

Stephen Tom of Chatham

by Doris Sherrow

J.B. Beers' History of Middlesex County Connecticut is the place to go whenever you want to know something about Portland's history, provided you are strong enough to pick it up--it's five inches thick! Consequently the statement in Beers "One of the Wangunks, known as **Indian Thomas**, was a soldier in the Revolution, and a pensioner..." is interesting, because "Indian Thomas" doesn't come up in other records. He doesn't figure in the many deeds of the Wangunk, nor the occasional mentions, like town welfare payments for old, blind **Tyke**, or **Benjamin Cuschoy's** probate papers.

So who was "Indian Thomas?"

As early as 1777, one "**Steaphen Thomas**" was a Chatham resident, receiving supplies for his service in the revolution. He listed five dependents in the "Revolutionary lists and returns, 1775-1783," printed by the Connecticut Historical Society. Another Thomas, "**Absealom**," who came from New London, was also listed.

In a similar listing for 1780, "Steaphen Thomas" still came from Chatham, and still listed five dependents. A 1781 list gave his rank as Private.

Although it may not be the same person, **Capt. Asaph Hall's** company, which was East Hampton-based, included a "Stephen Thompson" as of August, 1779. As you may have noticed, Indian names were spelled in a variety of ways.

On May 25, 1780, "Stephen Thomas" of Chatham was taken prisoner in a skirmish near Horseneck, New York. He was released January 5, 1781. That was a long time to stay in a prisoner encampment; even the camps of the troops were cold, miserable, and diseased in this time period.

However, Stephen Thomas returned to Portland, and in 1784, married a widow named **Ann** who had five children by her first husband. According to his pension application years later, he and she had no children of their own.

This information is confusing in the light of his reported family of five dependents during the Revolution. Possibly some document is filled out wrong, either by an information-taker who misunderstood Thomas, or because the truth would somehow deprive the family of benefits. However, it is possible that the wife and children for whom he received benefits during the Revolution had all died at some point and he had, in fact, married a widow struggling to raise five children. Such were the "good old days."

In the 1790 census, "Stephen Tom" was listed with six others in his family. For the white population, the 1790 census gave a bit of demographic information: males over 15, males 15 and under, and females. For slaves or "others," meaning free blacks or Indians, there was no breakdown of ages or genders. So we don't know anything about this family from the census, but the "six others" would readily accommodate Ann and the five children.

Ebenezer White, a justice of the peace, dealt with a case involving "Stephen Thomas" in 1792: Thomas was accused of theft by **John Crosby**, and convicted and fined 5 pounds on November 8, 1792. Interestingly, many men who are considered in other sources as honored forefathers, crop up in White's diary being fined for one stubborn action or another.

One thing about Stephen Thomas/Tom is clear: the sign on "**Stephen Tom Road**." This road, toward the eastern edge of Portland, probably points directly toward his old homestead. And "Stephen Tom" is probably the legitimate name for him, because in 1807, **Absalom Thomas** (remember Absalom Thomas from New London in the Revolution?) sold a house and lot he had bought from "Stephen Tom" in 1806, and that is the name he used. In fact, in the body of the deed, "Thom" is written, then crossed out, to be replaced by "Tom."

Unfortunately, Stephen Tom never filed the deed when he bought the land where he lived. It could have been as early as 1784, when, back from the Revolution, he married Ann. In 1806, he sold his land to Absalom Thomas, who must have been a relative of his. And when Absalom sold the house, he described it thus: "being the same house and land where the s[ai]d Stephen Tom last lived in s[ai]d Chatham...a little south of **Elijah Stocking's** house."

Elijah Stocking had built the charming Cape Cod style house at 121 Great Hill Road around 1750, and lived there until his death in 1807. (The Cape Cod house just south of Stocking's house and

directly opposite Stephen Tom Road is a twentieth century creation, though I'm sure Stocking would have loved it.) If Stephen Tom lived "a little south of Elijah Stocking's house," he would have lived in the vicinity of the modern Cape Cod, opposite Stephen Tom Road. Which is probably how the road got that name!

It is tempting to think that Stephen Tom left the area as his neighbor, Elijah Stocking, failed in health. Stocking died in 1807, the year after Stephen Tom had sold his lot to Absalom.

By 1818, Stephen Tom was living in Oneida County, New York. He applied for a pension based on his military service. He was then 80 years old, which means he had been born in 1738. He died on February 7, 1831, still in Oneida County, and his 96-year-old widow Ann reapplied for the pension from Brown County, Wisconsin in 1840. She seems to have lasted till 1844, age 100, when the last pension check was paid to her surviving children.

So think of them next time you stop at the intersection of Stephen Tom and Great Hill roads. The area is still nearly as rural as it would have been when he and the children farmed and fished...