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The Reverend Warham Williams
And
The Unredeemed Captive

By

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The Reverend Warham Williams occupies a prominent place in the early history of North Branford, or more precisely, of Northford. He was ordained as the first Minister of the Northford Congregational Church in 1750 and served with distinction in that role until his death in 1788.

He was a Yale graduate, Class of 1745 and after graduation continued on as a tutor for four years, a testimony to his scholarly ability. He was named a fellow of the university in 1769 and served as Secretary for two years.

But today, I would like to talk about another, perhaps less well known, aspect of his life. That is the relationship of his family to the Deerfield Massacre in 1704. His grandfather, the Rev. john Williams, was the Minister at Deerfield Massachusetts and was one of the hostages taken to Canada by the indians. His father Stephen, 9 years old at the time, was another hostage as was Stephen's 8 year old sister Eunice. Eunice became a central figure in the story of the Deerfield Massacre because of her shocking decision not to return to New England when offered the chance. She chose to stay with her Indian captors and to adopt their way of life. She was the "unredeemed captive" .

This story is told in two remarkable books which are the sources from which I have prepared this talk. The first "The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion" was written by the Rev. John Williams in 1707, shortly after his return to Massachusetts. It is still in print and for sale at Deerfield. The other, "The Unredeemed Captive" was written by Professor John Demos of Yale in 1994. It describes Eunice's life in captivity and her decision not to be redeemed. If you would like to know more of this story, I heartily recommend both books.

I would like to start with a summary of what happened at Deerfield in 1704. England and France were at war at that time and the war carried over to their respective colonies in North America. On the night of Feb 29, 1704 a large party of Mohawk Indians from Canada, accompanied by a few French soldiers made a surprise attack on the frontier village of Deerfield, MA.
The struggle was short and bloody. Forty five residents were killed outright,

including the two youngest of John Williams' children, Jerusha, aged one month and one year old John. A few people managed to escape and flee to a neighboring town but the rest were captured. The 112 survivors were told to dress warmly and to prepare to leave at first light. These included the Rev. John Williams, his wife Eunice and their children, Samuel, 15, Esther,13, Steven, 9, Eunice,8, and Warham,4. (This was not our Warham Williams but his uncle.)

A word on the hostage question. They were valuable for two reasons. First, they could be exchanged for French prisoners held in English jails or ransomed for cash. There is some evidence that Deerfield was chosen for the attack because John Williams would be a valuable hostage for exchange. For the Indians, there was another reason. Their population was falling drastically due to the unfamiliar diseases brought from Europe. They wanted to adopt women and children into their societies to replace missing family members.

The next morning they started out on a 200 mile trek to Montreal in the middle of a bitter new England winter. Not everyone made it. Twenty people were killed en route because they could not keep up the pace set by the Indians. One of the first of these was John's wife Eunice. On the second day she fell through the ice while crossing a frozen stream, She survived the night in her frozen clothes but was unable to continue the next morning. Her captor killed her, reasoning that a quick death was preferable to freezing to death alone in the woods. On the other hand, they were solicitous for the children, carrying them on their backs when they were too weak to continue

Once far enough away to be safe from English pursuit, the Indians split up into smaller groups and made their separate ways home. The Williams family was split up at this time and John did not see his children again for some weeks or in Stephen's case for 14 months. John's party arrived at Montreal in late April, after a journey of about 8 weeks. He was well treated by the French governor. Esther and Warham came in soon after. Esther was taken to a hospital to treat her feet badly bruised and cut by the ice. Warham, Samuel and Eunice were taken by the Indian to join their families in the region. These were so-called "civilized Indians. They lived in towns built by the French and had accepted the Catholic religion Soon after, John went to visit Eunice who was at that time anxious to rejoin her family and to return home.

In May 1705, 14 months after his capture, Stephen arrived with his Indian master. He had spent this time hunting and farming as part of the Indian group. He was wearing Indian clothing and his hair had been cut Indian- style, short on one side, long on the other.

After more than a year of this captivity, efforts were begun on both sides to arrange a prisoner exchange. Stephen was among the first group released and he returned in late 1705. More than a year later John Williams and his children Samuel, Esther and Warham were permitted to go home. However, Eunice's Indian captors refused to release her regardless of the amount of money offered. Living in the Indian village of Kahnawagte across the river from Montreal, she undoubtedly watched the departure of the ship carrying her family away.

John returned to Deerfield in Jan 1707 and in August of that year married the widow Abigail Bissell, cousin to his first wife. The children then joined them and John resumed his duties as Minister in Deerfield.

Efforts to free Eunice continued but with no success. The French were willing to pay to have her released but the Indians refused. Finally the Indians said that Eunice could leave if she wished. In 1709 the French governor in Montreal sent emissaries to the Indian town to interview Eunice in the presence of her Indian family. She refused to talk to them and claimed she had forgotten all her English and could only speak in the Indian language. Now this seems odd to me. Is it plausible that an 8 year old child could loose all knowledge of her native language in a period of five years? In any event, she firmly refused to go back to new England. Her refusal was passed to the Williams family.

In 1711, Eunice was re-baptized as a Catholic and took the new name of Margarite. This was another bitter shock to her New England Puritan family. In 1713, now aged 17 and a prisoner for nine years she married an Indian named Arosen. Hearing of this the John Williams asked a Dutch trader from Albany to go to Montreal to see if this was true. He met with Eunice and Arosen and again she refused to say a word or to consider returning to her family.

The next year, after a peace treaty between the French and English, John

Williams himself, returned to Montreal to entreat Eunice and other recalcitrant hostages to return with him. In a letter he described his meeting with them. "It is the pleasure of a holy God to excersize me with sorrow upon sorrow. It was not till Hartford election day the I could see my child. And she is yet obstinatly resolved to live and dye here, and will not so much as give me one pleasant look." He never sees his daughter again.

Little is heard of Eunice in the next few years. She is reported to have borne two daughters.

In 1716, Stephen, the father of our Warham, was ordained Minister at Longmeadow Mass and two years later he married Jane Davenport, of the New Haven Davenports. (This is probably why Warham went to Yale instead of to Harvard as did the other men of the Williams family.) At about this time, Stephen began to keep a detailed journal, 4,000 pages of which have survived. Most of what we later learn about Eunice comes from this journal.

In 1729, John Williams died of a stroke, leaving a large estate of £2,300, of which £220 was willed to Eunice. After John's death some of his friends published a collection of his sermons. One of these was entitled "The Privilege and Duty of the Children of Godly Parents". In this he reveals his bitter disappointment with Eunice's decision to become a catholic and to remain in Canada. In summary, he says that the children (Eunice) of Godly parents (John) have special privileges and also special obligations. Children who fail to meet these obligations must be roundly condemned. They show "a very disobedient, stubborn and ungrateful spirit". They have "cast off their first faith ... and have drank in very loose and hurtful Notions of religion, if not damnable Heresies". They cast "base reflections on their fathers themselves. "These ungrateful children shall be to him as the children of Ethiopians, the very filth of the world, the most despicable of Mankind." (John by the way owned two slaves, both of whom were killed in the march north.) If they persist in this error "your Godly parents will be witness against you in the day of reckoning. "

To me these are the words of a bitter man, humiliated by the unforgivable actions of an ungrateful daughter.

In 1730, a year after the death of her father, Eunice is again heard from. She was in Albany with her husband and indicated that she would like to visit

with her brothers and sisters. Was this because her husband urged her to claim her inheritance or was it that the death of her father had removed the obstacle that kept her from her family?

Nothing much comes of this until 1740 when Stephen finally travels to Albany to meet with Eunice, for the first time in 36 years. The 8 year old captive is now a woman of 44, with two grown daughters both of whom have married men of mixed Indian/English parents.

In August of 1740, Eunice and Arosen travel with Stephen to Longmeadow where Eunice meets for the first time, her 15 year old nephew, Warham Williams. I can't help but wonder at the reaction of the young Warham to the arrival of this Mohawk woman, who was, nonetheless, the sister of his father. She and Arosen refused to sleep in the house, preferring to set up a wigwam in the yard. The family tries once more to convince her to abandon her Indian existence and return to them but she refuses to listen. After seven days they leave and return to Canada with a promise to come again for a longer visit.

She visited again the following year and twice more in the following years, always accompanied by Arosen and usually by or both daughters. In 1743, they stayed in Massachusetts for over six months, visiting all her brothers and sisters. They were also invited to Boston by the Massachusetts Legislature, who had offered them a parcel of land and an annuity if they would settle in Massachusetts. She declined, explaining to her aunt that to do so would imperil her soul.

On this trip she returned to Deerfield to visit the grave of her mother. One can imagine with what emotion she returned to the site of that terrible experience 39 years earlier. She must have relived the murders of her two infant brothers and of her mother and the ordeal of that winter march to Montreal. Yet she had at her side 'her Indian husband to remind her that she had decided to cast her lot with them and not to return to her family.

Also, on this visit she traveled to Connecticut for the first time and may have met Warham who was then studying at Yale. After 6 months in New England they returned home to Canada.

In 1744, war broke out again between the French and English and lasted until

the final English victory in 1755, when Canada became an English possession. While the war lasted, there was no possibility of Eunice visiting her New England family. However, in 1761, Eunice, Arosen, their daughter Catherine, and grandson, Thomas again visited Stephen at Long Meadow but stayed only 10 days. This was the last meeting between them.

In 1765, Arosen dies after more than 50 years of marriage to Eunice.

In 1771, Eunice sent a the following letter to Stephen.

"My Dr Brother,

We have not received any account from you since your letter of the 19th of Sept, 1761 and are much surprised that you cannot find some opportunity of letting us know by letter or otherwise. We are all in good helth. My two daughters are married and well. The one of them has one child, and the other has not had aney, nor any appearance of her every having any. We have a great desire of going down to see you, but dos not know when an opportunity may offer. We are very desirous of hearing from you, and when you write let us know if all our friends are yet alive and if they are in helth and how they live, with their names that are alive. I am now growing old and can have little hopes of seeing you in this world. But I pray the Lord that he may give us grace so to live in this world as to be prepared for a happy meeting in the world to come. Doubtless you have herd that my husband is ded. He has been ded this six years. I have nothing more to acquaint you with, but am desirous to be remembered to all friends and relations and remaine your

Loving sister until death
Eunice Williams"

These are the only words from Eunice to survive. She almost certainly did not write the letter herself as she would not have been taught to write in any language but I wonder how much of the English was her own and how much was provided by the translator/scribe
Eunice died in Canada in 1785, aged 89 years.

Reflections

Inevitably, after hearing Eunice's story, one must ask why? Why did the

daughter of a prominent Puritan minister abandon her natural family and her religion to become a catholic and to marry an Indian, the people who had killed her two little brothers and her mother. When did her captors become her adopted family?

One must first recognize that her decision was not that unusual. Of the 92 Deerfield hostages who arrived safely in Canada, 28 refused repatriation when it was offered. I could understand this for boys and young men. After all, a life of hunting and fishing with no school and no church would seem pretty nice compared to the life of a hard scrabble farmer in Massachusetts. But 16 of the 28 were women. What did they find so attractive about Canada?

Eunice never explained why and her family could never understand or accept her decision.

To make some sense of this I think we have to go back and try to relive her experiences in those critical first years of captivity. Her estrangement from her father may have begun during that cruel winter's march from Deerfield to Canada. Eunice saw her mother killed. A murder her father was unable to prevent. During the trip, when Eunice had trouble keeping up in the deep snow, her father tried to carry her but was not able to. An Indian took her on his back and carried her safely to Montreal. Each night he would make a wigwam, start a fire and give Eunice her share of food. She depended on him for her life.

Once in Montreal, her father was housed with the Governor while Eunice was across the river in the Indian village of Kahnawake. John visited her soon after her arrival and at that time she was anxious to join him and to go home. There is no mention in his book that he went to her when he and his other children were about to leave, to explain that he would keep working for her release. She undoubtedly watched their ship disappear down the river, leaving her with her Indian captors. Years passed with no word from her family. She certainly must have felt abandoned and it would be natural for her to be bitterly resentful of her father's actions. After all, he could have sent his other children home and stayed near Eunice to press for her release. Then she heard that he had remarried and returned to Deerfield, with his new wife and the remaining children, to take up again his post as minister. This must have been a terrible blow to her.

At some point during these years Eunice must have decided to cast her lot with the people who were caring for her and to forget the family that had apparently abandoned her.

It was only after her father's death that she made efforts to contact her brother and agreed to visit them. In my opinion it was this bitter resentment of her father's actions that led her to reject her past life and to form a new one among the Indians. But of course, we will never know.

Finally, what impression did this family tragedy have on Warham Williams as he took up his pastoral duties here in Northford? Was this a dark family secret to be suppressed as much as possible? I believe so. As far as I can find out, Warham never wrote or preached about this affair. It was probably too painful and embarrassing a subject.

I have just barely skimmed the surface of this story. If you would like to know more. Please read these two books on the subject