

THE LADIES AND THE INDIANS

by Reginald McMahon

Women in colonial times, it is often said, were dominated by their husbands with few rights, legal or by custom. While frequently true, experience in historical research teaches caution of this old saw for there were exceptions.

In the late 1600's and early 1700's three women come to mind who were involved in Bergen County history and who were associated with the Indians of our area. They were Sarah Roelofse Kiersted, her daughter Blandina Kiersted Bayard, and Blandina's daughter-in-law, Rachel Van Balen Bayard.

Sarah Kiersted [there are variations of spelling] was born in the Netherlands around 1625 and came to New Netherland at about the age of five with her parents Roelf Jansen and Anneke Jans.

She was married June 29, 1642 to Hans Kiersted, a surgeon employed by the Dutch West India Company. The doctor was German, born in Magdeburgh, capital of Prussian Saxony, about 1612. It is said he came to New Amsterdam in 1638 with the new Dutch Director-General William Kieft. The couple had ten children and lived on the Island of Manhattan.

Sarah's role as wife and a seemingly perpetual mother did not deter her from acting as an interpreter between the Indians and the white man. It is not certain how she became skilled in the red man's tongue but perhaps it was through her father who was a fur trader.

Mrs. Kiersted's most well known association with the red men was with the Chief Sachem of

the Hackensack Indians, Oratam, whose name also has been spelled in various ways. It is not of record how long the two knew each other but it is documented that the Sachem considered her his friend.

Oratam lived a long life, saw the coming of the white man, fought against him in war, and lived to see the English government replace the Dutch in 1664. His home, at least in later years, was along the east bank of Overpeck Creek, possibly at the "Indian Castle" mentioned in an old deed. It was located in today's Palisades Park although village houses may have been situated in many adjacent areas. The Indian name along the western slope of the Palisades was "Awapaugh" and it has been suggested that it was subsequently corrupted to "Overpeck".

Oratam died at a very old age but his exact number of years has never been documented despite a later guess of ninety. Death, however, likely came in 1667 and in the early part of that year.

The aged Sachem did not forget Sarah Kiersted who now was a widow as Dr. Kiersted died in 1666. On October 21, 1667 it was recorded that "there appeared before the Governor two Indyans, the one called Wapomock, a Sachem; the other Tantequavis, who did then declare [that] Oratome the Chiefe Sachem of Hackingsack, did about three or foure years before he dyed, promise to give unto Mrs. Sarah Kiersted, a certaine Parcell of Land, lying upon the Hackinsack Neck, which the said Oratome, a little before his death did confirm in the presence of these Indyans and others" that he "freely gave it" to Mrs. Kiersted "in



consideration of the friendship hee had received from her." He also emphasized "that his will there in should be performed."

The document also recited that "this last summer" [1677], the "Land was markt out, according to the Indyans direction, who were witnesses to the said Gift [which] reaches from one side of the Neck to ye other".

The red men who carried out Oratam's directive signed with marks. Sachem Wapomock's resembled a closing parenthesis mark while the "mark of Tantequavis" was a distinctive stick figure of an animal rearing on hind legs. Oratam's mark, of course, did not appear but his well known signature looked much like an inverted numeral 3.

Almost two years later, on June 24, 1669, Sarah received an official patent from the Province of New Jersey for Oratam's gift. It was granted by Captain Phillip Carteret, Governor, his council, and the New Jersey Proprietors for "the neck of land that was given her by Oratan the Indian Sachem of Hackensack [note modern spelling] lying and being between Hackinsack River and the River called Overpecks Creek".

The Hackensack Neck patent consisted of 2260 "acres of upland and meadows English measure of good and Barron [barren] land". It was part of the original Indian locality later known as Old Hackensack and would encompass today's Ridgefield Park, Bogota, and southern Teaneck. The Dutch Reformed Church of Hackensack was organized here in 1686 and when the congregation erected its first house of worship in 1696 on the west bank of the river, the Hackensack name was

transferred to the present City and the original gradually lost its identity as a place name.

A provision in the patent was that "Sarah Kiersteed shall settle or cause same to be settled within three years", a clause which many early patentees failed to achieve, voiding such grants. Kiersted, however, placed tenants on the land and it is among the first regions in Bergen County to be continuously occupied. Sarah sold her patent some years later to Epke Jacobson [Banta].

It is of interest that Hackensack Neck was considered prime property. The Dutch established the Achter Col colony here with headquarters at Bogota but it was destroyed in 1643.

Soon after the Dutch had surrendered New Netherland to the English, a set of deeds was drawn. On October 5, 1664, "Oratum as Sagamore and sole Proprietor of Hackingsack ...being on the maine land over and against this Isle of Manhatans" and "for a good consideracon [sic] to me in hand paid" granted to Edward Grove, Commander of his Majesty's frigate Martin, "all that Land...knowne by the name of Hackingsack Neck".

Governor Richard Nicholls also had drawn a government patent to Grove for the same land "which is not Inhabited or Planted". The property was bounded "with a River on one side which runs up North East" [Overpeck Creek] and "on ye other with a River which runs up North" [Hackensack River].

Curiously, neither instrument of conveyance was signed, witnessed or acknowledged and therefor not legally valid. The reason is not of record but one



possibility is that the English had prepared the documents in the expectation that Oratam would sell. It is tempting to speculate that Oratam already had promised, verbally, to give the land to Sarah Kiersted as noted previously.

In any event, Sarah ended her widowhood in 1669 when she married Cornelius Van Borsum. Upon his death she married for the third time in 1683 to Elbert Elbertsen Sloothoff. It is said that land in Manhattan was granted to Van Borsum in 1673 because of Sarah's role as interpreter in negotiating a treaty by Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant with the Hudson River Indians. There is no record of children by Sarah's subsequent husbands and she died in New York where her will was probated October 21, 1693.

As a footnote, there is a story that Sarah received a beaded pouch from the children of Oratam. A colorful artifact made of red cloth and small beads, it is in possession of a Kiersted descendant. Also of interest is that she was honored by many Sarah's baptized in later Kiersted families.

The fifth child of Dr. Kiersted and Sarah was Blandina, baptized June 8, 1653. In 1674 she married Peter Bayard, son of Samuel Bayard and Anna Stuyvesant, sister of Dutch Governor Peter Stuyvesant. The couple were parents of five children but she became a widow in 1699. Blandina, however, continued the Kiersted family association with Indians.

In New Jersey she acquired land along the Passaic River and lots at Perth Amboy but in present Bergen County she is best known for her August 10, 1700, purchase of a vast tract

from the Indians at Ramapo and adjacent areas.

"For diver good causes and several kindnesses" as well as "sundry goods and wares", nineteen Indians conveyed the lands to widow Bayard as "Being the right owners and natural proprietors". Among the nineteen were four women whose names come down to us as Nanwaweron, Cominamaugh, Noundam and Weamquandewangh.

The land was then thought to be in the Province of New York but later the greater part was determined to be in New Jersey. The Bayard family never secured a government patent for the purchase and this oversight became a source of controversy.

In the meantime, Blandina had established an Indian trading post in a frame house she had built in present Mahwah. Long since gone, it was situated just north of the historic Laroe-Van Horn House on Ramapo Valley Road. Although sometimes at Mahwah, Blandina lived in Manhattan and to aid in the running of the establishment she enlisted her daughter-in-law, Rachel Bayard and Rachel's nephew, Lucas Kiersted.

The Indian trade likely involved the exchange of cloth, beads, pots and pans, axes, etc., for the red mens' furs. There is mention of a large chest at the post that seems to have held the trading goods and was said to have been left there by Blandina or Rachel.

Blandina died at New York in 1702 and devised her real estate to son Petrus and daughter Sarah. Petrus, or Peter, had married Rachel Van Balen in 1699 and was a mariner by trade. When he died in 1711, he left



his lands to Rachel for the duration of her widowhood. One man recalled, much later, that he "knew Rachel Bayard [and] that she lived sometimes at the City of New York and sometimes at Ramapo".

When entrepreneurs were trying to acquire land in today's northwest Bergen County, they complained that the "widow of Peter Bayard" [Rachel], the Bayard family and others including "Many Dutch in Hackensack have stirred up an Indian insurrection against Christians". Reportedly there were "threats from the Indians" as well as "slight unpleasantnesses with them". Perhaps an exaggeration, but the Bayards did strongly resist efforts of others to claim their Indian purchase.

Rachel Bayard remarried and she outlived her second husband, Henry Wileman. By 1754 she was declared "by reason of age [to be] of unsound mind". Rachel had five children by Peter Bayard and one by Wileman.

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The association of ladies and the Indians ended with Rachel but the Kiersted name continued with Lucas as an Indian trader who lived to see Ramapo change from a wilderness outpost to a farming community.

The original parchment map of the Ramapo tract which I was fortunate to rediscover after it had been "lost" to historians, identified Kiersted's house built by Blandina Bayard as well as nearby Indian houses. This and other obscure sources proves again that persistent research of the local scene can still provide new information and insight.

The subsequent role of Lucas Kiersted in Bergen County is detailed in my study, "Ramapo: Indian Trading Post to State College", published by Ramapo College of New Jersey in 1977.

-the preceding article appears in its entirety and has not been edited in any manner.

The Editors

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