

The Maine Story

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Ann Mitton Brackett

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Needlewoman to the Rescue

by Pat Higgins

Here's a little story from the first Indian war that demonstrates that old adage: A stitch in time saves . . . the whole family.

Our story takes place in August 1676, the month King Philip's War ended in Massachusetts but not in Maine. By this summer, Metacomet (aka Philip) and his warriors were dead, and most of the surviving Wampanoags were sold off into slavery. However contagion had spread northward into Maine along with native escapees from Massachusetts. One of these was Simon the Yankee Killer who led the Indian warriors against Casco in our story. It was easy for Simon and his fellow renegades to incite the Maine Abenaki; Maine was ripe for reprisal against the offending English settlers and with good reason. The ideas of land ownership, sales and deeds that so occupied Mainers at this time were beyond the wishes and the cultural understanding of the Native Americans. English cattle and pigs were allowed to wander the woods and meadows at will. They destroyed Indian gardens but were not wild animals that could be hunted down by the Indians for food. Hunting, so important to the native livelihood, was greatly improved by the use of guns, but during King Philip's War, the whites demanded that the Indians turn in their guns to the whites to prove their friendly intentions. The Native Americans depended on these weapons for hunting food; friendly intentions or no, starvation was a real possibility without guns. Increasingly, there were confrontational incidents that bred hatred, the drowning of Squanto's infant son, for example. In Maine, right from the start, natives were kidnapped and hauled off to Europe to be viewed as curiosities. By the mid 17th century, as the local fur trade wound down, whites were acting on the economic possibilities of selling captured Indians into slavery. The Native Americans were well aware that they were viewed by whites as inferiors. Now they sought revenge!

"The point of land commonly called Machagony..." Cleeves / Phillips Deed, 1659

Our story takes place in Portland, but it wasn't called that (nor Falmouth) back then. In 1676, the neck of land that the Native Americans called Mache gone was known to the whites as Casco. It was a small community, first settled by George Cleeves in 1632 in the India Street / Portland Company area along the Fore River. Cleeves, who had already lost a claim across the river in Spurwink, spent most of the rest of his life defending his properties in the title wars that raged between the various English land interests in Maine. Perhaps this made him overly cautious for he gave permissive rights to people he invited to settle but relatively few actual deeds.

Cleeves' close handedness with land titles did not extend to family. He deeded land to Michael Mitton, the man who married his only child, Elizabeth. The Mitton's had five daughters and one son, and Cleeves, as all men do, planned for his own eventual mortality by leaving various acreage to his grandchildren. Notable to our story, he transferred 100 acres to his granddaughter Ann Mitton. Ann married Anthony Brackett who came to Casco from

the Portsmouth area early in the 1660's with his brother Thomas who married Ann's sister Mary. Both men (and their brothers-in-law Thaddeus Clarke and James Andrews) married into the Cleeves land by taking control of their wives' property as was the custom of the day. Thomas Brackett gained land at Clarke's Point on the southerly side of the neck on the Fore River by a covenant with his mother-in-law for her support. Anthony Brackett eventually expanded his holdings to 400 acres. He became a wealthy man with property, livestock and even a slave. His farm was located along Back Cove from the area of Deering Oaks and extending up into the University of Southern Maine campus and out towards Capisic. His house was situated near where Deering Avenue and the interstate cross.

This was an untouched and virgin landscape! The lay of the land, literally, did not look anything like it does today, of course, and this is not due just to the interstate and the cityscape. Large sections of the modern area are the result of filling in Back Cove. In the 17th century, the cove was much larger, and the area around it was marsh land cut by tidal estuary; now there is Baxter Boulevard and Marginal Way. Ware Creek, which ran between the Brackett farm and Casco Neck and began in a small pond close to the Fore River, almost bisected the neck into an island. As imagined now, it was a beautiful place, full of amenities and possibilities for industrious settlers; unfortunately those same farmers, so attuned to this potential, were oblivious to their native neighbors' needs or rights.

The Brackett's were not alone out on this side of the neck. The farms of other colonists spread out around Back Cove, and another neighborhood grew up around the Lower Falls area of the Presumpscot. Anthony's brother Thomas owned land on Back Cove to the south towards the neck. The Brackett's young brother-in-law Nathaniel Mitton held land from his grandfather just to the west. A few other farms ran out towards Capisic and around to the Fore River side of Casco Neck. There were in all about forty families living in Casco in 1675. If there was an actual town center, it was around on the south side of the neck where Cleeves originally settled. There was no fort, only a few scattered fortified houses where families might congregate for protection. There was no army, only the train band of local farmers who were too widely spread out to be an effective fighting force. No real need was perceived; families preferred to live on their homesteads. Their defenses were too few to provide significant protection.

When Metacomet first waged war on Massachusetts in 1675, the reason for Maine colonists to provide themselves with a safe retreat became evident. Maine began experiencing bloodshed along its frontiers as Indians staged assaults on the few scattered settlements to the northeast. Casco was visited by its first war party. Seven members of the Wakely family (grandparents, father, mother and three children) were killed, and their farm on the east side of the Presumpscot was burned. An 8 year old girl was carried off into captivity but later redeemed. Some, but not all, colonists began to evacuate Casco and Maine for safer regions to the south. The war parties went on to attack Saco and Dunstan Landing in Scarborough and then took a brief hiatus during a particularly severe winter. The colonists planned an attack on the Indian town of Pequawket (Fryeburg) on the upper Saco but the snows were too deep. By the following summer, tempers were, again, short.

"Soe greate a tragedye" - Brian Pendleton, 1676

Cattle precipitated the events of August 11, 1676 but probably provided only the immediate circumstance. On the 9th, neighboring Indians killed one of Anthony Brackett's cows. The circumstances are now unknown, but surely the Indians were making a point. Brackett was promised assistance in finding the culprits by an Indian named Simon whom, as historian William Willis' writes, "insinuated himself into his (Brackett's) confidence". This Simon turned out to be the Yankee Killer from Metacomet's army. He had recently escaped from Dover prison where he was held for murders committed during the previous summer. Simon is said to have had a "counterfeit pass". It is unlikely the Casco settlers knew any of this, but they were suspicious enough to send a report to Major Waldron at Dover. Travel was difficult, and communications were bad.

Simon promised to bring the cattle slayers to Brackett, and he did. Very early on the morning of the 12th, Simon arrived with a war party whom he said killed the cow. Hardly contrite, the Indians ransacked the house and confiscated all the guns. Brackett asked the meaning of all this; he must have been stunned as it was obvious what was happening. Simon reputedly replied, "So it must be." Certainly it must, if the Indians were to reassert some control over their homelands.

Brackett and his family were given the choice of submission to their captors or death. Ann Brackett's brother, Nathaniel Mitton, was visiting at the time. Mitton was unmarried and possibly quite a young man which might

explain what happened next. He "offered some resistance" and was immediately killed. Certainly, this example provided the Brackett's with adequate incentive for submissive behavior. The two parents, five children and a Negro slave were bound together and carried off into captivity.

For Casco this was just the beginning of a long bloody day. The party set out around Back Cove to the Presumpscot. In their path, homesteads were looted, some were killed, and many were made captive. By now some awareness that an attack was in progress was in evidence. Richard Pike, who lived at Muscle Cove north of the mouth of the Presumpscot, and a companion were out in that river in a boat. They suspected "mischief" and set out for home. They saw an English boy running towards the shore, and soon a volley of shots flew over their heads. Then Simon appeared on the shore and beckoned the boaters in. "They liked not his curtesy" and made their way home as quickly as possible. The boaters never touched shore but instead called out the warning to seek safety in a garrison house and prepare for an imminent attack. Presumably, the Pike boat went on to carry the alarm elsewhere.

People on the neck were also beginning to find out about events transpiring at Back Cove. George Munjoy's son John and Isaac Wakely warned three men headed to Anthony Brackett's farm to work as threshers. The men turned back and shortly heard shots fired. The shots, which killed Munjoy and Wakely, were fired by warriors from Simon's band (or perhaps another war party) who crossed over from the Presumpscot to Casco Neck. The threshers now set out in earnest for Thomas Brackett's house at Clarke's Point on the Fore River. The men might have thought that this was the closest safety, but, unknown to them, a party of Indians crossed from Purpoosuck (South Portland) by canoe and landed near the point. The little party, seeking safety, arrived just in time to see Thomas Brackett shot down and his wife and children led off into captivity. Apparently unseen, the threshers were able to escape down the peninsula to Munjoy's garrison house where colonists from the neck were congregating for safety.

It is difficult now to determine just how many warriors and how many war parties were engaged in this attack. Estimates run as high as 200 hundred warriors in numerous parties and under a number of very able leaders who are said to have roamed the area between Pemaquid and Wells looking for targets throughout the summer and fall. At Casco, a large party of warriors under Simon may have split up to take different objectives in the thinly spread community, or smaller parties under different leaders may have staged attacks from various locations around Casco more or less in cooperation with Simon. Megunnaway, another Massachusetts Indian, is known to have led the attack at Thomas Brackett's house. Letters from Casco's Rev. George Burroughs and Thaddeus Clarke and from Brian Pendleton of Saco survive today, but no Indian accounts are available to modern historians.

The populous was truly frightened and did not dare to stay on the neck. The Indians' intentions and even their whereabouts were not known. Under the leadership of Rev. George Burroughs, colonists from Munjoy's garrison fled to James Andrews Island (now Cushings) where others soon congregated. Almost immediately, Burroughs wrote his letter describing the events of the day and begging for help to Henry Jocelyn at Black Point who, in turn, sent the news south. Pendleton picked up the cry of alarm from Jocelyn. Thaddeus Clarke wrote to his mother-in-law Elizabeth Mitton Harvey in Massachusetts about the terrible family news. From their accounts, circumstances and events can be pieced together.

The generally accepted casualty figure for August 12th is thirty four colonists either killed or carried off into captivity. Indian losses were unknown but quite possibly nonexistent. The greater number of whites were captured and not killed, but here the total number is a little murky because the exact number (or identities) of children was not recorded. Considering the size of the town, forty families before the war began in 1675 with many leaving after the first troubles, this is a devastating number.

Burroughs was an able organizer and set up what meager housing, provisions and defense that could be managed. During the first night several brave souls returned to Casco from the island to gather up gun powder from two locations in the town. Their success helped supply the whites and at the same time prevented the powder from falling into the hands of the enemy. Food remained in terribly short supply. The escapees managed to fish and gather what they could. Late in August, George Munjoy went to Boston and returned with 1500 pounds of bread. Many people from Casco and townships to the eastward were now holed up on Cushing and Jewel islands. Help was on the way in the form of Colonel Hathorne with 130 troops and 40 friendly Natick Indians from Massachusetts.

Despite help from the south, things were not turning around for the English. Early in September, Jewel Island, which was thought to be protected by its location so far out into Casco Bay, was attacked and nearly overrun. The survivors soon left for Massachusetts. Munjoy's bread lasted only until mid September; starvation on Andrews Island was still a reality. In the mean time, the war parties moved in and out of the area with impunity. On September 20, the day that Hathorne's troops arrived in the area, Indians were threshing the English crop in Anthony Brackett's barn. Forewarned, they slipped away ahead of Hathorne who had seen only two Indians in his whole trip up the coast.

The final blow for Casco came on the 23rd when a band of seven men left Andrews Island for Munjoy's (House) Island to procure much needed food. There were sheep on the island. Hathorne counseled patience but the seven men set out in a small boat saying that "they must and would go, else their Families must starve at Home". Immediately upon landing on the island, the little force was attacked. They fell back on the ruins of a small stone house; there was little hope. Without a boat to use for a rescue attempt, the families and troops could do little but watch from across the waters. Richard Martin, in a military communication from the times, wrote, "The Indians burnt Mr. Munjoy's house and seven persons in it." Historian Hubbard claims, "They were all destroyed either with the Stones cast in upon them, or else with the Enemies Shot." Within a few more days Hathorne returned south without finding any enemy to engage. The remaining settlers were evacuated with the troops. The war parties finished off Black Point in early October and were left in complete control of the area. Understandably the town was abandoned and not resettled until the end of the war in 1678.

"Carried away by the Indians" Brian Pendleton 1676

Following the fate of Casco's August captives is difficult due to the lack of Indian accounts. At least initially, captured whites were probably in shock due to the events of their capture and the deaths of family and friends. As the war parties made their escapes from the the white settlements, captives probably recognized less and less of their surroundings until they actually had no idea where they were or how to get home. Records indicate that the preferred method of travel in coastal Maine was by boat; outside of communities what passed for roads quickly became trails. The warriors herded their captives over these trails. In what became the traditional route for carrying captives to Quebec to be sold to the French in later wars, eleven Indians (other sources say eleven canoes) carried at least some of the Casco captives northward up the Kennebec across the Great Carry and the Height of Land, then down the Chaudiere to Quebec. That some of the captives remained in Maine is in evidence in a military communication dated September 26, 1676 stating that an Indian captive claimed there were twenty captives at Pegwacket on the Saco. Not necessarily all (or any) of these were from Casco.

Somewhere northeast of Casco, the Indians stopped to split up their booty including the Casco captives. Anthony and Ann Brackett and their children were kept together, but Thomas Brackett's family and others were led away to fates unknown. This must have been frightening to the already apprehensive colonists. As it turned out fate proved fickle. The warriors who took possession of the Anthony Brackett family were in a hurry to join their compatriots near Arrowsic. Marauding war parties were already laying waste to Arrowsic, Woolwich, and Sheepscot. On every field, the Indians appeared to be successful in their revenge. The family with five little ones moved too slowly. Fortunately, conditions did not appear to require speed. Instead of knocking the slower captives on the head and thus inspiring the others to greater speed, the warriors pushed ahead. The family was ordered to follow. After all, where else could they go? Even if they could find their way back down the trails, they would easily be followed and recaptured. It was, by now, becoming apparent to all that no safety could be found in Maine.

Along the shores of Casco Bay or some marshy estuary possibly at New Meadows near Brunswick, the little family happened on an abandoned canoe in some disrepair. If it could be repaired, the family could escape with some speed to Casco or to a settlement further south. Ann Brackett made the necessary repairs with a needle and thread that she carried with her or, as some accounts say, she found in an abandoned house along the way. In order to understand how such repairs could be made, some canoe construction techniques and a little sewing history should be examined.

First, needles and thread did not bear much resemblance to the modern day tools. Finding a needle in a ransacked cabin might not be as difficult as the old adage implies. Needles were bigger and thicker; thread was homespun and not very fine. The needles of the white settlers might be made of bone or of metal. Bone needles had been around for 20,000 years; iron needles with a closed hook instead of an eye were made in the 14th century followed by eyed needles in the 15th century. Fine crafts tool or no, needles were so valuable that a

woman often carried her needle with her pinned into her clothing. So it does not seem improbable that Ann Brackett would have a needle on her person as she was forced up the trail into captivity. It remains to be seen if a needle could be used to repair a canoe.

Maine Indians made many types of canoes for different purposes or types of waterways. Ocean going canoes could be quite long, often 24 feet. Canoes might be dug out of logs or covered with spruce bark or hide but the most common covering was birch bark. Canoe makers chose a large clear piece of bark and cut it from the tree in a single sheet in the spring when the sap just began to flow. It could be stored in a pond for use later. The bark was laid out flat and a wooden frame positioned on top. The bark would then be slit cross ways towards the frame so that it could be turned up and shaped not unlike a seamstress making a slit in a seam allowance to ease a curve. The edges of slits would join or overlap and be sealed with heated resin from white or black spruce that was mixed with animal fat. The seams would then be sewn together with the roots of black spruce. Indians used an awl to poke holes for sewing with the sharpened end of the stiff root; no needle was required. The roots would swell when wet and plug holes. The construction was limber but tough. The Indians would often leave canoes on the shores or at various waterway accesses, sometimes for years, and make a few repairs before launching them for new use.

It might seem possible, although more likely legendary, that Ann Mitton Brackett employed some sewing skills and perhaps even a needle with some sinew, twine or root (but not likely thread) to repair the canoe. Whether the canoe needed only minor repairs or the family was fortunate to venture out on a calm bay in a barely seaworthy vessel isn't known. William Hubbard described the trip in his Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New England (1677) as follows: "In that old canoe they crossed a water eight or nine miles broad, and when they came on the south side of the bay, they might have been in as much danger of other Indians that had lately been about Black Point and had taken it; but they were newly gone; so things on all sides thus concurring to help forward their deliverance, they came safely to Black Point, where they met with a vessel bound for Piscataqua, that came into the harbor but a few hours before they came thither, by which means they arrived safe in Picataqua river soon after."

And so the Bracketts made good their escape. However, Hubbard leaves a few logistics in question. Black Point was not taken by the Indians until October; this brings into question the duration of the family's captivity. Hubbard must have been mistaken as most accounts indicate that the Bracketts escaped while their captors were involved at Arrowsic. The duration of their captivity must only have been a few days. Perhaps they hopped from island to island for an extended period of time. Even so, they seemed to have missed the islands inhabited by other colonists.

"Upon the peace the English returned..." Cotton Mather, 1693

Mary, the wife of Thomas Brackett, was carried away to Quebec and died in captivity within the year. Her three children were restored to the English at the time of the treaty signed at Casco on April 12, 1678. They went to Portsmouth area, probably to their Brackett relatives, and never returned to Casco. Upon their escape, the Anthony Brackett family also evacuated to New Hampshire. Ann Mitton Brackett died there the following year, 1677, and was buried at Sandy Beach in Rye. At the time of the family's capture, she had five children; the youngest, Kezia, was an infant in arms. Perhaps Ann died in childbirth, which was very common. There is no record of another child. In hardly more than a year, three grandchildren of George Cleeves were dead.

In 1679, Anthony Brackett married Susannah Drake of Hampton by whom he had five more children. At about this time, Brackett returned to Casco to his farm. Relatively few returned unless they had a legal deed to their lands; those who leased land weren't as compelled to take their chances on the frontier. This time the people of Casco planned their protection a little better. Brackett served in the local militia in various capacities, and the town built Fort Loyal in 1680 on the neck near Cleeves original settlement. Before the end of the decade, Casco was again put to the test. On September 21, 1689, Anthony Brackett was killed in another attack. The battle was fought in the orchard on his farm so it is entirely possible that he died in the very door yard where he had escaped death thirteen years before. Ann's oldest son, Anthony, was captured at the fall of Fort Loyal in May of 1690 but escaped during the following September. Her second son, Seth, died either at the fort or in Clarke's battle on the hill just before fort fell. But that is another story.

After the second fall of Casco and for the time being, the Brackett's had had enough of Maine. Anthony Jr. became a rope maker in Boston. His sisters, Ann's daughters, Mary, Elinor and Kezia, all married

Massachusetts men and lived in the Boston area as well. Anthony and Susannah's son Zachariah was one of first settlers to return during the resettlement of Falmouth in 1715. Two of Mary and Thomas Brackett's grandchildren (Joshua and Anthony) also eventually came to Falmouth and took up the Clarke's Point land. So Brackett family connections lived on in Portland. Late in the 19th century, another Brackett descendent and Portland native, Thomas Brackett Reed, became one of the most powerful Speakers of the House of Representatives in U.S. history.

Sources: Churchill, Edwin Arnold. Too Great a Challenge: The Birth of Falmouth, Maine 1624-1676. Graduate Thesis. Orono, ME: University of Maine, August 1979. Goold, William. Portland in the Past With Historical Notes of Old Falmouth. 1886 edition. Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 1997. Moulton, Augustus. Portland By the Sea. Augusta, ME: Katahdin Publishing Co., 1926. The Wabanakis of Maine and the Maritimes: A resource book about the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet, Micmac and Abenaki Indians. Prepared and published by the Maine Indian Program and the American Society of Friends Service Committee, 1989. Willis, William. The History of Portland. Somersworth, NH: New Hampshire Publishing Co., 1972.

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Pat@mainestory.info

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