



William Bull and Sarah Wells

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It is hard to imagine today the knowledge, and hard work that it took to even survive, let alone prosper, in rural, colonial America. We are fortunate to have two different items that were created by William and Sarah with their own hands to help us begin to comprehend what truly skillful and industrious people they were.

The homespun linen wedding dress that Sarah made has passed through several hands and is now on permanent display at the Stone House. Some visitors admire it for its beauty and the colorful embroidery patterns. We might also look at it and imagine a pioneer woman taking flax that has been harvested, breaking and carding it so that it can be spun into thread, and then weaving it into cloth before the cutting and sewing of dressmaking can even begin.

Likewise, visitors to the stone house find it to be quite impressive, considering its size and age. But, we could also look at each and every stone and try to imagine William carefully fitting it into place and securing it with mortar that he made from scratch. The project took him seventeen years as he worked on it part time between paying jobs and operating his farm.

Lasting Legacies

Two artifacts from the hands of William Bull and Sarah Wells, of great interest to members of the family, have come down to us, demonstrating the skillful craftsmanship of those pioneering ancestors.

The Wedding Dress: This old dress, now displayed in a glass case at the Stone House, is usually referred to as Sarah Wells' wedding dress. It is made of coarse homespun linen, richly embroidered in red, yellow, green, and blue crewel work with thistles, roses, and lilies, the royal flowers of England. There once were sleeves, but they have disappeared; otherwise the dress is in a remarkable state of preservation, the colors of the embroidery still bright and unfaded.

It is an undisputed tradition in the Horton family that the dress was worn by Sarah Wells' daughter Margaret for her marriage to Silas Horton around 1756. One of Margaret's French slippers worn at the time, as well as a portion of her wedding ring, are also displayed

with the dress. Margaret gave the dress to her only surviving daughter, Sarah Hawkins, who gave it in turn to her daughter Margaret Rumsey. It was apparently at this point that the sleeves were lost. As related by Margaret Horton Seaman of Washingtonville:

"My grandmother told me about the missing sleeves. A dressmaker who was, she claimed, a relative of Sarah Wells, was sewing at Mrs. Rumsey's house where the dress belonged at that time, and asked to see it. The dress was displayed and left in the room where the dressmaker was sewing. That night she went away, and when the wedding dress was to be put away it was discovered one of the sleeves had been cut out. Afterwards my grandmother said she saw the sleeve in a frame hanging on the wall in the dressmaker's home in Middletown. She never told me the woman's name, and it was always considered a disgrace to the family and I believe this is the first time the story has ever been told outside the home. Then when the dress was to be worn, the

other sleeve was snipped out and where it is I do not know."

Later the dress was separated into two pieces, the skirt going to Julia Rumsey Newman, the waist becoming lost for a time. It was reunited later as related by Julia Tuthill of Craigville who then (1916) owned the dress.

"Aunt Julia Rumsey who lived in Middletown, my mother's sister, in some way heard of an old lady there who had the waist and caring nothing for it, would sell it for very little. Who she was or how she came by it, I do not know, but I do know Aunt Julia paid either two or three dollars for it. The skirt, as you know, came from Aunt Julia Rumsey Newman, my mother's aunt."

Mrs. Tuthill occasionally washed the dress, and her daughter Edna wore it in the 1912 pageant, in the role of Sarah Wells in the wedding scene. A

photograph of Edna Tuthill wearing the dress about this time hangs in the Stone House. Miss Tuthill gave the dress to the Bull Association in 1947 to be placed on permanent display.

The tradition that Sarah Wells made this dress for her own wedding in 1718 is first mentioned in the record of the second Bull Picnic in 1869, when Prof. Richard Bull read a

paper on Sarah Wells, "exhibiting thereafter a carefully preserved piece of the skirt of her wedding dress." However, this supposition is rather unlikely. It is doubtful whether Sarah had time to do such needlework before her marriage, nor the room to store such a luxury during her years of logcabin housekeeping. But by the time her daughter Margaret was married there was a measure of affluence in the family. There were slaves to do the cooking and farming, brother and sisters to help with the household chores, and many happy hours were undoubtedly spent sewing and fitting up a trousseau. Yet, even if this is not Sarah's

own wedding dress, it must be largely the product of her handiwork, from the spinning and weaving of the linen cloth to the cut and fit of the style. It is odd to think of this old dress returning, perhaps to the very room where it took shape over two centuries ago. And though it may appear crude by today's machine standards, it still reflects the patient and skilled hands of a proud mother



On display in "The Long Room", the homespun linen wedding dress, made by Sarah Wells, has returned to its home at the Bull Stone House. In the inset, the dress is shown being modeled by Edna Tuthill for the 1916 Picnic.

and the anxious anticipation of a glowing bride.

The Stone House: The ancestral homestead at Hamptonburgh built by William Bull stands today as a symbol of family solidarity, a sort of temple to which the twelve tribes annually make their pilgrimage to renew filial bonds. Laid upon a solid rock shelf, the house recalls for many the line of the old hymn, "How firm a

foundation." The outside walls are of solid mason work, two feet thick, with a partition wall of the same thickness extending the length of the house to the garret. Although shaken by earthquake in 1727 and scarred by lightning about 1768, these walls are as sound today as the day they were laid up nearly two and a half centuries ago. They are constructed of undressed fieldstone laid in a rough polygonal style, the stones varying in size from a few square inches to a square foot or more.

A curious feature in the northwest and northeast walls is a row of square holes about five feet from the ground. These are scaffolding holes, to hold the ends of the scaffolding beams. There were probably such rows every five feet or so, the height to which a man could work before a new tier of scaffolding was required. However, when the wall was completed, the upper holes were filled in as the scaffolding was torn down, all except the first row. In old English building tradition, it was considered bad luck to complete a house, so these scaffolding holes were left to assure the structure's good fortune.

Inside the walls are covered with a very smooth hard plaster, a product of the native limestone. No one knows exactly how William Bull produced so fine a surface finish. One large chimney is built into the southeast wall serving two hearths on each floor. (Eight men are said to have stood on the top at once, but

just why this curious place to congregate was chosen is not clear!)

The basement contains two cellar rooms, the floors of which still exhibit the bedrock, and a large kitchen and a dining room. Since the house is built on the southern exposure of a sloping rise, a low door opens directly from an open shed on the back of the house into the kitchen. Here is a large cooking fireplace with a dutch oven. The dining room was originally only a mass of rock over which a path of boards led to the stairway to the first floor. It was used as an ash cellar in which to collect the winter's ashes, which were leached in the



Other than some changes to the front porch, the Bull Stone House looks much the same today as it did a century and a half ago. In the inset is earliest known photograph of the house from around 1870.

spring for lye ready for making the year's supply of soap. In one corner of the room was a spring flowing in a thin trickle from the rock. At one time there was a catch basin cut in the rock to collect the water for use in the winter or against possible harassment by the Indians. In

1849, Stephen Bull blasted out the rock floor, cut a window to let in the light, and built the present comfortable room. However, the spring may still be seen in the closet under the stairs. The great timber beams are open in the basement ceiling and are much closer together than normally found, placed at 2 foot intervals. These beams, like the rest of the house framework, are hand-hewn from majestic chestnut trees. This species of hardwood, once so prolific in the native forests of this area, has now disappeared as a result of imported blight.

On the first floor is a large hall, with the main outside entrance through a massive oak door. The original iron knocker and latch, combined in a unique design, still serves its intended function. Outside, over the stone steps, there was a small wooden porch to protect the visitor from the dripping eaves, but this became dilapidated and was removed in 1962. To the right of the hall is the parlor, which has two large windows opening to the southwest and a large fireplace. Part of the southeast wall about the fireplace is paneled. Back of the parlor and hall was originally one large room with a corner fireplace at the southern end, but at an early date it was partitioned off to form a sitting room and bedroom. In 1841, this partition was moved toward the south and a window was cut in the northwest wall, making a large sitting room with two windows, and a smaller bedroom with one window and the corner fireplace. In late years, this partition has been removed, recreating the single large room where many of the family pictures and heirlooms are displayed.

A broad staircase leads from the hall to the second story, with a hand carved balustrade of oak. Three large bedrooms occupy this floor with what was a small bedroom being converted to a bath. In the garret is a large open space, with two small bedrooms partitioned off. Above this, with a scuttle opening onto the roof, is the attic. The roof was shingled with oak staves, quite wide and laid well to the weather. In time, they curled up so that each one would hold a pint of water. In 1860, this roof was replaced by a slate one.

Although the house is tastefully furnished, only a few pieces of furniture have survived since the time of William and Sarah, notably the grandfather's clock and two Queen Anne chairs. The clock was given to Mary Bull who married Benjamin Booth as her part of the furniture that had belonged to her mother, and it descended to her grandson Vincent Booth. He died in 1871 and his household effects were sold at auction. Ebenezer Bull, knowing the clock had originally been in the Stone House, told his

friends at the auction he wanted to buy the clock. When it was put up for sale, Ebenezer started the bid at ten dollars. None of his friends would bid against him, so he bought it for \$10.

Also, on the first floor is a plain corner cupboard. This apparently was built in the attic and until a few years ago was always kept there, as it was considered too bulky to get downstairs. But by maneuvering it through a window and lowering it from the outside, Corinna Brown and her sister Amy brought it down and refinished it. Of Sarah Wells' silverware, only one teaspoon remains in the Stone House. This is quite small, 4.75" long, marked on the back of the handle with the initials S + B. It was given to the Association by Anna Weeks Craft, who had bought it from Ella Newman.

With the exception of a few hours, the Stone House has always remained in the Bull family and subject to a loving care which accounts for its present state of fine preservation. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, William Bull started building about 1722, but the house was not completed until 1739 when the family finally moved in. Traditionally, Ann was the first child, to be born in the house. At his

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death in 1756, William left the house and farm to his wife Sarah. When she married Johannes Miller about 1759/64 and went to live near Montgomery, the house reverted to her eldest son, John Bull (1721-1807), then living on his neighboring 100 acre farm. He probably moved to the Stone House as his son Daniel is said to have been born there in 1764. At

John's death, the property passed to his son John Bull II (1760-1846).

It was John II who ran into financial problems. He had endorsed notes for a man engaged in some manufacturing business. When this man, as well as the other endorsers, failed to pay the notes, suit was brought against Mr. Bull, which resulted in a judgment against him. To satisfy the judgment, the Stone House property was sold

at public auction in front of the court house at Goshen, the purchaser being Thomas Powell, a wealthy commission merchant of Newburgh (the famed river boat "Mary Powell" was named for his wife.) However, Daniel Bull of Quaker Hill (1764-1849), the younger brother of John, felt that the property should not go out of the family and he accordingly repurchased it from Powell the next day (so it is told). Sentiment cost him dearly, however, for it was often remarked afterward that "he paid enough for the place to buy all the land from Quaker Hill (Oxford Depot) to Hamptonburgh."

Daniel Bull gave the farm to his son Ebenezer, though his brother John continued to live there with his two daughters. It is sad to remember that "Old Uncle John" grew very cross in his old age and felt hardly used to know that the farm was not still his.

Ebenezer Bull (1792-1857) was the owner at the time Samuel Eager visited the house and from him the historian obtained much of his information concerning it. It was Ebenezer's brother Stephen who made several improvements in the house at this time. Ebenezer's large family was born in the house and several of them continued to live there after his death. In particular, his daughter Amy Bull, who did so much to start the Bull Picnics, made her home here until her marriage in 1888. Title passed to Ebenezer's youngest son, Ebenezer Bull II (1846-1926), who married Anna Walling in 1894. As they had no children, "Uncle Eb" conceived the idea of forming a family association to take over the

property and keep it in family hands forever. This was subsequently done in 1921, when the newly-formed William Bull and Sarah Wells Family Association took title to the Stone House and adjoining farm, with life rights reserved to Ebenezer Bull and his wife. It was planned to serve as a fitting memorial to the Bull soldiers and sailors who had served and died in the first World War, but the house has since taken on a much deeper significance as a memorial to the whole family of all generations. After Mrs. Bull's death in 1933, the house was first occupied by C. B. Howell, a Bull descendant, and then Mr. & Mrs. Isaac Niel. For thirty years following 1937, the Association was fortunate to have Mr. and Mrs. Louis E. Brown as caretakers of the old homestead, who brought up their family amid the ancestral surroundings. Mrs. Brown (Corinna Bull) knew the house and its tales intimately, having spent many happy visits there as a girl, and many have expressed disbelief in learning that Louis Brown is not a Bull, his enthusiasm for the place being so unbounded. In 1967 the care of the house was turned over to their son, Michael Brown, and his family. It seems good to hear the shouts of children about the grounds once more and we wish the new occupants a long stay.

Samuel Eager wrote in 1847 that the old stone house had stood for 120 years and that with care it would usefully serve for another 120 years. That prediction has now been fulfilled, and with a continuation of the present assiduous care, another 120 years of service may be confidently assured.

On Friday, Sept. 18, 1868, more than a hundred descendants gathered on Lookout Hill above the Hamptonburgh church for a basket picnic. That was the beginning of the annual Bull Picnic. That year also marked the 150th anniversary of the marriage of William Bull and Sarah Wells. In our next installment, we will read about how the picnic tradition got started and some of the notable events during its first one hundred years.

"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 96-104.

Bull Stone House and Sarah Wells Wedding Dress 2009 photos courtesy of Robert Eager.

Inset photos: Sarah Wells Dress modeled by Edna Tuthill and ca.1870 Bull Stone House from Blue Book pg 96.