

**COL. MARINUS WILLETT, THE
HERO OF MOHAWK VALLEY:
AN ADDRESS BEFORE THE
ONEIDA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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Col. Marinus Willett, the Hero of Mohawk Valley: An Address Before the Oneida Historical Society by Daniel E. Wager

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COL. MARINUS WILLETT.

Among the objects and purposes for which the Oneida Historical Society is organized, are the collection and preservation of materials relative to that part of New York formerly known as Tryon county. Within the scope of this organization is the gathering of scant and scattered materials, and weaving them into a narrative relative to the lives of those who have been prominent and foremost in the important and critical period of the existence of the county, and by their valor, patriotism and masterly activity, made the valley of the Mohawk historic ground, and given to it a national importance in the history of the country. Of all the persons who have contributed to this grand result, I think I am safe in saying no one stands out more conspicuously than Col. Marinus Willett. It may be considered a fortunate conclusion that the gathering of materials for a sketch of his life should be no longer postponed, for it is evident that each year's delay lessens the chances and increases the difficulties of obtaining information not already recorded in the well known histories of the times, especially facts which can now be found only in unpublished manuscripts, or in the memory of living witnesses.

In my correspondence and inquiries for facts I luckily ascertained, what is probably known to but a comparatively few, that two sons of Col. Willett are yet alive, the one eighty-six and the other nearly eighty-eight years of age, with bright minds and unclouded intellects, who were able to impart much valuable information concerning their father, which but for their retentive memories and timely aid might have soon passed into hopeless oblivion.

Aside from the "narrative" of Col. Willett, written or dictated mainly, if not entirely by himself after he had attained his seventieth birthday, and published in 1831, the next year after his death, by the elder of the two sons aforementioned, there is no authentic sketch of his life extant. That "narrative" makes no mention of his civil career, which was quite a prominent one in New York, after the close of the revolutionary war, but has reference mainly to some of the more important military events with which he was connected; and even as to those, with the

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becoming modesty of a true soldier, but a brief narration is given.

But a few copies of that "narrative" are in existence, and those very difficult to be obtained. The details are too scant and meager to satisfy the longings of those who wish to know more of Col. Willett's life and character—specially those of Tryon county, wherein he achieved his greatest victories, and won his grandest triumphs. So, too, the histories of the stirring times in which Col. Willett lived have not the space to do more than to mention incidentally, or briefly narrate the more prominent events of the stormy period of his life. Hence, it has been no easy matter, though to me a very pleasurable occupation, to glean from the various and widely separated fields of his active labors materials for a paper that will be full and accurate, and do justice to his merits and memory, and worthy of preservation in the archives of this society.

Thomas Willett, the first one of that family name who crossed the Atlantic to make his home in this western world, was born in England, where his father and grandfather had been ministers of the gospel. He came in the good ship *Lion* in 1632, when he was but twenty-two years of age, and settled in the Plymouth colony, not far from the State line of Rhode Island. The records in that colony frequently mention his name, and furnish evidence that he became a person of wealth and prominence. In his young manhood he was a surveyor of highways, captain of a military company, and held other similar positions. He engaged in mercantile pursuits; was interested in sea-going vessels; owned large tracts of land, one of which was formed into a township by the name of "Swansea." In 1650, while a merchant of Plymouth, he was appointed by Peter Stuyvesant, then the Dutch colonial executive of New York, one of the boundary commissioners, to settle the disputed line between the English and Dutch. That line was adjusted, and has passed into history as the "Hartford boundary treaty of 1650." After the English came into power in New York, Capt. Willett was appointed one of the councilors of that colony, and held that office from 1665 to 1673. In 1667 he was appointed by the English governor, Richard Nichols, the first English mayor of New York, from which it would appear he had, in the meantime, become a resident of the metropolis. When the Dutch, in 1673, regained ascendancy in New York, the property of Thomas Willett was confiscated; he died the next year, at the age

sixty-four years, and his remains were buried at East Providence, in Rhode Island. At page 59 of Lossing's history of the Empire State, a *fac simile* of Thomas Willett's signature can be found. He was the great grandfather of Col. Marinus Willett, whose name and fame are so closely and dearly associated with the history of Tryon County, during the stormy period of the revolutionary struggle.

Edward Willett (the father of Col. Willett,) was a Quaker and a farmer of moderate means, near Jamaica, on Long Island; at that homestead Marinus was born on July 31, 1740, (old style.) He was the second son and child in a family of thirteen children—the same number that was born unto his great grandfather aforementioned. That father died in 1704, at the age of ninety-four years, and, although he belonged to a denomination that was on principle, opposed to war, yet he was destined to see two of his sons, before they were eighteen, enter the military service of their country, and the one to become a prominent leader; the other to be a lieutenant on an English privateer, and the vessel on which he was engaged swept away in a hurricane in the French war of 1758, and all on board lost at sea. Marinus, until he was nearly eighteen years of age, pursued the quiet and peaceful pursuits of a farm life at his father's homestead. About that period of his life, he was moved by a spirit of self-reliance to leave the paternal roof and provide for himself. With a resolute will and a determined spirit, and with only twenty shillings in his pocket, he crossed over to New York to seek in that great city employment, and, if possible, make his fortune. It was about the time of the French war of 1758, when the colonists were greatly excited by reason of raising of troops, and the activity of the contending forces. In the early spring of that year, three English expeditions were being fitted out, with a view to attack the French at different points, and drive them out of this country. One of those expeditions, and in which New York took the greatest interest, was under the command of General Abercrombie, and to be led by him from Albany to lakes George and Champlain to attack Fort Ticonderoga, then garrisoned by 4,000 troops under Montcalm, a field marshal of France. Here were to be raised in the vicinity of New York three battalions of 900 men each, to be under the command of Col. Oliver DeLancey, a brother of the acting governor of New York.

It required no great effort to raise the requisite number of

troops, for the whole country was in commotion, and the people running over with enthusiasm. Young Willett caught the prevailing spirit of the times and, following his own ambition and the example of others, he enlisted in the army and raised a company of soldiers on Long Island among his neighbors and acquaintances. Through the influence of friends, he was appointed second lieutenant of his company, and, although not then eighteen years old, he was as full of patriotism and spirit as those of maturer years. In his "narrative" is the following description of the uniform he wore on receiving his commission as lieutenant, viz: "Green coat trimmed with silver twist; white under clothes and black gaiters, a cocked hat with large black cockade of silk ribbon, with silver button and loop." The three battalions were raised, and the first week in May the troops left New York in sloops, ascended the Hudson to Albany, thence marched overland to Schenectady, and for two weeks were employed in patrolling the Mohawk to watch the settlements and prevent an attack from the French, if one should be made in that quarter. Orders then came to march to Lake George, where they arrived the fore part of June, and found that active preparations were there going forward to cross the lake. The last of the month Gen. Abercrombie arrived, but the soul of the expedition and the idol of the army was young Lord Howe, then thirty-four years of age; young Willett has left on record his high appreciation of the ability and soldierly qualities of that gallant officer. Soon after daybreak on Sunday, July 5th, the whole army, 10,000 strong, embarked in 1,000 boats, to cross Lake George, from its southern extremity, to its northerly shore. The day was bright and clear, the soldiers were clad in their scarlet coats, and as this armament floated upon the glassy surface of this inland sea, accompanied by martial music, while ensigns and banners floated in the breeze and glittered in the sunbeams, it looked more like a holiday occasion than an army going to battle.

At dawn the next morning, the troops landed at the north end of the lake, some four or five miles from Fort Ticonderoga, and while reaching the shore, had a slight skirmish with the occupants of a French outpost at that point, in which a couple of Frenchmen were killed. A few of the Stockbridge tribe of Indians accompanied this expedition, and as soon as they saw the two dead soldiers they rushed forward and secured their scalps. This was young Willett's first experience in witnessing the scalping process, but those scenes became familiar to him later in life. The country

between Lake George and Fort Ticonderoga was covered by a dense forest and tangled morasses; the troops formed in good order, and commenced marching by columns through the woods. Lord Howe led the advance guard, near whom was the regiment in which young Willett marched, moving forward to exposed points of danger and expecting every moment to fall into an ambush or to be met by a strong French force. The eve of battle is always one of breathless anxiety, especially to those who have never been in an engagement or witnessed one. This was Willett's first experience, and he has left an account of his feelings on this occasion; he states that he did not at this time, nor ever subsequently in his life, experience the slightest degree of fear, but on the contrary he was quite elated, and his spirits highly exhilarated as the crisis approached. The troops had not proceeded two miles before an ambush was discovered near where young Willett was marching. A sharp engagement ensued and Lord Howe was soon to the front rallying and cheering his men, when he was struck by a bullet and instantly killed. The French were dispersed, but the sudden death of Howe threw his troops into confusion and disorder. There then seemed to be no leader or any one to issue orders. The troops wandered about following incompetent guides, crossing each other's track, and firing at their own friends, mistaking them for the foe. While thus moving Willett and his companions accidentally fell in with Gen. Abercrombie, who stood under a huge tree, with a large cloak wrapped about him, while two regiments of regular troops were drawn up around his person to guard and protect him from harm. He issued no orders and the troops continued to wander the rest of the day, lost and bewildered in the woods. As night overtook them, they halted and rested until morning; on awaking it was found that most of the men had encamped near the spot where they had landed from the boats the morning before.

It was afternoon before the army was again in motion for Fort Ticonderoga, and when three miles from the fort, they halted and passed another night in the woods. The next day, which was the 8th of July, the army again started on its march for the fort, and about noon was re-enforced by six hundred Indians under the command of Sir William Johnson. But the want of a leader and competent guides had not been supplied. The same confusion, disorder and bewilderment prevailed, and before the troops were aware of it, or knew the danger they were in, they became en-



tangled in a network of fallen trees, and found they were directly under the enemy's breastworks, and exposed to a murderous fire. For four or five hours the battle raged, to the great disadvantage of the British troops, and it was not until sunset the firing ceased, and the latter retired to spend another night in the forest, expecting to renew the attack the next day, before daylight.

The next morning Lieut. Willett was awakened from a sound sleep and told that the army was rapidly making its way to their boats, with a view to recross the lake. About eight that morning the troops re-embarked, and, although there was no enemy near, great confusion and disorder prevailed, and this expedition, which, three days before, came with such pomp and splendor, returned in disgrace, leaving behind it, killed and wounded, some two thousand of its numbers. No doubt Gen. Abercrombie felt much safer when he had put thirty-eight miles of Lake George between himself and Montcalm.

In that expedition were two other persons prominent in the history of New York, and who have been more or less connected with affairs in Tryon county. The one was Gen. Philip Schuyler, whose name was given to Fort Stanwix during a portion of the revolutionary war; the other, Gen. John Bradstreet, a prominent officer in the colonial service, and who was, for years, part owner of Cosby's manor, which includes the site of Utica, and whose widow, by another marriage, was grandmother to that Martha Bradstreet who made her name famous, not only by reason of her legal and other abilities, but by the long, tedious and expensive litigation which, over half a century ago, she inflicted upon Uticans and others, regarding their land titles. Gen. Bradstreet was but a major in that expedition, yet he burned with indignation because of its shameful failure. At a council of war held at the head of the lake the very evening the troops returned from Ticonderoga, he urged the adoption of measures that would tend to wipe out or relieve the disgraceful blunder. He suggested an expedition against Fort Frontenac (now Kingston,) and offered to lead it. Some looked upon such an undertaking as wild and chimerical, and its successful execution improbable, for it was considered a strong fortress for those times, well supplied with men, cannon and ammunition; but Bradstreet urged his offer with so much earnestness that Gen. Abercrombie at last reluctantly consented to commission him to go and take with him three thousand troops. Among the number was young Willett and the regiment to which