

## **CORNERSTONE FOR COURAGE: THE CASE OF STEPHEN JENNINGS AND THE AMERICAN DELIVERANCE (1677-78)**

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Three hundred, twenty-five years ago [Hatfield, Massachusetts](#), consisted of a small fort and several houses outside the log palisades with nearby fields cleared for agriculture. There were no roads, just traces and cuts through the thick forests primeval. Most regional traffic moved north/south on the mighty Connecticut River. It was the frontier's edge, and there pioneers lived under the threat of constant attack by hostile Indians.

Family records over the many generations indicate young Stephen Jennings married Hannah Dickinson Gillett at Hatfield on May 18, 1677. Hannah was the daughter of John Dickinson of Hadley and the widow of Samuel Gillett who had been killed by Indians at the Battle of Turner's Falls. She had two daughters by him.

### ***Traces in the Wilderness***

Little is known about Stephen's origins, as records were lost concerning his parentage, but it is likely he had moved upriver from Connecticut, a colony which had undergone a period of marked instability corresponding with witchcraft trials of the 1650s. In such a repressive, fear-driven atmosphere any strong independent spirits known to frequent his family could have been targeted. In fact, it is likely that some members of his extended line were severely persecuted at witchcraft trials held at Old Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1661. Although [Nicholas Jennings](#) and his wife, Margaret Bedford, were found not guilty of unspecified witchcraft charges carrying the death penalty for conviction. The shadows of public opprobrium hung over their family. A veteran of the Pequot Wars, Nicholas moved next to his old commander, Major John Mason, and lived out his life bloodied but unbowed in Old Saybrook on a small, but beautiful home overlooking the Connecticut River. Their children, including a daughter Martha who would have been old enough to have been Stephen's mother, moved away with few traces. There is some possibility that they went south to Virginia or more probably South Hampton (North Sea) L.I. across the Long Island Sound.

### ***The Raid***

On the sunny morning of September 19, 1677, shortly after the men had gone to work in the fields, a large band of Indians attacked the fort at Hatfield north of the palisade before their victims could get to its shelter.<sup>2</sup> Twelve innocents, mainly women and children were killed and a number of others were wounded by the Indians, who also put the torch to the barns and houses. The raiders also carried off seventeen captives, including Martha Waite, wife of Benjamin Waite and their three little girls, and Hannah, wife of Stephen Jennings and her two Gillett children.

Seeing the spiraling smoke, Hatfield's men rushed back to find the devastation with a few lucky souls still barricaded in the fort. Waite, a veteran Indian fighter from Turner's Falls, urged an immediate pursuit and reconnaissance, but with the actual size of the raiding party unknown and its direction uncertain, caution prevailed. There was concern that, if Hatfield's men organized a pursuit as a group, the Indians might crush them all and/or circle back and destroy the fort.

### ***"In Action Faithful, and In Honor, Clear"***

Only one other man stood up with Waite in support of seizing the initiative – Stephen Jennings. The two moved quickly to determine which tribe/s were responsible and the direction the raiding party had taken with their captives.

In early October a break came while Waite was securing authorization letters in Springfield and Cambridge (seat of the Colony). One captive (Benoni Stebbins Of Deerfield) had escaped, and his

information confirmed the Indians (Norwottucks and Pocumtucks) were heading for Canada up the "Great River" (Connecticut).[/1](#)

Waite and Jennings then moved promptly to secure permission from the Royal Governor of New York to proceed north to Canada. After a chilly reception, owing to ill will between New York and New England colonies, the desired authorization was provided. This facilitated the receipt of similar approval from Albany (Captain Salisbury).

### ***The Searchers' Ordeal***

With the initial "political lifting" accomplished, Waite and Jennings hired an Indian guide to pilot them through the uncharted wilderness. They became the first white men to have followed the route to Canada along Lake George and Lake Champlain ([see map](#)) – a route that would prove significant in the next century during the French and Indian Wars (1755-1763), and our Revolutionary War (1775-1781). But winter was closing in fast. The Indian scout led the brave searchers from Saratoga Springs to the foot of Lake George where he suddenly deserted them. Before leaving, however, the scout etched a rough map on birch bark with charcoal showing the route along the lakes and provided a canoe.

Waite and Jennings paddled the length of Lake George (32 miles) according to direction and shouldered the canoe upon reaching the northern shore, carrying it over the ground where Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point would stand years later. They camped overnight on the southern shore of Lake Champlain. The lake was frozen over as far as they could see. They hid the canoe and started out on foot, not realizing the size of the body of water. After a day's journey, they came to open water, which forced a difficult backtracking to retrieve the canoe. They embarked again, following the length of the lake to Richelieu River (120 miles), though they were forced to abandon the canoe again when they reached Grand Isle. The lake divided there and was frozen from that point onward.

### ***Cheating the "White Death"***

Waite and Jennings had reached the Richelieu River on January 2, 1678 when they encountered the icy fury of a Canadian blizzard. Stumbling in the blinding snow, the weak travelers luckily found a deserted wigwam where they discovered a store of firewood, some biscuits and a half flask of whiskey. It was as if Providence had intervened. The next day they moved on and found traces of an abandoned Indian encampment with sad reminders of barbarism.

On January 6<sup>th</sup>, Waite and Jennings reached the French settlement of Fort Chambly (near modern-day Montreal). Their appearance was regarded by the French as miraculous. After regaining their strength, the searchers convinced the French to assist their mission. Captain de Neuville was attached to accompany them with several soldiers and Indian guides. Forty miles further along the banks of the St. Lawrence River Waite and Jennings found their captive wives and children at a poorly guarded wigwam near Sorel. With the French military participation, the returning Indians claimed that the original raiding party had bartered the captives to another tribe – a fact of chattel, which necessitated negotiations with the new captors. At Quebec, French Governor Frontenac agreed to front the ransom money and, apparently impressed with the two men's courage, provided them with a larger military escort under the command of Sieur de Lusigny. The party of captives now numbered twenty as two children had been born during the four month captivity and several had died – or been killed in the long, northward journey. De Lusigny's eleven soldiers were ordered to guide and protect the party during their trip back to Albany. After all were rested and well, in the spring, the party headed south. It took sixteen days to reach Albany.

### ***A Triumphant Reunion***

On May 22, 1678, the Waite/Jennings Party with French soldiers paraded into Albany causing widespread consternation. Captain Salisbury initially found himself in a quandary: What to do with the French soldiers under de Lusigny since they could be considered potential spies, probing weaknesses of the fortifications (despite their obvious gallantry in assisting the English party). This

was resolved without incident.

A few days later the party moved on to Kinderhook, New York, where they were greeted as true heroes by their overjoyed loved ones and other Hatfield residents, who had rushed to meet and escort them, having early word of their successful movements. In early June, Massachusetts Governor Leverett declared June 6 a day of fasting and humility (thanks) in the colony in recognition of the celebrated rescue. The governor also had a practical purpose. Notes over his signature were sent to all churches in the colony's 46 settlements urging a collection be taken to assist Waite and Jennings cover their expenses (and the funds advanced by Governor Frontenac). Nearly 350 pounds were raised in this manner which was more than sufficient to meet the costs of the expedition and redemption of the captives.

As with many frontier stories, Waite and Jennings did not enjoy old age. Waite was killed and skinned by a large contingent of French and Indians on February 29, 1704 during the famous Deerfield massacre. Stephen Jennings was killed on July 20, 1710 with his son, Benjamin Jennings, near [Brookfield, Massachusetts](#) where he lived on his farm near two other sons, Stephen II and Joseph. Another of Stephen's sons, Jonathan Jennings, born in 1692, carried the line forward with four children, including my ancestor, [Moses Jennings](#), who served as a corporal in the French and Indian War (1755-1763) and the Revolutionary War.

### **Conclusion: Character Education through History**

The Waite/Jennings rescue mission thus became one of the most famous stories in the early annals of our nation's history. One hundred, fifty years later key elements of the saga inspired James Fenimore Cooper as he wrote *Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and struggled with balancing ideals of the frontier wilderness with the cultivation of farms. The book is widely regarded as one of the greatest novels in American literature.

As Americans in this perilous, testing time for a national will, we could usefully reflect on the sacrifices and courage of these ancestors who came before and helped give us the freedom and institutions we often take for granted. Heroes such as Stephen Jennings and Benjamin Waite and their inspiring stories offer strength today as we stare into the abyss since September 11. We can chart the bolder course. Understanding our past can provide us and our families with important building blocks and values for the tough road ahead.

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Nicholas E. Hollis is president of The Agribusiness Council, a nonprofit/tax-exempt organization established in 1967. He is a direct descendant of Stephen Jennings and a native of New England. Much of the Waite-Jennings narrative was provided during interviews in 1979 with his great aunt, Ruth Hastings Jennings Anderson (1893-1987), and is also documented in *The Young and Old Puritans of Hatfield* by Mary P. Wells Smith, Boston (1900).

<sup>1/</sup>Smith, Mary P. Wells. *The Young and Old Puritans of Hatfield*. Boston (1900), p. 37.

<sup>2/</sup>Wells Smith notes that on the evening before the attack six Mohawk warriors with two captive women (presumably taken in a raid on another tribe) requested food and shelter at the gates and were allowed to sleep outside the Hatfield fort on the condition that they would be gone at dawn. In hindsight these Indians were seen as advance scouts for the main raiding party .

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