

The Totoket Historical Society, Inc.

Warham Williams: A Country Parson And
His Northford Home

by

Elizabeth Livingston

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Transcribed and Digitized

by

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Introduction:

The following is a transcription of an article which appeared in Volume Eighteen, Number Three, September 1969 (pages 58-67) of the Journal of the New Haven Colony Historical Society. The author also gave a talk titled "Warham Williams: The House And The Man" on January 14, 1969 at The Congregational Church in Northford based on this article. This document was transcribed from a Xerox copy of the original article. The photographs included in the original article are of a very poor quality and have not been reproduced here.

In the Appendix I have included several photos of the Warham Williams House taken from the Archives of The Totoket Historical Society and also from The Library of Congress.

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Warham Williams: A Country Parson And His Northford Home

by Elizabeth A. Livingston

Warham Williams was not yet twenty five when he was called to Northford in 1750 as the first minister of the newly formed Third Society of Branford. He purchased two and a half acres of land in April 1751 and was married on November 30, 1752. Perhaps the house was completed for his nineteen year old bride, Ann Hall of Cheshire. This unusual home, which is the most noteworthy eighteenth century house in the area that once comprised the New Haven Colony, stands on the Green in Northford, diagonally across from the site of the original meeting house.

Williams came from a well-known, prosperous and indeed famous family, so much so that he was ranked second in his class of 1745 at Yale when ranking was done by social prestige, or, as Ezra Stiles, later President of Yale, put it, "according to family Dignity." His forebears had been connected with Harvard, after his father married Abigail Davenport, the great-great-granddaughter of John Davenport, one of the founders of New Haven, the Williamses seem to have turned south rather than east for their education.

Warham's grandfather was the Reverend John Williams, the first settled minister in Deerfield, Mass. Warham's father was Stephen who at the age of eleven was carried off with the rest of his family by the French and Indians in the Deerfield Massacre in the depths of winter in 1704. John wrote the famous book *The Redeemed Captive*, and Stephen, who graduated from Harvard in 1713, wrote the preface for later editions.

The theme of the Indian captivity was of great romantic interest through the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly as it related to young Eunice, Stephen's eight year old sister who stayed in Canada and married an Indian. In the November 1868 *Antiques Magazine* there is mention of Chauncey B. Ives' statue "The Willing Captive" which possibly was derived from Eunice's story.

Digressing a bit further on Eunice, at one time there were tales of her having visited her nephew here in Northford, but that seems unlikely. However, it is documented by Stephen Williams' diary that she did visit her brother in Longmeadow, Mass., in 1740 when Williams was probably still at home; and on her visit there in 1761, Stephen noted "At night my son Warham came hither...." So Warham certainly knew his famous and extraordinary aunt.

Unfortunately Warham never seems to have had his portrait painted, but there are two of his father showing a handsome face with regular features. Warham's only published material is a dissertation at Yale, which, being theological and in Latin, this author regrets she has not read. Warham's handwriting, as it appears in the original records of the Northford Church is firm, direct and easy to read, without the embellishments so typical of much eighteenth century handwriting. He does not seem to

have kept a diary, or if he did, it has disappeared. But if the old adage “like father, like son” is true, he must have been an interesting person.

His father enjoyed tramping the hills and hunting, and also served several tours in the army. Perhaps this army service seemed important because of his experiences with the Indians as a child. Like John, Stephen had slaves but there is no record of Warham owning any. Stephen seems to have been conservative in his theology, yet pushed his congregation hard to permit singing the Psalms in Isaac Watts’ version. He also was concerned about neighbors being “uneasy” as he put it, “because of my house being so stately”: and one wonders if this was also true of Warham. (Unfortunately the “mansion” in Longmeadow burned over a hundred years ago, destroying many family papers stored in the attic.) Sibley’s *Harvard Graduates* says of Stephen that “He always emulated the good steward rather than the lily of the field, and invested his talents in land.” And in his diary he admits his frugality when, one stormy Sunday, he “had prepared a new sermon but preached an old one because the assembly was so small, and [he was] not able to write new sermons sometimes.” Adding “I hope I did not indulge sloth.” He married twice and lived to be nearly ninety, much honored and respected.

Warham Williams graduated from Yale in 1745 when his father was off as Chaplain on the Louisburg Expedition. He stayed on at the college for a year winning a Berkley Scholarship, then served four years as Tutor. The faculty of the College was so small that the post of Tutor was one of considerable honor, as well as responsibility. In 1745 he began to preach as a candidate in Northford, where there finally was hope of establishing a parish separate from the Branford Second Society, now North Branford.

In 1745 , the General Assembly of Connecticut had empowered a group of men to form the Third Ecclesiastical Society of Branford, and the Assembly even set the boundaries for the Society. Specifically they were north by Wallingford, west by New Haven (North Haven not having been set off yet), south by “the north side of Hezekiah Roger’s land” (which is estimated to be the south line of the now town-owned “Auger Property”), east up Great Hill (Totoket Mountain) to the ridge and then north and irregularly east to the Guilford line. Presumably, with a few minor changes, these are still the legal boundaries for the Second District for the town of North Branford.

In 1746 the Assembly approved a vote to build a Meeting House and then stated that it should be built “about 20 rods [or 300 feet] northward of the house of Mr. Samuel Bartholomew on the west side of the path in the highway, the sills of said meeting-house to enclose a walnut saddle there standing with a heap of stones about it.” (A saddle is a young tree left standing alone and was often cited in deeds as a corner marker.) Thus the building was probably just south of the present Meeting House; Clintonville Road did not exist then. The two houses on the west side of the Northford Green were Bartholomew houses., but neither is old enough to have been Samuel’s. The General Assembly voted in May 1750 that the name of the Society should be Northford.

So apparently there was a Meeting House already built when Warham Williams was ordained on June 13, 1750. The church of nineteen male members “gathered on that

date, and someone has said that it is evidence of his ministerial prowess that not a year passed without some additions to his parish. But, no doubt, the population of Northford was increasing at an equal rate, and he had no competition until 1763 when the Episcopal Society was founded.

In 1769 Warham was elected to the Yale Corporation and served on it until his death in 1788. Among his various duties he helped persuade Ezra Stiles to take the presidency of Yale in 1778.

Stiles, whose father was the minister in North Haven, had been in college with Williams and they remained friends through life. Ezra Stiles' diary gives many sidelights on Warham's activities, such as attending meetings, preaching at funerals of various noted divines in the area or at the College. When Warham preached at Yale, one of the Tutors came out to Northford for the day. And it was a day's preaching! All morning and all afternoon. Stiles not infrequently spent the night in Northford and mentions one time he came here to preach while Warham went up to Durham to supply for Elizur Goodrich who was taking inoculations for smallpox.

Because of the fear of invasion during the Revolution, Yale dispersed, each class going to a different minister somewhere in Connecticut. The library was also sent inland; about two thousand volumes were either in Northford, Durham, or Watertown. Remaining at the College were some books and scientific equipment, including "Mr. Williams' Cometarium," apparently a contrivance for illustrating motion in eccentric orbit. So it would appear that Williams also had a keen interest in science. In 1782, Stiles noted that "the King's Picture by Kellner and Mr. Davenport's and also the Human Skeleton commonly called the Anatomy and the residue of the Apparatus brot home from Mr. Williams's." With a houseful of children, even though some were grown, surely Mrs. Williams must have been happy to be rid of "the Anatomy."

Corporation meetings often went on for several days and the men would stay in town until adjournment. One January Warham made it through a blizzard to get there when others were more faint-hearted. Not only major affairs of appointments were to be dealt with, but also the quarterly bills for the students had to be made out, dining room stewards found and the like.

Not all of Warham's meetings were at Yale; he also was active in the Consociation of local Congregational churches. Once he must have wished he had not gone to Squire Dayton's in North Haven for what was planned to be a session of several days. Sixteen of the Council and eight of the Dayton family were taken violently ill overnight, probably with food poisoning, and so the meeting abruptly adjourned for three weeks.

Whether Ezra Stiles ever interested Warham Williams in his silkworm raising hobby he does not say, but Stiles does list Northford as one of the towns where the "Spirit for Raising Silk Worms was great."

Tragedy hit Warham several times. In 1768 he lost a baby only nine months old. However, in another eighteen months there was another baby girl, also named Abigail. In all he had thirteen children born from 1753 to 1776. Considering death rates in the eighteenth century, the Williamses were remarkably lucky. When the youngest was only a few months old Mrs. Williams died, “greatly lamented, after a painful and distressing sickness.” Thus Warren was left with twelve children ranging from twenty three to an infant (seven boys and five girls). The following year his fourth son, Jonathan Law, died at nineteen, shortly after graduating from Yale. He too had a lengthy illness.

Some time after Ann Hall William’s death, Warham married Mary Saltonstall Whiting of Branford and New Haven., the wealthy widow of Colonel Nathan Whiting. There were nine Whiting children, and the house must really have burst if all the Williamses and Whitings got together.

The years passed with children marrying and leaving home. Mr. Williams continued his active parish and other interests until he appeared to be quite sick the summer of 1787. Ezra Stiles, still President of Yale noted that he seemed to be suffering from a “Calculus” or what now would be called bladder stones. Through that summer and the following winter, Stiles frequently came to Northford to preach for his ailing friend. It certainly must have been small comfort to Warham when in January 1788, another supply minister had a fit, first Saturday night at the Williams house and then again during the morning service (but he made it through the afternoon preaching.)

Who took care of services in February and March, Stiles does not say, nor do the spare church records, but on April 4th comes the notation of Warham’s death between 12 and 1:00 PM. “A worthy Man.” Stiles record of the funeral is interesting, as even now one can picture the scene.

“I attended the Funeral of the Rev. Mr. Williams. There were eleven Ministers present. At about 2:30 P.M. the funeral Procession moved from the House of Mourning to the Meetinghouse. The Brethren of the Church preceded the Corps, the Ministers walking as Pall Bearers on each side of the Corps; which was followed by the Mourners, and the whole Congregation two and two.” After the service the same procession walked to the cemetery about a half mile away.

Stiles was not someone who would allow his emotions to overcome his scientific curiosity, and so the morning of William’s funeral he attended an autopsy at the house, and doubtless the verdict in modern terms would be cancer. But the personal feelings of Stiles, who was almost the same age, are very clear in his saying “May I be quickened to live in Eternity.”

While both the inscription on Warham William’s tombstone (which by its style might have been written by Stiles) and the obituary in the *Connecticut Journal* give a good idea of his personality, the best summary is in the diary of his old friend and colleague, Stiles:

“He has faithfully labored in Faith and Doctrine and was in Ministry there 38 years. He was a good Classic Scholar, and well studied in Divinity, and was a solid judicious Divine; a great Friend to Order and Regularity in Church and State. A steady, upright firm man....He was naturally rather fixed and rigid, especially in the former part of Life. But Experience benefitted him and he became mild and condescending but always steady and uniform....I have met with a great Loss in his Death!”

The “beloved parson” must have cared less about money and worldly things than his father, as his estate totaled £729 with debts of £138. His land holdings were only the three and a quarter acre house lot, two acres called “Bog Meadow (about where the Shell gas station is now), twenty acres around the Howd (now Jakubiszyn) house on Old Post Road, and a piece on Great Hill. Of the £729, the real estate amounted to £357, and the personal to £372. For comparison, a Northford farmer, Jesse Street, was appraised in 1785 at £981 with £736 being real estate and £245 personal estate. Unfortunately the Williams inventory does not itemize the personal estate, and the only part specified in his will is his library, except for dividing the first Mrs. William’s clothes among the girls.

Warham Williams’ true legacy is his splendid house and because of it his name is still remembered. Nicely sited on a slight knoll and angled to the Old Post Road rather than to the much later Middletown Turnpike, the house is very imposing. The magnificent doorway with its broken scroll pediment is outstanding. This type of door frame is mostly associated with the Connecticut Valley from Glastonbury to Deerfield, and it also appears in Salem and Portsmouth on some of the more elaborate mansions. The style is derived immediately from English architecture and has been called “Wren Baroque.” It calls to mind the bonnet-top highboys popular in the Queen Anne and Chippendale periods, which reflect the same desire to avoid a static horizontal and give life to the pattern of the façade. The scrolls terminate in rosettes, which also appear in simpler form above the fluted pilasters. These “Tudor Roses” were as popular in furniture and architecture as in embroidery of this period.

The doorway which this one most closely resembles has an interesting connection to it. It is on the so-called Reverend John Williams House in Deerfield Mass. That house has time and again been published as having been built for John upon his return from captivity. It was not his house, however; it is of too late a date, and was built in 1754 by his wealthy merchant son, Elijah Williams. It is an interesting conjecture that Warham and his uncle may have shared the same carpenter. Unfortunately for that theory, careful comparison of the fine details of the two doorways indicates that, though similar in basic design, they are far apart in execution and would not have been built by the same “joiner.” According to Mrs. Russ A. Miller of Deerfield, who has made an extensive survey of these broken-scroll doorways, the Northford house does not fall into any grouping of them, either by construction or decorative detail, and is unique. There are no other houses of this style in the New Haven Area, and yet such a doorway must have been constructed by a highly skilled carpenter or cabinet maker. It is indeed unfortunate that there are no account books or letters which might give a clue to the exact origin of Warham’s design.

Over the years the house has had to be partially re-sided, so the original beaded clapboards, graduated in size, survive only on the front and north sides. Old photographs of the house show shutters on all the windows, but those have been removed, quite properly, as they would not have been used in the 1750's. Although the house has been painted white for many years, it was not so originally. Underneath at least seven layers of white paint is a rich pumpkin yellow, appearing on both clapboards and trim. White paint did not come into general use until after the Revolution.

Another striking feature of the design is the very steep pitch of the roof and the unusual treatment of carrying the cornice across the gable ends. This cornice style was uncommon until after 1800, and then used with roofs of much lower pitch.

The gambrel-roofed ell at the rear was not built at the same time as the house, but probably was added thereafter, as that type of roof was not in fashion long. Since the inventory taken after Warham Williams' death lists the "Dwelling and the wash room adjoining," it is possible that the ell was the "wash room," and that later on it was converted into a kitchen.

The two-leaf front door, with no window lights above it, leads into a small hallway with large square rooms to the right and left in the typical center-chimney house plan. The woodwork around the stairs is simple rectilinear paneling. The stairs are "closed-string" style, the step-ends do not show. The balusters are delicately and elegantly turned with a rather attenuated profile. A half baluster is set against each side of the upper newel posts. The bottom newel is turned which is quite a rare treatment.

In the south parlor, as throughout the house, the corner posts, girts and summer beam are all exposed and cased. There is a compound crown molding making the transition from the girts to the plastered ceiling, again showing an interest in the interplay of light and shadow. The fireplace in this room is of a later date, and probably was altered after the Reverend Matthew Noyes purchased the house in 1791, when, according to a petition to the General Assembly to permit the Executors to sell, the house was "fast going to Decay." The fireplace is surrounded with old blue Delft tiles, some being replacements.

The north parlor is the glory of the house. The bottom side (or soffit) of the summer beam is very unusual and gives an interesting effect as it is paneled. The whole chimney wall is paneled, with fluted pilasters going from floor to ceiling on either side of the fireplace. The mantel shelf is supported by compound moldings several inches deep, giving a great feeling of strength and complementing the bolection molding around the opening. Above the mantel is a great fielded panel of one piece of wood, 21 by 53 inches, set off by finer moldings. Also in this room is a corner cupboard original to the house with a round-headed glazed door and nicely balanced paneling on the doors below.

Most interesting of all in this very handsome room, mulberry-colored Delft tiles illustrating Biblical scenes surround the fireplace. Since this room was the "Best parlor," it may not have been Mr. Williams' study, but those tiles certainly could have given him

many themes for his sermons. There are twenty tiles and originally there probably were four more. The subject range from the Judgment of Solomon, Zaccaeus up in his "Sycomore Tree" to St. Paul being dropped over Jericho's walls in a basket. Most surprising is the unbelievable Annunciation with a bare-bosomed Madonna.

Behind this parlor are the rear stairs and a little room in the cold northeast corner which would have been a pantry or buttery. Typical of many houses, the walls here are bevel-and-bead, or feather-edge boarding. Plaster was much more expensive than wood and was saved for the best rooms. Over the fireplace is a nicely balanced arrangement of rectangular panels. The mantel shelf had been removed long ago, but the present owner had a great stroke of luck, of the kind that all old-house restorers hope for, and found it undamaged in the attic and put it back in place.

The partitions between this kitchen and the south parlor were removed, most likely when the house serves as the Episcopal parish house. There originally would have been a small bedroom in the southeast corner. Back of this is the ell, of one large room with a fireplace on the east side and a small room beyond. A narrow flight of stairs leads to the attic where perhaps Matthew Noyes' slaves lived.

In the main part of the house, the two large upstairs front rooms also have fine paneling on the chimney walls with even larger over-mantel boards than downstairs., and beautifully bold bolection moldings around the fireplaces. Rather surprisingly the hearths are raised above floor level. This usually indicated that originally the ceiling beneath was open-beamed and unplastered, but in a house of this date and style, the ceilings certainly would have been plastered.

Also upstairs is one of the most fascinating aspects of the house. It was known for a long time that inside a closet door was a list of the people who had painted the house, with the earliest being 1792 and the most recent 1900.. However it was not until Mr. and Mrs. Schaeffer started to restore the house in 1943 that the full importance of this list was realized.

In removing layer upon layer of wallpaper in the "Parlor Chambers" (that is the room over the "Best Parlor"), the Schaeffers discovered Painting on the walls. It is free-hand painting, rather than the later stenciling. The background is a bright blue, over which is drawn a diamond design formed by a running vine of small feather-like leaves. Within each diamond is a flower spray in red, blue and mustard, with green leaves.

Because the blue of the wall matches the blue paint of the signature of Jared Jessup in 1809, this room is ascribed to him, and forms the key document for at least eight other houses in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Much more is known now about Jessup than when the discovery of this was published in the September 1945 *Antiques Magazine*. The late Elmer Keith wrote that this is "the finest painted wall yet discovered in New England." There are no other similar painted walls anywhere in this area, let alone in Northford, although the Harrison-Tyler house on Old Post Road, which unfortunately was torn down a few years ago, had some floral free-hand painting on the

staircase wall. The combination of Jessup's painting and the dated signature is of great importance.

There are many other fascinating facets of this house, and underscoring its recognized importance as an architectural gem. It was studied and recorded in 1916 in the *Old Houses of Connecticut*, compiled by the Colonial Dames for the Connecticut State Library, in 1937 in the *Historic American Building Survey* for the Library of Congress, as well as in the WPA census of Old Buildings in Connecticut and numerous architectural guidebooks.

After Warham Williams' death the house was bought by William Noyes, Esq. of Lyme, for his son Matthew, who had been called to serve as parson in May 1790. Noyes made what was called an "advantageous offer," and paid £190 for the house, only £5 more than the appraised value (even though Noyes was reputed to be the wealthiest minister in Connecticut!) Noyes lived in the house until his death in 1839 and his widow remained there until 1851. A few years later it became the rectory of St. Andrew's Church, and thus has a history of nearly a century each of Congregational and Episcopal ownership.

Let us hope this superb example of eighteenth century architecture will be spared from any further encroachments by highways and commercial buildings to stand in its dignity beside the Northford Green.

Owners of Warham Williams House Property

- 1751 to the Rev. Warham Williams from Samuel Bartholomew
- 1791 to the Rev. William Noyes (father of Rev. Matthew Noyes) from the Estate of Warham Williams
- 1852 to Reuben Augur from the Estate of Mrs. Matthew (Mary) Noyes
to John Hall
- 1866 to the Rev Sheldon Davis for St. Andrew's Church
- 1943 to Mr. and Mrs. Victor L. Schaeffer

The will and detailed inventory (1839) of Matthew Noyes' estate lists everything from a wheelbarrow at \$.25 to silver at \$70.00 and wearing apparel at \$135.00 and hay at \$200.00. He was reputed to be the wealthiest minister in Connecticut with his estate (including family land in Lyme) amounting to \$47,225.96. Like Warham Williams, Matthew Noyes was a graduate of Yale and a member of the Corporation. He, his wife and only daughter (who died at 20 of tuberculosis) are all buried in the Northford Cemetery.

Major References

Public Records

Branford Land Records

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Warham Williams House, Old Houses of Connecticut (Compiled by the National Society of Colonial Dames in the State of Connecticut), Connecticut State Library, 1916

Children of:

Warham Williams	Jan 7, 1726-Apr 4, 1788		
And Ann Hall Williams	1735-Mar 25, 1776		
	Baptized	Died	Married
Warham	Sept. 9, 1753	?	Ann Wilford
Stephen ¹	Jan. 12, 1755	?	Eunice Taintor of Northford
Samuel Hall*	Apr. 1, 1756	1790 (suicide)	---
Jonathan Law*	1757	Nov. 1, 1777	---
Davenport ¹	Jan. 1, 1759	?	Mary Atwater
Anna ²	Feb. 22, 1761	?	1) Jason Atwater 2) Lynde Huntington 3) Joseph Barker
William Augustus	Jan. 15, 1763	1834	Betsy Chapin
Lucy*	Feb. 17, 1765	Dec. 21, 1839	Elihu Foote
Abigail*	June 21, 1767	1768	
Abigail	Jan. 29, 1769	Dec. 31, 1836	Capt. Stephen Maltby
Eunice	March 1771	?	Kilbourne Cook of N. Guilford
Lemuel	Feb. 20, 1774	?	?
Sarah	Feb. 26, 1776	?	Dr. Pynchon

* Buried in Northford Cemetery

1 Stephen and Davenport in 1779 were “recommended to the 1st Church of Christ in Whitestone” [no state mentioned].

2 Jason Atwater was the parson in Branford when he married Anna in 1784; in 1794 he died of consumption and Anna soon married his successor who died in 1804 of the same disease. The Rev. Joseph Barker was originally from Branford but served a parish in Massachusetts. Atwater’s house built in 1792 still stands in Branford (next to the Catholic Church).

Appendix

Photos of The Warham Williams House

The Warham Williams House was located in the center of Northford where the Rite-Aid Pharmacy is now (2012).



Notice the old Northford Store to the left of the house and the well to the right.



A nineteenth century photo



The famous doorway



Fireplace with the Delft Tiles

In 1977 the Warham Williams House was sold, dismantled piece by piece and reassembled in Roxbury Connecticut. Since that time it has been resold and reconstructed along with 3 other old homes and a barn on the same site.

When the Warham Williams House was removed from Northford most residents were shocked and saddened to see the home leave its original site, but having seen its reconstruction on its present site, personally I am relieved to see that it has been done in such style with a focus toward historic preservation and architectural accuracy. To view the current location of the historic Warham Williams House and see the reconstruction and renovation visit the following website:

<http://www.antiquesandfineart.com/articles/article.cfm?request=853>

Two Photographs of the Warham Williams House during its deconstruction in 1977.

