



William Bull and Sarah Wells

Stone House Association, Inc.

183 County Route 51, Campbell Hall, NY 10916-2924 845-496-2855
info@bullstonehouse.org www.bullstonehouse.org

Following the Civil War, to commemorate the sacrifices and bravery of their soldiers, there was a great wave of monument building in communities across America. It was a natural time for families to think of erecting monuments to their ancestors as well. So it was that in the summer of 1867 some prominent members of the Bull family met to consider a monument to William Bull and Sarah Wells. A number of families met for a basket lunch, and they all wholeheartedly approved the project

Committees were appointed to gather information and to seek out extended family members to spread the word and to raise funds. When a second meeting was held, many more members of the family were there to hear the news and discuss the progress.

Then, a third family picnic was held, almost 150 years to the day after William and Sarah's marriage, to dedicate the large obelisk monument that stands today atop Burying Hill in the Bull family section of the Hamptonburgh Cemetery.

100 Years of Bull Picnics

On Friday, Sept. 18, 1868, more than a hundred descendants gathered on Lookout Hill above the Hamptonburgh church for a basket picnic. This was the largest gathering of all, as the previous two meetings had generated much interest and enthusiasm. At the dedication ceremonies, D. Kerr Bull delivered the address and Prof. Richard H. Bull read an account of the life of William Bull. These were followed by the reading of several poems. When the meeting was nearly over, one member spoke at some length saying that the three meetings had been very worthwhile in getting the family together and increasing family solidarity; but, regretfully, there seemed to be nothing further to do than to say goodbye to each other and go home. Then he made a suggestion. Why could not at least an annual gathering be held, even though there were no funds to be raised or monuments to be erected? This suggestion was met with unanimous approval, and it was voted to make the family picnic an annual affair.

Thus the first Bull picnic came to a close with an auspicious forecast of many more to come. What had been started was one of the earliest and certainly the longest lived of the family picnics in America, which became quite popular in later years. Today, a full century of picnics has rolled past and it is pleasant to look back and see what has transpired over that time.

For the first ten years or so, the picnic was held on the grounds of Daniel Bull, atop the little mountain just north of the Goshen road to Hamptonburgh. This was known as Lookout Hill, affording an excellent view of the surrounding country. It was also the site of the starting point of William Bull's original 100-acre tract on which the Bull Stone House stands. After 250 years, one can still trace the line of the old Bull boundary running southwest from the original east-west county line which crossed this hill, both lines marked by stone walls. After Daniel Bull died in 1878, the picnic was moved down to the lawn of the Hamptonburgh church. However, there was a growing sentiment for a picnic site more accessible to the people coming from a

distance by train. In 1882, the picnic was held at Bullville on the grounds at Thompson Ridge station on the Middletown & Pine Bush R. R., without too much success. But in 1884 the picnic managers found a congenial meeting place in Gouge's Grove at Campbell Hall, convenient to the railroad station, and the annual affair was regularly held there, with notable exceptions, until 1920. Mrs. George Gouge was herself a Bull descendant, and when she died in 1889, she willed her property to the Hamptonburgh Presbyterian Church with the provision that the Bull family have the use of the Grove for picnics. We still have that privilege. However, since 1921, with the purchase of the Stone House property, the picnic has always been held on the lawn of the old ancestral home.

We are quite astonished when we read of the attendance of the early picnics. Following the initial affair, enthusiasm continued to grow until by 1870 there were over 700 picnickers. Thereafter, the novelty wore off somewhat, but the average attendance for the next twenty years remained around 500. By the turn of the century, attendance had been reduced to half this number, and thereafter the picnics have annually attracted between 200 and 250 descendants.

The date originally set for the picnics was the first Wednesday in September, but this was changed in 1872 to the last Wednesday in August, which permitted the schoolchildren to attend. This remained the date for years. In 1933, there was much discussion among the younger members to change the date from Wednesday to Saturday, which was done for several years, 1934-36. But there was no notable increase in attendance (not many were traveling those years) and the traditionalists had the date changed back to Wednesday, where it

"properly" belonged. However, the weight of industrial society with its weekend finally made itself felt and in 1956 the picnic date was "permanently" fixed as the last Saturday in August. This was modified in 1958 to be the fourth Saturday in August, so the date can never fall on a Labor Day weekend. This places the picnic on the closest convenient date to the anniversary of William and Sarah's marriage. It will be interesting to see if the social changes coming in the next century will be reflected in a new picnic date.

Over the years, the format of the picnic program has changed very little. The minutes of the second picnic could be that of any later gathering with only a change of names:



William Bull and Sarah Wells Monument at the Hamptonburgh Cemetery. Placed by their descendants, 1868.

"2nd Picnic held in Hamptonburgh on Wednesday, Sept. 9th, 1869. A large concourse composed mostly of the descendants of Wm. Bull & Sarah Wells having assembled in this place at 11 o'clock A. M., Jesse Bull, Esq. of Oxford, N. Y. was chosen permanent President, Wm. Bull of Stony Ford, N. Y. was elected Secretary, and Theodore L. Jackson, Esq. of Hamptonburgh, N. Y., Treasurer. The meeting having been called to order by the President, the Rev. Samuel W. Crawford, D.D. of Chambersburg, Pa., opened the exercises by prayer. Prof. Richard H. Bull of New York City then read a very interesting Memorial of our great ancestress, Sarah

Wells, exhibiting thereafter a carefully preserved piece of the skirt of her wedding dress. After which, dinner being announced and God's blessing having been asked by the Rev. Slater C. Hepburn A. M. of Hamptonburgh, N. Y., there was a season devoted to eating and delightful social intercourse. Dinner being done, songs were sung by Mr. Wm. Spaulding of Newburgh, N. Y., after which Col. Henry M. Connelly of the same place delivered a short address in which he alluded tenderly and

touchingly to those who had died during the past and were perhaps now sitting at the feet of the Great Master in company with Wm. & Sarah. The names of many present were registered in a large book presented for the purpose by Prof. Richard H. Bull. By the forethought of Mr. Theodore L. Jackson, the great Photographer Barnes of Montgomery was present, ready to take groups or single pictures for a consideration. Games of croquet pleasantly stole away the hours for the young and active. The thrice told tale was retold to wondering ones who had never heard it. News of relatives not lately seen but whose memory had not faded was heard. A collection was taken to defray contingent expenses. David Booth, Esq. and Joseph Eager, Esq. of Hamptonburgh and William Bull of Stony Ford were appointed Com. of Arrangements for the year 1870, after which the meeting adjourned to meet in this place on Wednesday, Sept. 7th at 10 A.M., 1870."

The basket dinners were something to marvel at. Everyone brought his own but the fare was

shared by all on the communal picnic tables. The traditional staple has always been fried chicken. Along with this, the early minutes mention the piles of fresh bread and biscuits, the fragrant aroma of coffee and baskets of peaches. Especially remembered were Mrs. Jesse Booth's cinnamon rolls, Mrs. John Thew's cakes, and Mrs. Santee's delicious peach pies. There were also muskmelons and watermelons from local gardens and Mrs. Lewis Woolsey of New Paltz always brought great bunches of luscious grapes. The festive board would fairly groan under the load of good things to eat, and there was always enough to serve several times the number present.

Besides the inevitable speeches, there was a great deal of music at the early gatherings. The very early picnics resounded to the martial strains of the Goshen Cornet Band. But in 1879 the committee for arrangements noted that they had "reluctantly come to the conclusion that we are too poor to hire a band, and thereafter the musical offerings



1870 Bull Picnic - Photo by J.H. Beale, New York

were restricted to the vocal talents of the picnickers themselves. This is a form of community entertainment that we have largely forgotten today. Because canned music is now so much with us at the flick of a dial, rocking forth its banalities in shops and restaurants and at home in the kitchen, the home-grown variety has little power to move us. But then it was a great source of enjoyment. For years, Mrs. Hannah Crosby of Crawford led the singing. The program was often opened by a group rendition of "America." The Doxology was sung as a blessing before the noon meal. After the principal speaker, there were usually several solos and duets to enliven the occasion, as well as songs by the whole company. For several years a Glee Club was formed from the younger and more tuneful descendants, which performed with admirable zeal. The meetings were closed, then as now, with the traditional, "Blest be the tie that binds."

There was usually a photographer at the picnic, ready to take small group pictures, as well as the traditional wide angle shot of the whole company. Besides Mr. Barnes of Montgomery spoken of in 1869. Mr. Beales of New York is mentioned in 1870. Much of the early pictorial record was captured by the camera of Charles Fredericks, a New York City photographer. He was a friend of Uncle Samuel Weeks and spent much time as a guest of the Stone House, taking pictures of the family and the locality. Many of his photographs may still be seen at the old house.

Following the picnic festivities, Mr. Ebenezer Bull would invite anyone who cared to see the Stone House over for an inspection, and it became customary for an intimate group of 30 or 40 to stay for supper. Even after the picnic was moved to the Stone House grounds, this tradition has been kept up and many who cannot get to the picnic in the afternoon are encouraged to join those who remain for picnic supper in the cool of the evening.

Over the years many interesting items have been noted in the minutes of the picnic. Some of these are related in the following excerpts:

7 Sept. 1870: Harrison Mills presented an American flag to the picnickers to be raised over their meeting annually.

25 Aug. 1875: Rev. Mr. Brett of the Brick Church, Montgomery, gave an address in which he alluded to the fact that one of his ancestors, Mme. Brett of Fishkill, kept a mill and ground grain for our ancestors, and claimed relationship on that account; his claim was generously allowed.

26 Aug. 1885: The talk of the picnic concerned the recent marriage at Rouen, France, of J. Edgar Bull, son of Prof. Richard H. Bull, to Miss Sarah Adams Williams, great-granddaughter of Pres. John Adams.

25 Aug. 1886: The death of Miss Susan Bull of Central Valley, aged 95, was reported. She was the last of the family who had seen Sarah Wells.

31 Aug. 1887: Noted that Pres. Grover Cleveland sent his regrets that he could not be present.

31 Aug. 1892: Mrs. Simis and two daughters of Knox's Headquarters were present. As they take such interest in preservation and adornment of one of the houses built by Wm. Bull, they were adopted into family membership. Among those who died during the year were Prof. Richard H. Bull and Theodore L. Jackson, both of whom did so much to make the Bull Picnics a success.

29 Aug. 1894: Mr. Stevenson H. Walsh of Philadelphia is compiling a list of the names and families, dates of their births, marriages, and deaths, which he expects to have published.

28 Aug. 1895: A hand organ man with a monkey did a thriving business. Roy Lippincott had his fine donkey and cart, and took his little friends riding.

31 Aug. 1898: It is noted that Charles P. Howell, son of Mrs. Dewitt Howell, was on the battleship "Maine" when it was blown up in Cuba. He later died of his injuries.

26 Aug. 1903: Mr. Muirhead brought his sister Julia in his auto, the first to attend by this means of transportation.

25 Aug. 1909: Since the Campbell Hall church burned during the year, the benches usually obtained from there for the picnic were missed at the Grove.

30 Aug. 1911: Counsellor Andrew Wilson told of his visit to Wolverhampton, England, the birthplace of William Bull. Artist Dorr of New York City exhibited a picture of Sarah Wells at her debarkation near New Windsor. This painting still hangs in the Stone House.

28 Aug. 1912: To celebrate the 200th anniversary of Sarah Wells coming to Orange County, a pageant was presented on the lawn of the Stone House to a record audience of 1000 descendants. This ambitious undertaking, replete with costumes and a real log hut, was put on by family members without professional help. Anna Craft prepared the outline and Mrs. Susan Howell and Margaret Cocks directed the action. There were nine scenes depicting the life of the pioneers William and Sarah, from the dramatic arrival of

Sarah Wells and company in Goshen, to a tableau of eight generations in the line of William, the last four generations representing themselves. Several different persons took the parts of William and Sarah in successive scenes, allowing time to change costumes. Dolly Booth, Edna Tuthill, and Helen Pierson Bull represented their ancestress, while Harry Bull, Ebenezer Bull Jr., and Albert C. Bull played the part of William. Miss Tuthill wore the wedding dress made by Sarah Wells in the wedding scene. The role of the babe who was tied to the bedpost while Sarah went in search for her missing husband was played very convincingly by little Sarah Wells Bull - she bawled like any proper baby should under the circumstances. In addition to these mentioned, there were also assorted carpenters, pioneers, magistrates, messengers, and the inevitable howling painted Indians. Over \$200 was spent on the arrangements but receipts from a collection covered this with an ample surplus. A considerable increase of interest in attending the annual picnic was generated by this pageant, contributing in large measure to the picnic's continuing success over the next half century.



Pageant Participants for the 1912 Picnic

30 Aug. 1916: On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of William Bull's arrival in Orange County, the picnic was held at the home of Hamlet S. Roe near Chester, as this was one of the houses built by William when he came to work as a stonemason in 1716 for Daniel Crommelin.

28 Aug. 1918: This being the 200th anniversary of the marriage of William Bull and Sarah Wells, the picnic was held on the site of the house where they were married (the Tusten farm), then owned by C.H. Green. A monument had been erected on the spot beside the road and it was unveiled by Sarah Wells Bull and William Bull of the 7th generation. Mr. Ebenezer Bull of the Stone House related events of the last 50 years of the Bull Picnic. As a somber conclusion, the honor roll of members of the family serving in the War was read.

27 Aug. 1919: The picnic was held at the home built by Thomas Bull in 1769, now the home of his descendant, Mrs. Margaret C. Jackson. It rained in the morning but cleared in the afternoon. Before the meeting, on Aug. 4th, a letter had been sent to all members of the family asking their opinion on a suitable memorial to the members of the family who served in the War. At the picnic, Robert McLeod Jackson spoke for a town hall to be erected at Campbell Hall, Lillian Bull for a scholarship to be given to a member of the family each year, Ebenezer Bull for a monument, Charles M. Bull for buying the Stone House, Norman Young for publishing a history of the family, including our honor roll. It was the opinion of those present that such a history should be published, even if it was not the memorial decided on. A committee consisting of Charles M. Bull, Ebenezer Bull, Ernest M. Bull, Lillian Bull, and Robert McLeod Jackson were elected to study the best plan and to report at the next picnic.

25 Aug. 1920: This was the last meeting held in Gouge's Grove. It was voted to buy the Stone House property for the sum of \$20,000 as a memorial to the members of the family who served in the World War.

The War Memorial committee reported 133 members of the family were known to have served in the War, including one colonel, several majors and captains, and nine women. Fifteen of this company had died in service. In order to own property, it was necessary to set up a formal organization, and the meeting voted to incorporate under the name of "The William Bull and Sarah Wells Family Association." Those named to proceed with the incorporation were Frederick H. Bull, Charles M. Bull, James V. Bull, Mr. and Mrs. Ebenezer Bull, William Jesse Booth, Ernest M. Bull, Marianna Booth Woolsey, Phebe Ann Bull Oliver, Margaret Crawford Jackson, Hannah Booth Slaughter, Caroline Bull Knight, Emma Lena Zabriskie, Margaret Horton Seaman, and Anne E. Bull.

31 Aug. 1921: This was the first meeting at the Stone House after its purchase. By Aug. 15th, there was raised by subscription, \$10,365. (On Sept. 30th, when the deed passed to the family, only about \$4,000 remained to be paid.) It was voted to dissolve the old informal organization and turn the business over to the new corporation. In some ways, something was lost in becoming a legal body. The lively spontaneous quality of the meetings was dampened, as was the individuality in picking the officers and the honor of passing around the offices to various members of the family. Up to this time, by common consent, officers did not succeed themselves and the various localities were more or less equally represented. However, as the family has spread and the voices of the old-time family patriarchs have been stilled, the corporation has served as the principal bulwark against the dissipation of the family bonds.

28 Aug. 1929: The mortgage to the Stone House property was burned. Railroad travel to the picnic having fallen into almost total disuse, it was decided that the regular meeting of trains without request as in the past would be discontinued. Dancing was held in the Grange Hall for the young people, which was well attended and lively.

31 Aug. 1932: To mark the bi-centennial of the birth of George Washington, a tableau was presented, reviewing the roles of the Bull family in the American Revolution. Representatives of the twelve lines appeared in costume while the narrator told of their deeds in those heroic times.

25 Aug. 1934: The picnic gathered on Saturday for the first time rather than Wednesday. For many it was as bad as holding church on Monday. During the year, the Orange County Board of Supervisors had designated the road from Burnside to Goshen past the Stone House as "The Sarah Wells Trail," and signs displaying this name were erected.

30 Aug. 1944: The minutes concluded with the following heartfelt prayer of the Secretary: "The simplest occasions fare best in times of war; they accord with our serious preoccupations and conflict with none of our feelings, as often do formal or elaborate affairs. On the contrary, an idea which gives us a sense of permanence is of value in days of stress. The thought of our annual reunions having gone on without a break longer than most of us can remember is an anchor and gives us a sense of perspective. We are sure that there will always be a 'last Wednesday in August,' and for all practical purposes that there will always be a Bull Picnic. Next year, we hope, our young men and women in the services may be with us again. R.M.J."

31 Aug. 1957: The death of Aunt Lizzie Bull Green, aged 93, was reported. She attended the first Bull Picnic in 1868 and had attended every picnic thereafter through 1955.

The Blue Book was published in 1974. Since that time almost another fifty years have passed and our picnic tradition has continued. In 1986, the date was changed to the third Saturday in August. Then, in 2009, it was changed again to the first Saturday. All in order to better fit with family vacation schedules. But, other than that the tradition that our ancestors started back in 1867 has remained the same as each year descendants of William Bull and Sarah Wells gather for one of the longest running family reunions in America.

"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 1-13.

William Bull Sarah Wells monument photo courtesy of Marty Irons, posted 2009 on Find A Grave.

28 Aug. 1965: Special notice was made of the death of Robert McLeod Jackson. Cousin Bob had served as Secretary of the Association from its organization until 1963, when illness slowed his pen and he was elected Secretary Emeritus. In 1921, he successfully guided the incorporation proceedings and the completion of the purchase of the Stone House. Then over the succeeding years, he was the engineer whose assured hand kept our machine running smoothly.

26 Aug. 1967: Many picnickers came decked out in the gay-colored finery of their Victorian ancestors to celebrate the 100th Annual Bull Picnic. A series of sketches illustrating interesting and amusing incidents concerning the family association during the past century was presented under the direction of Amy Bull Crist. And who can forget that commanding figure with her black tasseled parasol fending off the rain gods for one more group photograph?

24 Aug. 1968: This being the 250th anniversary of the wedding of William and Sarah, that happy event was reenacted on the steps of the Stone House. Robert M. Hoppenstedt, in eighteenth century attire, took the part of his ancestor, William Bull; while petite Alison Ann Eager, neatly filling the old Bull wedding dress, represented her ancestress, Sarah Wells. The part of the magistrate was convincingly carried out by Michael K. Brown, present occupant of the homestead. With lovely reminders of the past such as these, it is hoped that picnic attendance will remain strong in the future.