

## **HEROES OF THE BATTLE ROAD, Truth or Fiction?**

There is no corroboration for the incidents described by Frank Wilson Hersey in his pamphlet, *Heroes of the Battle Road*. Hersey's stories date from the twentieth century. Stories appearing a hundred years after the events related are not creditable.

According to his account for the *Fiftieth Anniversary Report, Harvard Class of 1899*, Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey was born October 9, 1876 in Chelsea, Massachusetts. He attended school in Chelsea until 1889 when the family moved to Lincoln. While living in Lincoln, Hersey "eagerly became familiar with all the historic and literary sites." The famous shrines made a profound and lasting impression on him.

"One summer day my mother and I drove over the Old North Road with Deacon Jonas Hartwell who told us the story which his grandmother had told him about the events which occurred here on the 19th and 20th of April 1775. I zealously wrote down the account as we went along and sketched a map to identify every spot. Many years later, in 1930, I utilized these valuable records in writing my book, *Heroes of the Battle Road*."

During these years Hersey was in the Lincoln High School class of 1894. From 1895-99, he attended Harvard (A.B. 1899 and A.M. 1900). From 1900 to 1904 he was Instructor in English at Brown University. Returning to Harvard, he taught English literature for thirty-eight years, until his retirement in 1942. His interest in poetry in drama was continuous and he published many articles and books.

When he wrote the forward for *Heroes*, Hersey added detail to the story Mary Hartwell told Deacon Hartwell, her grandson. Deacon Hartwell told him how his grandmother "roused the Captain, how she watched the King's troops march past. . . ." Hersey said another grandson, Selectman Samuel Hartwell repeated the story told by Jonas.

To document the background for Hersey's story, I have copied an April 15, 1894 Boston Globe story told by Lincoln Selectman Samuel Hartwell (precisely the time when Hersey lived in Lincoln). To show the source for other details in Hersey's *Heroes of the Battle Road*, I have copied a story printed on 18 April 1900 in *The Boston Evening Transcript*. Describing events in Lincoln on the eve of the American Revolution, the anonymous article was titled, with historical allusion, *Chevy Chase in Lincoln*. Students of English literature knew this referred to an ancient British conflict, probably dating from the fifteenth century. Rivalry between England and Scotland was continuous. Percy, Earl of Northumberland, vowed to hunt for three days across the Scottish border on land belonging to the Douglas clan. When they met, they fought; Percy and Douglas were killed. The anonymous author thought it relevant because Lord Percy directed the British retreat from Concord.

Although anonymous had a superficial acquaintance with the characters and the scene, there are serious flaws. Ephraim and John Hartwell were not old feeble brothers, but active men, father and son. The action and dialog of Yeoman Childs, in the newspaper account, Hersey transferred to William Thorning.

Many have questioned the fear and frightened behavior of Hartwell's Negro servant Sukey, Sukey is a nickname for Susan. Ephraim Hartwell had a Negro servant named Violet. Five years before he died, Ephraim Hartwell named her when he wrote *his* will;

"I give unto Elizabeth Hartwell my Beloved Wife the use and Improvement of one third part of my Dwelling House & Cellers under the Same, which part She shall choose, with the priviledge of the well, House-yard &c During her natural life. And I give unto my said wife my Negro woman, named Violet for her own Service & Disposal. I also give unto my sd wife the use of all my house hold goods (excepting Barrels and one good Feather bed) During her life; I also give her annually During life Twelve bushels of Indian meal, Six bushels of Rye meal, one bushel & an half of Malt, half a bushel of white beans, two hundred pounds of pork. Eighty pounds of Beef, Two barrels of cyder, with barrels to keep it in, Six Bushels of winter apples, and all other sauce necessary for her, and Ten cords of Wood at her House cut fit for her use. Two good milch cows well kept for her Summer & Winter, and a horse to ride as she may have occasion; and also Five pounds Lawful Silver money annually, if called for. . . ."

To their son John, who remained at home and cared for his aging parents living in the new ell (added when John married making the house convenient for two families under one roof), Ephraim left the house.<sup>1</sup>

When Ephraim Hartwell died, in 1793, the Supreme Judicial Court had, with decisions in 1781 and 1784, abolished slavery. By 1790, the first Federal Census, there were no slaves in Massachusetts. The Hartwells may have considered Violet part of the family. In 1813, John Hartwell was administrator of the estate, valued at \$218, of a single Negro woman, Violet Thayer. She owned a thimble, three work bags, a lot of yarn, eight yards of shirting, ten-and-a-half of sheeting, and a foot wheel. She had money on loan to Samuel Hartwell and Bulkley Adams. Administrator Hartwell paid himself for boarding Violet, including fuel and candles, twenty-two weeks in 1808. He paid for boarding and nursing her in her last sickness, seven weeks in January and February 1813 and Doctor Haywood's bill. There were funds for her grave clothes, coffin, a suitable funeral, and \$114.45 remained. Evidently Violet was a successful seamstress.<sup>2</sup>

The *Heroes* account is folklore. It does no credit to the family or the town. The true story would more faithfully depict the heroes of the Battle Road.

1. Middlesex Probate, 10560.
2. Middlesex Probate Book 117:506-8.

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