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Pathways of the Past: Part 4

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A SERIES

PATHWAYS OF THE PAST

*The
Monponset Path*

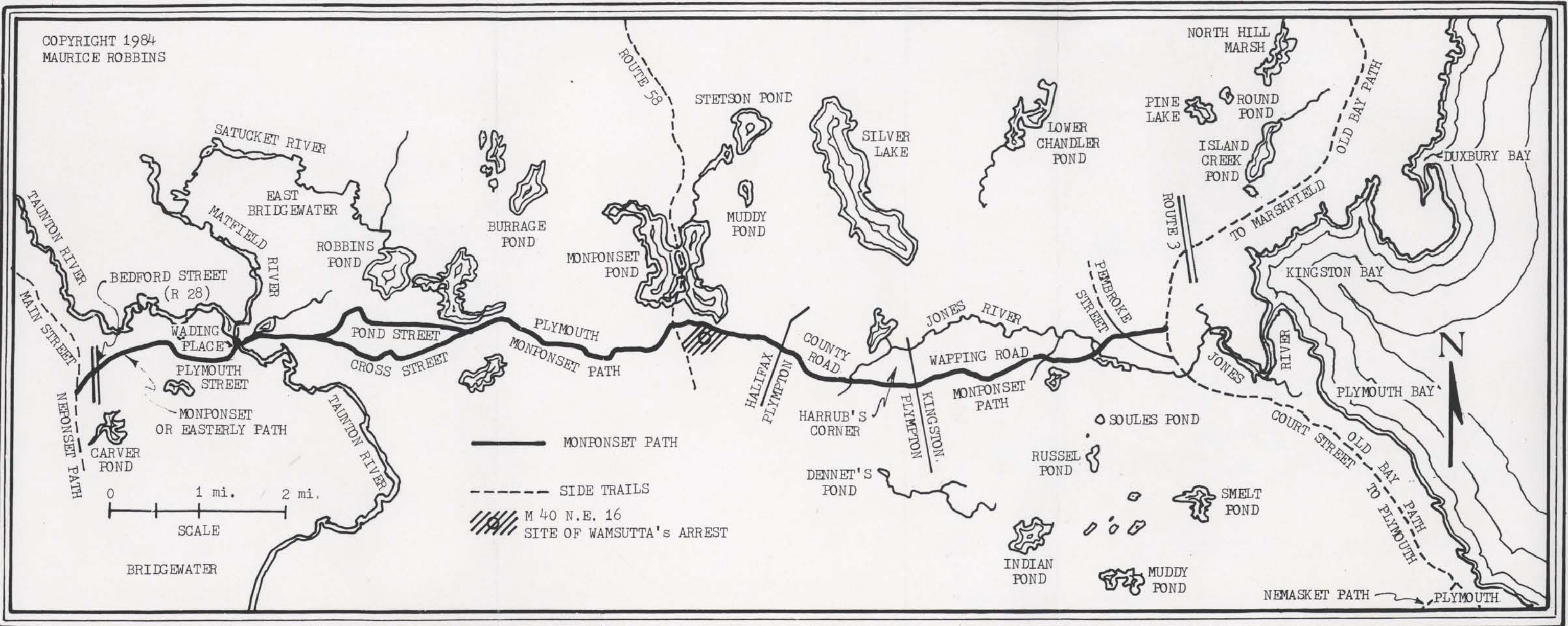
*The Capture
and Death of Wamsutta*

by Maurice Robbins



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The Monponset Path

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INTRODUCTION

Prior to the English occupation of New England the area was covered by a network of trails running from one native town to another or leading to a favorite hunting or fishing camp. These narrow forest trails avoided steep grades and swampy areas, crossed rivers at shallow places, but otherwise followed the shortest route between destinations. With some exceptions the major trails were inland rather than coastal as the rivers are widest at their mouths and are difficult to cross at flood tide.

Both the Indians and the English selected sites for villages with the same characteristics in mind--good drinking water, cleared land for planting, etc. Consequently, many English settlements occupied the sites of former Indian towns, and thus the original trails were continued in use. At first the English traveled on foot as had the Indians, but as horses became available, trails became bridle paths and were widened. Eventually, wheeled vehicles were introduced for inter-village travel and, as the traffic increased, the old footpaths were again widened to permit their use. Two-wheeled vehicles came first, but were quickly replaced by four-wheeled carts that could carry greater loads. Now the trails became roads, were straightened at some spots, widened to allow for passing, and abrupt turns, difficult for four-wheeled wagons to negotiate, were eliminated.

As the unoccupied areas between towns were laid out and occupied as farms, houses and buildings appeared by the roads, and resistance to any change in location of the right-of-way stiffened. This situation tended to maintain the "status quo" of the early network of roads. After all, what farmer would welcome a new piece of road that cut through his cultivated fields or pasture, who was willing to have his land cut in two simply to straighten a road?

Another development which also tended to perpetuate the road system was the growing use of paths to delineate boundary lines. In those days it was costly and difficult to run long lines through the virgin forest. It was much easier to make use of an established path. For example, the "Five Men's Purchase" (in Middleboro) was bounded on the north by the Lower Plymouth Path and on the south by the Upper Plymouth Path. Such instances made possible the definite mapping of a portion of an old path.

The paths or trails shown on the accompanying map were established by a very careful research of available records. Town and County documents and maps, references in town meeting minutes to highways and bridges (building and maintenance), various accounts of journeys in diaries, letters, and military movements, were among the many sources used. Whenever available, the older residents of an area concerned were questioned, often with surprising results. Many of these old paths and roads are still in use and some retain their ancient names. There is a Plymouth Road in Middleboro and in the Bridgewater, a Rhode Island Road in Middleboro and Lakeville, and a County Road in nearly every southern New England town.

With the passage of time, native foot paths became bridle paths, cart paths, stage roads and, finally, highways. The Indian wading places were bridged where the rivers had been crossed on stepping stones or with the help of poles driven into the stream bed. Main roads were widened so that vehicles might pass at will, and road beds were "hardened" within the limits of towns, to prevent rutting and dust. Finally, with the advent of the motor vehicle

and the demand for ever greater speed, the roads were paved. We live now in the day of the super-highway, with its multiple lanes and median strip, driven straight as a string through the countryside regardless of natural impediments. Even today, however, there is in certain instances a great reluctance to change; many a rural land owner raises objection to an invasion of his land and the dispute must be settled in the courts.

If one's objective is to reach a given destination in the shortest possible time and the consumption of a minimum amount of fuel, today's super-highway is the answer. Instead of being constantly alert for a possible Indian ambush, one must be aware of the radar speed trap and give attention to the 55 miles per hour road sign. Things never completely change; there are still road hazards.

On the other hand, it is relaxing to follow the twisting, wandering of an old country road, traveling at a leisurely pace and recalling the scenes and events of yesteryear. It is interesting to view the spots that can be pointed out at which some historic event took place, and perhaps take a picture or two for one's collection. It is restful to leave behind the "hustle and bustle" of modern travel and follow in the footsteps of the earlier Americans.

A SERIES

PATHWAYS OF THE PAST

THE ARREST AND DEATH OF WAMSUTTA, CHIEF SACHEM OF POKONOKET

When Wamsutta, the eldest son of Ousamequin (Yellow Feather), better known to us as Massasoit, became the chief sachem of Pokonoket in 1662 upon the death of his father, more than forty years of peaceful coexistence between the English at Plymouth and the Indians had passed. In those years there had been many changes in leadership. On that far off March day in 1621 the English had been few in numbers and were fearful of Indian hostility, while the Pokonokeuks, decimated by sickness, had been at the mercy of their hereditary enemies, the Narragansseuks, across Mount Hope Bay. The peace so critical to the safety and welfare of early Plymouth was founded on mutual need and good will. A long-enduring friendship based upon mutual respect and trust had developed between Carver's successor, Bradford, and the sachem Ousamequin. But now both of these leaders had been gathered to their fathers and those who had replaced them were plagued by suspicion and mistrust.

Sensing the deteriorating relationships between the Indians and the English, the "Old Comers" supported by the governor, persuaded the General Court in 1640 to grant them jurisdiction over the tribal lands of the Pokonokeuks, which they in turn solemnly reserved to the Indians "for ever." Unfortunately promises made "for ever" are very difficult to enforce. Succeeding generations often fail to respect the promises made by their ancestors.

There are several versions of the confrontations that arose between the Plymouth authorities and Wamsutta. These accounts differ so widely that, were it not for the names of the participants, one would hardly recognize them as descriptions of the same event. Whatever version we choose to accept, the arrest of Wamsutta and his death which immediately followed, convinced Metacomet (Philip) that the English had murdered his brother.

The historians who have given us accounts of this event have depended upon the contemporary reports of Increase Mather (1) or William Hubbard (2). Commenting upon the writings of these two authors, Ebenezer Pierce (3) says, "Had ungodly sinners varied thus in their testimony doubtless one or the other of them would have been 'liars,' and had such been the declaration of the Indians, it would have been laid to their heathenism and ignorance of the 'gospel of truth,' lack of Christian teaching and Christian example."

In instances of this sort in which there are so many contradictory statements coupled with ambiguous passages, and there are many such in the early history of New England, it behooves the historian to recount all of the existing evidence and then allow readers to arrive at their own conclusion.

Upon the assumption of the chief sachemship by Wamsutta it became increasingly apparent that the former amicable relationships between the English and their Indian neighbors was in danger.

In 1643 the General Court passed an order providing that no one should purchase Indian lands without first obtaining its approval (4): "Whereas it is holden very unlawful and of dangerous consequences and it hath been in constant custom from our first beginning That no Person or Persons have or

ever did purchase, Rent, or hire any lands, herbage, wood or timber of the Natives but by the Magistrate's consent. It is therefore enacted by this Court that if any person or persons do hereafter purchase, rent, or hire without the consent and assent of the Court, Every such person or persons shall forfeit five pounds for every acre thus purchased or hired."

In a curious interpretation of this act, which had been intended to protect the Indian owner, the Court in 1662 charged Wamsutta with being in contempt of the act because he "was alienating and not selling land to the colony." Without specifying the precise location of the land alleged to have been sold or naming the purchaser, the Court ordered Wamsutta to come to Plymouth and explain his actions. Wamsutta, denying the authority of the Court to summon him as if he were a subject of the colony, failed to answer the summons.

Probably realizing that the charge was a rather flimsy pretext for ordering the sachem before the Plymouth Court, Mather, in his account, says "Some of Boston, having occasionally been at Narragansett wrote to Mr. Prence, who was the governor of Plymouth, that Wamsutta was contriving mischief against the English and that he had solicited the Narragansetts to engage with him in his designed rebellion."

It was well known among the English that the Narragansseuks were the hereditary enemies of the Pokonokeuks and that the former would seize any opportunity that presented itself to drive a wedge between Pokonoket and Plymouth. Here at the very outset of Wamsutta's sachemship, when it was necessary for him to establish himself among his own people, was an opportunity to plant suspicion in the minds of his subjects.

The gullible authorities at Plymouth, however, swallowed the bait and sent Captain Thomas Willet post haste to Pokonoket to accuse Wamsutta of duplicity and to order him to appear before them to explain his actions. The arrogant assumption that the chief sachem was under the jurisdiction of an English court and could be summarily ordered to appear before it to answer unsupported accusations by an unnamed accuser was sufficient to arouse the anger of Wamsutta. Should he meekly bow to the English domination in this manner, his position among his people would be severely damaged. Prence could not have committed a worse diplomatic blunder. Carver or Bradford would never have reacted in such a manner. Wamsutta was much more statesman-like in his reply. He pointed out to Willet that the charges originated with his enemies with the obvious intention of stirring up trouble between him and the English as well as undermining his position among his own people by forcing him to bow to the demands of the Plymouth Court. Nevertheless, Wamsutta at first agreed to answer the summons served on him by Captain Willet. However, when the Court assembled, Wamsutta did not appear. Apparently he had reconsidered his decision and decided that it would not be proper for him to thus submit to English domination.

The Plymouth authorities assumed that Wamsutta's default proved that he was guilty of the charges they had leveled against him. Mather says, "the governor and magistrates there ordered Major Winslow to take a party of men and fetch down Alexander (Wamsutta)."

Josias Winslow of Marshfield, son of Edward Winslow, the third governor of Plymouth, was an ensign of the Marshfield militia in 1648, became captain in 1658, and was commissioned Major and made commander of all the Plymouth

forces in 1662. Because of his position he was selected by Governor Prence to carry out the order of the Court to seize Alexander (Wamsutta). According to Hubbard and Mather, Winslow, supposing he would find Wamsutta at his home in Pokonoket, took only ten men from Marshfield or Plymouth when he set out, intending to obtain additional help from the towns nearer his destination. Neither of these writers mentions Bradford in connection with the expedition, but the Rev. John Cotton, pastor of the church at Plymouth at the time, says that he was with the English force.

At the time of the Alexander incident, William Bradford, son of the second governor of Plymouth, was a captain of horse. He began his military career as an ensign of foot in 1648, was commissioned captain in 1659, and just prior to the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1674 was promoted to Major and placed in command of all the Plymouth forces. If Cotton is correct, Bradford was summoned from Plymouth with his mounted troop, to join Winslow in his expedition to arrest Wamsutta. Leaving early in the morning, in anticipation of a long and tedious journey to Pokonoket and back, the soldiers took the Indian path that led through Kingston and Bridgewater (now Halifax) which passed south of Monponset Pond. Had they continued they would have taken the Neponset Path southerly in Bridgewater, passing through Cohannet by the Old Bay Path and continued down the Bristol Path and the Pokonoket Trail to Wamsutta's village.

Mather, in his account, says "Divine Providence so ordered, as that when they were about midway between Plymouth and Bridgewater, they observed a hunting house, they rode up to it, and there did find Alexander and many of his men [Hubbard says eighty] well armed, but their guns standing without the house." Cotton, quoting Bradford, says, "At Monponset River, a place not many miles hence they found Alexander with about eight men and sundry squaws . . . He was there getting canoes . . . He and his men were at breakfast under a shelter, their guns being without." As Monponset Pond is about half way between Plymouth and Bridgewater the three authors, Hubbard, Mather, and Cotton or Bradford, agree as to the location at which Wamsutta was unexpectedly encountered.

In a letter dated December 1877 (8), Captain Ephraim H. Thompson of Halifax says that the site of Wamsutta's hunting lodge was on an island in Monponset Pond in what is now the township of Halifax, but in 1662 was within the bounds of the town of Bridgewater. Thompson says further that the lodge was on the southerly side of the island and that the island contained about twelve acres and was known as White's Island.

Bearse (5) says, "Route 58 bisects the twin Munponset Lakes via the century old causeway crossing White's Island where in July 1662, the Wampanoag sachem Wamsutta, son of Chief Massasoit, was arrested in his lodge by Plymouth vigilantes on conspiracy charges." The several contemporary accounts by Hubbard, Mather, and Bradford agree that the site of Wamsutta's capture was somewhere at or near Monponset Pond or Lake but do not mention an island. However, these differences concerning the precise location of the Indian hunting house are inconsequential compared with the contradictions found in their several descriptions of the reactions of the main characters involved in the incident.

Mather's account is the most dramatic of all the extant relations. He would have us believe that a small but intrepid band of English soldiers, not more than twelve in number, came upon the sachem Wamsutta and a large company

of armed warriors. That the Indians observed the approaching English but did not interrupt their breakfast even long enough to secure their arms which were standing outside of the house or shelter, and that the English resolutely seized these arms and surrounded the house without the slightest action or protest by the Indians. How it was possible for twelve English to surround eighty Indians is not explained. If these Indians were guilty of conspiring to attack the English as charged by the Plymouth Court, one would hardly expect them to act in such a manner. Mather says that the English, "having possessed themselves of the Indian's arms, and beset the house, then did he [Winslow] go in amongst them, acquainting the sachem with the reason for his coming in such a way; desiring Alexander with his interpreter to walk outside with him who did so a little distance from the house, and then understood what commission the Major had received concerning him."

Mather continues, "the proud sachem fell into a raging passion at this surprise saying the governor had no reason to credit rumors or to send for him in such a way, nor would he go to Plymouth but when he saw cause. It was replied to him, that his breach of word touching appearance at Plymouth Court and instead thereof going at the same time to his pretended enemies, argued the jealousies [suspicions] concerning him. In fine the Major told him that his order was to bring him to Plymouth and that, by the help of God, he would do it, or else he would die on the place . . . but that if he once more denied to go he should never stir from the ground whereon he stood; and with a pistol at the sachem's throat, required that his next words should be a positive and clear answer to what was demanded."

At this point in the confrontation the Indian interpreter (Roland Sassamon, brother to the ill-fated John Sassamon) spoke up, asking to be allowed to speak privately with Wamsutta before he gave his answer to the demand. After discussing the matter, Wamsutta is said by Mather to have consented to go to Plymouth provided that he would be accompanied by his company and as a free agent and not as a prisoner. The Major then retreated somewhat from his pistol-point demand, and agreed to Wamsutta's conditions, and the combined party of whites and Indians, including some squaws, set out for Plymouth.

A messenger was sent ahead by Winslow, explaining the reason for their early return and asking as many of the magistrates as possible with the governor to meet them at Duxbury. However, the governor now living at Eastham could not conveniently come to Plymouth that day and returned an answer asking that Winslow entertain the Indians at Marshfield until the court could be assembled.

Mather concludes his account by saying, "that not so much as an angry word passed between them whilst at Marshfield; yet proud Alexander, vexing and fretting in his spirit that such a check was given him, he suddenly fell sick of a fever. Mr. Fuller, the physician, coming providentially thither at the time, the sachem and his men earnestly desired that he should administer to him, which he was unwilling to do, but by importuning him it was prevailed with him to do the best he could to help him, and therefore gave him a portion of a working physic; which the Indians thought did him good. But his distemper afterwards prevailing, they entreated that those who held him prisoner should grant him liberty to return home, which upon engagement of appearance at the next court, was granted him. Soon after his being returned home he died."

Hubbard's account does not, in the main, differ too much from that of Mather. Hubbard says that Wamsutta had eighty in his company while Mather is content to say that he "had many." In closing Hubbard tells us that Wamsutta promised "to return again if he recovered and to send his son as a hostage till he could do so. On that convention he was fairly dismissed but died before he got half way home."

The Pierce genealogy of the royal family of Pokonoket does not mention any children of Wamsutta and Weetamoo, but there is an obscure statement in a letter of a Boston Merchant published in London in 1675-76 (6) which calls Massasoit or Ousamequin the grandfather of Metacomet (Philip) and names Moaniam alias Wamsutta as the son of Massasoit. Another passage in the same letter reads, "Philip, the Son of the aforesaid Moaniam was the grandson of Massasoit . . ." If we are willing to accept this rather radical change in the genealogy of the royal family, Wamsutta did have a son, Metacomet or Philip, who succeeded him as the great sachem. Thus, Philip would have been the son that Wamsutta offered to send to Plymouth as an hostage.

There is still another version of the arrest of Wamsutta that differs greatly from both the Hubbard and Mather accounts. Judge Davis in his edition of Morton's Memorial (9) reproduces a letter said to have been written by the Reverend John Cotton, minister at Plymouth to Increase Mather in which Cotton quotes the younger Bradford as saying that he was with Winslow when he surprised Wamsutta at Monponset Pond. The letter is not dated, but as Bradford is called "Major" it must have been written in 1674 or later when he had attained that rank.

The Cotton letter reads in part as follows: "Major Bradford confidently assures me that in the narrative "de Alexandro" (an account of the Wamsutta incident written for and approved by the Plymouth Court and now among the manuscripts in the library of the Massachusetts Historical Society) there are many mistakes, and, fearing that you should through some misinformation print some mistakes on that subject, from his mouth, I this write. Reports being here that Alexander was plotting against the English, authority sent him to come down. He came not. Whereupon Major Winslow was sent to fetch him. Major Bradford went with him. At Munponset river, a place not many miles hence, they found Alexander with about eight men and sundry squaws. He was there getting canoes. He and his men were at breakfast under their shelter, their guns being without. They saw the English coming, but continued eating; and Mr. Winslow telling his business, Alexander, freely and readily, without the least hesitation, consented to go, giving his reason why he had not come to court before, viz., because he waited for Captain Willett's return from the Dutch, being desirous to speak with him first. They brought him to Mr. Collin's that day (one of the magistrates) and Governor Prence living remote at Eastham, those few magistrates who were at hand issued the matter peaceably, and immediately dismissed Alexander to return home, which he did part of the way but, in two or three days returned and went to Major Winslow's house, intending to travel thence to the Bay and so home; but at the Major's house he was taken very sick, and was by water conveyed to Major Bradford's and thence carried upon the shoulders of his men to Tethquet [Titicut or Taunton] River and thence in canoes home, and, about two or three days after, he died."

It is obvious that some of the foregoing accounts contain misstatements. Both the reverend authors used the "de Alexandro" paper, a sort of white paper written under the direction of and approved by the Plymouth Court, as a

source, but, in spite of the statements by Bradford and Cotton, they failed to revise their original accounts.

It would seem that there was a deliberate attempt to depict Winslow as a second Miles Standish, an intrepid soldier who, despite eight to one odds, carried out his orders at great personal risk. By the time the Narratives of Hubbard and Mather were written, the Indians had charged that Wamsutta had been poisoned by the English. Perhaps it was to counter this accusation that Wamsutta was said to have been in a great rage and that his pride was so injured that it induced the illness that caused his death.

It might be of interest to close our account by quoting the suggestion of an interested physician who has pointed out that the Indians may have been correct in blaming the English for Wamsutta's death. Quoting Mather who said that Dr. Fuller administered a "working physic" and assuming that Wamsutta was suffering from an inflamed or ruptured appendix, the treatment could well have resulted in the death of the patient.

THE MONPONSET PATH

The Monponset Path originates at the Bay Path in Kingston (at the junction of Court Street and Wapping Road). This was probably the spot at which Major Winslow, who came from Marshfield, and Captain Bradford from Plymouth, met on the morning of their first day of their journey to Pokonoket where they intended to arrest the sachem Wamsutta.

From the Bay Path turn westerly onto Wapping Road and follow it about four miles to Harrub's Corner in Plympton where the name of the street becomes County Road. About one and a half miles further the street name again changes to Plymouth Street (at the Plympton town line). Another mile through the town of Halifax brings out to Monponset Pond at the junction of Route 58. South of the path before the present Route 58, there was in 1662 an Indian site that may have been the location of the hunting lodge where Wamsutta was found (M-40-NE-16).

This encounter with Wamsutta was unexpected by the English who thought that he was many miles away at his home village of Pokonoket. It had been their intention to follow the Monponset Path westerly through Halifax and Bridgewater, turning south in the latter town to follow the Easterly Path on South Street to the Taunton River crossing at Titicut (6 miles) and continuing south on Vernon and Richmond Streets to the Cohannet Path.

From this point, if Winslow chose to take the shortest route, the soldiers would have turned westerly following the Cohannet and Assonet Paths to another crossing of the Taunton River at East Taunton, where they would then have followed the Bristol Path (Somerset Street, Dighton) and through Somerset, Swansea, Warren (R.I.) and Barrington (R.I.) to Pokonoket.

Had they been obliged to make this round trip from Plymouth to Pokonoket they would have covered nearly a hundred weary miles. Judging by the pace set by Benjamin Church, who claims to have traveled on horseback about fifty miles in a day (see Pathways of the Past No. 2), Winslow would have taken at least two days to return with his prisoner.

We should add a word concerning the terms Neponset and Monponset as they are used in this paper. These almost identical names of paths in Bridgewater are most confusing. Probably this is simply a result of the weird spelling of colonial times. There is also a trail or path in Bridgewater which is called the Neap or the Nip Path probably alluding to its destination at Lake Nippinicket. In some of the old records the Neponset Path is referred to as the Easterly Path as its final destination at the coast is east of its origin in Middleboro.

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