FIRST WHITE SETTLERS IN ORANGE COUNTY



THE OLD BULL HOMESTEAD, HAMPTONBURGH

Two hundred years ago there came to Orange County a white woman, the first, presumably, to place foot upon the soil of the county that up to this time had been the home of the redskin. She was the pioneer of her sex and her descendants are to observe the anniversary in appropriate manner the coming month, on Wednesday, August [illegible] at the "Old Stone House" in Hamptonburg. At that time the Bull Family Association will do honor to the heroism and devotion of Sarah Wells, who was the maternal head of the immense family its organization [illegible] half a century has been meeting annually, of course, there be independent of all others although continued from year to year by the election of officers and the appointment of standing committees to carry on the routine business. At the present there are upwards of 300 enrolled members, and in the time it has been in existence the organization has carried on its rolls more than 2,000 of the descendants of William Bull and Sarah Wells Bull, his wife. They have come from all sections of the country, from all parts of the Union, and an occasional delegation has put in appearance from Canada and Nova Scotia. At Campbell Hall the Bull family has a picnic grounds where the family assembles annually, the praises of those who have gone before, have a good time socially, transact minor business matters and part—in many instances never again to meet. This year, being the ducentennary of the coming of the maternal ancestor to Orange County, it was deemed wise to depart from the time honored picnic grounds at Campbell Hall, and instead assemble at the "Old Stone House" in Hamptonburgh. In addition to the regular officers elected at the meeting held last August, a special committee with Ebenezer Bull of Hamptonburgh as chairman, and Seeley L. Bull of Monroe, as secretary, was appointed at a meeting held at the home of Henry C. Bull in Hamptonburgh. It will be the duty of the officers and the special committee to [illegible] attractive that the gathering and [illegible] the most memorable in the history of the Bull Association.

Founder An Orphan.

With the anniversary so near at hand it may be of general interest to learn how it came about that Sarah Wells, a girl of 16 years of age, should lead the advance guard of her sex and people into Orange County, and eventually become the maternal head of a family that has embraced among its members some of the leading citizens of the County and of the State. In prefacing this story it may not be amiss to remark that the honors came to Sarah Wells through her practical-headedness and [illegible] to the mandates of those above her on the one hand; and the cold heartedness and unsympathic character of those who had assumed the legal responsibility of caring for and protecting the orphan girl who had been a member of their family from infancy, on the other hand. They were Christopher Denn and his wife. What the given name of Mrs. Denn was, or her family name before becoming a help mate to Cornelius no record shows.

Just who Christopher Denn may have been the ancient historians of Orange County do not tell, but they refer to him a sufficient number of times in prominent matters to warrant the assertion that he was an important personage, politically as well as socially. As a politician he figured in the special appropriations of the General Assembly, and was mentioned in connection with the sale of public lands. Like many others Mr. Denn lived up to his income, and the year 1712 found him financially bankrupt. It was a case of getting out of New York City into the country, where his expenses would be less and he could have an opportunity of recuperating his exhausted means. With the influence which was still a part of his [illegible] Mr. Denn had a section of a new patent set apart for his benefit. It was known as the Wawayanda Patent, and covered a part of each of the towns of Minisink, Warwick, Goshen and Hamptonburgh. A settlement on the patent by some individual, by way of example to others, had been generally conceded to be a desideratum, and when Mr. Denn announced his willingness to be the man," a portion of the patent was deeded to him. It contained about 2,000 acres, and it was upon this tract on the west bank of the Otterkill and about six or eight chains westerly from the bridge across the stream known as Tusten's Bridge that Christopher Denn in 1712 located a residence for himself and family. It was his hope, as that of his co-patentees, that by starting the opening of the [illegible] into the [illegible] belonging to the wilderness infested by [illegible] intruder was sure to be wounded in the conflict and carry the scar home with him for reflection." From this it may be inferred that the times in which she lived, and the individuals with whom she held intercourse in the early part of her life, as well as afterwards, while the country was being settled, were not of the most refined character, and much that would in these days be considered rude and vulgar, influenced to a large extent the habits, manners and conversation of the early settlers.

pents, roamed over by beasts of prey and lit up by the fires of the wigwam and war dance, might be redeemed and lands that were of little worth might be disposed of at remunerative figures.

Makes Friends of Indians.

Denn was a politician and like a politician he decided to make friends with all before starting in on the work of making a new home in the trackless wilderness. He invited the Indians on the reservation to confer with him concerning the ideas they held in regard to having a visit from the white people, and it was only when he found them agreeable to his plans that he actually set about carrying out his contemplated scheme. The Indians found him so agreeable, so generous and so friendly that they selected three of their young warriors to accompany him to the city and assist in removing his party and goods to his contemplated new abode. The trip was made in a sloop. It was so far as can be learned, without incident or accident.

When Christopher Denn and his wife proposed leaving New York to take up their abode on the Wawayanda patent they had with them an orphan girl, about 16 years of age, Sarah Wells by name, who was destined to be a great figure in the history of Orange County. She became acquainted with [illegible] companions on the river and her protector from dangers of poisonous reptiles and wild animals in her new home. They took a great love for her and were ever willing to aid and assist her.

Indians Loved Young Girl.

In person Sarah Wells is described as frail and of less weight than the average woman, yet she was active and capable of greater exercise and more remarkable endurance than many of her sex. This may have resulted in part from the fact that while young she had been in the habit of crossing the ferry in an open boat from Staten Island to New York, attending to the purchases for friends and neighbors and returning to her home daily. This exposure, while it imparted health by the exercise, not only hardened and compacted a constitution otherwise delicate, but deepened the color of her sanguine complexion. The chronicler says "her eyes were not large nor were they small, but they were dark, playful and sparkling. Though not a flippant talker she was free and conversable, and when excited to reply to some rude remark or impertinent inquiry [illegible] fire, and the [illegible] Denn had to provide for the materials to be sent to the new home.

History records that finally, at the last moment, Denn decided against his desire. It was that [illegible] pany the Indians and the carpenters, and in five or six weeks Denn and his wife would come overland, traveling by horseback. In consideration of the duties to be undertaken and the risks assumed Denn agreed to set off to Sarah Wells from his tract of 20 miles square 100 acres which were to be her own personal belonging. The historian says: "When Denn ceased to speak, Sarah Wells looked around upon the three Indians, as they stood clad in the rude and uncouth garb of the forest, with raven looks, undressed and filthy in person, whose dark eyes fell upon her like the gaze of a reptile, and an involuntary shudder vibrated her frame as if it were an aspen leaf. Thunder struck by the magnitude and [illegible] manity of the proposition she remained silent and protested not against it. In a moment she became calm and collected, and rose in spirit and dignity of character equal to the crisis; and as if with prophetic vision, and with a mind cheered more by hope than depressed by fears yielded consent."

Having arranged with Sarah to make the trip alone with the Indian guides Denn had to provide for the

He was short on the cash end, but he had no end of determination and "raised the wind" among his friends, so that the boat [illegible] to man it, horses to take the goods from New Windsor to Wawayanda patent, cows, dogs, household furniture and farming implements were ready within 48 hours. Sarah Wells in later years tells that the inventory of articles included the following: Two pack horses with bells on them, two milk cows with bells, wo dogs, two Irish Brahmas, one spade, two pails, two beds and bedding one small and one large pot, one small and one larger kettle, wooden trenchers and bowls, candlesticks and tallow molds, a pair of trammels, a frying pan, small tin plates, coffee pot with coffee, tea pot, chocolate tin canister with a silver tea spoons and sugar tongs, small China tea cups, saucers, bundles of cloths, addle bags, pillow saddle, knives and forks, some potatoes, wallet, medical cordials in viols, refined sugar in umps, brown sugar in rolls, flour, biscuits, ham in small sacks, some trinkets, ribbons and small knives. The last three articles were to please the Indians when they should become silen or troublesome.

Parts With Denn.

Sarah Wells in later years thus referred to the parting words of Denn to her, as the boat was about to set [illegible] New Windsor: "He [illegible] far, and your [illegible] conduct confirms us in your kindness. The duty you have to perform is new and may be fatiguing, but must, if possible be accomplished now or the season will be lost. The women will take care of you while on the boat and afterwards, the Indians of whose friendship I have no doubt, will guide you through the wo[illegible] the place selected for our d[illegible]. The work is very important, [illegible] what you do now for Mrs. Dunn and me is also done for the benefit of the company. You shall be rewarded according to promise and still more fully compensated. You will be taken to New Windsor, and from there conveyed on horseback to the settlement, and we [illegible] meet you th[illegible] sible, in the co[illegible] of five or six weeks at farthe[illegible] of good cheer and we hope no accident will befall you."

The boat was then pushed off from the dock, and in two days they were at New Windsor, where there was no dock and the cargo was discharged after running the boat up on the beach. It must have been an unique scene that was presented as the party undertook the journey from the shores of the great River to Goshen township. The dogs led the van with their bells; the cows and their bells followed, but were prevented from going rapidly as they were made animals of burden by the loads they carried. One of the horses were loaded above and below, while the other horse carried the bedding with Sarah seated on top. The white men followed, an Indian being in charge of each of the animals. So far as history records there were no unusual incidents in the journey form the Hudson shore to the Otterkill banks, a distance of 20 miles, which was made before night fall of the May day.

Many Rattlesnakes Seen.

Camp was pitched under the thick trees, the blankets being raised from the ground on sticks to keep out the [illegible] snakes which many had been seen. The scream of the panther and the howl of the wolf dog in the distance made it necessary for some one to remain awake, keep up the fire and protect the camp from invasion. The Indians did this most cheerfully. Next day the work of building the first wigwag in the Wawayanda patent was commenced and in due time completed. When ready for occupancy the Indians declined to enter until Sarah Wells had first passed the threshold, it being their superstition that a woman brought good luck, a man happiness to [illegible] brought sorrow, success and distress. The superstition continues with the Indian to the present day, and while the red man has no veneration or respect for womanhood he will not enter a new building or home until a woman has first passed in and appeased the Great Spirit.

The new home of Sarah Wells, the 16-year-old pioneer girl of Orange County, was 16x18 feet in size, simply a shack or frame, covered with palisades cut from the trees, the roof was covered with limbs and shrub, and the smoke of the fires passed out through a square opening, about 36 inches in size in the center of the roof, which served to admit light by day and water on occasions of rain storms. The table used was a log [illegible] eight feet long, flattened on the upper surface. The kitchen table with cupboard was made by placing supports in the palisades in one corner, with flattened tree stumps on the crutches used for supports. A chair, the only one in the wigwam, was made for the use of all at one time, by driving pegs in the ground and placing a sawed board over it. It required but a few days to do this, and when the building was to be occupied preparation was made for a grand feast in which all were to participate.

The Denns Arrive.

While engaged in making up the feast an alarm was given by one of the Indian guides of approaching strangers. It turned out that the strangers were Denn and his wife, on horseback. They had become fearful of danger for the girl and could not rest, accordingly started up the west bank of the Hudson, past the Palisades, through the mountain passes near Nyack, and thence across country to the Wawayanda patent, where they found supper nearly ready for them, a wigwam fitted with comforts of home, and peace reigning where they had feared there would be trouble, if not entire annihiliation.

The opening of civilization by Sarah Wells in Wawayanda was followed by hundreds of others who had learned of the delightful country, and in a few years the [illegible] which had been a dread forest became a fairly well populated section of civilization. While Sarah continued to live with the Denn family, which she did until her marriage, the only road to New Windsor was a foot path through the woods and not a cabin on the route. The nearest flour mill was at Fishkill, and when the family tired of wheat, crushed in a mortar, and pined for some real flour it was necessary for Sarah to load up her horses, two in number, place bags of grain across their backs, one bag on either side, and lead the horses for 20 miles to the river front, unload the bags, row the wheat across the river, carry it to the mill, and when ground return to her horses on the west side of the Hudson and lead them home. It generally took 18 hours to make the trip, the start and the finish being in the darkness.

Her Husband's Ancestry.

William Bull, who married Sarah Wells, the first white woman in Orange County, was born at Wolverhampton, England, in February, 1689. He learned the trade of [illegible], Ireland. When he had learned his trade, history records that in company with a friend they took a contract to build a bridge. Just as they were completing the arch and about to drop the key stone the entire structure went down and with it all hope for future contracts. Young Bull, with five guineas in his pocket applied for passage to America, and in due time was landed at New York. When he handed over his five guineas the captain declared it insufficient, and as Mr. Bull could pay no more the captain directed that he should be sold for his services to make up the difference. While the conversation was on, Daniel Cromline, who was interested in the Wawayanda Patent, and was desiring to build a number of houses applied at the boat to know if there were any mechanics willing to accept a job. Bull stepped forward, proclaimed his willingness, told of his financial embarrassment and offered to work for Cromline until his advanced fees were repaid, and longer if wanted. Cromline accepted the tender, paid the shortage and Bull accompanied Cromline to the latter's where a settlement was effected. Bull executed the chimney work and others did the carpentering. In erecting the chimney William Bull cut the date, 1716, in the stones, and the excellence [illegible] many years after his death, being demolished in 1832, after occupancy 116 years. It was known in Orange County history as the "Old Graycourt House" to distinguish it from the Bull stone house at Hamptonburgh.

Courtship Is Brief.

Christopher Denn was a patentee, and Daniel Cramlee was interested in the patent. They lived about 6½ miles apart which in those days was considered very near neighbors. In the one home lived Sarah Wells, in the other William Bull. In the natural course of events, the two became acquainted, and after a brief courtship were married in [illegible]. Bull was an Episcopalian and desired to be married according to the forms of the Church of England. To do this it was necessary that the banns should be published three [illegible] there was no church and no [illegible] to make the announcement for miles around. There was a justice of the peace and he had been engaged to marry the couple. To him was told the disappointment felt by Bull that his banns could not be properly announced to three different congregations. The justice of peace agreed to obviate this and meet all desirements. With the guests assembled at the [illegible] the magistrate picked up the Book of Common Prayer furnished by Bull, and with all the solemnity possible walked to the front door and there proclaimed the banns to the trees of the forest: walking [illegible] he made a second proclamation to the cattle [illegible] then again [illegible] front door made a third proclamation to the wilderness at large. It was a new and novel method and in these days would be considered little less than irreverent. The justice of the peace followed it by the legal form of marriage and Orange County tradition to the present time places this as the first marriage consummated between white people in Orange County, and the Town of Goshen has ever been proud that the Bull-Wells marriage was solemnized within her borders.

Husband Tames Prophecy.

When Sarah Wells consented to come to Orange County as the van guard of civilization, Denn promised her 100 acres of land from the patent which after some bickering he [illegible] set off for her on his [illegible] the land was not given until [illegible] Mrs. William Bull, [illegible] her to accept what her husband was willing to take, and he was determined to have a tract that should be his own. He selected 100 acres on the southeasterly side of Christopher Denn's lot, then considered wild and not worth the taking. On this he located his [illegible] in [illegible] Hamptonburgh, the house of Wolverhampton, the place of his birth, which designation it still retains. Besides the patent taken by him in Wallkill, William Bull secured a large tract of land just east of the 100 acres. On this William Bull erected the stone [illegible] ing. It is literally builded upon a rock and has a spring of ice cold water in the cellar. The family tradition is that while they were living in the log cabin and the new stone house building, Mrs. Bull was awakened at midnight by a rumbling noise and shaking of the bed and house. Mrs. Bull remarked, "William, we have lost our new house." On inspecting the building next morning they found a crack beginning in the lower part of the first story at the east end which extended up through the second story. This was plastered up the house finished, and no [illegible] has been evidence to the present [illegible] of the power of the earthquake which was felt 1500 miles.

Shingles Held the Rain.

The erection of the stone house was the pride of William Bull's heart. It was well constructed in every respect. The shingles that covered the roof were oak staves, very wide and laid to the weather, they curled up with the action of the weather so that when the rains fell [illegible] would hold a t[illegible] of water was struck by [illegible] the scars of [illegible] eradicated. [illegible] house of refuge [illegible]

(Continue[illegible]