

Chapter XIV

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR
THE WAR OF 1812
THE MEXICAN WAR

The Revolution

Tory sentiment was rather strong in this region just before the beginning of the Revolution. Thomas Gilbert, a leading citizen of Assonet, was a Tory. Gilbert's political influence did not extend far from the village. There were many ardent patriots in the eastern and southern parts of Freetown as well as in Tiverton and all other surrounding towns. The "Whigs" who demanded liberty, opposed to the "Tories," who sought to conform to the wishes of the "King" were making gunpowder and small arms and forming companies of minute men.

An assembly of minute men and other patriots from Bristol County towns attempted to capture Gilbert on April 10, 1775. He escaped but they captured twenty-nine Tories who had enlisted in a regiment to be commanded by him. "They also took thirty-five muskets, two case bottles of powder, and a basket of bullets." As William A. Hart¹ has pertinently expressed it, — "This foray occurred on April 9 and 10, and had either Minute Men or the guard of twenty-five armed Tories around Colonel Gilbert's house fired one impulsive shot, the Revolution would have dated from April 10, with men of Shawmut Lands sharing the fame."

Thirty-one men of Freetown answered the call to Lexington.

The region was sparsely settled and offered no important objective for British assaults; nevertheless, those who lived in what is now Fall River and Tiverton were in constant danger of marauding parties. Mr. Waldo A. Sherman, whose forebears have resided in North Westport for generations relates, — "During the Revolution my grandfather's grandfather served with others in the American Army. The men around here served in relays of two weeks on and four weeks off".

¹ "History of the Town of Somerset", 1940.

Among the local patriots was Daniel Page, whom Fowler declared was the sole male survivor of the Pocasset Tribe of Indians.² He served in the division with Samson Sherman, Sr. at Fort Barton in Tiverton and was a member of the party which made a surprise visit and captured Col. Prescott at his home in Portsmouth. He lived on the Indian Reservation (Indian Town) and died in 1829.

The following account of the capture of Major-General Prescott, on July 9, 1777, published in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* for August 7, 1777 and reprinted in Frank Moore's *Diary of the American Revolution*, Vol. I, p. 468, mentions Daniel Page as a negro.

"They landed about five miles from Newport, and three-quarters of a mile from the house, which they approached cautiously, avoiding the main guard, which was at some distance. The Colonel went foremost, with a stout active negro close behind him, and another at a small distance; the rest followed so as to be near, but not seen.

"The single sentry at the door saw and hailed the Colonel; he answered by exclaiming against, and inquiring for, rebel prisoners, but kept slowly advancing. The sentinel again challenged him, and required the countersign. He said he had not the countersign; but amused the sentry by talking about rebel prisoners, and still advancing till he came within reach of the bayonet, which, he presenting, the Colonel suddenly struck aside, and seized him. He was immediately secured, and ordered to be silent, on pain of instant death. Meanwhile, the rest of the men surrounding the house, the negro, with his head, at the second stroke, forced a passage into it, and then into the landlord's apartment. The landlord at first refused to give the necessary intelligence; but, on the prospect of present death, he pointed to the General's chamber, which being instantly opened by the negro's head, the colonel, calling the General by name, told him he was a prisoner."

One Dr. Thatcher, of Albany, New York, who was a surgeon in the American Army, in his description of the event wrote, — "A negro man, named Prince, instantly thrust his beetle head through the panel door, and seized his victim while in bed."³

The village of Falls river, at the time of the Revolution was too small and unimportant to have a separate government but its inhabitants were strongly anti-British. In spite of the disaffection of a substantial element, most of the residents of the whole section performed valiant services for the Continental army. They rendered first aid for the patriots in Boston in 1774.

² There seems to be some question as to whether Daniel Page was the last of the Pocassetts. There are members of the Page family who trace their ancestry (without a complete record) to Daniel. See *Fall River Herald-News* for May 25, 1929.

³ "An Historical Research" by George Livermore.

Tiverton was not populous. In 1757, we find it had 1040 inhabitants, of which 99 were Indians. In June 1776, the population had increased to 3393. The town voted that year to pay a bonus of thirty shillings and to equip every soldier who would join the town's infantry. The fidelity of many residents to the continental cause became so questionable that, in October, 1779, a special court was convened in Tiverton to deal with the subject. Many estates were confiscated in Rhode Island and sold on Court order, to raise the sum for which their owners were held liable, to meet the bonus and pay dues to the Continental soldiers. Bayles' "History of Newport County" on page 918, lists the estates which were confiscated, and also gives elsewhere the names of those persons who, in each town, voted for and against the adoption of our Federal Constitution. Rhode Island, on May 29, 1790 was the last of the thirteen original states to join the Union.

Col. Joseph Durfee,⁴ who started the first cotton mill in this region, was appointed captain of a company of minute men and took an active part in the war. His reminiscences,⁵ written in 1834, give to us what are, perhaps, the most authentic records of local events. He wrote, — "Our country has been involved in three wars since my recollection. The first was with the French and Indians — when we fought for our lives. The French offered a bounty for every scalp which the Indians would bring them. It was therefore certain death to all who fell into the Indians' hands. * * * I saw many men enlist into the service, and among them, Joseph Valentine, father of William Valentine, of Providence. I was then about ten years old.

"The second war was with Great Britain, during the greater part of which I was actively engaged in the service of my country. We then fought for liberty."

Col. Durfee, in continuance of his narrative relates that early in the Revolution, British ships commanded by Wallace, Asque and Howe were off our coast, in the river and bay; that his company guarded the shores and prevented the British from landing; that he marched to cover the retreat of the American troops from New York and afterwards joined Col. Carpenter's regiment and took an active part in the Battle of White Plains; that soon after that, the British took possession of Newport and his company

⁴ Col. Joseph and Capt. Richard Durfee, the two officers in command at the Battle of Falls river, were two of the group of five who organized the First Congregational Church. (See Fascicle II, p. 12.) Hon. Thomas Durfee, the father of Col. Joseph, lived where the Superior Court House now stands, just north of which, he maintained a deer park. (See map of 1812.) It is related, that his wife, on the approach of the British, before the Battle of Falls river released the deer, in order that they might not provide food for the enemy if captured. It is also related that much to the surprise of Mrs. Durfee and her neighbors, all the liberated deer returned to the enclosure at nightfall.

⁵ "Fall River and Its Industries", pp. 199-204.

assisted in covering the retreat of Col. John Cook from the island of Rhode Island, which was difficult because there was then no bridge to the main land; that the inhabitants here were in a critical situation because there were so many British emissaries during that time; that an English squadron lay off the coast and their troops had possession of Rhode Island; that these harassed the town, destroyed property and imprisoned the inhabitants; but that in addition to this we had Tories at home, enemies in disguise, who were aiding and abetting the British while professing friendship for liberty; that in the spring of 1777 he received a Major's command, and was stationed at Little Compton with a regiment under the command of Col. John Hathaway of Berkley; that he returned to Fall River in the fall of 1777, raised a guard for the safety and protection of the town, consulted Gen. Sullivan in Providence, who was commander in chief of all the forces in this section, received approval from him of his plan for a guard, secured two whale boats and an order drawn upon the commissary at Bristol for rations for twenty men; that he had possession of a store at the end of the Iron Works Company wharf which he used as a guard house and stationed sentinels there every night, the order being to hail an approaching boat three times and if without answer then to fire upon them; that not long afterward Samuel Reed, acting as guard, discovered boats cautiously approaching the shore and receiving no answer fired upon them; that the whole neighborhood was soon in arms; that from behind a stone wall the guard kept up a rousing fire upon the enemy until they brought their cannon to bear upon us and fired grape shot among us, whereupon a retreat was ordered. Two of the guard were sent to remove the planks which had been laid over the lower stream for people to cross upon, and that we retreated slowly until we reached the main road where the bridge now crosses the stream and there we formed and gave battle, whereupon the enemy retreated leaving one dead and another bleeding; that they carried away their wounded; that before the soldier who was left behind expired he said that there were 150 British in the charge commanded by Major Ayers; that upon landing the enemy set fire to the new house of Thomas Borden, then to a grist mill and saw mill belonging to Mr. Borden, both of which stood at the mouth of the fall river; that he saw them set these buildings on fire; that in their retreat they set fire to the house and other buildings belonging to Richard Borden, who was then an aged man and took him prisoner, but they were pursued so closely that the buildings which they had set fire were saved; that we continued to fire upon them as they passed down the bay; that they ordered Mr. Borden to stand up in the boat so that we would

desist firing upon them but he refused to do this, and threw himself upon the bottom of the boat; that while lying there a shot killed a British soldier standing by his side; that Mr. Borden refused to answer questions and in a few days was dismissed on parole; that this engagement was on Sunday, May 25th, 1778; that they buried the two soldiers near the south end of the Massasoit factory.

Col. Durfee relates that during a considerable part of August the soldiers were engaged in procuring supplies and in building flat bottom boats and scows with the intention of dislodging the British from Rhode Island; that the troops occupied as a commissary store a barn near the present location of the Stone Bridge; that he had charge of that barn until the troops were ready to cross over to the island, and he then left it in charge of Walter Chaloner; that the American troops embarked in boats and scows and landed on Rhode Island where he joined other forces as a major in Col. Whitney's regiment; that they encamped without tents to the north of Butt's Hill; that they anxiously looked for the French fleet from which they hoped to secure assistance; that when the fleet appeared, the British set fire to the shipping in the harbor and blew up most of their own vessels; that as soon as the British fleet neared them, the French fleet tacked about, went out to meet and attacked the British squadron; that soon a tremendous storm came on during which many persons were drowned and that the fleets became separated; that the French fleet then went to Boston for repairs, and the British fleet to New York; that soon after the storm the American troops marched in three divisions towards Newport, one by the east road, one by the west road, while Gen. Titcomb, with his brigade, moved in the center; that when they came in sight of Newport they pitched their tents near the south end of the island; that on the following morning a detachment which included the colonel took possession of Hunneman's Hill. The morning was foggy and that they were unobserved by the enemy until the fog cleared, but thereafter a heavy cannonade was directed upon them; that they fell back until night came and then marched up the hill undiscovered; that when day broke they had two cannons mounted and had completed a covered way; that they compelled the British to abandon a small fort; that when they took possession of the fort the British retreated, but returned at night and threw bomb shells into the fort, killing one man; that the French fleet failed to return; whereupon commanding officers Lafayette, Greene and Sullivan ordered a retreat to the north end of the island; that the retreat began on the 29th of August; that the British troops followed them until they were joined by recruits a short distance south of

Quaker Hill; that a general engagement ensued and many lives were lost; that the Americans retreated to Tiverton during the following night; that they then left Tiverton, crossed over Slade's Ferry and marched by way of Pawtucket and Providence to Pawtuxet, where he remained until his term of service expired; that soon afterwards he received a commission as lieutenant colonel, took command of a regiment to protect the sea shores, and later, on orders from General Gates he marched to Tiverton and joined General Cornell's brigade; that on October 29, 1779 the British troops left Rhode Island and he returned to the island under the command of Generals Gates and Cornell; that he returned home to his family on December 29, 1779; at which time his term expired; that at the close of the Revolutionary War, Col. Durfee removed from the village of Fall River to Tiverton and lived there about thirty years, during which time he was a member of the General Assembly of Rhode Island; that in 1801 he was not permitted to hold office because he was a Federalist, Thomas Jefferson then being president; that party fervor became very high until after Munroe became president.

The site of the battle of Fall River is marked by a bronze tablet on the southwest corner of City Hall; there placed by the Quequechan Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The Sons of the American Revolution have provided markers for the graves of Revolutionary soldiers: in the North Burial Grounds, Colonel Joseph Durfee, Thomas Durfee, Robert Irving; in Oak Grove Cemetery, Ephraim Boomer, Elisha Caswell, Benjamin Peck; in the North Steep Brook Burying Grounds, Captain James Simmonds and Benjamin Weaver.

The War of 1812

The Mexican War

The town of Troy evidently purchased arms and ammunition for the purpose of defence in 1812 but there was no occasion for their use. The following excerpt from a letter from the Adjutant General's office in Boston would indicate that there was no concerted effort to enlist men for either the War of 1812 or the Mexican War. "So far as I am able to determine from records, Fall River had no militia companies that had any active participation in either of these wars. One regiment of ten companies from Massachusetts was in the Mexican War and none of them were from Fall River."⁶

⁶ "Records of Massachusetts Militia in War of 1812-1814." Published by the Adjutant General's office.