

Henry Manassa

Henry Manassa's name will forever be associated with that of Barnice White, the Colebrook River resident who was murdered in 1850. Just as it took 16 years to pass before Manassa obtained some degree of vindication, 150 some-odd years were to pass before a reasonably accurate account of the true circumstances surrounding the case was documented. Here then are the facts as we know them concerning the last Native American who lived in Colebrook. Some of this information has been obtained from Superior Court in Litchfield; some are newspaper accounts of the period. Walt Landgraf, whom I consider to have been an authority on the subject, supplied others.

Manassa's family background is revealed in a speech given on September 11, 1901 at the annual meeting of the Farmington Village Library, from which I will quote:

"We will close this paper with a brief account of the scanty remnant of the Tunxis Tribe who lived and died on their ancestral soil. Solomon Mossuck, who joined the church in 1763, died January 25, 1802 at the age of 78 and was buried in the Indian burying ground [in Farmington]. He had a son, Daniel, who was a soldier in the Revolutionary War and another son named Luke, who removed to Brothertown. [Brothertown was the name of the Indian village.]

The story of Henry Mossuck, son of Luke and grandson of Solomon, is not edifying, but as he was the last of his race, and as his career well illustrates the inevitable fate of weaker races in the contest of life, I must venture to give you a brief sketch of a man sinning somewhat, but very much sinned against. His first recorded appearance in public was via a court record where he was fined for stealing chickens in July 1824. A month afterward he was wanted in another matter, but had absconded to parts unknown. Two years later he goes to sea for a three years voyage, giving a white neighbor a power of attorney to take care of his land in his absence. Just before he returned, his trusted friend agent sold the land, pocketed the proceeds, and went west.

Passing over twenty years of his uneventful life, we find him at the age of 49 in Colebrook, where, on a Saturday night in the last week of March 1850, two wretches not twenty-one years of age, William H. Calhoun and Benjamin Balcomb, murdered a certain Barnice White in a most brutal manner. They were sentenced to be hanged, and Henry Mossuck, also known as Henry Manasseth, was sentenced with them as having prompted and abetted them. A year afterward the sentences of all three were commuted to imprisonment for life. I have read the lengthy records of the court and the minutely detailed confession of Calhoun, and have learned much from other sources. There seems to have been no evidence whatever against Mossuck except that the men, who rehearsed the story of their brutal crime with no more compunction that they would feel at the butchering of an ox, had every motive for lying.

Mossuck vainly petitioned the legislature for release for three consecutive years, in 1861, 1862 and 1863, but finally, in 1867, Balcomb, on his deathbed, having asserted the innocence of Mossuck, and the chaplain and officers of the state prison giving him a good character, he was pardoned. He died in our poorhouse on the 19th of October, 1883."

The factual aspect of Mossuck's background determined, read the "facts" as we have been taught in Colebrook:

The Barnice White murder case in 1850 found four men accused of the murder. The Superior Court records in Litchfield list them as follows: William H. Calhoun, Manapeth (a Tunxis Indian), Lorenzo (Lo) Cobb and Ben Balcomb.

The public heavily attended the trial and much jostling took place so that a good view of those charged, especially the Indian, could be had.

After a long trial Calhoun, Balcomb and Manapeth were found guilty of murder, while Cobb was imprisoned on a lesser charge. The three convicted murderers were sentenced to be hanged in July 1851.

They had their sentences changed to life imprisonment in the state prison. Cobb and Balcomb both died in prison, and after 16 years, Calhoun and Manapeth were pardoned by the governor and the General Assembly, it having been proven that “they had no hand in the actual commission of the fact.”

Manapeth, or Manassa, as he was generally referred to in Colebrook, left the prison and returned to that town, which he considered his home. Here he was coldly met by a general population who felt that because he was an Indian, he had to be guilty, and what did the governor and General Assembly, sitting ‘way over in Hartford, know about it anyway?’ Therefore they denied him permission to remain in town, and he was thus driven out. He eventually went to Farmington, Connecticut, where he later died October 19th 1883 at the poor farm there.

Some documents after his release refer to him as “a half-breed Indian”, presumably this being considered as a lower category than just “a Tunxis Indian”.

Dwight Kilbourn, clerk of Superior Court in Litchfield, authored a book “Bench and Bar of Litchfield County 1709 – 1909”. On page 198 it reads: “In the vicinity of Colebrook River, where there are people living who remember the murder distinctly, the name is pronounced Manassa with now and then a person who refers to the original familiarly as ‘Old Nasseth’. It seems probable therefore that the name Manasseth, as given on the state prison records cannot be far out of the way. By dropping or slighting the final ‘th’, it is quite easy to call it Manassa. While the number who call it Nasseth, or who find difficulty in pronouncing the last syllable seems to indicate that the ‘th’ is there, if not always audible.”

It seems strange that no official of the State ever bothered to determine that Mossuck was his Family name.