

Asahel Porter (1752–1775), Noncombatant



Asahel Porter was one of the eight men killed “in the morning, when hostilities were first commenced” in Lexington on April 19 1775.¹² He was 23, married, and by trade, a clothier like his father. In the normal course of events he would have been a member of Samuel Belknap’s militia company, but on that morning he was a noncombatant.

Asahel lived in Woburn and had relatives who lived in Lexington. Grandfather William Porter moved to the area from Essex county, bought land in Woburn and Lexington in 1750 and died in 1755.³⁴ Mary, the grieving widow, quickly married John Bridge of Lexington. Asahel’s seven cousins in Lexington were courtesy of his aunt Ginger (Porter) Merriam, wife of Benjamin Jr. In 1774, cousin William married Hannah Munroe.⁵

Asahel was born in Lebanon, Connecticut where his parents, Josiah and Sarah (Bradstreet) lived for a few years before buying land in Woburn near Horn pond.⁶⁷ One parcel of land bordered the land of Nathaniel Brooks, and that might be how Asahel was introduced to a young woman, Abigail, daughter of Timothy Brooks. At some point, Timothy moved his family to Salem.⁸ But distance did not keep young hearts apart.

On October 13 1773, there were two marriages in Seabrook N.H: Abigail Brooks married Asahel Porter and her sister Ruth married Josiah Richardson.⁹ The Presbyterian minister recorded all four as living in Salem, Mass. Perhaps Asahel was temporarily living with relatives or, for whatever reason, he fibbed about where he lived. Be that as it may, ‘Asa’ Porter was assessed *Woburn* real estate taxes in 1774.¹⁰

By all accounts, Asahel wasn’t carrying a musket the morning of April 19th 1775 and he might not have known there was any reason to; in the dead of night he may have just happened to be out and about...east of Lexington...and in the path of the redcoats. In 1843, Stoneham historian Silas Dean claimed Asahel was in company with Josiah Richardson that night.¹¹ Later stories claim the two were travelling to the markets in Boston.¹² Some of these nineteenth century stories claim the two were captured and subsequently released, with variations on the theme that Asahel, conspicuous by running, was therefore shot.

Eyewitness battle participants didn’t mention Richardson and didn’t maintain that Asahel was a released prisoner. John Munroe in 1824 swore that Asahel was a prisoner of the British who “attempted to make his escape, and was shot within a few rods of the common.”¹³ Amos Lock’s recollection was somewhat more visceral: “Under the cover of a wall, about twenty rods distant from the common, where the British then were, we found Asahel Porter, of Woburn, shot through the body.”¹⁴

In Woburn two days after the battle, Asahel Porter’s body was “attended to the grave by a multitude of persons who assembled on the occasion.” The Reverend Josiah Sherman delivered “a very suitable sermon and prayer.”¹⁵ Perhaps at the graveside, Abigail Porter rocked Asahel’s infant namesake son in her arms.



Abigail remarried and had a family with Ephraim Pierce in the neighboring town of Stoneham.¹⁶ Asahel Jr. became a shoemaker, married Betsey Atwell of Lynn, and lived in Reading near his mother. With Betsey, he was the father of nine children. After his step-father died, he was also guardian to three younger half siblings. He died of a fever in 1819 at the age of 43.^{17/18} Asahel Porter’s descendants are now widely dispersed.

And there were three sons of Zeruiah there, Joab, and Abishai, and Asabel. And Asabel was as light on foot as a wild roe. 2 Samuel 2:18

Abner with the hinder end of the spear smote him under the fifth rib, that the spear came out behind him: and he fell down there, and died in his place. And as many as came to the place where Asabel fell down and died, stood still. 2 Samuel 2:23

Endnotes

1. Jonas Clarke. 1776, "The fate of blood-thirsty oppressors, and God's tender care of his distressed people" p.28. 1825 reprint: Franklin Press, Boston <https://archive.org/details/fateofbloodthirsty00clar/page/n31> . Accessed 11 Mar. 2019.
2. The pictured stone is a 1975 memorial placed in Woburn's First Burial Ground by the Baldwin Historical Society. Photo: Rick Weaver. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7491130/asahel-porter> . Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
3. "Massachusetts Land Records, 1620-1986," images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89Z7-69X1?cc=2106411&wc=MCIM-L6F%3A361613501%2C364545201> : 22 May 2014), Middlesex > Deeds 1748-1750 vol 48 > image 324 of 391; county courthouses and offices, Massachusetts. Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
4. *Middlesex County, MA: Probate File Papers, 1648-1871*. Online database. *AmericanAncestors.org*. New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2014. (From records supplied by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court Archives. Digitized images provided by FamilySearch.org) <https://www.americanancestors.org/DB536/rd/14465/17796-col/263969250> . Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
5. Charles Hudson. "History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County ... - Internet Archive." <https://archive.org/details/historyoftownofl00hudson> . Hudson's Genealogies. various pages. Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
6. "Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001," database with images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L97M-5926-B?cc=2061550&wc=Q4DQ-166%3A353349401%2C353511101%2C1006133602> : 29 November 2018), Essex > Rowley > Births, marriage intentions, marriages, deaths 1636-1835 > image 148 of 409; town clerk offices, Massachusetts. Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
7. "Massachusetts Land Records, 1620-1986," images, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-89Z7-X3FZ?cc=2106411&wc=MCIM-L6N%3A361613501%2C364551601> : 22 May 2014), Middlesex > Deeds 1763-1765 vol 61-62 > image 615 of 715; county courthouses and offices, Massachusetts. Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
8. William Cutter. "The Brooks Family of Woburn, Mass. : Cutter, William ... - Internet Archive." 30 Apr. 2010, <https://archive.org/details/brooksfamilyofwo00cutt> . Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
9. The Rev. Purley's records from Seabrook followed him to Gray, ME. Accounts and records, 1767-1818. Image 204 of 629 <https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q57-L9NW-38V5?i=203> . Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
10. Woburn Town Records, microfilm, Woburn Public Library. Asa, though a fine biblical name in its own right, was also used as a nickname for Asahel. It seems Asahel did have a brother named Asa, but he was only about 14 at the time (Sorenson Porter book)
11. Silas Dean. "A Brief History of the Town of Stoneham, Mass., from ... - Internet Archive." 24 Apr. 2008, <https://archive.org/details/briefhistoryofto00dean/page/9> Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
12. "Transcript of epitaphs in Woburn first and second ... - Woburn, MA 01801." 18 Apr. 2018, <http://firstconchurch.vzwebsites.com/FirstBurialGround.pdf> . p.47 Accessed 10 Mar. 2019.
13. Elias Phinney. "History of the battle of Lexington, on the morning of ... - Internet Archive." <https://archive.org/details/historyofbattleo0lphin> . p 36 Accessed 9 Mar. 2019. Munroe might not have directly witnessed Asahel escaping, but might have been repeating what was generally accepted to be the truth.
14. *ibid.* p 38 Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
15. Josiah Sherman was brother to Connecticut statesman Roger Sherman. Funeral reportage and coffin image from "Bloody Butchery, by the British Troops: or, The Runaway Fight of the Regulars" Broadside. <http://americanantiquarian.org/earlyamericannewsmedia/items/show/21> . Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
16. *loc. cit.* "A Brief History of the Town of Stoneham."
17. Ephraim Pierce Probate. <https://www.americanancestors.org/databases/middlesex-county-ma-probate-file-papers-1648-1871/RecordDisplay?volumeId=14465&pageName=17456:1&rId=263965443> Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.
18. Reading Vital Records and Asahel Porter Jr. Probate. <https://www.americanancestors.org/databases/middlesex-county-ma-probate-file-papers-1648-1871/RecordDisplay?volumeId=14465&pageName=17765:1&rId=263968866> Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.

Other source: 'Asa' Porter Probate. 1782. <https://www.americanancestors.org/databases/middlesex-county-ma-probate-file-papers-1648-1871/RecordDisplay?volumeId=14465&pageName=17764:1&rId=263968856> Accessed 9 Mar. 2019.