

Project Canterbury

Missions to the Oneidas

By Susan Fenimore Cooper

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We continue in this issue the historical and descriptive paper which were begun last spring, on the Mission to the Oneidas, from the pen of Miss Susan Fenimore Cooper, daughter of the distinguished author, and niece of Bishop De Lancey. These may be followed, if our readers are interested in the subject, by the Diary of Ellen Goodnough, the wife of the missionary. This diary gives an insight into the working of the mission in its everyday detail. It is a sort of photograph of the life of the people, simple, accurate, and pleasantly written.

It was the expressed wish of the venerable Bishop Kemper that an authentic record of the Oneida Mission should be prepared. In accordance with this wish these papers have been written, and it is hoped that some publisher may think them worthy of being permanently preserved to our Church literature, in book form. Meantime they will have a wider circulation in these columns than most books attain. It is hoped that this simple and truthful narrative will not be without interest to our readers, old and young. ED. L.C.

In 1811 Bishop Hobart was consecrated to the diocese of New York. The position of the Church was growing more assured. Her charities enlarged. The missionary spirit moved her heart and missionary action followed. Bishop Hobart already looked upon the remnant of the Six Nations within the limits of the diocese of New York, as a legacy bequeathed to him by the venerable society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The revival of that mission by our Church dates from 1816. A movement was made in behalf of the Oneidas, the services of a catechist were offered to them; they responded warmly to the proposition, and when their teacher appeared among them they received him with great cordiality.

The catechist sent to the Oneidas was a man whose history was strangely remarkable. When the village of Deerfield, in Massachusetts, was surprised and burned during that terrible winter's night of 1704, by a united band of French and Indians from Canada, the Rev. John Williams, the minister of the village, and all his family were carried away prisoners. In course of time after a painful captivity, Mr. Williams and all his children but one, returned to Massachusetts. One, a daughter, had been adopted into a Mohawk family, and nothing could induce her to leave her adopted people. She lived and died a Mohawk woman at heart, having married in the tribe. The descendants of Emma Williams, as usual among the red people, bore the maternal family name. She had a grandson named Thomas. Some of the friends of her family, in Massachusetts, offered to educate a son of Thomas Williams, in New England. Eleazar Williams, then a lad, was accordingly sent to these friends, who provided for him very kindly. Their object would seem to have been to fit him to become a missionary among his own people, in connection with the Presbyterians. But while the young man professed a wish to serve his people as a missionary he sought the communion of the Church. His boyhood had been passed among the Mohawk relatives on the St. Lawrence, and he was familiar with the Prayer Book in the language of his tribe. Under these

circumstances he offered his services, as a lay missionary, to Bishop Hobart, who gladly accepted them as coinciding with plans he had already much at heart. He was accordingly sent to Oneida Castle, and entered on his duties in March, 1816. He met with a warm reception from the people, who looked upon him as one of themselves. He soon acquired much facility in speaking the Oneida dialect, which greatly resembles the Mohawk, though softer and more musical. Large numbers of the people flocked every Sunday to the school house to take part in the services, with which a number of the older persons had been familiar thirty or forty years before. Once more the Oneidas heard the solemn words of the Litany, by which an earlier generation had been deeply affected.

At the close of the first year of the services of Eleazar Williams, a very important step was taken. Many had relapsed into heathenism. In 1816 the tribe was divided into two parties. "The First Christian Party" consisted of those who had been baptized. These almost immediately joined Mr. Williams' flock. The other division of the tribe were avowed heathens, or the "Pagan Party," and addressed as such by the Governor of the State. But during the winter of 1817 Gov. De Witt Clinton received at Albany the following letter from the Oneidas:

May it please your Excellency: We, the chiefs, and principal men of that part of the Oneida nation of Indians, heretofore known and distinguished as the "Pagan Party," in the name of the said party beg leave to address your Excellency on a subject which we hope will be as pleasing to your Excellency as it is to us. We no longer own the name of "Pagans." We have abandoned our idols and sacrifices, and have fixed our hopes on our Blessed Redeemer. In evidence of this assertion we here tender to your Excellency, sincerely and unequivocally, our abjuration of Paganism and its rites, and take the Christian's God, to be our God, and our only hope of salvation.

We believe in God, the Creator and Preserver of all things, as omniscient, and omnipresent, most gracious, and most merciful. We believe in Jesus Christ, that He is the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, the Mediator between God and man, and that all must believe in Him and embrace Him in order to obtain salvation. We believe in God the Sanctifier and Comforter. We believe in a general resurrection, and a future judgment in which all mankind shall be judged according to their works. We believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God, and that in them are contained all things necessary to man's salvation. We present to your Excellency this abstract of our faith in order to demonstrate the impropriety of our any longer retaining the name of Pagans. We trust that through the mercy of God we have abandoned the character of Pagans; let us also abandon the name. We therefore request your Excellency that in all future transactions with this State we may be known as the "Second Christian Party of the Oneida Indians," and we pray that your Excellency will take such means as may be necessary, and proper, to cause us to be recognized in future by that name. And, in the name of the Holy Trinity, we do here sign ourselves, your Excellency's most sincere friends.

Done in general council at Oneida, this 25th day of January. A.D. 1817.

Cornelius Olhasheat, Arius Tehoranigo, John Cahellius, Jacob Atoni, Wm. Toniatesheu, Peter Sauthecalcos, Nicholas Garagoertie, Moses Schuyler, Wm. Tegarentotashou, Wm. Tchoratatshe, Peter Tawasertasha.

This document was no doubt prepared by Mr. Williams. Soon after the missionary was sent to New York charged with a letter to Bishop Hobart. This letter was written by a young Oneida, a communicant.

The Chiefs of the Oneida Indians in the State of New York, to the Rt. Rev. Bishop Hobart:

RIGHT REVEREND FATHER:--We salute you in the name of the ever adorable, ever blessed, and ever living Sovereign Lord of the universe: We acknowledge this Almighty Being as our Creator, Preserver, and constant Benefactor. Right Reverend Father: * * * We see now that the Christian religion is intended for the good of the Indians as well as the white people; we see it, and do feel that the religion of the Gospel will make us happy in this world, and in the world to come. We now profess it outwardly * * May it ever remain in our hearts, and we be enabled by the Spirit of the Eternal One, to practice the great duties it points out to us. Right Reverend Father: Agreeably to your regard we have treated our brother with that attention, and kindness which you required of us; we have assisted him all that was in our power as to his support; but you know well that we are poor ourselves, and we cannot do a great deal. Though our brother has lived very poor since he came among us, but he is patient, and makes no complaint; we pity him because we love him as we do ourselves. We wish to do something for his support; but this impossible for us to do at present, as we have latterly raised between three and four thousand dollars to enable us to build a little chapel.

Right Reverend Father, we entreat and beseech you not to neglect us. We hope our Christian brethren in New York will help us all that is in their power. We hope our brother will by no means be withdrawn from us. If this should take place the cause of religion will die among us; immorality and wickedness will prevail.

Right Reverend Father:--As the head and father of the Holy Apostolic Church in this State, we entreat you to take a special charge of us. We are ignorant, we are poor, and need your assistance. Come, venerable Father, and visit your children, and warm their hearts by your presence in the things which belong to their everlasting peace. May the Great Head of the Church whom you serve be with you, and His blessings ever remain with you."

We, venerable Father,
Remain your dutiful children.

Oneida, January, 1818.

This letter signed by thirteen prominent Oneidas, received a kind answer from the Bishop:

MY CHILDREN:--I have received your letter by your brother and teacher, Eleazar Williams, and return your affectionate and Christian salutation, praying that grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, may be with you. My children: I rejoice to hear of your faith in the One living and true God, and in His Son Jesus Christ, Whom he has sent, Whom to know is life eternal, and I pray that by the holy Spirit of God, you may be kept steadfast in this faith, and may walk worthy of Him, who hath called you out of darkness

into His marvellous light.

The Bishop then proceeds to urge his children "to acquire the holy tempers, and practice the holy duties which the Gospel enjoins;" to unite with their teacher "in the holy prayers of our Apostolic Church translated into your own language;" he exhorts them "diligently to get your own living by cultivating the earth, or by some other lawful calling." The Bishop closes as follows:

My Children:--It is my purpose, if the Lord wills, to come and see you next summer, and I hope to find you, as good Christians, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and living righteously, godly, and soberly in the world. I shall have you in my heart, and remember you in my prayers; for you are part of my charge, of the flock for whom the Son of God gave Himself, even unto the death upon the cross, and whom He commanded His ministers to seek to gather into His fold, that through Him they might be saved for ever. My children, may God be with you, and bless you.

JOHN HENRY HOBART.

Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in State of New York.

Dated at New York, the 1st day of February, in the year of our Lord, 1818.

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The promise which Bishop Hobart gave to his Oneida "Children" was faithfully fulfilled. On Tuesday, September 13, 1818, he visited their village. At that day the journey into the Oneida country was not without its difficulties. There was neither canal nor railroad, to speed the traveller on his way, and the roads were of the rudest description. It was but a frontier civilization, where the traveller went jolting over "corduroy" tracks, or sank deep in ruts or mud, half the days in the year. Bishop Hobart, however, reached his destination in due time, and became deeply interested in what he saw of the people, and their country. It was a condition of society, though no longer savage, yet very peculiar and foreign to all his own previous experience. The population of the Oneida reservation was at that time said to be about one thousand, it was probably, however, rather less. The Reservation was owned in common by the whole tribe. Only a small portion was under cultivation for potatoes, and the old Indian staples of maize, beans and pumpkins; the rude pasture lands where their cows and sheep fed together were more extensive; but much the greater portion of the land was a forest wilderness. Through these woods there were no roads whatever, but many Indian paths or trails. The dwellings of the people lay scattered about in wild irregularity, according to the fancy of the builders; there were a few frame houses, others of logs, and others were wigwams of bark; some stood on the shady hillsides, others in the fertile valleys near their fields of maize and pumpkins. The Oneidas at this period busied themselves in gathering gin-seng in the forest. This they sold to the traders, by whom it was carried to New York and Philadelphia, and sold to merchants, who sent it to China, where it was burned as incense in the temples. The Oneidas gathered about 1,000 bushels annually, and sold it for \$2,000.

The Chiefs gathered about the Bishop with the usual calm dignity of their race when doing honor to a favored guest. One aged Sachem, probably Hendrick Schuyler, made a speech which was translated by Mr. Williams. He told his "Father," the Bishop, that in his youth he had been instructed in the holy Christian Faith by a missionary from beyond the sea, when this State was an English Colony; that, he had been baptized, and had held fast the faith while the snows of fifty winters had fallen about him, and while many of his brethren were still heathens. He pointed out the spot where the missionary had preached the Gospel to his tribe; it was an open glade in the forest, with a few oaks of noble growth throwing a grateful shade here and there. Within sight of this spot rose the little church, which the Oneidas had recently built, under the direction of their catechist, Eleazar Williams; it was a neat rustic chapel, still unfinished, but in every way creditable to the tribe, who had raised more than \$3,000 for the expenses. In this unfinished chapel Bishop Hobart confirmed eighty-nine persons. In his address to the convention of the diocese, the Bishop spoke of his visit to the Oneidas:

It is a subject of congratulation that our Church has resumed the labors which for a long period before the Revolutionary War, the Society in England for

Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts directed to the religious instruction of the Indian tribes. * * The religious instructor of the Oneidas, employed by our Church, being of Indian extraction, and acquainted with their language, dispositions, and customs, and devoting himself unremittingly to their spiritual and temporal welfare, enjoys their full confidence, while the education he has received has increased his qualifications as their guide in the faith and precepts of the Gospel. Mr. Eleazar Williams, at the earnest request of the Oneida chiefs, was licensed by me about two years since, as their lay reader, catechist and school-master. Educated in a different communion, he connected himself with our Church from conviction, and appears warmly attached to her doctrines, her Apostolic ministry, and her worship. Soon after he commenced his labors among the Oneidas, the Pagan party solemnly professed the Christian faith. Soon after their conversion, they appropriated in connection with the old Christian party the proceeds of the sale of some of their lands to the erection of a handsome edifice for divine worship, which will be shortly completed. In the work of their spiritual instruction the Book of Common Prayer, a principal part of which has been translated for their use, proves a powerful auxiliary. Its simple and affecting exhibition of the truths of redemption, is calculated to interest their hearts, while it informs their understanding, and its decent and significant rites contribute to fix their attention in the exercises of worship. They are particularly gratified with having parts assigned them in the service, and repeat the responses with great propriety and devotion. On my visit several hundreds assembled for worship; those who could read were furnished with books; and they uttered the confessions of the Liturgy, responded to its supplications, and chanted its hymns of praise with a reverence and fervor which powerfully interested the feelings of those who witnessed the solemnity. They listened to my address to them, interpreted by Mr. Williams, with so much solicitous attention; they received the laying on of hands with such grateful humility, and participated of the symbols of their Saviour's love with such tears of penitential devotion; that the impression which the scene made on my mind will never be effaced. Nor was this the excitement of the moment, or the exhibition of enthusiasm. The eighty-nine who had been confirmed had been well instructed by Mr. Williams, and none were permitted to approach the Communion whose lives did not correspond with their Christian professions. * * I have admitted Mr. Williams as a candidate for Orders, on the recommendations of the Standing Committee.

This was the first occasion on which the Oneidas had ever been visited by a bishop of regular consecration. It was the first time that the rite of Confirmation had ever been performed among them. The services are described by those who were present as deeply impressive. The unfinished chapel was filled to overflowing. The touching reverence and devotion of the people, both young and old, were very affecting. Some of the clergy present were moved to tears, and withdrew to weep for joy, and offer prayers of thankful praise, before the services were completed.

The following year the little chapel was finished. On the 21st of September 1819, it was consecrated under the name of St. Peter's church. On this occasion the Bishop confirmed fifty-six persons, and baptized two adults, and forty-six infants, all Oneidas.

Mr. Williams continued faithful in his services. As he was not ordained, other Church clergymen occasionally visited the mission for the purpose of administering the Sacraments.

The faithful Father Nash, the pioneer missionary of Otsego County, performed service there, in company with the Rev. Mr. Orderson, of the Island of Barbadoes, in the spring of 1821. On this occasion five adults and fifty children were baptized. In speaking of this visit Father Nash writes: "In the month of May last, I visited the church at Oneida and with pleasure can testify to the excellent order observed. In no congregation, although I have seen many solemn assemblies, have I beheld such deep attention, and such humble devotion."

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