

**HISTORIC GLEANINGS
IN WINDHAM COUNTY,
CONNECTICUT**

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Historic Gleanings in Windham County, Connecticut by Ellen D. Larned

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ELLEN D. LARNED

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WINDHAM COUNTY, CONNECTICUT

BY

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"HISTORY OF WINDHAM COUNTY."

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HISTORIC GLEANINGS IN WINDHAM COUNTY.

I.

SPENT LIGHTS.*

There is nothing more surprising to the student of history than the apparent capriciousness of the chance by which human beings are remembered or forgotten. "Survival of the fittest" has been promulgated as the great law of the universe. Of the innumerable multitude gone in countless ages "to the pale realms of shade," only a few bright and shining lights have escaped oblivion. Only those of great ability or achievement, or associated by character or circumstance with great and vital events, have won remembrance. But when we apply this principle to recent periods, and especially to our own field of observation, we are stumbled. We take, for instance, one of our Connecticut towns, study its civil and church records, exhume its lists of public functionaries in every department, extract from living sources every available item, and flatter ourselves that we have

* Read before Connecticut Historical Society.

gained exhaustive knowledge of every past resident connected with its development, and then stumble by chance upon some note-worthy personage who had somehow slipped out of present remembrance.

"Why have you robbed me of a grandfather?" queries an aggrieved descendant. After all our care we are called to account for other vital omissions. *Is* this "survival of the fittest" an universal law, as applied to those who have won or failed to win the boon of permanent remembrance? Is it not quite possible that names are left out and forgotten as worthy of remembrance as many that still survive in textbook and history? In a modern and carefully prepared "Cyclopedia of American Biography" we find many names once honored are missing. Froude has given us interesting pictures of "Forgotten Worthies" in the mother country. May we not with equal profit recall to memory some Connecticut worthies once prominent but overlooked and in part forgotten.

James Fitch, Junior, of Norwich and Canterbury, may be called in a certain sense the Father of Windham County, owning for a time the greater part of the territory, selling the land and assisting in the organization of several townships. The oldest son of the first, most honored minister of Norwich, son-in-law of the worshipful Major John Mason, with much native shrewdness and force of character, no young man in the colonies had a better start or more hope-

ful prospects. Very early in life he engaged in public affairs, especially in relation to that very vital matter in a new country—land surveys and transfers. In military and political lines he was equally prominent, attaining in a few years the rank of major and office of county treasurer. Soon it appeared that he had even exceeded his honored father and father-in-law in influence over the Mobegan Indians, and had gained control of a large part of their territory. The drunken and flexible Owaneco—son of Uncas—in 1680 made over to his loving friend, James Fitch, Jun., "the right and title to all his lands to dispose of as he shall see cause," while the General Court of Connecticut constituted him the legal guardian of this Mohegan chieftain. The whole Wabbaquasset country, a tract extending forty-five miles west of the Quinebaug river and north as far as Massachusetts would allow, was thus placed within his disposal and practical ownership. But just as Major Fitch was preparing to lay out this princely domain, negotiating for the sale of the future Pomfret and Brooklyn, he was compelled by the process of events, and the administration of Sir Edmund Andros, to observe a season of "innocuous desuetude." Fitch was far too shrewd a man to waste time and money in attempting to secure confirmation of his land from that despotic ruler, in whose eyes an Indian deed was "worth no more than the scratch of a bear's paw," but quietly

bided his time till that welcome Revolution which overthrew the power of James II and his detested governor-general. He immediately bestirred himself in the re-instatement of colonial government, "travelling" it was said, "from Dan to Beersheba, to incite the freemen, and summon a General Court." "By whom was the Charter of the Government restored," sneeringly asks an enemy of Connecticut, "but by James Fitch, Nathaniel Stanley, and such like *private men*?" A private man instrumental in such a public service is surely worthy of grateful remembrance.

After the first general election Fitch appears as member of the council, and thenceforth figures as the most prominent and picturesque personage in eastern Connecticut—a magistrate and military leader, as well as proprietor of a vast tract of country. Selling out townships as if they were farms, surveying disputed lands and bounds, holding courts of inquiry, deciding vexed questions, he makes what seems like royal progresses through his domains, with his accompanying retinue of Indians, soldiers, and land-jobbers. The jealous eye of a contemporary, who could not "see cause to acknowledge Capt. James Fitch to be Lord Proprietor of this Colony," enables us to see what power and authority he was exercising at this early stage of his career. A "Remonstrance," laid before the General Court by many of his majesty's