

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by
Dr. David E. Mulford
on November 21, 1998
The Captain and the King: The Life of Captain Samuel Mulford (1644-1725)

One evening -- I think it was in January of 1995 -- the phone rang in our home in the mountains of Western North Carolina. It was a reporter from "Newsday", the Long Island daily. Said the reporter, "I'm doing an article on your ancestor, Captain Samuel Mulford. I was told that you have written a number of articles about him, and I wanted to ask you some questions."

You may wonder why the interest in a man named Samuel Mulford, who lived from 1644-1725. Why have I been so fascinated with his life? Why have academic theses at Fordham, the University of Virginia, and other universities as well been written about him? Why was his life story depicted in both radio and television on the old "Cavalcade of America" program? Why did historian Timothy Breen make him the central figure of his book, *Imagining The Past*? Why would a news reporter call me, Samuel Mulford's fifth great-grandson, on a winter's evening in 1995 to talk about him?

The reporter went on to explain why he was given this particular assignment. Captain Samuel Mulford is remembered as one who fought against a tax the British crown imposed on whale oil, at a time when whaling was a major industry of eastern Long Island, and he was successful. "The mood of the country now," said the reporter (and remember this was shortly after the 1994 Congressional elections), "is anti-tax. Maybe Speaker Newt Gingrich and Governor George Pataki can learn something from Samuel Mulford." Well, maybe we all can, because, as a history buff, I am convinced we can learn from history, and if Samuel Mulford has something to teach us today, all the better. So, the reporter and I talked for some time about this fascinating but still relatively unknown hero of pre-Revolutionary America.

I explained that I had grown up only a few hundred yards from the house in which Samuel Mulford lived, and I still own property which Samuel Mulford owned. Furthermore, this early American hero is buried no more than a few yards from the graves of my parents in the Old South End Cemetery (in East Hampton, New York). Asked the reporter, "Were stories of Samuel Mulford passed down in the family?" "Yes." "What did it feel like to grow up in a community where your roots went so deep?" I tried to tell him. This reporter, may I add, did write an article about Captain Mulford which appeared in "Newsday" under the title, "The Captain and The King", the title I have borrowed for my presentation today. But now, let me tell you a little bit about Samuel Mulford. I won't try to cover all of the details. I wrote

a much fuller account of Samuel Mulford's life in an unpublished book, *Puritan Profile*, a copy of which is in the Long Island Collection at the East Hampton Library. But I want to convey to you why Samuel Mulford has been remembered, and what I think he has to teach us today.

His father, John Mulford, came from England to Massachusetts in the 1630s. In 1643, he and his wife came to the newly-settled Southampton, on the eastern end of Long Island. In 1648, John Mulford was one of the first settlers of East Hampton, located some twelve miles further east, a rich agricultural area, bordered on the south by the Atlantic and on the north by what is now Gardiner's Bay. Active and interested in law and politics, John Mulford became Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Justice of the Peace for the County of Suffolk, Deputy to the General Court at Hartford, and a Representative for Suffolk County in the first Assembly of New York in 1683.

Soon after his coming to East Hampton, John Mulford held an office which gives clear indication of the esteem in which he was held by his peers. Jeannette Edwards Rattray in *East Hampton History and Genealogies* tells us about it in these words: "When the eastern end of Long Island was first settled, a patent on certain lands was issued to the colonists direct by the reigning King of England; and under that charter the colonists instituted a government; the first Republic on American soil, it might be called. The chief magistrate was constituted a common court. A second court was constituted by a jury of twelve freeholders, and a third, the highest judiciary, was a general court, presided over by the magistrate, but in which the whole body of freeholders was constituted a jury. From 1650 to 1654, the name of John Mulford, and his only, appears as chief magistrate of this little republic, which had full treaty power with the Indians."

While some have pointed out the weaknesses inherent in this particular arrangement, it nevertheless did set a pattern of service which Samuel was to emulate.

Samuel, John's oldest son, was born, probably in Southampton, in 1644. When he was four years old, the family came to East Hampton, which was destined to be Samuel's lifelong home. If we let our imaginations go, we can picture this boy, growing up in a new settlement, hewn out of the woods, bordering the restless sea. The houses, such as they were, encircled the village pond, with a meeting house and the beginnings of a cemetery on a knoll close-by. The boy grew strong under the influence of hard work and salt air. From his father he learned the rules of whaling and politics, both of which were to play such an important part in his later life. On summer days he made his way across fields and through woods to the windswept dunes guarding the ocean. There he gazed across blue waters that, years later, he was destined to cross on a mission which took him to the Royal Court of London.

From his father, Samuel Mulford inherited a keen mind, high principles, unyielding determination -- yes, even stubbornness. And all these qualities became increasingly evident as he grew into manhood and took his place in the life of the

community. Early in life he was made a Captain of the Militia, and was known until his death as "Captain" Samuel Mulford. For a long time he was a "Recorder of the Town" as well as a Town Trustee.

In most family records, Samuel's wife is listed simply as Esther, who died November 24, 1717, aged 64. Research has led me to the conclusion that she was Esther Conkling, a daughter of Ananias Conkling. For this, however, there is no proof. Six children, so the records tell us, were born and lived to maturity: Mary, Elizabeth, Samuel, Timothy, Elias and Matthew, the ancestor of the present-day East Hampton Mulfords.

Amazing as it may seem, Samuel Mulford's real political career began when he was past sixty years of age. A lifetime of turbulence, disappointment and gratifying success were packed into his final twenty years. But let's look at his "first sixty years". They were certainly not years of idleness.

Documents pinpoint certain events in his life. In 1683, when his father, Judge John, was chosen Representative for Suffolk County to the first Assembly of New York, Samuel is listed, with others, as a delegate to "select such representative". In 1686, we read that certain parties obtained an order from the Governor and Council that land be laid out for them in the town of East Hampton. A strong protest against this order was drawn up and signed by Samuel Mulford, Recorder of the Town, and nailed to the wall of the meeting house. In 1689 Captain Mulford was appointed by Lieutenant Governor Leisler, Justice of the Peace for Suffolk County, and continued in this position until 1712.

As early as 1702, Captain Mulford, who is reported to have had a whaling company of 24 men, erected a wharf and warehouse at Northwest, at that time the harbor of the town. In 1702, when the Northwest storehouse was built, tradition is that thirteen whales were killed and brought ashore at one time between East Hampton and Bridgehampton.

A neat, yellow-covered volume, now preserved in the Long Island Collection, was Captain Mulford's diary, and is inscribed, "Samuel Mulford, my book". It was kept by Mulford from 1702 to 1706 and was taken up by another member of the family in 1772. Among the many interesting but cryptic notations recorded in this journal are lists of furs exported from Northwest in 1706. A typical list, one of several mentioned is as follows: "159 muskrats, 70 foxes, 32 racoons, 2 catts, 3 otters, 1 mink."

Seventy years after Captain Mulford put in his wharf at Northwest the shipping had so increased that better and deeper landing was sought. In this enterprise, East Hampton and Southampton men combined. The Town Trustees of East Hampton, in 1770, granted liberty at Sag Harbor to build a wharf where channels led close to the shore and vessels could be easily loaded.

After 1770 the wharves of Samuel Mulford were no longer used, and as the years went by, the farms were deserted, and the fields reclaimed by woods.

However, I'm getting ahead of my story. In 1705, when he was 61 years old, Samuel Mulford was elected to represent Suffolk County in the General Assembly in New

York. During the time he was in the Assembly, he fought for several things particularly needed by his people:

1. A fair representation for Suffolk County in the Assembly, and a just tax quota.
2. A port of entry close at hand, so that the residents of Long Island could trade with New England and the mother country without first journeying one hundred miles to New York.
3. Freedom from the law that put a 5% tax on whale oil and forced whalers to take out a license.

But it was his protest against the tax on whale oil and bone that is most remembered. Let me give you the highlights of what happened.

To protest this tax, Captain Mulford made his first trip to London in 1706. The trip, from all indications, was successful, for nothing more was demanded or paid during the remaining years of Lord Cornbury's administration as Governor of New York.

However, upon the accession of Governor Hunter, the tax was revived. Hunter decreed that a whaler should pay one-twentieth of all whale oil and bone gathered from either drift whales or those captured in boats, and furthermore, that this share should be taken to New York City. Fishing was among the rights granted to the people in the patent to their lands, and for that patent they paid a yearly tax of forty shillings. Samuel Mulford, with his two sons, Timothy and Matthew, and enough Indians to complete the crew of a boat, went to sea whenever the lookout reported a whale, and they disposed of the catch according to the ancient custom under which the captors had all they killed. As a result, Samuel Mulford was arrested and a long court battle ensued.

Captain Mulford's defense against Governor Hunter's charge is a masterpiece. Mulford mentions the privileges granted to the people of East Hampton concerning the use of "rivers, riverlets, lakes, ponds, brooks, streams, and harbors." His knowledge of the Bible is illustrated in the following passage from his defense: "We have Water and Lakes, which is Sea granted to us. In the 8th Chapter of St. Matthew, verse 32, it is said, 'The Herd of Swine ran into the Sea;' And St. Mark, Chapter 5, verse 13 saith 'They ran into the Sea;' St. Luke, Chapter 8, Verse 33 saith, 'They ran into the Lake and were choaked.' So that by the most Infallable Rule, the Lake is Sea and the Sea adjacent to the Land is Lake, which is granted to us..."

The court battle went on for some time, without resolution.

Captain Mulford then decided that he would go once again to London to lay his grievances openly before the British government. To conceal his departure, Samuel Mulford, who was then 72 years of age, went to Newport, Rhode Island, and proceeded on foot through the wilderness to Boston, and from there sailed for England. We can easily picture him. The history books describe him: "Dressed in homely garb, of the type made on the farm; his head held high, proud of his Puritan background; his manner simple, but polite; a man self taught, but with great intelligence and firmness."

And here is where we come to the one story about Samuel Mulford which made the

history books. It is said that while he stood outside the gates of the King's palace, unable to get in, his pockets were picked. That night he sewed fishhooks in his pockets, and the next day again took his place outside the palace. Again, someone tried to pick his pockets, but found a surprise waiting for him. Mulford immediately turned the thief over to the police, and the incident received so much publicity that King George I granted Mulford an audience. Eventually, the whale oil tax was repealed.

Now, did all this really happen? Some scholars think not. Todd Savitt in his Master's Thesis, "Samuel Mulford of East Hampton", inserts this in a footnote: "No evidence was found to corroborate the legend that Mulford had an audience with the King as a result of the disturbance created when he caught a pick-pocket outside the Royal Palace by lining his pockets with fishhooks." Timothy Breen has come to a similar conclusion.

Did George Washington chop down the cherry tree and then confess, claiming he could not tell a lie? Did he throw a silver coin across the Rappahannock river? Probably not, but those are the kinds of things he might have done and could have done, and they tell us a lot more about Washington's character and strength than many factual stories. Sewing fishhooks in his pockets and then using the resulting publicity as an opportunity to secure an audience with the King might have happened or might not have happened, but it is perfectly in character with the kind of man Samuel Mulford was.

John Lyon Gardiner characterized Mulford in 1798 as "a man of an original genius, of good judgment, but of an odd turn." Whether or not the episode can be proven does not bother me in the least. The fishhook episode captures the very essence of Samuel Mulford, and I will continue to repeat that story as long as I live!

Well, in any event, Captain Mulford pleaded his case before the House of Commons by reading a "Memorial" which contained a bold denunciation of the misrule of the governor in New York, and a charge of burdensome taxes. We can well imagine the reaction of the Governor when he heard this, especially when he received a letter from the Lord Justices in London saying: "We must observe to you that we hope you will give all the due encouragement" to the whalers. To this Governor Hunter was forced to reply, very humbly, that he had remitted the tax on whale fishing.

An interesting exchange of letters between the Governor and a Mr. William Popple in England reveals the Governor's true feelings. In one letter, dated June 3, 1718, he mentions that the continuing complaints of "that poor cracked man Mulford" are tiring

him greatly. In another letter, dated July 7, he writes: "I assure you that I want nothing but a conveyance to bring me to you...after the encouragement Mr. Mulford and some others have lately met with from some great men..." He complains bitterly that "...the voice of a whole Province is not judged of force sufficient to disprove the simple allegations of one crazed old man..."

But the battle was not over. Subsequently, Captain Mulford was expelled twice from the Assembly. The first time he was promptly reelected, but the second time, at

the age of 76, he decided that the time for his retirement had arrived. Having been widowed in 1717, he had remarried, and he returned to a life of comparative quiet in East Hampton.

When death came to Samuel Mulford, it was mercifully quick. On August 21, 1725, he went for his usual early morning walk, was taken ill, and within eight hours was dead, probably from what we would call a heart attack or stroke. He was 81 years old.

Now, back to the question I raised at the beginning of my talk. Why has the life of this man fascinated me since I was a teenager? Why was a newspaper reporter assigned to write a feature article on Samuel Mulford in 1995?

No one who studies the life of Samuel Mulford can doubt that he was intelligent and courageous, yet at the same time stubborn and, on more than one occasion, unnecessarily blunt. Also, there is no doubt that part of his motivation was to protect and advance his own and Long Island's mercantile interests. He was a shrewd businessman as well as an astute politician -- and there's nothing wrong with either of these traits.

But what has really endeared him to me, and to many others, is that in addition to what I have just said, Samuel Mulford was a man who fought the tyranny of a government which took advantage of the little person; a man who said unfair taxation cannot continue; a man of integrity and courage who said, "I can make a difference" and then proceeded to do just that; a man who was willing to forego personal ease and comfort for a greater cause.

But perhaps most significant of all, as we evaluate the life of Samuel Mulford, is the fact that in the course of a few years, almost all of the goals for which Samuel Mulford worked were obtained by the demand of the people and the concession of the crown.

In his address at the 250th anniversary of the settlement of East Hampton, Judge Henry P. Hedges glanced backward to the early days of American history, and wondered what the early patriots would think of the present generation. He said, "If Samuel Mulford lives in the spirit land, does his thought go to the locality where as a patriot and hero he suffered and wrought that future generations might be free? Does he there see a spirit nobler, loftier, grander than his own?"

Today a modest brown stone in the Old South End Cemetery marks the final resting place of Samuel Mulford. Back-to-back with this is the tombstone of his first wife, Esther, while a few yards away is that of his second wife, Sarah Howell Mulford. I wonder what Samuel Mulford would think if he returned to East Hampton today; walked along the streets; talked with its citizens; or tramped the Northwest woods to view the site of his wharf? Or what he would say if he knew his story had been told to millions through the media of radio and television, through academic theses, books, articles and talks? We can be sure his comments would be swift and to the point, but said with a twinkle in his eye. May East Hampton and America never forget Samuel Mulford, champion of freedom.

SOURCES

- Breen, Timothy H. *Imagining the Past*. Addison Wesley Publishing Co. 1989
- Brodhead, John. *Colonial History*. 1855
- "Diary of Samuel Mulford", preserved in the Pennypacker Long Island Collection,
East
Hampton Library
- Flint, Martha B. *Early Long Island*. G.P. Putnam, New York, 1896
- Fussman, Cal. "The Captain And The King", *Newsday*, February 8, 1995
- Gardiner, David. *Chronicles of the Town of East Hampton*
- Hazelton, Henry. *The Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, Counties of Nassau and Suffolk*, Vol. 3
- Hedges, Henry P. *A History of East Hampton*. J. H. Hunt, Sag Harbor, 1897
- Mulford, David Eugene. *Puritan Profile*. Unpublished manuscript, 1974
- Mulford, William R. *Genealogy of the Family of Mulford*. David Clapp and Son, Boston, 1880
- O'Callaghan, E.B. *The Voyage of The Sloop Mary*
- Pryor, Donald J. "Samuel Mulford's Place in New York Constitutional History",
Thesis,
Fordham University, 1961
- Rattray, Jeannette E. *East Hampton History and Genealogies*. Country Life Press, Garden City, N.Y., 1953
- Savitt, Todd Lee. "Samuel Mulford of East Hampton". Master's Thesis, University of Virginia, 1970
- Spears, John R. *The Story of New England Whalers*. Macmillan, New York, 1908
- Various papers of Samuel Mulford, preserved in the Pennypacker Long Island Collection,
East Hampton Library