## SARAH WELLS on the 300th Anniversary of her settlement

First let me say that those of you descended from this pioneer family can be so proud and blessed to know not only the background and names of your ancestors but also the circumstances and personalities of some of them.  Not everyone knows the history of their people.

   The story of this area begins with land grants that were given and taken away, sold and resold, and ruled by a succession of incompetent and often corrupt governors.  Governor, Peter Stuyvesant surrendered New Netherlands to the British in 1664.  The Dutch colony had been carrying on a profitable trade with Native Americans for more than 40 years.  The 8,000 or so people who formed the colony were now under the rule of King Charles II who gave the control to his brother James, the Duke of York, hence the name of our state became New York.  Later came the reign of Queen Anne and large patent areas belonging to John Evans were annulled or changed and what once reached from New Paltz on the north to Haverstraw on the south and further west including the present counties of Ulster, Orange, and Rockland were settled by a new influx of people.

   Patrick MacGregorie and a group of Scottish adventurers were persuaded to come north from New Jersey to Evans’ patent land in 1685.  They settled, built a trading post, some learning the language of the native people at the mouth of the Moodna, at one time called Murderer’s Creek.  Their ownership of the land was lost because the then Governor Dongan had failed to record it properly and MacGregorie lost his life in a battle in England.  The area was always inhabited, however, some by the descendents of the unfortunate change of ownership and rule.  Some nine years later, Sarah Wells was born and was indentured to Elizabeth and Christopher Denn, who had no children of their own and became her only known parents. Christopher Denn, along with a number of other men, shared a large patent property.  The rush was on to inhabit the area to make certain claim.  When he came to view the land he found an area along the Otterkill that had a natural spring nearby and befriending some of the native people who had been assisting the men who had been surveying the area he encouraged them to come back to Staten Island with him.  His plan was have them pack and move the necessary items to clear and build a permanent settlement with the help of other men that he in employment. Young Sarah was now 18 years old and to her fell the formidable task of leading this group as Christopher’s representative in the patent settlement.  Lacking enough money to see the venture through he applied for aid from the other 12 shareholders who were anxious that the settlement become a reality. Sarah’s promise was 100 acres of land for the extraordinary assignment of leading the entourage north on the Hudson River.

   Was she the first American of her gender to demonstrate that women have the courage, determination, and faith to dutifully accept the ominous responsibility presented to her with cheerfulness and obedience? Denn is quoted as saying. “Sarah, you have been kind and dutiful to us thus far, and your present 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 may be lost. Then a prayer was offered “Be of good cheer and may no accident befall you.”

“God speed and protect you Sarah”.  It was promised that the men would look after her and we can only guess what pondered in her mind and how often she prayed her own prayers of courage and protection from the Almighty Father.

   The entourage left in May along with horses, cows, household goods, implements and tools and all necessary items to clear the land and make a new home. The Hudson River is a beautiful and peaceful natural wonder.  The ancient rounded mountains rise on either side having been split by the action of an ancient glacier.  While its banks have seen development over the centuries, the sharp turn made on the river at West Point, shows a view not unlike that which Sarah might have witnessed.  Breakneck Mountain on the right and first Crows Nest, then Storm King Mountain (formerly Butter Hill) on the left have not experienced enormous change and rise in beauty as you come into Cornwall Bay.  By now it was evening and as they approached the spot where the Moodna flows into the Hudson they grounded the large vessel (as there was no dock) and spent the night. They were now beside the original MacGregorie settlement and while that family was gone it is claimed that there was always people inhabiting the spot.  No mention is made in that there was a welcome or meeting of anyone but if you were on that shore looking south there is sure evidence that any boat traveling up the river would have been seen and not ignored.  Much noise would have been heard as cattle and horses were set out and all the contents unloaded before they bedded down for the night. Historians and family diaries are yet to reveal if any contact was made with the early settlement (1685) of MacGregorie.

   They embarked early the next morning with Sarah a top one of the heavily loaded horses as they traveled over the land.  After traveling some twenty miles they reached the opposite bank of the Otterkill and spent the night. The stream was crossed after the men constructed a raft and the business of clearing and building a permanent home was begun.  Sarah slept in a wigwam before the cabin was finished.  One can only imagine that fear and excitement, the newness of everything around her and the kind attention of those assigned to her care.  But there was much work to be done and much of everything fell on her shoulders.  The Denns arrived some days later and should certainly have been proud of the efforts of these few.

   Settling patent land was now an urgent plan.  William Bull was sent as the representative of David Cromline.  He was a gifted stone mason and builder and it was he who became Sarah’s bride and constructed the cherished Stone House that all are enjoying a visit to today. His skill was such that there are other houses of his that stand in Orange County to this day.  The union of their marriage produced a dozen children who produced dozens more and here many of you trace you history. Sarah lived to be over 100 years old and tell the story of the great adventure to her progeny. She made her own wedding dress, raised a garden, cooked the meals, and taught the children. You may all have your own stories carried down through generations of descendents who have admired the attributes of the remarkable woman we celebrate today -   Sarah Wells.

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