

Professional Development Grant Final Report

Stephen Williams, 1694-1782: The Life and Times of a Colonial New England Minister

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For this professional development project, I conducted two weeks of archival research at the Longmeadow Historical Society, in Longmeadow, MA, and the library and archive at Historic Deerfield, in Deerfield, MA. During that time I examined archival material related to Stephen William's adult life, Williams family correspondence, a collection of over 200 sermons he delivered as pastor of the Longmeadow Congregationalist Church, as well as material pertaining to his childhood at Deerfield and captivity by Native Americans during Deerfield's fateful 1704 French and Indian attack. Below is a summary of the results of these professional development activities.

A. Restatement of Research Problem

While conducting dissertation research I encountered Stephen Williams, who occupied a minor role in my research project as a disseminator of Solomon Stoddard's theological ideas from his pulpit and a supporter of eighteenth-century missions to Native Americans such as the Stockbridge project and Eleazer Wheelock's Indian school. I realized that scholars have not produced a significant manuscript detailing Stephen Williams's life in detail, despite the abundant evidence that survives in the form of his personal and family correspondence, collection of sermons, and his personal diary. Despite the public availability of his diary since the 1930s Works Progress Administration project to transcribe the text, Williams has become a neglected and somewhat peripheral figure in the history of Western Massachusetts and colonial New England. I intend for my new research project to rectify this oversight as I work to produce a scholarly biography on Williams that situates him within the cultural context of his day.

B. Brief Review

Compared to figures like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards (both relatives of his), Stephen Williams has been treated as a secondary figure in most other works on New England's history.

The most significant book detailing aspects of his life remains John Demos's *The Unredeemed Captive*, which focuses primarily on his sister Eunice, her captivity, and efforts by John and Stephen Williams to convince her to return to New England after she married a Mohawk man and converted to Catholicism. Williams occasionally shows up in works on Jonathan Edwards due to their mutual involvement in the Breck Affair, which was a controversy sparked by the appointment of Robert Breck to the pulpit in Springfield, Massachusetts when some ministers accused him of preaching subversive and heretical doctrine. This is unfortunate because he lived a fascinating life that intersected with a number of major events and trends within the region. As a young boy he was captured during a 1704 raid on Deerfield by Indians during Queen Anne's War and ransomed by the French after a year of captivity. After attending the seminary at Harvard, he became a prominent minister in the Connecticut River Valley and supporter of the Great Awakening. He was a master and slaveholder within a region where slavery was far less common than in the colonial South, though this was typical of New England ministers. He served as an army chaplain in the imperial wars of the eighteenth century between Britain and France. By the end of his life he held the rare distinction of remaining loyal to the British Crown during the American Revolution while maintaining the support (and begrudging respect) of his congregation in Longmeadow before he died just shy of the Revolution's end in 1782.

C. Summary of Findings and Experiences

This research trip was incredibly productive, as I was able to capture roughly 13.5 GB of photographs of archival material as I took notes and organized the material for later use during the writing process. The archivists at the Longmeadow Historical Society were particularly helpful in ensuring that I was not overlooking any material related to Williams in their collection. As a result, I was able to examine a large body of correspondence between Williams and Eleazar Wheelock

regarding Indian missions and progress with Wheelock's Indian school that I would have possibly missed since the items were filed under Wheelock rather than Williams. The archivists were also helpful in discussing the project and any other secondary works that were available on Williams, so I was able to verify that I have located all of the relevant works on Williams and had not missed a biography newer than one written by Stephen West Williams in the 1800s. The majority of my work at the LHS involved documenting the subject, primary text, and dates of various sermons. This was a difficult task, as Williams had notoriously inconsistent and obscure handwriting depending on the size of the paper and his script. I took extensive notes on sermons delivered during the Great Awakening that will be useful in supplementing that period of his life, as there is a notable gap in his diary during this crucial time. I also spent extended time reading through sermons delivered prior to the American Revolution that forcefully assert duty to one's monarch as a biblical virtue. These sermons will be of great interest when I approach this period of Williams's life and contextualize his dissent within the debates over the Revolution. At Historic Deerfield I managed to document a surprising body of correspondence between John and Stephen Williams, particularly in the wake of his captivity and redemption, and his time as a student at Harvard when he trained for the ministry. This period in Stephen Williams's life predates his diary, so these materials will be helpful in documenting this period of his life. Another unintended benefit of the research trip was the ability to familiarize myself with the geography and landscape of Western Massachusetts. Visiting the grounds at Historic Deerfield was especially helpful in enabling me to visualize the scenery of Williams's birthplace and how the 1704 attack transpired. I also gained a better sense of the distance between towns like Longmeadow, Springfield, Northampton, Deerfield, and Hartford and what it would have been like to travel on horseback or by foot during his lifetime.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the funds from my ATU professional development grant allowed me to complete a crucial first exploration of the archives for this research project. I intend to utilize these archival materials to produce a publication for a relevant peer-reviewed journal in my field, like *The New England Quarterly*, *Massachusetts Historical Review*, or *The William and Mary Quarterly*, and to further develop the book manuscript for the biography on Stephen Williams. On my final scheduled day of research at the LHS, archivists noted that they also have a large collection of town and community records from the eighteenth century as well. I was not able to examine them during this trip, so a return trip will be necessary to gain a wider perspective on the community beyond Williams's personal writings. I also learned that additional material is likely housed at one of the colleges in Springfield, Massachusetts, as it was the town seat until Longmeadow incorporated as a separate town after the Revolution. Additional material may also lie in the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) in Hartford and at Dartmouth College, which was founded by Eleazar Wheelock. I intend to apply for funding from ATU, the CHS and Dartmouth for future research once the project is further developed.