

January 7, 1776

By Andrea Hoskins

This past December, when BIGS members had an opportunity to “Bring Your Ancestor to Life,” I presented the story of my 4 X great grandfather Jehiel Stewart. Jehiel had been a minuteman during the early days of the Revolutionary War. He had kept a daily journal that offered one of the few first-hand accounts of taking part in the Siege of Boston, and, later, fighting in the Battle of Valcour Island, in Lake Champlain, with the Northern Army, under the command of Benedict Arnold. The journal is one of the treasures that I have uncovered with my research. But there is another side to this story, also worth the telling, and that is the story of how Jehiel’s journal came to be among the pension records in the first place.



On July 4, 1836, more than 50 years after the end of the war, Congress passed legislation which provided that a widow of veteran who qualified for benefits under the 1832 Act, could claim his benefit if she was married to the veteran during the term of his active service in the Revolution, and remained unmarried after his death.

At the age of 77, Rachel Williams Stewart, with the assistance of a trusted friend and neighbor, Joseph Ellis, began her application for a widow’s pension. But it would take multiple affidavits, along with the testimony of three of her sons, her sister, and several community members, to convince the government that Rachel had been married to Jehiel at the time of his service. Initially, Rachel submits a page from her husband’s journal that records the date of their marriage. But according to the Pension Board, the date “appears to have been altered” which puts into question whether she was truly married to Jehiel when he was actively in service. Ultimately, she submits the entire journal. Of the 123 pages in the pension file for Rachel, 65 images are of her husband’s open journal, showing left and right pages at once. The pages are not easy to read, lacking punctuation, with many errors and inconsistencies in spelling, one page bleeding through to another, etc. The other 58 pages are affidavits, testimony, letters of support and inquiry, that would ultimately secure Rachel the pension that was due her.



WEDDING ATTIRE CIRCA 1776 AS
DEPICTED IN “OUTLANDER”.

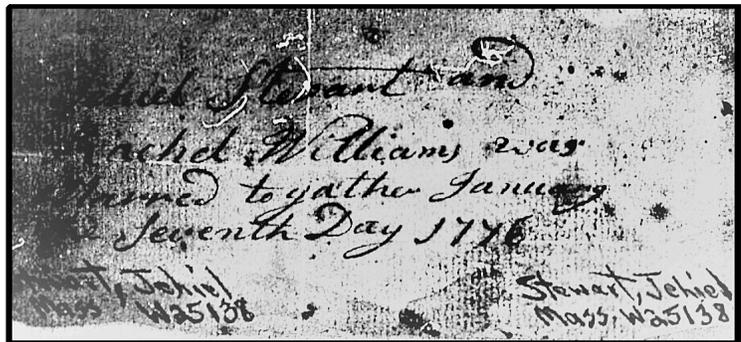
State of New York, Sullivan County

On the 23rd day of September 1837, personally appeared before me, Cornelius Cochran, a justice of the peace in and for the county of Sullivan, one Rachel Stewart aged 77 years, who being first duly sworn according to law doth on her oath make the following supplemental declaration in order to more fully explain the time of her marriage to Jehiel Stewart and his services in the war of the Revolution...

My husband, Jehiel Stewart, was in the service before we were married in the year of 1775. I believe he entered the service in 1774 as a soldier in Captain John Ferguson's company. I have heard him say this, and others have as well. After we were married, Jehiel enlisted again and served once more under Captain Ferguson. He was gone from home with the northern army about five months or more. While he was away, I moved into my father-in-law's home and remained with him until Jehiel returned. When he finally came home, I begged my husband not to go again. I was so much concerned about him while he was gone that I could not bear to have him gone again. I persuaded Jehiel to hire a substitute to serve out his time. He did find someone to take his place, and we gave the man two or three suits of clothes, a pair of silver shoe buckles and some money, I think about 40 dollars.

Before we married, my name was Rachel Williams. I was 16 years old and my husband was 10 or 11 years older when we were married by a Presbyterian priest by the name of Aaron Baskum. About nine years ago, I gave my son William Warren Stewart a writing book of my husband that had our marriage recorded in it. I got the book back from my son and gave it to my neighbor Joseph Ellis who had offered to help me apply for a pension. He sent it to Washington with a further declaration which I made before Judge Garvey. I have seen the record of our marriage often and it always appeared as the date of January 7th, 1776 and I know this to be correct. My husband died on March 19, 1813, and I have remained a widow ever since.

Rachel's sister, Hannah Horton, who attended her wedding submits testimony as to the time and place: My sister Rachel lived with our father, Peter Williams, in Norwich, Berkshire County, MA. I was visiting my father's home in the forepart of January 1776 and saw my sister married to Jehiel Stewart, by a Presbyterian clergyman.



THE PAGE TAKEN FROM JEHIEL'S JOURNAL ON WHICH HE RECORDED HIS WEDDING: JANUARY 7, 1776

Attempts are made to secure a marriage record from the Presbyterian church in Norwich, but despite a "diligent search," the church could find no such record, admitting that their records were quite incomplete for the time in question.

Rachel's son Peter provides an explanation for the condition of the pages, writing: My father's book was often wet during his lifetime in consequence of the house leaking, being covered with bark for a roof.

In 1840, Joseph Ellis writes to the Pension Board, making the case for urgency in approving the application. Sir, if you will have the goodness to re-examine her papers once more carefully it will be very gratifying to the old lady. She is an old lady who is much advanced in years, and much esteemed as a Christian and for her good morals. She tells me that she has to labor hard in her old age to support herself. She likewise has a cancer on her face which I think will soon put an end to her existence. If by a careful examination of her papers you should find her entitled to a small pension it will be very gratifying to the old lady and to all her friends and neighbors. Please answer me soon as convenient...

Five years, and a pile of affidavits later, Rachel was finally found eligible for a pension of \$42.11 per annum. It wasn't until March 1841, at age 81, that Rachel received a payment of \$210.55, for the five years since the congress approved a pension for widows in 1836. And, as a result of her efforts to prove the timing of her marriage, Jehiel's journal was preserved in our National Archives, waiting to be discovered.