

Meeting Metacomet by the Housatonic



Here, by the far end of the River Walk, a stone bears a plaque: “Twenty rods north of this stone was the old Indian fordway on the middle trail from Westfield to the Hudson River. Nearby was the site of the Great Wigwam where Major John Talcott overtook and dispersed a party of Indians, August, 1676.”

The Tuesday Morning Club who dedicated it in 1904 may have meant to honor the Major for his army service. But I find it a sad reminder. What was the Great Wigwam? A Great Barrington history walking tour app tells me that the bridge on Bridge Street crosses an old ford, and that the people Talcott “dispersed” were Naragansett soldiers at the end of King Phillip’s War.

I doubt he simply drove them into the trees. In July of 1676, Major Talcott was capturing Algonquian people and selling them outside the Colonies as slaves.

A plaque marks an old ford in the Housatonic River. Photo by Kate Abbott

In August, he was chasing down the last of the opposing army. King Phillip was the leader of the Wampanoag, and his name was Metacomet. He was the son of Massasoit, the commander who negotiated with the Plymouth Bay Colony and kept it alive.

Sixty years later the hundreds of thousands of native peoples in new England had been reduced by illness to 10,000 — fewer people than live in Pittsfield now. The Colonists were taking land aggressively. Imagine a settlement the size of Pittsfield hit by smallpox and completely wiped out, and then Adams and North Adams and all along the valley.

Metacomet's older brother had died after what should have been peaceful negotiations with the colonists. If Metacomet wanted them gone, it's hard to imagine any sane reason why he would have wanted them to stay.

By the summer of 1676, the Colonists had withdrawn into their largest towns and were facing food shortages, but Metacomet's people were continuing to die of illness, and their ammunition was running out.

In August, 1676, Metacomet was killed by an American Indian soldier serving in the Colonial army.

The people who put up that plaque may have had other ideas, but for me it stands as a memorial of the men who died at the river ford and of the man they looked up to as a leader.

Ferns grow thickly along the river bank by the River Walk in Great Barrington. Photo by Kate Abbott

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