

CHAPTER II

THE MOHICAN HUNTING GROUND

THOUGH the inhabitants of the beautiful hills and valleys of eastern Berkshire and western Hampshire counties realize in a general way that their lands must at some time have belonged to the Indians, little interest has been aroused in the subject. No doubt this is due to the absence of the savage warfare which took place in the Connecticut Valley and in many other places in the eastern part of the state. It is not without satisfaction, however, that one learns that this territory was once a portion of the ancient domain of the Mohicans, whose fame has been immortalized in Cooper's tale, and whose loyalty to the colonists during the wars with the French and their Indian allies contributed much to the peaceful settlement of the western part of the state.

This branch of the Algonquin nation originally lived along the banks of the Hudson. Westward they claimed as much territory as could be covered in two days journey, and northward as far as Lake Champlain on the east side of the river. Eastward their land extended through western Massachusetts to "the head waters of the Westfield" or the hills of the Hoosac Range which extend north and south through Middlefield and the neighboring townships.

The early traditions indicate that the Mohicans could at one time summon a thousand warriors at the call of battle and that they held in subjection the individual tribes of central and western New York. With the formation of the confederacy of the Six Nations, however, their ascendancy came to an end, and about 1625, they were driven into the Connecticut Valley, and their Berkshire hunting grounds appropriated by the hated Mohawks. During this period it is said that every year two old Mohawk chiefs would paddle from the Hudson, up the Hoosac, carry their elmbark canoes across the mountains along the Mohawk Trail to the headwaters of the Deerfield River and journey

down the Connecticut to collect tribute from the subject tribes that lived along its banks.

The sway of the Mohawks was not lasting. When Albany was taken from the Dutch by the English, the remnants of the Mohicans were occupying their original possessions and were waging a more or less successful warfare with their hereditary enemies. The council fire of the Mohicans was originally near Schodack, New York, but the influx of the Dutch led them to sell their Hudson River lands and move eastward, about 1664, to the Housatonic River, where they were known as River Indians. In 1735 a tract of land was reserved for them in Stockbridge where they lived until after the Revolution. They eventually removed to New York State, and their descendents are now on a reservation at Green Bay, Wisconsin.

As there were no lakes or navigable streams in what is now Middlefield, it is doubtful if the Mohicans ever had a large or permanent settlement here. Yet this region is not without its Indian relics. In the woods near the northwest corner of the township is a large flat boulder with a perfectly round, bowl-shaped cavity in the center. That this curiosity is an old Indian mortar seems to be authenticated by the finding of a stone pestle or axe near by which is now exhibited in the Pittsfield museum. Spear points and arrow heads found in a neighboring lot and in an abandoned house add to the evidence. As it was the custom of the Indians to plant their crops at a distance from their settlements where hostile tribes would not discover them, the wooded slopes near the head of Factory Brook may have once concealed the Mohican corn fields.

Remains of Indian villages have also been found at Dalton and Pittsfield, whose occupants are thought to have been game keepers for the main settlements further west, supplying the warriors with food and making preparations for the annual hunting and trapping expeditions in which all took part. An early history of the tribe states that they were accustomed in early March to hunt moose in their winter quarters on the mountains, and in the fall to capture deer, bear, otter, raccoon, martin, and various fish, thus providing themselves with dried food and clothing for the winter.



INDIAN MORTAR—WASHINGTON, MASS.

Only one Indian name attaching to the Middlefield country has been preserved—"Pontoosne"—the original name for the west branch of the Westfield River, the winding course of which is now followed by the Boston and Albany Railroad. This word at once suggests that more familiar "Pontoosuc," meaning "The Field of the Winter Deer," which was applied not only to Pittsfield but also to certain woods in Cummington and other places in Hampshire County not identified. From this fact, it is inferred that the region of "the head waters of the Westfield River" was considered by the Mohicans as their regular hunting ground.

There is some reason to believe that in the days of the Pilgrims the beaver were very plentiful in the Middlefield streams and marshes. Whether or not the formations on the Den Stream are beaver dams or not, the Westfield River branches were also frequented by the Woronoaks who lived at what is now Westfield. So famous did this tribe become for its beaver pelts that in 1640 Governor Hopkins of Hartford under the impression that this Indian village lay within the boundary of Connecticut established a trading post there for a short time.

Whether this boundary region between the Mohicans and the Connecticut River tribes was ever a scene of dispute and conflict will only be known through the investigation of archaeologists. Whatever Indian blood was shed on Berkshire soil was, as will be seen later, that of hostile savages from other sections, and not that of the native owners in defense of their rightful possessions. As we shall now see, the transfer of the Middlefield region from the Stockbridge Indians to the colonists was accomplished in a more legal and peaceful manner.

In the disposal of their lands the Indians were at a disadvantage, although the Provincial Government sought to protect both them and the proprietors by forbidding the purchase of land without authority and by ordering that all transfers of ownership be properly recorded. Without surveyors the Indians could not define in detail the borders of the tracts sold, but they naturally could not see the necessity for such exactness when they retained, as they usually did, the right to hunt and fish, and supposed that the pale faces would use the land for the same purpose. It is not surprising to learn, therefore, that the bound-

aries of grants as surveyed by the proprietors did not always agree with the descriptions in the Indian deeds—a fact which discloses the temptation of the proprietors to occupy more land than they had actually purchased.

In tracing the purchase of the Middlefield territory from the Indians it must be remembered that, when the township was incorporated in 1783, it was composed of sections of townships or grants already established. We therefore have no picturesque meeting of proprietors and Indians such as occurred at Westfield in 1724 when the Housatonics exchanged the first and perhaps the choicest portion of their hunting ground, the beautiful region now mainly comprising Sheffield and Great Barrington, for four hundred sixty pounds, three barrels of cider and thirty quarts of rum. On the contrary, we shall find that Middlefield contains portions of three different purchases from the Indians made at different periods before the establishment of the township.

Just east of the Sheffield and Great Barrington tract the Indians sold a second and larger portion of their domain in 1737 to Nahum Ward, of Shrewsbury, and Ephraim Williams, of Newton, to whom had been granted four townships bordering on the road from Westfield to Sheffield. The proprietors faced a difficult and expensive task in making a survey of their territory, especially in the northeast section where Township No. 4 was to be marked out in a country where rugged, wooded hills were interspersed with frequent lakes and swamps. According to the original plat of November 24, 1736, which was accepted by the General Court, this township included parts of what are now Otis and Tyringham, but in June the next year the proprietors submitted a new plat on which No. 4 was shown as a rectangle just north of that region, or where Becket now is. This plat was accepted June 24, 1737, No. 4 receiving seven hundred thirty-eight acres of the land formerly shown as No. 4 as equivalent land for lakes. In December the proprietors, having paid twelve hundred pounds to the Committee of the General Court, and three hundred pounds to the Stockbridge Indians, to obtain a title, were confirmed in the possession of their Berkshire tract.

When we examine the Indian deed of conveyance, we find that the northern boundary of the four townships is given as “wilder-

ness and Province land'' and the eastern boundary as the Farmington River. According to this description the northeast corner of Township No. 4 could not have been much further north or east than Shaw Pond, near West Becket, which is the Farmington River's main source. Now of the proprietors' new plat the northeast corner was eight miles further northeast, at a point near what is now Middlefield Center, with the northern boundary of the township running west toward what is now Becket station, and the eastern boundary running south over Mt. Gobble. Practically the whole of what is now Becket, which included the southwest quarter of Middlefield, seems clearly not to have been covered by the deed of the Indians to Ward and Williams.

That the Indian deed was based on the old plat is evidenced not only by a comparison of the two but also by the date it was signed,—June 2, 1737, three weeks before the new plat was accepted by the General Court. The question naturally arises why the proprietors obtained their title at this time when they had just completed a new survey which clearly included land outside the boundaries mentioned in the deed. In the light of subsequent events the explanation seems to be that the proprietors saw to it that the boundaries were so vaguely described in the deed that they might be interpreted by the General Court as covering the Becket tract as well as the land contained in the old survey; or they may have considered that the Becket and Middlefield region lay along the border line of the ancient Mohican domain and that any claim of the Stockbridge Indians to it might be successfully disputed by the Province. At any rate the Indian deed was allowed and confirmed without question, and the proprietors were granted all remaining land contained in it which had not been granted to them by the Court. There is no record or indication that the proprietors paid an additional sum for the Becket land.

It seems probable, therefore, that the Indians were kept in ignorance of the existence of the new plat and grant until they saw settlements being made in the Becket region. That they put forward some claim to this land is shown by the fact that the proprietors of Township No. 4 in August, 1752, appointed a committee to investigate the matter and report to the General Court. This action seems to have been taken in response to the General

Court's act of June 5 to consider a petition of the Stockbridge Indians "that there are divers tracts of land belonging to them upon which the English Inhabitants of this Province are settled without purchasing the Petitioner's Right" and that full satisfaction be given them. No recompense, however, was given them at this time.

An indication that the Stockbridge Indians claimed land as far east as the main branch of the Westfield River running south through Cummington and Worthington is found in a deed executed in 1750 by four Indian owners whereby the tract of land lying east of Pittsfield and bounded on the east by the Westfield River was conveyed to Johannis Mtoksin, also an Indian. This tract included what is now Peru besides parts of Cummington, Worthington, Hinsdale and Washington and also a northern strip of Middlefield including the Smith Hollow region. An idea of how this trackless wilderness appeared to the Indians may be had from their picturesque description of it in their deed as "consisting of upland Swamp and meadow land wood Timber Clay Stones mines & minerals Springs of water Brooks Ponds of Water Courses." Although signed in 1750 this deed was not recorded until 1758 at which time several other large tracts mostly in northern Berkshire were also conveyed to Johannis Mtoksin by Indian owners. It might be gathered from this that the Indians, after experiencing difficulties in obtaining recompense for lands deemed illegally occupied by white settlers, sought to establish their own title to those lands yet unoccupied, by having deeds recorded after the manner of the white man.

Another section of Middlefield the ownership of which was once a subject of controversy between the Indians and the whites is a triangular piece of land in the uninhabited West Hill region in the northwest part of the town which was ceded by the town of Washington in 1783. Washington was originally a tract lying between Becket and Pittsfield and was called Watson town from its reputed owner, Richard Watson, of Sheffield, who sold it to a company of Connecticut men in 1757. It soon developed, however, that Watson had neither satisfied the claim of the Indians to his land nor obtained the consent of the Province to its purchase. Watson being in bankruptcy, the

proprietors made a new beginning, repurchasing the tract from Konkapot and two other Indian owners and later paying eight hundred pounds for a grant from the General Court.

The conflicting claims of the Indians and the province to the Mohican borderland came to a crisis when the General Court proposed in 1760 to lay out ten townships most of which were in eastern Berkshire and western Hampshire counties, and therefore covered in part by the Indian deeds to Mtoksin already mentioned. The Middlefield territory was involved in this dispute as it contains portions of three of the townships established, which are known to-day as Chester, Worthington and Peru.

In 1762, therefore, Konkapot on behalf of all the Indian owners petitioned that the sale of these townships be stayed until the claims of the Indians could be heard, setting forth that they were recognized by all Indian Nations as the lawful owners of lands as far as Westfield River; that they had always been faithful to the English and had lost many men in their wars; and yet the General Court had granted away several large tracts of their land against which they had formerly protested, but had never obtained redress, although assurances of compensation had been given them; and that they now heard that all lands in western Massachusetts were to be sold by the Province. A committee was thereupon appointed to investigate these claims, and it reported that while the Indians had not produced sufficient evidence of ownership, it was recommended that one thousand pounds be paid them to quiet them and to secure title to all their remaining lands. The Indians must have had friends at court for the amount was raised to fifteen hundred pounds and again to seventeen hundred pounds before they signed away the remainder of their hunting grounds.

The "last of the Mohicans" thereupon retired peacefully to the reservation at Stockbridge and the pioneers of Middlefield and neighboring towns were soon establishing homes in "the green woods between Westfield and Pontoosuc" without fear of molestation from its former possessors.