ATHERTON'S SEIZURE OF 400 SQUARE MILES OF NARRAGANSETT LAND

There is a long but interesting background to Humphrey Atherton's seizure of 400 square miles of Narragansett land (about 40% of the land in today's Rhode Island).

On June 9, 1660, Connecticut wrote a letter to the Commissioners of the United Colonies of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut and New Haven regarding "Alleged Indian Outrages by Narragansett uncircumscribed Heathens" and "beastly minded and mannered Creatures" who shot eleven bullets into a house of the English for which Connecticut sought a response from the Commissioners (see page 19 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame).

This happened near today's Norwich, Connecticut on the Thames River on land provided to Jonathan Brewster by the Mohegans enabling him to establish a trading post there. It was Brewster's house at which the Narragansett had fired shots.

The house was clearly in Mohegan Territory. It was across the River from the home base of Uncas who had asked for the trading post. The Narragansett had invaded Mohegan territory as a part of their war with the Mohegans after they murdered the Narragansett Sachem Miantonomi.

At that time, Connecticut did not have a Royal Charter and so technically did not have jurisdiction over crimes in that area. But the Mohegans did and they were allied with Connecticut and the Bay Colony.

In addition, Brewster was the son of William Brewster, the original senior elder of the Plymouth Colony, and had first come to the Mohegan Territory as agent for Plymouth, so most of the United Colonies had an interest in coming to the aid of the Mohegans.

But the Narragansett had a legitimate grievance against Brewster because his trading post was providing guns, gun powder and shot to their enemies Uncas and the Mohegans.

Before the eleven shots were fired, the Narragansett shot one of Brewster's Mohegan servants who, at that time, was holding on for dear life to the waist of Brewster's wife (Lucretia Oldham, sister of John Oldham). This was a traumatic experience for her.

(See pages 83 and 84 of *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts* by Fisher and Silverman for much of the story regarding the eleven bullets)

On Sept. 6, 1660, the Commissioners responded to the Connecticut letter of June 6, 1660, with a message to the Narragansett Sachems (despite the Sachems' insistence that they had not consented to the shooting of the "8" bullets) requiring the Sachems to deliver at least four of the Indians who shot at the house for punishment or, in case that did not happen, requiring them to deliver 500 fathoms of wampum. (see page 22 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame). Half of the Commissioners were also associates of Atherton who would be trying to benefit from what followed (John Winthrop Jr., Simon Bradstreet, Daniell Denison and Josiah Winslow).

A fathom is 2 yards. It took 3.5 to 7 days for one person to make a fathom of wampum. 500 fathoms of wampum would require 1,750 to 3,500 days of labour or almost 5 to 10 years.

On Sept. 29, 1660, the Sachems provided a mortgage of their whole country (400 square miles or 50 square miles per bullet) as security for the required wampum, which was to be paid in four months (see page 26 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame).

On Oct. 1, 1660, the Narragansett Sachems accepted an offer from Humphrey Atherton and his associates to take a mortgage on all the lands in Narragansett country (the 400 square miles) upon condition that he and his associates pay the required wampum to the Commissioners. The mortgage provided that if the Sachems paid to him and his associates the required wampum within six months the grant would become void (see page 28 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame). This was done to circumvent the law in the Providence Plantations (later Rhode Island) forbidding purchases of land from the Indians.

The wampum was not tendered on time by the Sachems and the land was seized.

Francis Jennings alleges that the required wampum was tendered within the six months but was refused and the land was seized anyway (see page 279 of *The Invasion of America* by Jennings). In fact, none of the sources referenced by Jennings in footnote 65 on page 279 say that the required wampum was tendered. For that matter, the majority of those sources state the exact opposite – that the wampum was never tendered. The referenced report in 1687 by Andros says that the Atherton mortgage was extorted by a troop of horse from Massachusetts, and that the debt on which it was based was fictitious.

On December 17, 1661, Humphrey Atherton died, at the age of 52, when his horse was frightened by a cow. He had been exercising his men of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company and was returning home in the evening.

On March 20, 1664, Royal Commissioners, who had been appointed by Charles II, declared the purchase in Narragansett country under the Atherton mortgage to be void upon payment of 750 fathom of wampum, which the Narragansett may have previously raised and tendered (see page 36 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame). The additional 250 fathoms was interest charged by the Atherton Company at the rate of 50%.

On Oct. 30, 1672, the purchase of Narragansett lands by Humphrey Atherton and his partners was recognized by the Assembly of Rhode Island, apparently because of all the work that had been done on those lands over many years by those deriving title to the lands from the Atherton partners (see page 38 of *The Narragansett Mortgage* by Burlingame).

On December 18, 1675, John Winthrop Jr., Governor of Connecticut, wrote to the Connecticut General Court on behalf of Jonathan Atherton, as administrator of his father's estate, regarding the release of security given by him on the lands fraudulently

taken from the Narragansett by his father and his partners (see page 543 of *The Public Records of The Colony of Connecticut, from 1665 to 1678*).

King Charles II issued a commission in 1683 to Edward Cranfield, and others, to inquire into the claims and titles to Narragansett lands, and make report. By that time the Narragansett and other New England Tribes had lost King Philip's War with the consequence that seizure of the 400 square miles by the Atherton Company was confirmed by conquest. The Commissioners met at Boston, in October, 1683. Their report, dated Oct. 20, 1683, confirmed the title of the mortgage proprietors and assigned the jurisdiction of the Narragansett Country to Connecticut. (see page 229-237 of *The Early History of Narragansett* by Potter).

It is interesting to note that Narragansett Country became the King's Province after the Narragansett submitted themselves as subjects to Charles II. It then became Kings County as a part of Rhode Island in 1728, so Connecticut finally lost the battle for jurisdiction. Kings County became Washington County after the American Revolution.