

Deborah Day Emery, "The Monarch of Hampshire: Israel Williams" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 17, No 2 (Summer 1989).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



The Monarch of Hampshire: Israel Williams

Deborah Day Emery

The bell atop the Hatfield meetinghouse began to peal, summoning the citizens to the town meeting. Farmers abandoned their chores, shopowners locked up their stores, and tavern owners left their wives and their establishments as all hurried to the large, weatherbeaten building in the center of this quiet, farming community. It was September 22, 1768, and important business was at hand. Colonel Israel Williams and the other selectmen of Hatfield waited for their fellow townsmen to be seated. Williams, Hatfield's leading citizen, was a tall man, nearing sixty, with determination in his eyes, an air of arrogance about him, and an aristocratic bearing that tended to intimidate. He was committed to the welfare of the people of Hatfield and of Hampshire County. Hatfielders depended on Williams' guidance because he was their representative to the Massachusetts General Court in Boston, and because he had knowledge of and experience in provincial affairs.

For several years, Williams had been concerned about Parliament's increasing interference with Massachusetts' affairs. He felt that the new duties that Parliament had imposed on the colony, the Townsend Acts, were unjust and "unconstitutional." Williams also opposed the standing army that Parliament intended to send to enforce the duties.¹ But he could not concur with the methods of redress his colleagues in eastern Massachusetts were using.

The previous spring, a group of representatives from the Boston area had waited until the Hampshire County men had returned home. Then they pushed through the House of Representatives a resolve to send a circular letter to the rest of the colonies asking them to join Massachusetts in opposing Parliament's new policies. When King George III learned of the

1. Israel Williams to Thomas Hutchinson, January 9, 1769, in Massachusetts Archives, 25: 287.

colonists' plan to unite against him, he ordered the House to rescind the letter. Williams had voted to rescind, but he was outnumbered; the House refused to recant. The royal governor retaliated by dissolving the House. Many Bostonians were outraged; if there was no House of Representatives, they asserted, there was no government in Massachusetts. On September 18, 1768, the people of Boston authorized their selectmen to write a letter to each town and district and ask them to send delegates to a convention in Boston.²

It was this letter that occasioned the unscheduled Hatfield town meeting. After the moderator read the letter to the villagers, he asked for comments. Williams warned the gathering that the proposed convention was against the king's law, and that an extralegal convention would not aid the province but only add to its troubles. The way to approach England, he said, was to petition the king, appeal to Parliament's good sense, and above all to avoid riotous behavior and open defiance. He convinced the Hatfielders that a small group of impassioned, resentful men in Boston were trying to inflame the province; no real threat to liberty existed.³ After fully debating the issue, the Hatfielders voted unanimously not to send delegates to Boston, and they appointed a committee, headed by Williams, to explain why.

Williams emerged into a damp, rainy, fall evening and gazed at the town he loved, at the tidy homes set close to the road with tiny gardens in front and orchards in back. Rich fertile meadowland rolled back from Main Street to the pure, clear waters of the Connecticut River. People here were hard-working, God-fearing farmers who tended to their duties and minded their own business, unlike the situation in chaotic Boston. Williams hoped that the Connecticut River Valley's well-ordered, patriarchal society could be preserved, at least during his lifetime.

At the time of Israel's birth in 1709, Hatfield was a frontier town. Indians still swept down from the forested mountains to scalp isolated farmers hoeing corn in the meadows or to kidnap innocent berry pickers. Israel spent his early years within the bounds of a fortified parsonage. As the Indian menace subsided,

2. Boston Gazette, September 19, 1768.

3. Records of the Town of Hatfield, September 22 and 23, 1768, microfilm in Forbes Library, Northampton.

his father, Hatfield's minister, Reverend William Williams, allowed him more freedom. Like the other village boys, Israel hunted deer and small game, fished for shad and salmon, and attended classes in the little red schoolhouse.⁴ But his real education came from his wise and gentle father. Not only did Reverend Williams teach Israel Latin, Greek, and Hebrew to prepare him for Harvard, but he also instilled in his son a religious and moral code to guide him through life's journey. Israel developed a belief in a kindly God who wanted to protect and nourish his earthly children and comfort them in time of distress, in a structured society ruled by God's chosen elite. The simple folk must obey and respect their superiors; the leaders must use the prosperity and status God had given them to benefit the public good and to foster community cooperation. All must obey their minister, their king, and their God, to avoid the upheaval, confusion, and anarchy of a lawless society.⁵ Israel also learned how the valley's political structure functioned. In each town, one family of wealth and distinction presided over the courts, maintained law and order, guarded against Indian raids, and enforced the crown's policies. Collectively, these families comprised an oligarchy known as the "river gods," which ruled Hampshire County. As he traveled up and down the valley, visiting uncles and cousins, older brothers and sisters, Israel realized that he was related to all the valley's local leaders and that someday he would take his place among these respected, revered men. But first he had to complete his education at Harvard.

By 1723, when Israel enrolled, Harvard's curriculum included courses geared to educating judges and soldiers as well as ministers. As befitted a man who would later become a "river god," Israel avoided the raucous escapades of the wilder young men and devoted himself to his studies. He earned a reputation

4. Daniel White Wells and Reuben Field Wells, A History of Hatfield, Massachusetts, 1660-1910 (Springfield, 1910), p. 149; Reminiscences of Samuel Dwight Partridge (1806-1893) dictated in 1891, in Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Judd mss., Hadley Series III, p. 14, in Forbes Library.

5. William Williams, A Sermon on the Day of Interment of the Rev. Solomon Stoddard Preached at Northampton, February 13, 1729; William Williams, A Sermon at the Ordination of Mr. John Ashley at Deerfield, November 8, 1732; Jonathan Edwards, A Sermon at the Interment of William Williams on September 2, 1741, all located in Forbes Library, Northampton.

for being a serious, responsible, young man who could be counted on to obey and uphold authority. Upon his graduation in 1727, he returned to Hampshire County and the tutelage of his uncle, John Stoddard, who served as commander of the local militia, as judge, and as Northampton's representative to the General Court. Stoddard was also a land speculator and the wealthiest man in Hampshire County.

During the next two decades Israel bought land on speculation in the northwestern wilderness of Massachusetts, married Sarah Chesterfield of Wethersfield, Connecticut, (whose parents gave her a large dowry), became active in town affairs, and represented Hatfield in the General Court. Through his uncle's influence, the governor appointed him justice of the peace, judge, and commissary of the Hampshire regiment. Israel opened a store, bought provisions and supplies, and resold them to the army. His father died in 1741, leaving Israel his house and land in Hatfield. Seven years later "Uncle John" also died. The governor commissioned Israel a colonel and gave him command of the Northern Hampshire Regiment. Now the wealthiest and most powerful man in Hampshire County, he became known as the "Monarch of Hampshire."

As "Monarch of Hampshire," Williams protected his realm from invasion, maintained law and order, and acted as liaison between the valley and Boston. He also guarded his people against unjust British actions. Williams scorned the king's pine laws that reserved the tallest and finest trees for the king's navy. These laws hurt an important source of revenue to the valley, the lumber trade. Once, when the king's deputies were trying to recover some stolen pines, Williams refused to help them. He "did not see as he was obliged" to issue "a warrant to press men" for the deputies' assistance.⁶ On another occasion, Williams openly challenged the governor's appointment of a "conceited, pedantic, and impertinent person" as justice of the peace in Hampshire County.⁷ Williams insisted that the governor's choice "was

6. Josiah Gilbert Holland, History of Western Massachusetts (Springfield, 1855), 1: 183.

7. Hampden County Justices of the Peace to Thomas Pownall, May 7, 1765, in Israel Williams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston (cited hereafter as Williams Papers).

obnoxious to the people" and would make both the current justices and "ye office contemptible in ye eyes of ye people."⁸ Eventually, after all twelve justices in Hampshire threatened to resign, the governor appointed a more acceptable man.

His first real challenge as "monarch of Hampshire" came with the beginning of the French and Indian War in 1754. From his Hatfield command post, Williams enlisted men to serve with the British troops in upper New York, and to garrison the frontier posts. He established a constant scout plan, a series of patrols, that kept the valley free from invasion. In his heart he was with his men, experiencing their dangers and feeling their suffering. The news from the front often tired and discouraged him, but when he heard of the British ignominious retreat from Fort Ticonderoga, he flew into a rage. Unable to take the French-held fort, the British had fled for the safety of Lake George, leaving their dead unburied, their wounded crying for help, and their supplies and ammunition lying about for the enemy to retrieve. Frustrated at British incompetence and cowardice, Williams wrote to the governor practically ordering him to relieve the British general at Lake George. When the governor refused, Williams appealed to the people. He penned a tract that accused the British of betraying the very people they were supposed to protect. His anger somewhat spent, he concealed his identity by entitling the tract "Letter from a Gentleman in Connecticut," and he sent it off to the Boston papers.⁹ A friend in Boston, who feared that Williams would be charged with treason if its contents were known, suppressed the letter and then warned Williams to stop attacking the crown or he would be branded an enemy of the king.¹⁰

England, however, did send over qualified generals who led the colonists to victory. When peace came in 1763, Williams expected the turbulence of the last few years to end. But in 1765 Parliament enacted the Stamp Act, which levied duties on various

8. *Ibid.*, May 19, 1765.

9. "Letter from a Gentleman from Connecticut," August 14, 1758, in Williams Papers.

10. Hutchinson to Williams, August 1758, in Williams Papers; Hutchinson to Williams, August 1758, in John Davis Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

printed items, such as pamphlets and newspapers, and on legal documents, including deeds and licenses. Williams protested this encroachment on the colonists' rights. All Englishmen, he said, had a basic right to be consulted about taxes imposed upon them and to consent to them.¹¹ In November of that year, heeding the people's demand to close the courts until the Stamp Act was repealed, Williams and his fellow judges did indeed close Hampshire's Court of Common Pleas.

A Boston mob, prodded by a small group of patriots called the Sons of Liberty, went further; they burned an effigy of an English official, destroyed the home of Williams' good friend, Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, and terrorized Hutchinson's family. Williams was horrified; there was no law and order in Boston, no due process there. Closing a court was one thing since that was a non-violent protest. But mob action? Riots? Confusion? "Are we not a miserable people," he wrote, "if we receive our law from a mob."¹²

Williams' abhorrence of violence and disorder prompted him to take a firm stand at the Hatfield town meeting on September 22, 1768. But although he convinced his conservative neighbors not to attend the convention in Boston, he was just as upset as his eastern colleagues over the taxes imposed by the Townsend Acts. Williams was "as much for liberty[,] for supporting the rights of the colonies[,] and for taking every possible reasonable measure to maintain and defend them as any" of his countrymen. Yet he wondered if the colonists could reasonably "expect to be excused from the duties and taxes" they complained about.¹³ Williams feared that by protesting the taxes, the colonists would be "obliged to pay 'em probably greater only in a more imperceptible way." He could see no way of avoiding it "but by setting up Independency" and he knew that "in that dispute and Struggle the mother Country" would be "too hard for the colonies." How easy it was for the British Parliament to destroy the colonies "in a

11. Williams to Hutchinson, 1765, in Williams Papers.

12. Ibid.

13. Williams to Hutchinson, Massachusetts Archives, 25: 352-353.

variety of ways."¹⁴ Williams dreaded the prospect of war, but he realized that there was nothing he could do to save his "Sinking Country" from a revolution instigated by a "few mad demagogues" in Boston who had nothing to lose.¹⁵

Williams had much to lose; a war for independence would destroy the elegant life he had worked so hard to achieve. In the morning, Williams arose to be served breakfast by a maid on fine china imported from England. If it was a court day, a male servant would hitch a horse to his riding chair, a primitive carriage, and off he would go to Northampton or Springfield.¹⁶ Clad in a black robe and powdered wig, he sat at the front of the courtroom dispensing justice to petty violators: Sabbath breakers, disorderly persons, and common thieves. Some were fined, others were whipped or locked in the stocks. Other days he inspected his livestock and crops and tended to his store. He ordered cloth, woolens, and hardware from Boston merchants, rum and spices from Connecticut towns. He bought local produce and artisans' goods for resale in Boston or Connecticut, or took them in exchange for goods.¹⁷

In the evening he returned to the elaborate, two-story, mansion he had built after his father died. Often friends would come to visit. He welcomed them into his parlor, which was decorated with high paneled wainscotting and deep crimson wallpaper. On a cold winter night they would sit sipping Madeira in front of a fire in the huge fireplace which was topped by a hand-carved mantle.¹⁸

Sometimes he and his wife Sarah spent the nights alone with their family. While his two oldest daughters had married and moved away, Elizabeth and Lucretia still lived at home, as did Israel Jr., who worked in the store with his father. Just twenty-four, he had recently obtained his first public office, Register of

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., p. 341.

16. Judd Diary, 1768-1770, in Forbes Library, Northampton.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.; Charles A. Wight, The Hatfield Book (Springfield, 1908), p. 6; Wells and Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 170.

Probate for Hampshire County. Down the street lived Israel's oldest son William, called "Clerk," and "Clerk's" family. As his father had been, "Clerk" was Clerk of the Hampshire County Court of Common Pleas, and he had served as Hatfield's selectman and representative to the General Court in Boston.

But tragedy soon struck the Israel Williams' homestead. On September 17, 1770, Williams awoke to discover that his wife Sarah had died in her sleep. After the funeral, he resumed his daily routine, but he was unable to fill the void caused by Sarah's death. He felt so alone without the kind woman who had been his partner for over thirty years. It was "not good to be alone," he said. Life did indeed go, however, "in some peculiar situations and circumstances."¹⁹ When he came home at night, Sarah was not there to discuss the day's events, to share the comings and goings of the children, to listen to him fume about public affairs, and perhaps to soothe his temper and curb his outbursts. She was not there to support and approve his reign as "monarch of Hampshire," or to urge him to attend General Court to help his good friend, Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson, keep peace in the province.

Hutchinson, a tall, thin, fair-complexioned gentleman with almost no sense of humor, had met Williams at Harvard back in the 1720s. Despite his father's warning that public officials were seldom appreciated and usually attacked, Hutchinson went into politics. Like Williams, he was a conservative and a Congregationalist, totally committed to law and order and due process. His integrity and loyalty to the crown were unquestioned. Williams relied on Hutchinson to keep him informed of provincial affairs. Letters sped back and forth between Hutchinson in Boston and Williams in Hatfield. Hutchinson wrote of the Boston Massacre and of the Townsend Acts' repeal, and he begged Williams to come to Court and to support the royal government. Remember, Hutchinson said, "You don't live in the Commonwealth of Plato but in the dregs of Romulus."²⁰

Williams refused to go to Boston. He felt he was at an age "seven years past the time of life," when he ought to reduce his public service. "I know of no earthly objects that will influence me to quit my humble cottage," he wrote Hutchinson. "Under my

19. Williams to Hutchinson, in Massachusetts Archives, 154: 84.

20. Hutchinson to Williams, May 9, 1771, in Williams Papers.

many infirmities it behooves me to consult my ease and such comfort in private life which permits me to stay here."²¹ Besides, Williams was disgusted with the patriots' antagonism to the government. He deplored the violence and disruption they had generated in the province. At times, he even wished that the patriots "were dismembered from the rest of the Province" before they "ruin us all." He believed that "one bold stroke" from Parliament would end the rebelliousness in Boston.²²

During the next four years, Williams saw the eastern rebelliousness spread to the farmers in Hampshire County. Younger men and newcomers to the valley challenged the patriarchal structure of Hampshire society. Even the old-timers, the docile, apathetic, farmers who had always obeyed their wise leaders without question, thundered against British usurpation of their rights and they turned against the local representatives of the British government. Hatfielders no longer thought of Williams as their fatherly protector, but as a domineering, tyrannical, autocrat. They feared the control that his judicial and militia positions gave him over their lives; both his wealth and his air of superiority irritated them.

Williams could only wonder what would happen to the people of Hampshire who disobeyed their king and brought upheaval to God's peaceful land. Surely, God would wreak vengeance upon them. He wrote Hutchinson that out in Hampshire, "we are degenerating fast," and he asked Hutchinson to please send some good news.²³ But Williams received only bad news. A mob in Boston defied Parliament by throwing tea into the harbor. In the spring of 1774, Parliament, determined to control the unruly Bostonians, passed the Coercive Acts. These acts gave the governor the power to appoint and dismiss all judicial and administrative officials, disregarding the people's wishes. The acts also canceled town meetings, except for an annual one to elect the necessary town officers. Throughout Massachusetts, angry men protested their loss of voice in government by attacking crown officials. Bostonians forced

21. Williams to Hutchinson, in Massachusetts Archives, 125: 163.

22. Unaddressed letter, 1771, in Williams Papers.

23. Williams to Hutchinson, 1772, in Williams Papers.

Hutchinson to flee to England, and the people of Hampshire County deposed Williams from his "throne." When Hatfielders learned that Williams was to be one of the new royal appointed officials, they called him an enemy to his country and excluded him from the town's affairs.

On July 9, 1774, Hatfielders streamed into the little red schoolhouse from their farms, their shops, and their taverns; they were no longer a grave and subdued people but noisy and boisterous, ready to assume control of their local government. They organized Hatfield's Committee of Correspondence and directed it to confer with other committees which were springing up all over the valley, to determine what action should be taken against these new British regulations. Other Hampshire people were unwilling to wait for more talk; they vented their frustration and anger on Williams. Wild rumors spread through the valley that he was undermining patriotic zeal, that he was in constant communication with General Thomas Gage, the new British governor of Massachusetts, and that he was enlisting men to fight for the British. Williams remained calm and showed his opinion of the patriots when, ignoring a province-wide day of fasting and prayer, he put on a great feast for family and friends, hired a fiddler to entertain them, and sent some tea to his brother-in-law in Deerfield.²⁴ The patriots soon had their revenge.

On August 20, Williams galloped to Pittsfield to be at the bedside of his dying daughter, Eunice. A few days earlier a mob of 1,500 had surrounded the court in Great Barrington, which forced Williams' uncle, "Colonel Billy," and his son-in-law, Israel Stoddard, to close the courts. Eunice, Stoddard's wife, terrified by the angry crowd, delivered prematurely; neither mother nor child were expected to live. The Pittsfield inhabitants heard of Israel's arrival and summoned him to appear before them to explain his views. Williams postponed the meeting until the next day; Eunice was too ill for him to leave. When he was late, a mob met him part way and ushered him to the meetinghouse which was packed with men from all over Berkshire County, men who feared his influence.

The Berkshire patriots charged him with supporting the Coercive Acts and the principle of taxation without representation.

24. George Sheldon, A History of Deerfield, Massachusetts (Deerfield, 1972), 2: 677.

Then they scolded him for his dangerous tendency to support the crown. Surrounded by men who at any moment might tar and feather him, even hang him from the liberty pole, Williams agreed that the British acts were "unconstitutional." He asserted that the people certainly had the right to oppose unjust British Acts, but by suitable means. Then he promised that he would neither accept the royal appointment nor support the acts. He also agreed to honor any non-importation agreements to which the colonists might agree.²⁵

The patriots, not trusting his word, made him sign a formal agreement before they released him. As he left, "Uncle Billy" stopped Israel and asked if he had signed the agreement. "I didn't sign before they ordered me to do it," Williams replied, "my daughter's circumstances you know, Colonel, put me into a very difficult state from what I should suppose myself in was it otherwise with her. I consider myself in a state of duress and you know persons in duress are not considered holden by what they do." Williams then rode home swearing that he would not abide by the agreement.²⁶

On a hot, sultry morning ten days later, Williams rose early and rode off to Springfield to open the Court of General Sessions. The town was filled with judges, court officials, and lawyers who had arrived the night before; rumors spread that a mob was on the way from the western frontier. Williams mounted the court-house steps and retired to his chamber. A few minutes later, he heard a distant bell clanging furiously. From the window he saw a large crowd of men carrying white staves march into town and gather on the steps and in the square. They yelled at him to come down and answer their charges. When he appeared, the crowd, now numbering over two thousand, massed around him and the other judges and forced them to agree not to accept any royal appointment. While part of the mob of patriots swarmed across the square into Parson's Tavern, the rest herded the hapless judges to a hot, sandy spot close by and formed a ring around them. Some of the patriots rounded up other known Tories, men loyal to the crown, and even searched private homes for missing loyalists.

25. Articles alleged against Israel Williams, August 26, 1774, in Williams Papers; J. E. A. Smith, History of Pittsfield (Boston, 1869), 1: 196-199.

26. Clifford K. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates (Boston, 1951), 8: 321-322.

As more Tories were brought to the square, the group of terrified men in the center of the ring grew larger and larger. When the patriots were satisfied that they had captured all the loyalists still in Springfield, they forced the Tories to run round and round the ring, enduring insults and accusations hurled at them by the unruly mob. One by one the trapped men promised to uphold the patriotic cause. The patriots saved Williams for last. The roar of the crowd almost drowned out his words as he quickly resigned his appointment and promised to support all the patriotic measures. Their vengeance still not sated, the patriots then forced the shaking old man to kneel in the center of the ring and beg forgiveness for his Toryism. Toward night he signed a formal pledge of loyalty to the patriotic cause, whereupon his tormentors let him go.²⁷ Jubilant at their success in closing all the courts in western Massachusetts, the mob gathered in companies. Trumpets blared, fifes played, drums beat, and colors flew, as they marched through the streets of Springfield. Humiliated and stripped of his judicial office, Williams left the square and rode to Hatfield and to his family. Bitterly he recounted the day's events and he condemned the baseness of those who brought anarchy to the province. The following Monday, news reached Williams that the new governor, General Gage, had captured cannon and powder in Charlestown. A worried Williams watched the angry crowds gather and overheard their wild fantasies of throwing the British into the sea. From all over the valley he learned of village rowdies molesting isolated Tories. The Hampshire men were spoiling for a fight, and Williams was the logical target.

On September 6, a mob of about fifty men gathered in Williamsburg. Egged on by disgruntled Hatfielders, who promised that not more than five men would stand by old Williams, they headed for Hatfield. These Hatfielders wanted to see him humiliated and physically threatened, but they dared not do it themselves. The mob marched into Hatfield expecting to put Williams in his place. Instead they faced not a few Tories, but three hundred conservatives who were sick of disorder and wanted the mobbings to end. At that, the mob backed down.²⁸

27. Judd *Revolutionary Matters*, August 1774, in Forbes Library, Northampton; Sheldon, *A History of Deerfield*, 2: 682.

28. Benjamin Reed Deposition, September 15, 1774, in Williams Papers.

Although the mobbings stopped for a while, Williams soon realized just how much his neighbors despised him. Hatfielders refused to trade at his store or to welcome him into their homes. They even forced him to resign the militia commission he held under Hutchinson. And Joseph Lyman, Hatfield's new minister, used the pulpit to warn his congregation against this "evil traitor" in their midst. Lyman was a tall young man with flashing dark eyes and a Roman nose. A native of Lebanon, Connecticut, he had grown up listening to Williams' brother preach about a gentle compassionate God and instruct his congregation to be charitable and kind toward their neighbors. But Lyman was impulsive and he was determined to steer his own course. Shortly after he moved into the parsonage next door to Williams, he asserted that now Hatfield had a man Williams could not rule.²⁹

When Lyman started to preach the patriotic cause and to attack British rule, Williams stopped attending church. Sometimes Williams went to Deerfield to hear a good Tory sermon, but usually he stayed home and stewed over his misfortunes. Not only had he lost his judicial and militia positions, but "Clerk" also had lost his job when the courts closed and he had moved to his father's lands in Dalton, where he could farm and support his family. Sarah was dead. Hutchinson was in England. What more could befall him?

About four in the afternoon of February 2, 1775, a group of 150 men, determined to give "the old dog" a good scare, appeared before Williams' door. Some were armed with firelocks, others with staves and sticks. Three men carrying muskets forced their way into the house and demanded that Williams stand before the people to answer charges. Williams protested that an old man shaking with palsy should not be outside in the mud and rain, and he offered to speak from the window or in the meetinghouse.³⁰ The mob promptly grabbed him and Israel Jr., marched them through the cold, raw, wet evening to a cabin in Hadley, where they shut the two prisoners in a small room and left seventeen men with loaded muskets to guard them. Throughout the evening, their guards swore at them, shouted insults, and threatened to shoot them. Later that night someone stopped up the chimney,

29. Wells and Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 182.

30. Shipton, Sibley's Harvard Graduates, 8: 325.

which darkened and filled the room with smoke and left Williams and his son coughing and gasping for air. As he wondered how he and his son would survive the night, Williams' thoughts tumbled back through the centuries to another man held by an irate mob, harassed and persecuted during a long night and nailed to a cross at dawn. Concentrating on Christ's suffering and faith in God gave Williams the courage to face whatever ordeal awaited him and Israel Jr. on the next day.³¹

At sunrise the mob escorted them to the Hadley meetinghouse. Defiantly, Williams asserted that no charges could be proved against either him or his son.³² The examiners treated them with respect and fairness, but the crowd insisted that they sign a covenant agreeing not to oppose colonial measures or to correspond with America's enemies. Late in the afternoon, the irate citizens released them. They thought the old colonel had finally been humbled, that they had "smoked old Williams to a Whig."³³ But they underestimated his resilience.

War between England and the colonies broke out in April of 1775. Now the Hampshire hotheads had a real enemy to fight. Tories from all over the province fled to Boston, but despite a Berkshire patriot's threat to kill him if he did not leave the valley, Williams stood his ground.³⁴ There was not much for him to do in Hatfield but putter around his mansion, dust the nearly empty shelves in his store, and wait for things to get better. The colonists seemed to be losing their bid for independence, just as Williams knew they would. In the fall of 1776, the British chased the American troops out of New York City. Gloom spread through the colonies; the people in Hampshire County expected momentarily to hear of the patriots' surrender.

Williams took inventory. If peace came, he would no longer be an outcast and his store would prosper, especially if he was the

31. John Williams to the Massachusetts Historical Society, July 22, 1837, in Williams Papers; Judd Diary, February 1775.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Margaret Miller, "A Whig Parson and a Tory Colonel at Hatfield," History and Proceedings of the Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 1905-1911 (Deerfield, 1912), p. 426.

34. James Easton to Williams, 1775, in Williams Papers.

first in the valley to have English goods in stock. He wrote two merchants in England, ordering items the people had long been without, and he signed the letters "Israel Williams & Son." At the same time, he asked his old friend Hutchinson to help the merchants obtain the desired goods, and he expressed his wish for a speedy British victory.³⁵ Then he summoned a messenger and instructed him to deliver the letters to a British ship in New York harbor.

In February, the Hatfield Committee of Safety paid Williams a visit. His messenger had been startled on the road near Albany and he had thrown the letters into the woods where they were later found and sent to Hatfield. His neighbors were furious; they said both the colonel and Israel Jr. should be thrown into jail -- or hanged -- for consorting with the enemy.³⁶ On March 26, Elisha Porter, sheriff of Hampshire County, knocked on their door with a summons; they were to appear before the General Court to answer charges made by the Hatfield Committee. The elder Williams, ill with the aches and pains of old age, refused to attempt the long, arduous journey to Boston. Instead, he prepared a statement for Israel Jr. to present to the Court. In it, he pleaded that he never had any intention of betraying his country. He simply felt that peace was coming and that he wanted to stock his store.³⁷ The General Court could not be pacified; it found both father and son guilty of treason to the American cause and ordered Sheriff Porter to confine them to the county jail in Northampton until further notice.

Porter escorted Colonel Williams and his son to Northampton's log jail and locked them in a dingy cell, just four feet high, packed with other Tories and filled with noxious odors from the privy vault. Chinks in the logs admitted only a dim light. Occasionally "Clerk" and his children brought supplies, but Williams' daughter, Lucretia, made the trip from Hatfield every day, alone on horseback, ignoring the sneers and jibes along the

 35. Williams to Henry Laughton and Williams to Hutchinson, December 21, 1776, Massachusetts Archives, vol. 154.

36. Hatfield Committee of Safety to the General Court, March 29, 1777, in Williams Papers.

37. Williams to the General Court, Massachusetts Archives, 154: 114.

way, to bring food, paper, pen, and money to pay for their board. Williams hated his confinement. He had always believed that the wicked would eventually be punished and that the upright and benevolent would be gloriously vindicated and rewarded. Yet here he was in this hell-hole, an ill, old man, shaking with palsy, while the mob that had brought chaos to the country was free. In June, when Williams learned that the court had been dissolved, he thought that he and Israel Jr. would be released. To his horror, he discovered that neither he nor his son would be freed until another court issued a new order. At that point, he realized that he could spend the rest of his life in that grubby room with no fresh air, no bright sunlight, no privacy. His clothes were filthy, his tremors grew worse, and his bones ached from the dampness.

Williams lashed out at Sheriff Porter and the General Court. The accusations were based on misrepresentations, he wrote. "You took me at my home and compelled me to come to Northampton County jailhouse" without legitimate authority, and "here you detain me by virtue of your illegal power, depriving me illegally of the enjoyment of rights, God, nature and law had secured me. Were it not that you knew a mob would support you, you would not have dared to do what you have done."³⁸ He blamed Lyman, Hatfield's minister, for his plight; Lyman had turned the people against him with his seditious sermons. For lack of anything better to do, Williams occasionally jotted down his reflections. "Don't matter that I was at my chamber. Don't matter. We are much better to be here than at Hadley."³⁹

Late one night in the middle of August, the frantic pealing of the meetinghouse bell roused Williams. Guns went off. Drums beat. He rushed to a crack in the logs and looked out, but it was too dark to see but an occasional glimpse of a fleeing figure. Everything seemed to be in confusion over at the meetinghouse. Did he dare hope that the British were coming? Later he heard of a British attack on Bennington, of the American victory there, and of the Hessian captives housed in the town hall because the jail already was packed with Tories. In October, the colonists defeated the British at Saratoga, and the war moved south. With

38. Williams to Elisha Porter, June 3, 1777, Elisha Porter Papers, in Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

39. Unaddressed statement, October 9, 1777, in Williams Papers.

the danger of invasion and enemy occupation removed, people in Hampshire County calmed down. "Clerk" Williams successfully petitioned the General Court and obtained their conditional release. Israel Jr. was confined to town limits, and Colonel Williams to his home lot, except for Sunday meeting. Both posted bonds and promised not to correspond with or aid the enemy. At last he was free to go home and to be with Elizabeth and Lucretia, sleep in a real bed, eat at a table, sit in front of a fire and sip Madeira, free to stand up straight again. Yet he was not content. Lyman tried to excommunicate him, but failed. Hatfielders, who still feared Williams, spied on him and reported him to the General Court for straying out of his limits. Williams was upset over this constant surveillance and harassment. Because his hands shook too much to hold a pen steady, he dictated to "Clerk" a challenge to the people of Hatfield. Let those who called him a dangerous enemy to his country step forward so he may know his adversaries. Let them state his crimes openly so he might refute them, "for there is no fencing against Daggers and Darts."⁴⁰

No one stepped forward, but in May of 1780 the people of Hatfield convinced the General Court to restore full freedom and citizenship to both father and son, provided that they took an oath of allegiance. The oath galled Williams. "No such Oath has been prescribed and enacted by Legislature of this State," he exclaimed. It was but an imposition solely due to the Hatfielders' "unkind and ungenerous complexion" designed "to embarrass us."⁴¹ Nevertheless, both men took the oath and obtained their freedom.

By the time America won her battle for independence, the turmoil and animosity of the Revolutionary years had dissipated. The farmers, shopkeepers, and tavern owners in Hampshire County once again tended to their business and left town affairs to a new, younger generation of wise and capable leaders. Both "Clerk" Williams in Dalton and Israel Jr. in Hatfield held offices in their respective towns. Williams' bitterness too had faded. He still maintained that he had never been an enemy to his country, that he simply had not thought that the colonies were ready for independence. But obviously, he admitted, he had been wrong

40. William Williams to the Town of Hatfield, June 1780, in Williams Papers.

41. *Ibid.*, May 1780.

about that, and he wrote to John Hancock that he wished only the best for his country.⁴²

Both Elizabeth and Lucretia had married now, and Williams was alone. He roamed around the house that he and Sarah had so lovingly built almost fifty years earlier. One terribly cold day in January of 1788, he started down the cellar stairs to fetch preserves. Feeble and shaking, he lost his balance and tumbled down the entire flight, banging his head as he went. The servants carried him upstairs, laid him gently on the bed, and summoned a physician. Upon examining the still, frail man, the doctor said he was in a coma and would never regain consciousness. Williams died a few hours later.

Once again the people of Hatfield filed into the meetinghouse, which was situated just two doors down from the Williams' mansion. They came to bid farewell to the man they so long ago honored and revered. Friends and neighbors spoke of his kindness, of his charity to the poor, and of his devotion to his children. Joseph Lyman preached the funeral sermon, never once mentioning the Revolutionary War years.⁴³ Then they laid him to rest in the cemetery, next to his beloved Sarah.

42. Williams to John Hancock, January 25, 1779, in Hancock Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

43. Elizabeth Phelps Diary, January 13, 1788, in Forbes Library, Northampton.