thought in mind the messenger's wait dragged almost beyond endurance.

The delay, unknown to and unanticipated by Captain Pierce, had no effect upon his plans, he pushed boldly out to Quinsniket, expecting all the while to be reinforced.

The message was at long last delivered to Captain Edmonds, who prepared his troops and set out almost immediately, by forced march, to unite with Pierce.

Canochet, in complete control of the situation, anticipated the attempt of Pierce to unite with the Providence detachment and realized that he must attack and destroy the English before this unification could take place. His plan was simply to lure the troops into a box whereupon he could have his battle on his own terms, at a place of his choosing, and on terrain most favorable to his success.

The advanced party of the Narragansetts engaged the previous day had lingered in the area to serve as bait for this trap. Pierce, advancing rapidly over the partially frozen swamp, soon encountered these indians and began pursuit. The indians, as planned, withdrew, remaining in sight at all times but out of musket range. They played their roles well, some of them limping as if lamed and all of them looking as if they were diligently trying to escape.

The chase soon led the English to the east shore

of the Blackstone, where the indians crossed by swimming and escaped. Pierce marched north along the shore in search of a fording place. They had to cross to unite with the Providence forces which were expected to arrive within the hour.

Events were rapidly drawing to an unfavorable conclusion for Captain Pierce. He, of course, did not know this so his confidence went undiminished. When they reached a ford, Pierce's company took up a position at the base of a ravine controlling access to the ford.

All of the high ground about him was occupied by the carefully concealed Narragansetts. This was the place of Canochet's careful choosing. The English had fallen securely into the well laid trap.

The indians strength at this fight has been variously estimated at between 700 and 1,000 warriors. 700 is probably a more realistic figure.

Captain Pierce, understanding that his position was a poor one, and in spite of his ignorance of the indians' plan, made the very sensible decision to ford the river now rather than wait for Edmonds. He reasoned that he could more easily be reinforced if he became engaged and both he and Edmonds were on the same side of the river. With this in mind he ordered his men across.

Almost immediately, the indians, who had been waiting patiently, sprung the trap. It was more than they could have hoped for. Pierce and his men were not only cut off, they now were waist deep in water.

Pierce, of course, quickly realized his exposed position would be certain death and ordered his men back to the limited protection of the shore. Behind him now, as well as in front of him, those indians who had been the bait, the pursued, turned and became the pursuers.

If regaining the shore so recently left was important before it was doubly important now. He could never survive a stand in the river. When they reached the banks of the river they formed what defense they could from the natural cover available. Their position resembled a circle, two deep, with the men firing outward in all directions.

Screaming indians, arrows and tomahawks formed their world. The Narragansetts swarmed at them. Numbers and planning tell the tale, however, and even though the soldiers had muskets to somewhat equalize the odds their poor position and numerical inferiority were too much to overcome. The arrows and tomahawks took a fearful toll. Captain Pierce was killed early in the fight. His men continued to battle for nearly two hours.

The indians were relentless in their attack. The woods were filled with death screams and war whoops as the defenders' circle became ever small-

er with each passing minute. From behind every tree and bush the indians dealt death to the English.

The soldiers' spirit, their desire to face the attack and die well, weakened with the dwindling hope that they would be relieved by the arrival of Captain Edmonds from Providence. They continued to fight and pulled the wounded into the relative security of the shrinking circle. But, as the struggle rapidly approached its inevitable end, they finally broke and, every man for himself, tried to escape.

One of the indians, a friendly Wampanoag called Amos, painted his face black, as had the Narragansetts and blended into the confusion. The trick worked and he escaped. An Englishman is said to have convinced another of the friendly Wampanoags to do the same thing but in addition he was to chase him, as if to kill him. The Englishman got up and ran with the Wampanoag in hot pursuit, brandishing a tomahawk and screaming. This artifice also worked and both escaped. The successful escapes end here. There were no more survivors of the battle. One more man lived to tell the tale but he never saw action. He was the messenger sent to Captain Edmonds.

Nine of the soldiers, in their escape attempt, had made for the Reverend Blackstone house only to find it burned, Blackstone dead, and a party of Narragansetts waiting for them. They were all captured and led away.

The objective of Pierce's detachment had been to get to the indian stronghold at Quinsniket. These nine men accomplished at least that much, but under circumstances that, to say the least, were very different from their personal preferences.

The indians seated the captives on a large rock while preparations were made for their torture and death. This place, on the grounds of the former monastery in Cumberland, is called *Nine Men's Misery*. There is a plaque at the site which reads . . .

"On this spot, where they were slain by the indians, were burried the nine soldiers captured in Pierce's Fight, March 26, 1676."

Some time later Captain Edmonds and his reinforcing column arrived at the appointed meeting place on the west bank of the Blackstone. They saw no sign of Pierce or his men. Realizing their lateness and fearing the worst, Edmonds crossed the river.

The scene was a typical March afternoon. Trees were in bud and all around spring was giving birth to new life. He soon discovered how very false these impressions of tranquility really were, when the bodies of the Narragansetts and then of Pierce's detachment were found concealed in the new foliage.

Later scouting parties found the remains of the Blackstone house and still later the bodies of the nine soldiers in Quinsniket. These they buried in a mass grave and marked the spot with a large pile of stones.


Canochet had his revenge. The price he had paid was high. From an estimated original strength of 700 he had lost 140 killed and a similar number wounded.

Canochet himself was later captured after being wounded in another battle, by a Pequot in the pay of the Connecticut, and he was executed. The power of the Narragansetts was forever broken.

George F. Walden provides this year's edition with what interests him most . . . history. Pierce's Fight and a word sketch on the Battle of Rhode Island are two small, but important elements in Rhode Island's history. Mr. Walden, a Providence native, places special concentration on our state's history and feels that "Rhode Island is too often neglected as a source of important Americana."

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