

A Black Patriot: Wentworth Cheswell

BLACK REVOLUTIONARY ERA PATRIOT

Wentworth Cheswell

(1746-1817)

At WallBuilders we strive to “present America’s forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on our moral, religious, and constitutional heritage,” so Wentworth Cheswell (sometimes Chiswell or Cheswill) is a perfect subject for our attention.

He was the grandson of black slave Richard Cheswell (who early gained his freedom and in 1717 and became the first black to own property in the colony of New Hampshire); and he was the son of Hopestill Cheswell, a notable homebuilder who built the homes of several patriot leaders, including John Paul Jones and the Rev. Samuel Langdon. Wentworth was named after the famous Wentworth family, from whom came several state governors, including Benning Wentworth – the governor at the time of Wentworth’s birth.

In 1763, Wentworth began attending an academy in Byfield, Massachusetts (30 miles from his home), where for four years he received an extensive education, studying Latin, Greek, swimming, horsemanship, reading, writing, and arithmetic.

In 1767, he returned home and became a schoolteacher, also marrying Mary Davis (they eventually had 13 children – 4 sons and 9 daughters). At the age of 21, he had already become an established and educated property owner and a stalwart in his local church, even holding a church pew.

The following year, Wentworth was elected town constable – the first of many offices he held throughout his life. Two years later in 1770, he was elected town selectman (the selectmen were considered the “town fathers” of a community). Other town offices in which he served included seven years as Auditor, six years as Assessor, two years as Coroner, seven years as town Moderator (presiding over town meetings), and twelve years as Justice of the Peace, overseeing trials, settling disputes, and executing deeds, wills, and legal documents. (View an 1813 document signed by Cheswell as justice of the peace.) For half a century – including every year from 1768 until 1817 – Wentworth held some position in local government.

In addition to his civic service, Wentworth was also a patriot leader. In fact, the town selected him as the messenger for the Committee of Safety – the central nervous system of the American Revolution that carried intelligence and messages back and forth between strategic operational centers. Serving in that position, Wentworth undertook the same task as Paul Revere, making an all-night ride to warn citizens of imminent British invasion.

In April 1776, he signed a document in which he pledged, “at the risk of . . . live and fortune,” to take up arms to resist the British, and in September 1777, he enlisted in a company of Light Horse Volunteers commanded by Colonel John Langdon (Langdon later became one of the 55 Founding Fathers who drafted the U. S. Constitution, then a framer of the Bill of Rights, and later the New Hampshire governor). Langdon’s company made a 250-mile march to Saratoga, New York, to join with the Continental Army under General Horatio Gates to defeat British General Burgoyne at the Battle of Saratoga – the first major American victory in the Revolution.

After returning from Saratoga, in the spring of 1778, Wentworth was elected to the convention to draft the state’s first constitution, but some unknown event prevented his attendance.

Wentworth also served as Newmarket’s unofficial historian, copying town records from 1727 (including the records of various church meetings) and chronicling old stories of the town as well as its current

events. Additionally, having investigated and made extensive notes on numerous artifacts and relics he discovered in the region around Newmarket, he is considered the state's first archeologist. Therefore, when the Rev. Jeremy Belknap published his famous three-volume *History of New Hampshire* (1784-1792), he relied on (and openly acknowledged) much information he gleaned from Wentworth.

In 1801, Wentworth helped start the town library to preserve and disseminate useful knowledge and virtue. His commitment to providing helpful information is not surprising, for not only had he become a school teacher in 1767 but in 1776 he was elected as one of five men to regulate and oversee the schools of Newmarket.

In 1817, in his 71st year of age, Wentworth succumbed to typhus fever and was buried on the family farm, where other members of his family were later buried. In fact, when his daughter Martha died (his last surviving heir), her will provided that any members or descendants of the family could forever forward be buried on the farm. Unfortunately, that family graveyard long lay in disrepair, but in recent years friends and family have managed to restore it.

The legacy of Wentworth Cheswell is a lasting one: a patriot, teacher, and church leader; an historian, archeologist, and educator; a judge and official elected to numerous offices (he is considered the first black American elected to office in America). He is truly one of our forgotten patriots but he is a laudable example for all Americans – a hero worth remembering and honoring.

Sources:

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