



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

William and Sarah did not start their life together living in the grand Stone House that is so familiar to family members today. Like so many pioneers living in the wilderness, their first home was a small log cabin. Ten years went by, as William built a second cabin for them and completed the present day Dutch barn, before he even started construction on the Stone House. It would be another thirteen years before it was completed.

In that time, William was carving a farm out of the forest and taking jobs as a stone mason to supplement their income. Sarah was making a home for their growing family and, in some cases, working side by side with William when needed.

William and Sarah Build a Life Together

When Bull first settled at Hamptonburgh there was no mill nearer or more convenient than Madam Brett's at the mouth of the Fishkill in Dutchess County, and his grain for a few years was ground there. His custom was to shoulder his bags and carry them there and back, which usually consumed two days. On one occasion he went and did not return at the usual time, and Mrs. Bull fearing some accident had befallen him, tied her infant to the bed post and went off to meet him. She met him some half way to New Windsor, trudging homeward, tired and weary with the weight of his load. He had been delayed in crossing the river, but in other respects was well, and they returned with lighter hearts, mutually bearing each other's burdens, and found the child safe and still tethered to the bed post.

Another story that has been handed down is that as each of her children was born, Sarah took them on horseback to New York City to be baptized at Trinity Church. This rings true

to Bull's convictions as indicated by his insistence on the Episcopal forms at his wedding. He would thus probably have insisted on his children being baptized in the Anglican Church, the nearest being in New York. Sarah, too, having been in the household of the Dennes, was probably an adherent of the Church of England. However, there is no way to check this pretty tale, since a great portion of the early parish records were lost in a fire which destroyed Trinity Church in 1816.

...Mrs. Bull fearing some accident had befallen him, tied her infant to the bed post and went off to meet him.

An account of William and Sarah's early homes and the building of the Stone House have come down to us from Prof. Richard H. Bull, who collected the story from older members of the family in 1841. The first log house which William Bull built was on a knoll situated in an orchard and near the line of

the adjoining farm which in 1841 was owned by Albert Watkins and near the Craigville road running from the blacksmith shop through to Hulsetown. Later he built another log house a little less than a quarter mile to the southwest of the former one and said to be a few rods south of present Stone House. It is thought

that this latter location is somewhat misplaced, and should be placed about 5 rods northeast of the Stone House in the yard just beyond the flagpole. There is a gentle rise here and when digging was done in 1925 to prepare a footing for the pole, a hearthstone was uncovered and a piece of foundation timber was found which is now displayed in the house. Here William and Sarah lived while in the process of building their new stone dwelling on which they worked little by little over a period of thirteen years.

According to Prof. Bull, the stone work was commenced about 1726 and the whole house finished so as to get into it in 1739. However, Mr. Ebenezer Bull II who lived there always maintained that his father had told him that work on the house

was begun in 1722, and this date appears in several accounts in the early 1900's. (The "1722" on the north corner stone of the house was cut in the 1940's.)

The limestone for making the lime was obtained from a ledge of limestone rocks about three miles north of the house on the Conning farm, which was brought to the building site in the winter when the Otterkill and the sloughs were frozen over, as there were no bridges. The lime was burnt in log heaps, first a layer of logs, then a layer of stone and so on, a few rods northeast of the house where the stones to hold up the first tier of logs were

occasionally found about the site of the hogpen as late as 1847.

It was their custom to collect together materials at odd spells for a year or two and then lay them up as far as they would go. William did his own mason work while Sarah assisted him by carrying many of the stones in her apron. (Considering the size of some of these wall stones, more than one young

skeptic has been led to wonder at the strength of her apron!)

When the walls of the house had been carried up, to the second story, family tradition says there was a very heavy earthquake. As related by Eager, it was about midnight when William and his wife were waked up by a rumbling noise and a shaking of the bed and house, which



Greycourt Manor, William Bull's first stone building project in America, was razed in 1832. This smaller companion stone building was probably completed next. The Roe family added the large frame extension around 1840.

they thought an earthquake, and Sarah remarked, "William, we have lost our new house." On inspecting the building in the morning, however, they found only a crack in the southeast wall, extending from the lower part of the first story up through the second story. This was plastered up and the house was finished, but the seam may be observed to this day, serving to verify the date of the walls.

Traditionally the old barn standing about 13 rods northwest of the house is older than the house itself, and probably dates from the early period of the 1720's or 30's. It has been much

admired by students of early colonial architecture as one of the oldest barns existing on the East Coast, and a study of its structure has been filed in the Library of Congress. Though never painted, it is still in excellent condition. The hardwood beams and posts of the frame are of chestnut, while it is sided with hand-sawed planks of riven ash. The shingles were split pine and put on each with two pegs. In late years, some of the siding has been replaced and the roof reshingled to preserve the structure. It has always been noted with a chuckle that the barn was built on Sarah's bounty land while the house stands on William's 100 acre lot, the division line passing between the two. Thus there was no partiality made between their respective contributions to the home farm.

It may strike us today that thirteen years was an unduly long time to be about building a house. But it should rather strike us as singular that such a house would be attempted at all. Clearing the land and wresting a living from it was not for the weak-hearted. Yet this was only a side-line. William Bull's chief occupation was as a contractor, building substantial houses for his more affluent neighbors. And thus it was only on odd days here and there that he would put in any work on his own house.

Today it is not known how many houses Bull may have built. Only a handful are standing that are attributed to him. Completing the mason work on the Greycourt manor house in 1716, Bull undoubtedly continued to work on the Crommelin tract for the next couple of years. Family tradition asserts that during this period he constructed the smaller stone dwelling standing a few hundred yards from the great house. Though Greycourt was razed

in 1832, its smaller companion is still in good repair. Since 1827, it has been occupied by the Roe family, whose present generation claims Bull descent. Until a large frame section was added around 1840, this was a typical pioneer dwelling. There was one huge room twenty by twenty-two feet with a fireplace on one side and several small rooms above.



Known today as Knox Headquarters, this was probably the last house that William Bull built. It was constructed in 1754 for Thomas Ellison and used at various times by Generals Knox, Green, and Gates during the American Revolution.

The hewn ceiling beams are exposed, and the stair door still swings on the H and L hinges installed by the builder.

Another house said to be built by Bull is the stone portion of the old Charles Booth place on the road from Neelytown to Campbell Hall. Mr. Booth later became the father-in-law of two Bull daughters and a Bull son. It is traditionally stated that Bull also laid up the stone for the Howell tavern at East Coldenham, which was torn down when the new road went through.

Probably the last house that Bull built was constructed in 1754 for Thomas Ellison at

Vails Gate and known locally as "Knox's Headquarters." The Ellison house is now maintained by New York State as a museum, its fame arising from its use during the Revolution as headquarters by Gen. Knox and others while the American troops were stationed at New Windsor Cantonment.

At the close of the war, a fancy ball was given here, attended by Gen. Washington himself. It is a pleasant thought, imagining the "father of our country" minuetting with the belles of old Orange, the music and laughter ringing from the solid walls built by our grandsire, the "father of a multitude."

In our next installment, we will read about the final years of William and Sarah. William Bull's last will and testament provides us with valuable information about each of his children around the time of his death. Years later, when Sarah died at the age of 102, the family gathered, and a record was made of the number of her descendants. This was the beginning of the Bull family genealogy.

"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 71-78.

Roe's Orchard House, Chester, NY photo courtesy of Sarah Brownell.

Knox Headquarters photo courtesy of Sarah Brownell.