



## *William Bull and Sarah Wells*

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*When Samuel Eager wrote about the early life of Sarah Wells, he relied on the recollection of his elders and "some notes made by an old and intelligent individual many years since." It is believed that the individual was Johannes Miller, a grandson of Sarah's. Prior to the Blue Book being published in 1974, some pages were found in the Goodwill Presbyterian Church that may be those very notes. Many of the early stories in the Blue Book were taken from those "Goodwill Notes".*

*Sarah Wells and the Dennes probably lived in the hastily assembled shelter for a few weeks before a more substantial home could be built. Even then it was probably only a double log cabin. Sarah would spend the next six years of her life there in service to Christopher and Elizabeth Denne. That cabin is now long gone, but we know where it was located. In 1918 Ebenezer Bull, then master of the Stone House, excavated the hearthstone and some household artifacts. He placed a stone marker alongside the Sarah Wells Trail. It, along with a New York State Roadside Marker, is on the right side of the road from Goshen to the Stone House just before crossing the Otterkill.*

#### **Life at Denne Hill**

To this pioneer farm, Christopher Denne gave the name of "Denne Hill". Whether he gave up his residence in New York to reside solely at this place, we do not know. However, it is hard to believe Rутtenber's (History of Orange County, 1881) contention that he was an absentee landlord like his neighboring patentee Crommelin. He probably went back and forth as business required, though no record of him is found in the city after 1709.

Outside of the patent records, later notice of him is sparse. In a deed of 3 September 1721 to Robert Brown, he is styled "Christopher Denne of Denne Hill in Orange County, gent." In the New York Historical Society library there are a group of depositions concerning a boundary dispute taken by Denne as justice of the peace, dated at Goshen 1721. Three letters from Denne to the colonial secretary's office in New York, dated 1721, 1723, and 1724, were posted from "Denhill". Denne died sometime in the winter of 1724-5, though we do not know where. Since his will was drawn up in 1706

(NY Wills) it tells us nothing of his later circumstances. Denne's widow, Elizabeth, continued to be referred to as "of Orange County" in deeds up to 1731, and from then on as "of the City of New York." She died in New York late in 1736, leaving her estate to nephews and nieces. (NY Wills).

Aside from the question of Denne's residence, it is supposed that Sarah Wells resided permanently at "Denne Hill" after her adventuresome arrival. She undoubtedly was kept busy with the domestic chores of keeping the house, raising a garden, and caring for the cattle.

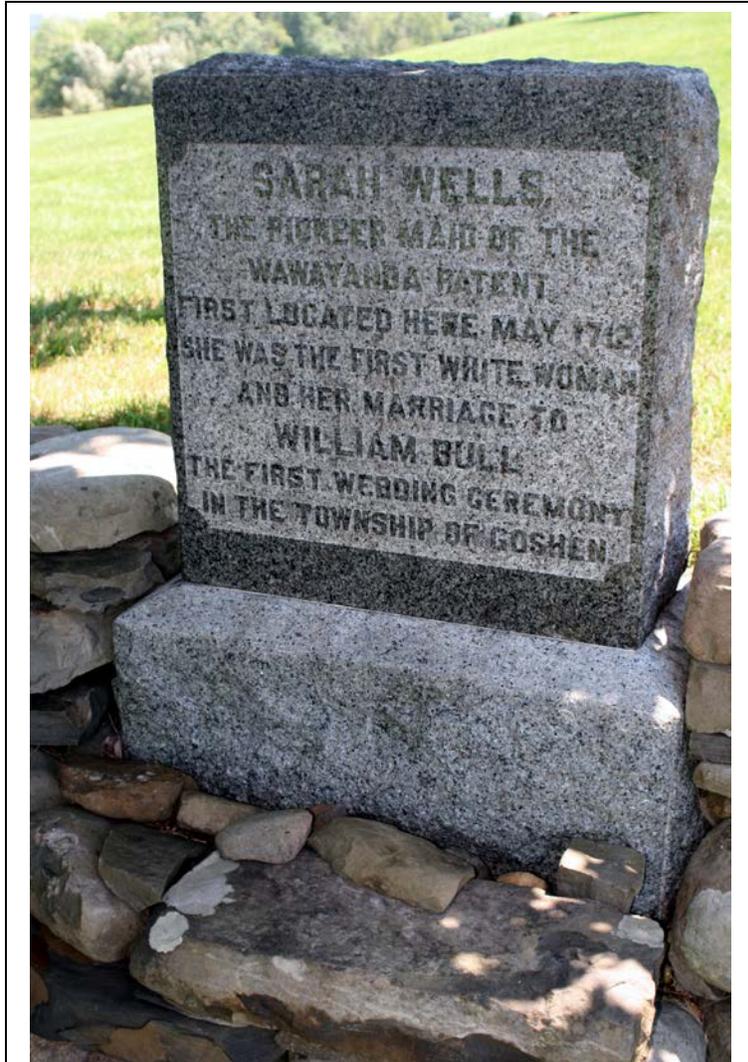
Here we may inquire further into her background. Of her birth, we know only that she was born 6 April 1694, probably in New Jersey, as is stated in the brief family record drawn up at her death, which was referred to in the previous chapter. She was orphaned at an early age and was brought up on Staten Island, as the Goodwill notes tell us. Who her parents were is a matter we shall probably

never know. It is doubtful she even remembered them herself. But this has not stopped later generations from guessing. Some notes made by Prof. Richard Bull in 1841 claim her to be of German or Welsh descent. However, Stevenson Walsh, writing in 1891, said "it is believed that she was of French extraction and that her father, a sea captain, was lost on one of his voyages." Margaret Horton Seaman wrote in 1920 of the tradition handed down in the Horton family - that "Sarah was born on shipboard to a young English couple coming to America, who both died during the voyage, and upon landing she was adopted by Madam Denne of Staten Island."

Of three lines we are quite sure: that Sarah was not descended from the prominent Connecticut family of Gov. Thomas Welles, nor from the Rhode Island family of Nathaniel Wells, nor from the family of William Wells of Southold, L.I., although descendants of the latter settled in Orange County and married into the Bull family, giving rise to curious twists like Sarah Bull Wells. However, there were many other Wells' scattered over the eastern seaboard at this time and the search is not soon exhausted.

One recent supposition is interesting, but no proof can be found to credit it: that Sarah may have been the daughter of Philip Wells, onetime surveyor-general of New York and

land-owner on Staten Island. He apparently came to New York with Gov. Andros as his steward in 1674. The following year he was appointed sheriff. From 1680-86, he ran many surveys in New York, especially on Staten Island, where he acquired a considerable holding for himself.



**This roadside marker, where the Sarah Wells Trail crosses the Otterkill, indicates the location of Denne Hill.**

For a short time in 1683 he was a deputy surveyor for New Jersey, then was appointed surveyor-general for New York, which office he held until 1690. He then retired to his estates on the north shore of Staten Island. He died sometime in the span 1700-04 outside the New York colony in some place where he was then residing, perhaps Virginia or Barbados. However, there is no record of his family and such a connection for Sarah is unlikely. It is hard to believe that a wealthy public official's daughter could become an indentured servant and forget to tell her children of her important father or fail to name a son after him.

The only other traditionary information we have

concerning Sarah Wells' origin is her appearance. She is described by Eager (Outline History of Orange County, 1846) as somewhat small for her age, light and agile on her feet, and capable of remarkable endurance. Her dark eyes sparkled like coals, setting off her ruddy complexion. "Though not a flippant talker, she was free and conversable, and when excited to reply to some rude remark or impertinent inquiry, her eyes would flash like fire and the

presumptuous intruder was sure to be wounded in the conflict and carry the scar home with him for reflection."

*[Since the Blue Book was published several more theories of Sarah's origins have surfaced. What has not surfaced is any documentation or evidence of any kind to support them.*

*One theory that is currently being researched is that Sarah's father was a Methodist minister and that he and his wife were drowned. What makes this story so tantalizing is that it supposedly originated with a genealogist from Chester who found the account years ago in the Library of Congress. If that were true the account might include some detail or a hint that could guide our research efforts. Any new piece of piece of information could lead to a source document or some type of evidence that could begin to unravel the mystery. Unfortunately, the Library of Congress is a very large place and we don't have the title or the author of the work that contains the account. ]*

Sarah's relationship with the Dennes should be clarified. This was much clouded by Mr. Eager, who emphasized that she was their adopted daughter. This, of course, made the settlement story rather incredible, as no one would be likely to place a young daughter in such circumstances, adopted or not. The Goodwill notes put the correct stamp on matters in a forthright manner. As an orphan and ward of the public authorities she had been indentured to the Dennes as a domestic servant. They undoubtedly had a high regard for her, both for her usefulness and her personal worth, and there existed reciprocal bonds of affection between them. Yet the servant-master relationship is evident throughout the notes.

It easily explains how Denne could have thoughtlessly sent a mere girl on such a risky

enterprise and then have second thoughts concerning the wisdom of that action. Only once is the phrase "our adopted child" used in the notes and then as a figure of speech, but this single instance is apparently what colored Eager's account. Finally, it is entirely consistent with her status as servant, not daughter, that Sarah is not mentioned in either of the Denne's wills.

Sarah's life at "Denne Hill" was considerably more arduous than what she had been accustomed to in the city, though in many ways it was freer, and she quickly adjusted to the forest life. Eager relates that the nearest grist-mill at this time was Madam Brett's at the mouth of the Fishkill across the river from New Windsor. When there was grinding to be done, Sarah would rise at midnight and load the grain bags on the horse. Then winding her way fifteen miles through the woods to the "Water-side" with only a faithful dog for a companion, she would transfer the grain to a boat and, as the chill morning mist began to rise from the river, she would row across to the mill and then back again in the afternoon. Here the flour was loaded on the horse and she would retrace her long and weary footsteps, arriving home by nightfall. The last time she returned from the mill

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she was late and, when only half way home, the night being dark, the wolves howled so loud and close around her that she thought herself in personal danger. To escape from them she rode under the branches of a tree, tied her horse to one of them, and from the back of the horse climbed into the tree. There she spent the night, "often wishing for the day before the tardy sun left his eastern couch, who came at last blushing like a maiden for his long delay." This cured her of all wild adventures of that kind.

It is not at all strange that a girl of this caliber and situation should excite the attention of the young stone mason, William Bull, working down on the Crommelin tract. However, willing hearts were not enough and for the moment there were obligations to fulfill and then enough means to be gathered to permit the support of a family. At last the happy day arrived, and William Bull and Sarah Wells passed out of their previous bonds and were bound to each other on 25 August 1718.

The marriage ceremony took place at "Denne Hill" and we are favored with the following account of it by Mr. Eager:

"Previous to this time courts of justice had been established and a magistrate\* resided in the neighborhood, who was called upon to perform the marriage ceremony, there being no priest to do it. Bull was an Episcopalian and wished to be married according to the forms of that Church, but how were the banns to be published three times to make the contract valid? After long deliberation they concluded that circumstances altered cases, and that three proclamations made in one day

were as effectual for all purposes as if they were made during three successive weeks. To test the principal and carry it out in practice, the guests being assembled and the bride and groom anxiously waiting to know how it was to be performed, the magistrate, with a solemnity demanded by the occasion, took up the book of common prayer and proceeded to the front door of the house and there proclaimed the banns to the trees of the forest. Then he walked through the hall to the back door and made a second proclamation to the cattle and outbuildings; and then again at the front door made a third to the wilderness at large. The trees of the forest made no objection; the cattle did not forbid the banns; and the wilderness seemed to echo back its approbation and consent, whereupon the marriage ceremony was immediately performed. Though this was a new and hazardous experiment on a delicate subject, we never heard that its legality was questioned, even by those who were most personally interested in the matter. Tradition affirms this to have been the first marriage within the limits of the old town of Goshen."

*In our next installment we learn about William Bull's shaky start in the new world. Having been tricked by the ship's captain, he was nearly sold into servitude to pay for his passage. But a chance encounter with a wealthy land speculator, Daniel Crommelin, changed his life forever. That encounter would take him to the wilderness of the Wawayanda where he would prosper, using his skills as a stone mason. There too he would have the chance to meet Sarah Wells.*

**"Tales from the Blue Book", the William Bull and Sarah Wells Stone House Assn., edited 2015 by Robert Eager**

Source: Emma McWhorter, Dolly Booth, Philip Seaman, [History and Genealogy of the William Bull and Sarah Wells Family](#) (Printed by The Service Press, Middletown, NY, T. Emmett Henderson, Publisher), pp 55-60.

Alternate theories about the origins of Sarah Wells provided from the collection of Judy Wood, Bull Family Genealogist.

Roadside Marker Photograph courtesy of Sarah Brownell.