



William Bull and Sarah Wells

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Our story begins in the early years of the 18th century. Christopher Denne (old spelling – Denn) was a prominent member of New York City society. He and several other wealthy men had speculated on land in the wilderness up the Hudson River. The large tract, or patent, they had purchased was called the Wawayanda. It comprised what would later be a large part of Orange County. By 1712, Denne’s lifestyle was catching up to him. He was in financial trouble and his share in the Wawayanda was his last resource. He was determined to make it viable.

Denne and his wife were childless, but they had taken a servant girl into their home, an orphan named Sarah Wells. A number of theories, but no solid facts, exist as to Sarah’s origins or her parents. Much of what we do know about her amazing story was published in 1846-7 by Samuel Eager in his Outline History of Orange County. In 1974, the Bull family retold the story as a part of the six generation genealogy, The William Bull and Sarah Wells Family. Here is a portion of that story from the 1974 ‘Blue Book’.

The Pioneer Maid of the Wawayanda

From its patent date in 1703 to the spring of 1712, nothing but speculation had transpired in the Wawayanda of Old Orange County. Yet these exertions in speculation were but little more than a mere accumulation of expense. There were doubtless many useful and actual surveys made relative to the division of rights and subdivisions of rights among the patentees. But as yet, there were no actual settlers; nothing more than perhaps a mere hut built for the convenience of surveyors, which as likely became demolished and consumed by the fires of the wilderness in their absence.

This buying and selling was like the artificial compliments of High-life, kept up as a currency upon false credit, a mere artificial name without the essentials. This was clearly understood by Christopher Denn, one of the patentees. He saw that he could float no longer upon speculative and false credit, but he must soon run aground. Something else

must be done or he would have to withdraw from public society, and he might as well die in the wilderness on his own premises as in the city of New York.

So he had a line run, laying out a triangular lot adjoining the town of Goshen. Here, the Otter Creek connects two large deep sunken miry swamps and drowned meadows together, at the distance of about twenty chains apart. The creek itself is about one chain wide at this point, a deep and silent stream, scarcely fordable except at dryer seasons of the year. On this lot, Christopher Denn selected a sequestered spot for himself and his wife Elizabeth, they having no children and therefore nothing to risk by this seclusion but themselves. This site was on the westerly side of the creek and between the two large sunken meadows, where a fine spring of water was flowing from the rising ground near the creek bank. This was about six or eight chains westerly from where Tusten’s Bridge now stands.

About two miles southward stood the wigwam of Rumbout (one of the chiefs who had granted the patent), one and a half miles to the east there was a small Indian village of three or four families, who were on the most friendly and sociable terms with Christopher Denn. They were somewhat conversant, being for so many years acquainted, and Denn made known to them his intention of settling as a neighbor among them. They seemed much pleased at this, and to confirm their sincerity, they offered to assist him in forwarding his enterprise. Denn chose three of the younger Indians to accompany him, leaving an elderly Indian to take care of the women and children while they were away. They then made their way to the "Water-side" at New Windsor and boarded a vessel for New York, where Denn introduced the Indians to his family as his friends of the wilderness in Wawayanda.

Denn had no children, as before observed; nevertheless, Madam Denn had an indented orphan girl, bound to her by the public authority as a domestic handmaid, whose usefulness they thought much of, as the darling of the family, and whose name was Sarah Wells. After introducing these friendly natives, Denn explained to his wife and orphan girl his contemplated settlement. To complete the arrangements, he wanted Sarah to consent in taking the charge of their bedding, kitchen utensils and provisions, and to sail up the Hudson River about sixty miles to New Windsor, where the Indians would guide her westward to the spot he had chosen for settlement. If she thought she could do this, he would endeavour to get two or three carpenters with their tools to go along, beside a couple of cows and two horses to carry the baggage. As soon as accommodations were

ready, he and Madame Denn would leave New York and make their way to the Land of Goshen to their new residence where they would be reunited.

Upon hearing this, Sarah (as she said) cast her eye around, took a glance at the Indians, and then turned her back upon them all in dismay, with a pouting grumbling silence, too plain to be concealed. Disgusted with the proposal, she said to herself, "Is this the fate of orphan children; a poor destitute girl, without a guardian or protector, who could scarcely dare think of herself a woman, to be huddled and crowded on board a vessel, and to journey through a wilderness with a motley group of strange men, without even an acquaintance to counsel with?" It was too hazardous a task to put to stake and her feeling therefore shrank from the proposition.

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But Christopher Denn spoke kindly to her saying, "Sarah, we place our entire confidence in you. We have no desire of being otherwise separated from you than for the mere accomplishment of a settlement in the wilderness where we expect to be united in company again. And to secure to you a livelihood, I will give you a hundred acres of bounty land at the end of your servitude for your faithful services that we may live as friends and near neighbors through life."

The hundred acres sounded large and cheering to Sarah's ear, and having no desire of being separated from Madam Denn, the only female friend she had in the world, she assented to their proposition, though not without some misgivings, and put herself under their direction how to proceed.

Matters being fairly stated and clearly understood, the next concern was how to

bring about the expedition while the season was favourable. Madam Denn immediately set about fixing up Sarah's needs, while Christopher Denn sought carpenters with suitable tools to begin in the woods. He readily found three who were willing to volunteer. The next thing was how to find credit to procure the cows, horses, and provisions necessary for the voyage and campaign, which requirements he made known to some of his patentee friends. To his surprise, they proved to be his true friends indeed, and he found a new species of credit reviving on his old worn-out speculations. They, with but little trouble, procured a suitable boat and boatmen for the voyage, and by the evening of the following day had collected at the ferry stairs on the west side of town all the requisites for the expedition: two milking cows with bells on, two pack horses with bells on, including Irish brahams on which to lade their bedding, baggage, and provisions, two dogs to serve as sentinels for the night, and even a spade was provided; all was in readiness before sundown. Denn with his Indian friends brought on board his bedding and kitchen utensils, consisting chiefly of two pails, a larger and lesser pot, two kettles, a coffee-pot, wooden trenchers and bowls for milk. Then he hastened back to bring on Sarah.

She had just closed her bundle of clothes with some trinkets and toys of amusement for the

Indians, and was taking a rare and parting meal with Madam Denn. Christopher snatched a dish of tea with them and then with Sarah's bundle, they all hastened to the boat, where the Indians were sitting with observing eyes. Stepping on board, they had scarcely time to show Sarah where her concernment and charge was stored, as the boatmen were loosening and casting off from the dock. Then they silently shook hands with Sarah and the three Indians, and stepping on the ferry stairs, bid them all a heartfelt farewell. An ordinary citizen passing by would think nothing more from appearances than a mere preparation for crossing the ferry in an open boat, while it was in fact a secret, enterprising, and hazardous expedition.

However, the shade of the evening, with a light and favorable breeze, soon wafted them up the Hudson River out of sight from the city. After a while the breeze slackened, but the boatmen so managed their business with the eddys and aided by the men and Indians on board with the rowing, they gained the New Windsor flats on the following afternoon, and came to anchor near

shore. (This landing spot was then known as the 'Water-side' and continued to be so-called by the Wawayanda pioneers for half a century, since it was the principal access to the interior of the patent from the river.)

The party stayed on board for the night and prepared for an early start in the morning while the boat was aground, so that one might

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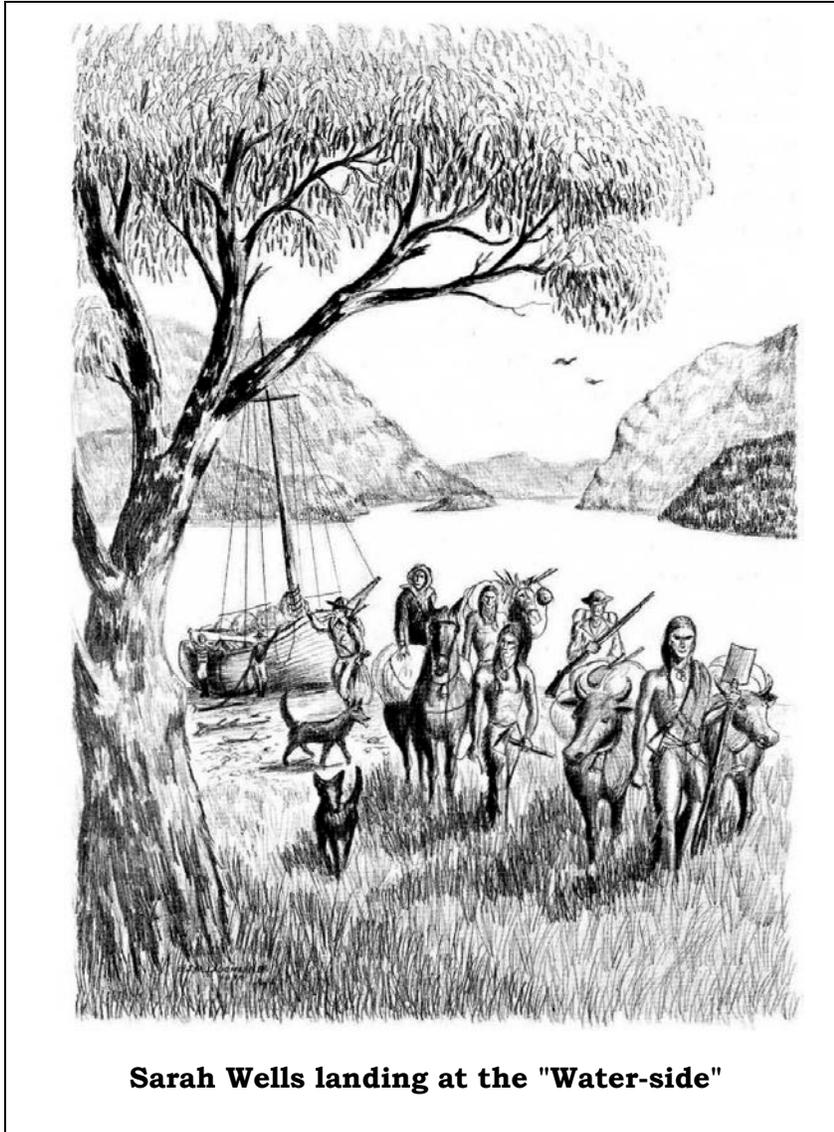
step ashore on the sand which (as Sarah said) was much in their favour. The cows were first unshipped and their bells unstopped while they browsed along the shore with the most youthful Indian to take charge of them. The horses were next with their bells stopped and their straw pack saddles fastened. The first horse was loaded with the heaviest provisions, tools, and kitchen utensils, and the oldest Indian was given charge of him. The other horse was loaded chiefly with bedding and baggage, including Sarah's budget, and the charge of the

horse was given to her, with a place fixed for her to ride occasionally as she felt disposed.

The following arrangement was made for the journey. The youngest Indian was to take the lead with the cows, and with the spade in his hand to sound the sloughs and miry places, brooks and streams, where the cows might pass through before him. The horse with the provisions and heavy goods came next, which

the old Indian had to lead, he being considered the best judge of the wilderness through which they had to travel.

Behind him came Sarah's horse with the bedding and other light baggage. Where difficult places were discovered, the third Indian was to take Sarah's horse by the head and lead him through, whether Sarah was riding or not. The workmen with their tools came after Sarah's horse, and the dogs brought up the rear. All had something to carry or slung about them in knapsacks or wallets, with pieces of bread, biscuit, ham or cheese in their pocket to munch on during the day.



Sarah Wells landing at the "Water-side"

When the whole train was thus arranged in single file, the Indian who was to assist Sarah with her horse walked around them all on both sides to view their position with a critical eye, and finding everything ready, they all started at the word, 'March!' bidding the boatmen who stood by, 'Farewell, farewell!' who echoed the same with their hearty prayers for a successful expedition.

In our next installment we follow young Sarah's journey into the wilderness, the lone female in the company of strangers and Indians.

"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 38-44.

Sarah Wells Landing drawing by Hudson River artist, Edward J. McLaughlin