

New England Immigrants to Schaghticoke: Bethel Mather

In previous columns, I've discussed immigrants to Schaghticoke. First came the Native American refugees, invited to settle in Schaghticoke following King Phillip's War in New England from 1675-1676. The first European immigrants to Schaghticoke were Dutch settlers from Albany, who rented land in the vicinity of today's Knickerbocker Mansion, the Albany Corporation Lands. Around the time of the Revolution, some of the Palatine Germans who had first settled in the Poughkeepsie area moved on to Schaghticoke, settling in what is now the Melrose part of town. Following the Revolution, the next big group moved in. They were people from New England. Some were farmers who found New England becoming congested and sought new land; others were budding industrialists, who sought business opportunities on the rivers of New York, here the large water fall on the Hoosic River in Schaghticoke.

One of these incomers was Bethel Mather. He was born in Torrington, Connecticut in 1771. At some point he moved to Amenia in Dutchess County. He married Huldah Smith there in July 1794. Their first three children were born there: Amelia in 1795, Charles in 1796, and Montgomery in 1797. In 1796, they bought 47 acres in Schaghticoke from Isaac Hart for 184 pounds. This plot, which had been part of the Hoosic Patent, was located to the northeast of the intersection of the road to Easton and the road to Valley Falls. Presumably they moved once they had built a house. Mather bought 49 more acres in 1827, for \$2,210. On the map of 1856, his house is labeled right where the M&T Bank is now, at the junction of Routes 40 and 67.

Bethel went beyond farming and invested in industrial property. In 1803 he purchased 81 acres on the Hoosic River, which he sold in 1815, reserving ½ of a "mine" on the bank of the river. I don't know what type of mine that was. About the same time he bought 34 more acres on the river from Charles Joy, an early mill owner. Mather, Joy, John Knickerbocker, and two others built the second bridge over the Hoosic River at Schaghticoke in 1799. They were authorized to collect tolls from those using it, as long as they maintained it properly. If they didn't, ownership would revert to New York State.

The year before Mather died, the 1860 census recorded this data about his farm: he had 145 improved acres, 25 unimproved, worth \$13,600. He had implements worth \$200, six horses, two cows, nine oxen, 24 sheep, 450 bushels of rye, 150 of corn, 100 of oats, 500 of potatoes, and 40 of buckwheat. He had \$200 worth of production in his orchard, and produced 500 pounds of butter that year.

Mather was also a good citizen of his town. In 1803 he was one of the founders of the Presbyterian Church. The first building was erected on his property, near the junction of Route 67 and Geary Road. He also gave the lot for the church when it was moved down near the river to its current location in 1820. Mather bought a pew in 1820 for \$49, one of the higher purchase prices, and served as a trustee until 1836. His wife, Huldah, was one of the first members of the church, and his daughter Ann Eliza was among the first babies baptised in the church.

Mather also served his town and county in the militia. In 1801 a new cavalry troop was formed with Herman Knickerbocker as Captain, John Vanderspiegel (as in Speigletown) as 1st Lieutenant, and Bethel Mather as the 2nd Lieutenant. By 1804 he was in the artillery. He was first a Major, then a Lieutenant Colonel in the State Militia about 1815. He seems to have gone by the title "Colonel" for the rest of his life. In the deed for St. John's Catholic Cemetery, the property is defined by its proximity to "Colonel Mather's Four Corners."

In the next column, I will describe Mather's plunge into politics and his family. I will also provide a bibliography of my research.

Bethel Mather: part 2

In the last column, I described the arrival of Bethel Mather of Connecticut as an immigrant to Schaghticoke around 1800, and his plunge into the agricultural, industrial, and military life of the growing village of Schaghticoke, known as “the Point,” so much so that the intersection of current routes 40 and 67 by his home was known as “Colonel Mather’s Four Corners.”

Mather was elected a representative to the NYS Assembly in 1813. The War of 1812 was in progress, and Mather was a peace candidate. The war seriously interfered with trade and commerce. The “Troy Post” of April 1813 reports that Bethel Mather was nominated to run for assembly at the Rensselaer County convention of the Federal Republican Delegates. Herman Knickerbocker, another prominent Schaghticoke resident, was the secretary of the convention. Their slogan was “Peace, Liberty, and Commerce”. An article in the “Troy Sentinel” in September 1813, was a “call to prevent the repeal of tariffs, to protect farmers, mechanics, and manufacturers of Rensselaer County,” reporting on a meeting at the courthouse in Troy to appoint delegates to a convention in New York City. Among those signing this call was Bethel Mather, along with Herman Knickerbocker. Mather served only one term in the Assembly, which was rather common at the time.

Mather was also a founder of the Rensselaer County Agricultural Society in 1834, helping to write its constitution and serving as a vice-president. He was also a member of the Homer Lodge of the Masons, and served as a school commissioner for the town. When Judge Josiah Masters died in 1822, Mather was one of two men who did the inventory of his considerable belongings. In the auction that followed, Mather bought 90 sheep, a boar, a heifer, a hive of bees, a barrel of pork, a plow, some iron, and the flax, wheat, and oats in the barn. All of this indicates his prominence in the town.

Bethel Mather and his wife Huldah had fourteen children, twelve of whom were baptized in the Presbyterian Church. As I said earlier, the oldest, Aurelia, was born before they moved to Schaghticoke, in 1795. The youngest, Lydia Jane, was baptized in 1832. Four of the girls attended Emma Willard’s Troy Female Seminary. One, Ann Eliza, born in 1800, studied with Mrs. Willard in 1819, before she moved her school to Troy. Very few girls from Schaghticoke had this opportunity for what was a very advanced education for girls at the time. Ann Eliza married a Rhode Island immigrant to Schaghticoke, Amos Briggs, in 1824. Briggs was for a time the wealthiest man in town.

The oldest of Mather’s sons, Montgomery, born in 1797, must have died before 1815, as he wasn’t baptized at the local church. Another son, Derick Lansing, was a doctor who died at age 24 in 1851. A third son, Henry Platt, died in 1821 at age 12, and a fourth, Sidney Smith, died in 1834 at age 29. Huldah Mather died in 1858, and Bethel in 1861. At that point, just six of their children survived. The only surviving son, Charles, lived in Berlin, Wisconsin. Aurelia lived in Steuben County, New York. Maria, born in 1798 lived in Delevan, Wisconsin. Daughters Ann Eliza Briggs, Harriet Congdon, Caroline Morgan, and Lydia Hawley all lived locally. An 1847 will left son Charles \$700, and each daughter \$250, but that was without accounting for sale of the property. Surely each received substantially more in the end.

Bethel Mather was certainly a valuable member of the community of Schaghticoke, contributing economically and socially to its development in the 19th century. He was involved in the development of scientific agriculture, participated in politics, served in the local militia, and supported the Presbyterian Church. He (or maybe his wife) believed in the education of women, and through the marriage of his daughter Eliza Ann, he became allied with the wealthiest industrialist in town.

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