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Keene's Captivity Story

Every day, thousands of people pass the corner of Main and Winchester streets, unaware that on that very spot a man was captured by a Native American war party 272 years ago.

The man was Nathan Blake, a white settler of what was then called "Upper Ashuelot," later to be named Keene, NH. Nathan came here in 1734 from Wrentham, MA, with his brother, Dr. Obadiah Blake, his sister, Sarah, and her husband, Thomas Fisher, and seven other British colonists.

Good farm land was becoming scarce along the New England coast due to white settlement patterns and the practice of primogenitor. If a family farm was inherited by the eldest son, the other siblings (which often were many) had to find other land to farm to support themselves.

Both French and English explorers and settlers were in search of what was seemingly endless unsettled land, as well as the raw materials so plentiful here; timber, furs, fish, and metals. The French had claimed northern land and were spreading west and south, bringing Catholic missionaries with them. The British were spreading west and north, infiltrating overland and up the Connecticut River, armed with their culture of land use and Protestant religious beliefs.

Forests were considered by them to be unclaimed land; however, the Connecticut River Valley and the area that is now Cheshire County had been inhabited for at least 12,500 years. Ash Swamp in Keene and the Whipple Site in Swanzey are two of the first signs of Paleo-Indian people in New Hampshire. These people were hunters, farmers, and fisher men.

During the French and English expansion, if native settlements were encountered, they were either taken by force or "purchased." Since native people had no concept of land ownership, they assumed they were deeding over the right to joint use of land, not restrictive private possession. Consequently, they were confused and angry when forced off their land.

Also, the great thirst for furs in Europe, especially beaver, created a lucrative trade item. English and French trading posts were set up along the Connecticut River and in large towns such as Albany. Native trappers could trade pelts for blankets, metal pots, tools, guns and especially rum. This created competition and conflict among tribes.

Conflicts erupted into wars. Tensions resulted from the violence. Consequently, these factors caused many

native people to leave their home land and head north to Quebec, mainly the settlement of Saint Francis. Here French settlers and soldiers, as well as priests, encouraged a disdain for the English colonists. In partnership with the French, warriors of the Wabanaki Confederacy began raids to steal, capture and destroy English settlements over a period of many years.

1746 saw a lot of activity in this region. Small raids were made on Northfield, Hinsdale, Lower Ashuelot (Swanzey), Hopkinton, and Fort #4 (Charleston). Two days after Nathan Blake was captured during the April 23rd raid on Upper Ashuelot, Captain Pomery arrived with 400 troops and saved the settlers here from further immediate danger. But warriors struck again on July 10th, when Josiah Fischer was killed and scalped while driving his cow to pasture. Scalping may have been a response to the English ransom offered on any Native scalps that were turned in.

All this proved to be too much because settlers abandoned Upper Ashuelot in April 1747 and returned to Massachusetts. Farming had become impossible and protection difficult. Once the settlers left, the Natives burned all the buildings except for the mill at Beaver Brook and the house belonging to the miller.

Peace was declared between England and France in October of 1748, but conflicts between settlers and Natives continued until 1749, at which time a peace treaty was established. That same year, Nathan Blake returned from captivity. Upper Ashuelot proprietors also returned and began to rebuild their homes and village. What is today the oldest home in Keene was built by Seth Heaton on Marlboro Street at this time.

The memorial to Nathan Blake on the corner of Main and Winchester streets will be re-dedicated by the Daughters of the American Revolution this May.

To honor the event, the Horatio Colony House Museum will be hosting an exhibit on the Native American and early colonial presence in the region. There will also be complimentary programs by Dr. Robert Goodby from Franklin Pierce University on his archeological findings here and in Swanzey; the Indian Wars of New England presented by Michael Tougias; and King Philip's War by Dr. Lisa Brooks from Amherst College.

For more details on these events, visit www.horatiocolonymuseum.org or call 603-352-0460.

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