

JOSEPH ATTEAN

(1829 - 1870)

by S. Glenn Starbird, Jr.

Looking back from the perspective of the century of time that has passed since the death of Joseph Attean it is difficult for the historian to understand why his only claim to fame in the eyes of the public at large seems to be that for a short time he was Henry David Thoreau's guide. Joseph Attean, however; was far more than a simple Indian guide, he was a Chief, the son of a Chief, descended from a long line of Chiefs and far more than that even, he had the character, qualities and ability needed for the station into which he was born. The meager records of Penobscot Tribal History which tell us of the troubled times through which he lived give us brief snatches of his life story but more than that, they tell us also, of the political factionalism that nearly tore the tribe to pieces before it was finally settled, largely through the efforts and abilities of Joseph Attean.

He worked as did his fellow tribesmen, in the woods and on the river drives to earn his living for this was a time when the lives of most Maine men were spent in the woods and on the rivers. Joseph Attean and his nephew Steve Stanislaus (Fannie Eckstorm consistently but incorrectly calls them cousins) shortly gained a reputation of being two of the best river drivers and boatmen on the Penobscot. They normally worked in the same boat, one at the bow and one at the stern and so well did they work together, (they were nearly twins

in their height, weight, general looks, manners and mental outlook) that they operated their boat almost as a single man. The fact that Stanislaus was not in the boat the day Joseph Attean died was the one factor perhaps more than any other that sealed his fate and that of two others. Joseph Attean was born Christmas Day 1829 and grew up during the 1830's and 1840's when strong resistance was growing to many of the policies of his father and his father's Lieutenant Governor John Neptune. This resistance and political unrest eventually came to a head in 1838 when the group opposed to Attean and Neptune after consulting with the heads of the Passamaquoddy and Maliseet Tribes (always up to this time federated with the Penobscots) and finding these in agreement, concluded to attempt to depose Attean and Neptune and choose new chiefs. Therefore a convention of the three tribes was called to meet at Indian Island, Old Town in August 1838 for an election according to their ancient usages.

The group opposed to the old Chiefs, accomplished their purpose and chose new ones but the trouble did not end there for the old leaders refused to step down and their supporters continued to regard them as the true Heads of the Tribe. Neither party would back down, apparently even rejecting the State's well-meaning effort at settlement the next year. From that time on those who followed Attean and Neptune were

called the Old Party and those favoring the newly elected leaders Tomer Sockalexix and Attean Orson were known as the New Party. This state of affairs continued throughout the 1840's causing much discord and disruption in Tribal life and because of this, more and more of the authority of the Chiefs was taken over by the State and in several instances political differences resulted in bloodshed. When John Hubbard became Governor of Maine he immediately tried to find a way to bring some order out of the chaos that was developing rapidly in both tribes, for a similar situation existed among the Passamaquoddies. In the case of the Passamaquoddies he was successful, with the Penobscots he was not.

The agreement entered into about 1850 between the officers and principal members of both parties at the urging of the Governor of Maine provided that: "as John Attean and John Neptune were chosen according to the ancient usages of the tribe into their respective offices, that they should remain in said offices during the remainder of their lives, and on the decease of one or both, the vacancy should be filled by majority vote of the male members of the tribe of twenty-one years of age and upwards, in a meeting duly called by the Agent. Said officers to continue for two years, and that an election should be held every year to choose one member of the tribe to represent the tribe before the

Legislature and the Governor and Council." Elections were then held annually for choice of representative and although the State now recognized Attean and Neptune as the legal Chiefs there still existed much ill feelings often resulting in conditions close to a riot at many elections.

Governor John Attean died in 1858 and after the usual period of mourning the Old Party declared his son Joseph, his successor and he was duly inaugurated by them, according to ancient Indian custom, for life. The succession to the offices of Governor & Lieutenant Governor was still a hotly disputed issue between the two parties but now a generation had passed since the original rupture and it seems apparent that Joseph Attean had decided in his own mind that the time was ripe to settle the chaotic political situation once and for all.

On page 68 of Fannie Hardy Eckstorm's "The Penobscot Man" she describes Joseph Attean as "not only brave but good, an open-hearted, patient, forbearing sort of man,.....loved for his mild justness." These were exactly the qualities needed in a leader, especially at that particular period. In addition to his undoubted leadership abilities Joseph Attean had the prestige of his background and ancestry, an ancestry that traditionally traced to Chief Madockawando and perhaps even further to the half-legendary Bashaba. With these assets Attean commanded respect from even his New Party political opponents. As soon as Joseph

Attean was firmly in control of his own party he seems to have made enforcement of the agreement of 1850 one of the first issues to be settled. He felt sure of his position and so earnestly did he desire a solution to the tribe's leadership question that he was willing to submit himself to the elective process for possession of an office that was his hereditary right. Exactly how the firebrands of the two parties were persuaded to submit themselves to the ballot is not known but quite likely the patience and forbearance of Joseph Attean played a large part in it. Only one change seems to have been made in the 1850 agreement, that the elections should be annual instead of biennial beginning with 1862. Mrs. Eckstorm says in a note on the bottom of page 69 of *The Penobscot Man*,....."Joseph Attean won his election by popular vote against great opposition, and carried seven out of the eight elections held up to the time of his death. The eighth-by the intervention of the so-called 'Special Law' passed by the state to reduce the friction between the parties-was the New Party's first election, none of Joseph Attean' party, the Old Party, or Conservatives, voting that year."

Of course Joseph Attean's popularity even among New Party members did not set too well with New Party leaders,

with the result that the Special Law of 1866 mentioned above was passed giving the two parties exclusive election rights in alternate years beginning in 1867 with the Old Party. In agreeing to this it shows how far Joseph Attean was willing to go to settle forever the party strife and animosity that had almost destroyed his tribe's political existence, for Attean and his new Lieutenant-Governor Saul Neptune (who was chosen by the Old Party to succeed his father John upon the latter's death in 1865) had little to fear in an open election. The new law had the desired effect, and from that time on, for the most part, elections were conducted in an orderly manner, everyone abiding by the results, until the law was again changed about 1930.

Unfortunately, however, Joseph Attean was not to live to see the long term results of his efforts. Political office in the Penobscot Tribe at that period in time was not the best place to earn a living. Although a small stipend was paid, the holder of any office in the tribe could not support a family on it and so had to look elsewhere for a livelihood. In Joseph Attean's case as it was in so many others, his livelihood involved working in the woods in the winter and on the river drives in the spring and summer. It was while on one of these drives in 1870, near present day Millinocket,

that Attean was drowned in the West Branch of the Penobscot trying to save the lives of three fellow drivers who could not swim.

Fannie Eckstorm has told the story culled from the memories of the men who were there and saw it happen in her book "The Penobscot Man," of the jam, of the logs"....ricked up like jackstraws on both sides of the falls....," of the boats ordered into the roaring tumult near the falls to try to break the jam. In one of those boats was Joseph Attean, but on this day his nephew Stephen Stanislaus was not, and this in the end made all the difference. In his place the day before had been put Charles Prouty, young and inexperienced, so much so in fact he had acquired a nickname, Dingbat, that was to stick with him the rest of his life. His clumsiness and inexperience was probably the reason he almost lost his life that day along with three others (including Joseph Attean) who did. At least all who were there agreed it was his fault, all that is except John Ross the river boss who later told Fannie Eckstorm the responsibility was really his for putting Prouty in the bow position in that boat in the first place. Be that as it may the boat did not turn, did not respond, as it would have had Stanislaus been there with his uncle working with him as it was said, "like one man." The boat veered, shot across the

thundering current among the jagged rocks on the opposite shore close above the bellowing avalanche of water that was known as the Blue Rock Pitch. The full force of the river drove eighteen hundred pounds of boat and men on to the sunken rocks, the side buckled, the ribs groaned and gave, the nails screamed in protest as they were ripped from the wood. In poured the water and those who could swim, jumped as the boat poised on the brink of the Blue Rock Pitch.

All those who could swim jumped—all that is, save one — Joseph Attean. Attean dropped his useless pole and grabbed his paddle but the boat would not answer to it weighted down and half-filled with water as it was, and with the three non-swimmers clinging to it. "these clung to the boat, "Mrs. Eckstorm says, "and Joe Attean stayed with them, not clinging as they did, buried in water; not crouching and abject, waiting for the death that faced him, not a coward now, never, but paddle in hand, because the water ran too deep for pole-hold, standing astride his sunken boat, a big caulked foot upon either gunwhale, working to the last ounce that was in him to drive the sunken wreck and the men clinging to it into some eddy or cleft of the log-jams before they were carried down over the Heater and the thundering fall of the Grand Pitch. It is the last one sees of Joe Attean, no one has reported anything after that; one remembers him always as standing high in the stern of his boat, dying with, and for his men."



Attean's death closed a turbulent era in Penobscot history. His life had been short, given in the end that a lesser man, an cockey little bantam rooster of a man, a man with the strangely apt name of Dingbat, might live.

But by the time he died the political life of the tribe had been given new strength, largely through his efforts. It had turned into a new direction now and was held somewhat in check by the Paternalistic Power of the state, but it lived. And by living it enabled new generations of Penobscots to develop the political skills that would give them an ever increasing control over their own destinies in the middle half of the coming century.

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