

Barnice White

We have learned about Colebrook's last Native American, Henry Mossuck, and the misfortunes that beset him.

I will reproduce here excerpts from an article that appeared in the Hartford Times, May 13th 1867, headlined from Colebrook, it reflects the false account conjured up by Balcomb and Calhoun that Henry was unable to disprove:

“As the particulars relative to Balcomb's confession have not yet been before the public, I take the liberty of sending you the following:

On the night of the murder, Balcomb was at a sawmill at Sandy Brook playing checkers. [This is most likely Reuben Scovel's mill whose foundations can still be seen situated about ¼ mile up stream from the second bridge past Tom Bell's lumber mill.] Menasseth (the Indian) called and wished to see Balcomb by himself. They left the mill together, walked down the road, and found Calhoun sitting by the side of the road, where Menasseth had previously left him. Here they all took a drink from a bottle Menasseth had in his pocket. Balcomb was now told that Barnice White was to be knocked over that night; Balcomb refused to go. All took another drink and Calhoun says ‘You dare not go; you are a coward’. Balcomb says ‘I dare’, and they all started. After going about ½ a mile, [probably to the present Route 8] the Indian sprains his ankle (as he said) – set it himself – and on they went until he sprained it again; he now says ‘I cannot go any farther unless you insist on it – if you do, I will crawl on my hands and knees.’

They concluded to let him off, and he took his leave by taking another drink and saying to Calhoun and Balcomb that ‘dead men tell no tales.’ Before leaving them he agreed to meet them at his shanty on the mountain by the time they could commit the murder and get to that place. [Mossuck's home consisted of a three-sided one-room shack utilizing a large boulder as the fourth side. It was located high on the mountain above Scovel's mill on a road that still exists as one of the trails in Algonquin Forest. I have dug down through the leaf debris on the forest floor at the site and discovered charcoal, suggesting that some vigilante had torched the shack.]

Cobb, it appears, started with Calhoun, but got off with some excuse about equal to the Indian's sprained ankle. Calhoun and Balcomb went to Mr. White's house and committed the murder, following which they went to the Indian's shanty, but found him absent. They saw Cobb the next morning and divided the money equally between the three, the Indian not being present.”

In a sense, poor old Manasseth's troubles continued throughout the 20th century and perhaps are to continue into the 21st; here is what happened:

When the State of Connecticut began acquiring land in Colebrook for a state forest during the 1930's, an appropriate name was sought. Quickly the name of Manassath arose to the top of the list, as his dwelling was situated about midpoint in the initially acquired land situated along Sandy Brook Road. The choice was seen as a way to honor the name of the last Native American to live in Colebrook. However, no sooner had the proposal been made than a hue and cry arose both in Colebrook and in Hartford. Simply stated, there were concerns as to the appropriateness of naming a section of state land for a convicted murderer. In vain did the proponents point out that he had been completely exonerated by pardons given him by the governor and legislature. It was this negative thinking that carried the day back in the 1930's. A compromise was reached

when a proposal was made to name the new forest for his tribal affiliation, and thus the name “Algonquin” became a prominent feature on the maps of Colebrook.

Had the situation remained as it was, no doubt the compromise would have withstood the test of time, but such was not the case; the state continued to add acreage to Algonquin Forest, not just contiguous to the original lands east of Sandy Brook, but west of the brook as well. Nor did land acquisition cease there; today there are five non-contiguous sections all bearing the name Algonquin Forest within the boundaries of Colebrook. This by no means is a precedent setting situation, maps of just about every state in the union show similar state and national forests that are comprised of multiple units, some of which are quite far apart. We, however, have a more complex situation. The problem is that hunting is permitted in season in four of the five units bearing the name Algonquin; the fifth one (and by far the most easily accessible), is designated a game preserve, allowing no hunting or other disturbances to any form of wildlife, game or otherwise. Connecticut provides maps and brochures to hunters stating that hunting is permitted in Colebrook’s Algonquin Forest, while making no distinction between hunting and non-hunting areas. It is a very confusing situation.

In 1998, the Colebrook Land Conservancy, through our state representative, made a proposal that the sanctuary portion of the forest be renamed for Henry. Whether his true name of Mossuck, or either of the two Colebrook spellings of Manassa or Manassethe be used, would resolve the situation in their estimation.

The proposal made it to the floor of the State Legislature, where it was immediately shot down, and the Conservancy was rebuked for having attempted initiating the move. A ray of hope for some form of name change arose this past summer when a member of a state agency stopped by my house while researching the forest. (I live at the northern entrance to the sanctuary.) This person had been directed to me as a possible source of information, and the name change proposal was mentioned during our conversation. To my surprise, it was met with enthusiasm; another attempt will be made to have the legislature address a name change. Perhaps there is a chance once again that a great wrong can be corrected, while eliminating the confusion as to where legal hunting can be found.

Historic Bytes

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