

A Stone Arabia Pioneer's Will

William Nellis 1694 – 1778

Soon October 21st will be forever past in the year 2015. In fact so are 238 years since the old document I hold in my hand was signed by an 83 year old man with a shaky hand. The man was the pioneer William Nellis and this is his last will and testament. William was born on January 7, 1694 along the Rhine River in what is now Germany. That area was called the Palatinate. In the early 1700s the area had been invaded by French troops and was experiencing extra harsh winters. The Nellis family along with many Palatine neighbors chose to emigrate to the new world—their promised land. After a harrowing voyage the mother of the family Marie Elizabeth, William, brother Christian, and sister Catharine Elizabeth arrived in New York early in 1710.

They had been farmers and grape growers in the old world so naturally they wanted land they could call their own. To find that land was a difficult venture. It was to take them to the sites along the Hudson River in New York, onward to Schoharie, and finally to the Mohawk Valley. William in 1723 settled in what was then and up to the present still is called Stone Arabia on the north side of the Mohawk River. Christian established himself near present St Johnsville, New York. His 18th century home now called Nellis Tavern still exists. Catherine Elizabeth married Jacob Krauss and settled near present Fort Plain, New York. She passed away in 1755.

Let us look at this will of pioneer William Nellis and the circumstances that prevailed when he wrote it. William and his wife Sabina Dygert Nellis had eleven children, six boys and five girls. By 1777 when the will was executed William was a reasonably wealthy man, particularly in land. The family resided in Stone Arabia. The same land he had secured as a patentee of the Stone Arabia Patent granted in 1723. By 1777 William and his family had witnessed some trying times. The British Crown had ceased to control the local area, state and federal government. The growing pains in establishing the United States of America were underway.

Only a few months before William's signature was affixed there had been great loss of life at the battle of Oriskany. Many of William's neighbors were destined never to return to their Mohawk Valley homes. Relatives fought there also. As was the case with many Mohawk Valley families the Nellises were divided in their loyalties. Hendrick Nellis, William's son, chose to remain loyal to the British cause. He had served in the Indian Department during the French and Indian War and chose to continue that service in the American Revolution. William knew all too well that his son would be engaged against his old friends and relatives and that Hendrick was destined to take part in the Native American raids that were eminent. Some of Hendrick's sons were mentioned in their grandfather's will but the only mention of Hendrick (Henry) was as follows: "to my three grandsons Robert, Peter and Jon, the sons of my son Henry all my shirts and handkerchiefs."

Let's scan through this old document and bring ourselves up to the 21st century. I copy one item: "I give to my son Ludwig Nellis and his heirs and assigns forever all my lands and tenements whatsoever lying and being in the Stone Arabia Patent he paying my said granddaughter the sum of fourteen Pounds, New York currency and ten Pounds of like money to my said grandson William."

Many people in the present day and age would be listed as descendants of William Nellis the pioneer including my wife Ethel Nellis Barshied, 1930 to 2006. His grandson John L Nellis was born on the old

Nellis Farm on December 3, 1762. It is ironic that that date has a significance in the 21st century. The generations passed as did the old Stone Arabia farm. It is now owned by John G Nellis born December 3, 1954. The gist of this story is that whoever owns this early Nellis farm at present should also possess his early ancestor's will. The writer of these lines is now presenting this old document to John G Nellis and his family to preserve with the ancient Nellis farm.

A footnote

How did the writer of this story get the William Nellis will? A lifelong interest in ancient things brought me in contact with many area residents. Sometime in the early 1960s I met Mame Wagner of Palatine Bridge. Her mother was a member of the early Eaker family. I purchased some Eaker artifacts. Among them was a shoe box of Eaker documents. When I reached home with my newly acquired treasures I found I had the William Nellis will that no one had ever found in the present time. With the unsettled times when it was written public records had lapsed until a new government could be established. Johannes Eaker was one of the subscribers and a relative of William Nellis. Did the old man hand the document to Eaker hoping that he would see it was executed? It is only a guess. We will doubtless never know.

Skip Barshied, Stone Arabia, October 21, 2015