

BIOGRAPHY OF WARNER HENRY TAHANATA NELLES (1799 – 1896)

Warner Henry seems to have had a bit of a checkered career, from an Indian chief, highly respected military officer as a Colonel in the militia, prominent figure in the social life of St. Catharines (local magistrate), to an accused murderer.

Warner Henry Nelles was born the 2nd of May 1799 on the Nelles Tract along the Grand River in what became Seneca Township, Haldimand County, Ontario, Canada. He was the son of Warner Nelles and Elizabeth Young who was apparently a Clan Mother of the Mohawk Bear Clan. Two events occurring in the years before moving to St. Catharines, are noteworthy. The first involved his being appointed an "Indian Chief" at age 17 (more on this later), and when 23 being involved in an alleged murder.

In the year 1822 Nelles was granted a commission as a lieutenant in the Haldimand Regiment of Militia. However, in November of 1822 Warner and Peter Young (the latter a distant cousin) went to a party at the home of John Young on the Grand River. They began to argue. A fight ensued, and Warner struck Young on the side of his head with an open hand - killing Young. From then until at least January 1823 Warner was in Jail in Niagara awaiting trial - being eventually acquitted (NAC, RG 1, E3, Vol. 56, pp. 116-121). He seems to have bounced back from this incident since, as we see in the obituary below, for example he advanced to the rank of Colonel in the militia, and by 1846 a was a local magistrate (St. Catharine's Public Library, Nelles File, Smith's Canadian Gazatter 1846).

The life of Warner Henry Nelles is profiled in considerable detail in his obituary.

1896 OBITUARY: *"Col. Nelles Buried. Sketch of his long life - He was made the Chief of a tribe of Indians - His great physical powers. St. Catharines, Ont., Oct. 12 (Special).*

Col. Warner Henry Nelles, who died here on Friday in his 98th year, was buried to-day. there was a large attendance at the service. The following is a short sketch of his career;- In 1776 before the war of Independence, Henry William Nelles son of old Hendrick Nelles, the first of that name who came to America, feeling his German heart would not allow him to take up arms against Great Britain decided to go to Canada and make a home for himself and family. Accordingly, he, with his sons Robert, William, John, Warner, Abram, and Peter with five slaves, started in canoes, via the Mohawk River to Fort Plain. From there, they passed over the portage from wood Creek, and on into Oneida. Later, from there they commenced that long and arduous journey by the Oswego River to Fort Oswego, and up Lake Ontario to the Niagara River, where they

landed. They tested the soil here, and finally pushed on to Grimsby, the father saying to his sons "Here we shall make our home". After peace was declared the American Government offered them their land back if they would return to the United States. All except Peter remained in Canada. His heart yearned for his old home, so, leaving friends and kindred he returned and claimed the lands left by his father and Mother, The old Palatine Church in New York State, which still stands until this day, was built on land given by Hendrick William Nelles. The subject of this sketch, colonel Warner Henry Nelles of Grantham, who passed away on Friday morning at the advanced age of 97 years and 5 months, was a great-grandson of the above named Hendrick William Nelles. The deceased was born in Haldimand County, May 2nd, 1799. He was educated at Grimsby by the Rev, Mr. Fell, took his first commission as a lieutenant of the First Regiment of Haldimand Militia in 1822 which commission was signed by Sir Peregrine Maitland. He was made captain of the First Regiment of Light Infantry, a company he raised in two days in 1838. His commission was signed by Sir George Arthur. His last commission as Lieutenant - Colonel was signed by Sir Edmund W. Head in 1859. His popularity as a young man may be judged when, being only seventeen, he was made a chief of a tribe of Indians called the Beavers. Upon the death of the old chief, they saluted him as Tahanata, and the chain of wampum they threw over his head is still in the family. Up to the end of his death he was still recognized as chief, though the tribe is greatly scattered. He was married at York in 1825 to Sarah Uhlein and they enjoyed sixty eight years of a happy life together, his partner passing away about four years ago. He leaves one daughter only, Mrs. Taylor, and several grand-children: two of whom reside on Chestnut Street in this City, the Misses Nelles; Mrs. P.S. Ball, Niagara-on-the-Lake; and Mr. J. Lewis Taylor, of Santa Barbara, California. To show the great physical powers of Col. Nelles, some six or seven years ago, when the colonel was more than 90 years of age, he walked from his home, near St. Catharines to Niagara-on-the-Lake, a distance of more than eleven miles to visit an old friend, the late Mr. Alma."

As to Nelles being appointed an "Indian Chief" at the age of 17, in 1817, the following information provides some background for this honour. On 22 February 1815 George Martin, a Mohawk chief, wrote a list of all the Principal (hereditary sachems) and War chiefs for each of the three Mohawk Tribes (clans). In every list before and after there have been three sachems for each clan, relating to the principal families. Here there is a number four sachem linked with a bracket to Astawenserontha (the Hill family lineage). So after 3. John Johnson Astawenserontha is 4. Francis Cotter Tahatonne. It appears that around the time of the War of 1812, in addition to 5 war chiefs, there were 4 hereditary sachems for the Bear Tribe. The obituary informant(s) gave the Tribe as Beaver (it was Bear) and the sachemship as Tahanata (Tahatonne in the Martin list). The latter was a simple switch of the last two syllables. None of the children of Nelles grew up on the Grand River so it is debatable how much they knew about

their father's Native heritage. The Cotter family left the Grand River about 1816 to reside among the Wyandot of Amherstburg, thereby opening up the sachemship to eligible individuals through the maternal line. The mother of Chief Francis Cotter was Margaret Hill, the sister of Catharine Hill the maternal grandmother of Warner Henry Nelles. The late respected Cayuga linguist Reg Henry believed that Tahatonne and Tahanata were the same name, which he translated as, "He is putting pine trees between". It appears to be equivalent to the man's name in the Akwesasne Mohawk dialect, Tehanetorens, "He walks through the pines".

At the time of his death in 1896 "the chain of wampum they threw over his head" was still owned within the family. This artifact would include three strings of wampum which were worn by hereditary chiefs on their heads. I wonder if this important item still exists somewhere. Unfortunately it does not appear that there are living descendants of Warner Henry – so hopefully someone donated the wampum to a local (Niagara) museum or library.

Warner Henry signed his will on 11 September 1896. The probate papers give his date of death as 9 October 1896. Herein he mentions his daughter Charlotte Taylor, bequeathing to her all his cash and monies owed, as well as all his personal effects. He directed his executors to sell 8 acres off the southwest corner of his homestead farm being the south part of Lot 15, Concession 4, Grantham Township - the entire lot being 30 acres. The rest of the property was to go to friend Robert Jones, with the provision that he pay legacies to Charlotte Taylor, and his five grandchildren - namely, Marion Nelles, Kate Nelles, Annie Beshgetoor the wife of Rev. Horace Beshgetoor, John Lewis Taylor, and Gertrude Ball (AO, Lincoln County, Surrogate Register 10, No. 1866, p. 701).

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