

Redeeming the Fathers of America

Oliver Wolcott (1726-1797)

Among the most prestigious and distinguished families of colonial Connecticut was that of the Wolcott family. Oliver Wolcott (Sr.) was the son of the royal governor of the Connecticut Colony, educated at Yale College in 1747, volunteered as a soldier of the York County Militia in the French & Indian War, promoted to captain and later major-general, a merchant, county sheriff, and Signer of the Declaration of Independence.



The royal heritage of Wolcott's can be traced back to Jeran Wolcott (son of Sir John) of Wolcott in eleventh century Wales. Through the generations the family amassed great wealth and the throne began to look upon them as an annoyance to its rule. From the Wolcott lineage was born a son by the name of Henry Wolcott. Henry was the second son of John Wolcott of Galdon Manor, Tolland, Somersetshire, England and was baptized in the parish of Lydiard St. Lawrence, on December 6, 1578. He married Elizabeth, dan of Thomas Sanders of Lydiard St. Lawrence. Henry's elder brother died, leaving him as the sole proprietor of the family's properties and mill at Tolland.^{1, 2}

Henry was quite content dedicating his life to that of an English country gentleman, and reaping the fruit of his labors. But that would soon change after meeting the Rev. Edward Elton, which occurred at a time when the British government was further tightening its grip on English society, especially regarding religious freedom.

Their discussions caused Henry to contemplate many of life's questions and as a result, he embraced Rev. Elton as his religious mentor, and was soon led to a personal relationship with Christ Jesus. Henry pursued his faith with considerable passion until his death.

In the 1600's the British government was watching every corner of the nation for those who dared to challenge its administration of subjection. After considering his options, Henry decided to sail to America with his wife and three sons, while leaving his two daughters and youngest son behind. Henry joined with Rev. Elton's colleague, Rev. John Warham on the *Mary & John* on April 7, 1630. Upon their arrival in America, Henry and his family made their home in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Later they relocated to Windsor, Connecticut where Henry Wolcott became a member of Connecticut's Lower House from 1637 to 1643 and was a member of the house of Magistrates from 1643 until his death. He was highly respected in the community, reportedly second to the pastor.

Three generations later we find Roger and Sarah Drake Wolcott, daughter of Job and Mary Wolcott Drake. Roger never attended school and was "dull of learning." His mother taught him at home and he overcame any earlier insufficiency. He succeeded in business, which likely drew attention from those in community leadership. Roger was active in public life; serving as a Selectman to Windsor in 1707, a Deputy to the Connecticut General Assembly 1709-1711, a Justice of the Peace in 1710, and a Clerk in the Lower House from 1710-1711. Roger was also engaged in a military expedition against the French in Canada during 1711, where he was charged with being a supply master.³

Among Roger and Sarah's children is the subject of this writing, Oliver Wolcott Sr., who was born at East Windsor, Connecticut on November 26, 1726. We know little of Oliver's early education. What we do have is a significant and lengthy history of a patriotic and engaged public servants, successful businessmen, honored Yale graduates,

and colonial governors. Second, we must not overlook the fact that his mother, Sarah had birthed 15 children with leadership in their blood. She was likely much more influential to Oliver's education than history records. This heritage, the family's faith, knowledge, and experience appear more than adequate in laying the foundation of Oliver's early years.

In 1747, Oliver graduated from Yale College and was commissioned a captain by the Governor George Clinton of New York. He succeeded in raising a company of volunteers and served on the northwestern frontier in the French & Indian War.

In 1748 with the French & Indian War at an end, Oliver Wolcott returned to Litchfield, Connecticut where he studied medicine under his elder brother, Dr. Alexander Wolcott. He never practiced medicine, instead Oliver dedicated time to the study of law, which proved to be a more fitting direction for his life. He served as Litchfield County's sheriff for twenty years (1751-1772), as chief judge of the Court of Common Pleas (1773-1786), and Judge of Probate at Litchfield, it was here that he was elected to Connecticut's State Council.⁴

Mr. Wolcott dedicated much of his spare time to family, the study of various sciences, and works of learned Europeans. He was a lover of ancient and modern history, and of order and religion. I had to pause here to consider how this knowledge of history and religion might well have guided his discernment on the battlefield, in the court room, and in the Connecticut State House.

On January 21, 1755 Oliver married Lorraine (Laura) Collins, daughter of Captain Daniel and Lois Collins, of Guilford, Connecticut. Laura, who was born January 1, 1732, brought five children into the Wolcott household. Rev. Charles A. Goodrich wrote of her; "*few women were better qualified for the discharge of domestic duties, than Mrs. Wolcott.*" Goodrich provides proof to my earlier statement of a mother's value in raising her children when he writes; "*she superintended the education of her children, and by her prudence and frugality administered to the necessities of her family, and rendered*

her house the seat of comfort and hospitality.” Another described her as being, “a woman of almost masculine strength of mind, energetic and thrifty,...attended to the management of the farm, educated their younger children, which made it possible for Oliver to focus on his duties of office.^{1, 2}

As devoted Congregationalists and patriots, Laura and Oliver Wolcott donated money, blankets, food, and other supplies to the army during the Revolution. One of the family’s greatest acts of patriotism was experienced on July of 1776, when Oliver was present in New York as George Washington read the Declaration of Independence. After the reading the Sons of Freedom, a mix of Washington’s soldiers and civilians pulled down a statue of King George III. The statue’s weight was estimated at nearly 4,000 pounds. This was not enough to dissuade Oliver Wolcott from arranging the leaden statue be carted back to Litchfield where, with the help of family and friends, melted it down for bullets, yielding some 42,088 cartridges for the Revolution.⁵

In 1771, Oliver rejoined the Connecticut militia where he advanced in rank. In 1774 the Continental Congress appointed him a Commissioner of Indian Affairs in order to secure a treaty at the Council at Albany. In 1775, Oliver was named to obtain neutrality in the conflict between the Iroquois and Great Britain. Before the end of the war Oliver was chosen as a delegate to the Continental Congress where he served from 1775-1778 and 1780-1784, but he was often absent due to his military duties as Major-General of Connecticut’s militia. He was not present for the occasion of the Declaration of Independence, but signed it in September of 1776.

Having raised several thousand troops during the summer of 1777, Oliver Wolcott, Esq. was appointed as a brigadier-general. General Wolcott reinforced General Putnam's forces on the Hudson River and in the fall of that year he joined General Horatio Gates, appointed by Governor Trumbull and the Council of Safety to command a brigade of militia that took part in the defeat of General Burgoyne at Saratoga in

October 1777. Oliver Wolcott was commissioned to major-general by General Trumbull in 1779.

In the summer of 1779, loyalist Governor Tryon of New York was commanding the British forces to plunder and dislocate colonial forces in southwestern Connecticut. His forces burned Fairfield and Norwalk to ashes, and committed horrific acts of violence on the citizens; ransacking homes, and abusing both men and women. Many fled half naked into the woods and swamps. Major-General Oliver Wolcott took command of militia assigned to defend Connecticut's southwestern seacoast, and succeeded in defending that region of the state.

Wolcott continued to serve as an active Indian Agent in 1784 and 1785, where he participated in peace terms to western New York's Six Nations of Indians.

Upon his retirement, Congress called him twice more to serve as an Indian Commissioner. Wolcott was much revered in his native state, he was elected president of the Connecticut Society of Arts and Sciences, and in 1786 he was elected Lieutenant Governor of his state. Oliver had earned an MA degree from Yale in 1765 and in 1792 he received an honorary LL. D. He assumed the Governorship when Samuel Huntington died in January of 1796, and was popularly elected to the post at the following election. He died in that office in 1797.

When we consider the nature or character of a man or his community, I think it important to consider the following quote from; *The History of the Town of Litchfield, Connecticut, 1620-1920*.⁶ It reads; "*It was the triumph of the puritan spirit, brave, unyielding, severe to itself and just to others; if we think that it was a religion too concentrated upon doctrine and too hard upon the individual, must we not yet confess that it made Litchfield within a hundred years a place looked up to far and wide.*"

A Personal Quote by Oliver Wolcott:

The Constitution enjoins an oath upon all the officers of the United States. This is a direct appeal to that God Who is the avenger of perjury. Such an appeal to Him is a full acknowledgement of His being and providence.

The Hon. Oliver Wolcott was a husband, father, Sheriff of Litchfield County, ca. 1751-1775; judge, 1750-1760s; militia leader, 1771-1774; Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1775, 1784-89; Delegate to the Continental Congress, 1775-76, 1778-84; Major-General of the Connecticut Militia, 1776; Lt. Governor of Connecticut, 1786-96; Governor, 1796-97, a humble man of God, and signer of the United States Declaration of Independence.

This has been Redeeming the Fathers of America.

References:

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2. Sanderson's Biography to the Signers of the Declaration of Independence, 1876
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4. History of the United States for Families and Libraries by Benson J. Lossing, 1860
5. The Connecticut Quarterly Vol II No. 1, January, February, March, 1896 and Vol IV No. 1, January, February, March 1898
6. History of the Town of Litchfield, 1720-1920

Additional Resources:

7. Biographic Sketches of the Signers of the Declaration of American Independence, The Federalist Papers Project by B.J. Lossing, 1856
8. National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, History of the United States Vol I, 1898