

By HENRY W. HARRIS JR.

III—The Ghost Campaign of Gloucester



REV COTTON MATHER,

Who Published an Account of the Gloucester Ghost-battles in His Contemporary History of Massachusetts.

ESSEX COUNTY, Massachusetts, has been the scene of some weird happenings in the course of its history. It was at Salem in Essex that most of the witch-hanging took place. It was at Newburyport in Essex that Lord Timothy Dexter (self-ennobled) issued his decrees and shot at strangers who chanced to wander near his estate. But the incident which really gives Essex claim to renown more than passing—which shows to most pleasant advantage the county's peculiar genius for this sort of thing—is that of the Summer of 1692, when they called out the Militia to defend Gloucester from the ghosts.

The early July nights of that year found Ebenezer Babson sleepless. And it was neither from heat nor mosquitoes; for the good citizens of Gloucester had got used to those years before. But Babson heard every night sounds of people running around in the house. When he chased the sounds, nothing human presented itself; when he returned to bed, the sounds were resumed. He could not sleep. He was disgusted—it was enough to ruin the sweetest of dispositions.

Then, "one night, being abroad late, at his return home he saw two men come out of his door and run from the end of the house into the corn. But those of his family told him that there had been no person at all there; whereupon he got his gun and went out in pursuit after them, and coming a little distance from the house, he saw the two men start up from behind a log and run into a little swamp, saying to each other, 'The man of the house is come now, else we might have taken the house.'"

The above quotation is from the priceless account published in the contemporary history of the Rev Cotton Mather, at that time pastor of the North Church in Boston and a big political power in the colony.

It would seem that Ebenezer, returning from "being abroad late," was seeing things.

But his family believed him, and the whole crew rushed over to alarm a nearby garrison. "And being just got into the garrison, they heard men stamping around the garrison, whereupon Babson took his gun and ran out and saw three men running into a swamp."

Two nights later the ghosts were seen once more—again by Babson alone. This time he said they looked like Frenchmen.

Here was something tangible; for the colony was at war with the French in Canada. But, as Mather says, Gloucester was "a town so situated, surrounded and neighbored (meaning 'so far from a frontier') . . . that no man in his wits will imagine that a dozen Frenchmen . . . would come and alarm the inhabitants." Besides, the Salem Witch frenzy was well under way—almost in full blast—at the time. For a solution, the Gloucesterites were torn between the two pet menaces of the day—the French and the agents of the Devil. They were not sure that it was not a combination of both.

The visitations continued. "Within a night or two after this," seriously re-

ports the learned Mather, "the persons in the garrison heard a noise, as if men were throwing stones against the barn."

Up to this point, although many had heard the ghosts, Babson alone had seen them. But two nights later they were seen by one of his cronies, John Brown, who was standing at a garrison window with the observant Ebenezer. They fired at them, but without success.

From that time on all Gloucester was seeing spooks. On the night of July 14 the whole garrison marched out against the ghostly visitors, sending Babson ahead as scout. The latter soon located three alleged spirits and fired at them, whereupon they lay down. "I've killed three I've killed three!" he shouted to the oncoming soldiery.

At this the spirits rose from the place where they had laid down and fired back—under the circumstances there was nothing else for a self-respecting spook to do. Then they disappeared into a cornfield. One of the bullets they had fired lodged in a tree—not a ghostly one at all, but a real live bullet of real human lead. Babson was unharmed.

A sharp order, and the troops had deployed about the corn and nearby swamp. But when detachments combed the corn for the spook, sounds of conversation in a foreign tongue came from the swamp. When they searched the swamp, shadowy figures were seen skulking in the corn. Finally, in disgust, the officers marched their men home.

Now the excitement overflowed the confines of Gloucester, became county-wide. Sixty men under command of Major Appleton were sent down post-haste from Ipswich to reinforce the garrison of the ghost-beleaguered town. Farmers left their firesides for the field; for two regiments were being hastily raised to go forth in battle against the ghosts. Drums beat; trumpets blared; the green cow-paths of the county resounded to the hollow shuffle of marching feet. By night the ruddy gold of campfires dotted the dim meadows of Essex.

But here the spooks fell down on the job; visitations became less and less frequent. Maj Appleton's Ipswich men had but one bit of excitement in Gloucester, the chase of a ghost in a blue shirt in and out of a swamp. On July 25 they were seen for the last time, again by Babson.

The campfires smouldered to ashes, the drums and bugles were heard no more. The regiments disbanded and the farmers of Essex returned to their firesides—unembattled.

So ended the ghost campaign of Gloucester—without a single casualty, human or spooktual.

If it had occurred under a civilization less strictly Puritanical, one would be inclined to lay this affair to the effects of the rum which was being manufactured in Medford at the time for sale in the less godly parts of the world. As it stands, it can only be considered as the result of a dry jag—produced by war and witch fever.