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# WALTER TITUS AVERY

BY J. M. ARMS-SHELDON

DEER FIELD, MASSACHUSETTS



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## WALTER TITUS AVERY.

In 1871, when our Association was in its infancy, when, in fact, it was but one year old, a stranger came to Deerfield. So far as known, no one here knew him, no one welcomed him. Yet for some reason he had come; for some reason he lingered, wandering through this elm-arched street and breathing in the air of this old, historic town. When he went away, he had become a life member of our Association by the payment of twenty-five dollars. The President of this Association, speaking of the incident, said "This elated me! We had but just started. There was little interest in the movement. Only a few of our elderly and middle-aged people cared for it; but here was a total stranger who was not only interested in our undertaking, but who proved his faith in the objects of the Association in the substantial manner of becoming a life member."

Words cannot tell of the encouragement received from sympathetic help for a cause just struggling into being, because there are no words that adequately express the new sense of strength and gladness one feels.

The name of the stranger was Walter T. Avery. His home was New York City.

In 1878, after much effort, the Old Academy had been secured for a Memorial Hall. It was a time when there were many who could not understand why the relics of the past should be saved. "These things," they said, "have served their day; they are now useless rubbish,—let them go." But Walter T. Avery was not one of these. He knew that every relic, however dingy, however homely in itself, is a connecting link in the evolution of early New England life, without which the history of that life is incomplete, with which it is a priceless heritage to hand down to posterity.

Ms. A. 9. 2. 1-1773



Money was needed to transform the Academy into a Hall that should preserve the records and the relics of the past, and on July 15, 1879, Mr. Avery sent a contribution of \$25, to aid in this purpose, followed, March 19, 1880, by another of the same amount. This proved that his interest was not impulsive and temporary, but was constant through the years.

On the twenty-first of last January word came to us that the Association had received a legacy of \$1,000 from Walter T. Avery of New York. Thus was the seal set upon his strong, abiding faith.

Why did this stranger come to Deerfield? His home and the home of his father before him was far away in the heart of the largest city of America.

Why did this stranger take such a living interest in our Association?

To answer these questions we must know something not only of the life of Walter T. Avery but also of the sources of that life. We are not wholly creatures of environment; on the contrary, we are, in large measure, what our fathers and mothers, our grandfathers and grandmothers have made us.

Go back with me 255 years and stand on the shores of Massachusetts Bay. Look out upon the tossing white-caps of the old gray sea, till you discern on the far horizon a tiny speck; watch it till it grows into a ship with white sails spread and with prow turned westward. This little vessel has buffeted the winds and the storms of the mighty Atlantic for weeks, aye, for months, but now it is nearing port. Among the passengers on deck scanning with breathless eagerness the new land and the new home rising out of the waters are William and Margaret Avery with their three little children. Mary of five years, William of three, and baby Robert.

The father and mother have left their native land with all its tender associations, a comfortable home amid the rural beauty of Barkham in the county of Berkshire, England,—and for what? For a dangerous voyage and a home in a land peopled by savages, where toil and privation must be their daily portion.

But this does not tell the story of the secret of their com-





ing. Men do not give up comfort for hardship without an all-controlling purpose. It was this purpose that illumined the faces of the men and women on board that little vessel as she rode triumphant into Boston Harbor in 1650. They had come for that which humanity through all the ages has, *at times*, yearned for,—a larger life, a freer air to breathe. This they found in America, the land that struggles to make men free.

William Avery took his family to Dedham, a little plantation only fifteen years old. What a warm feeling it gives us to know that the sturdy settler of this home in the wilderness first named it Contentment. Here a house was built almost under the boughs of an oak which even then was an old tree. In this home four more children were born to William and Margaret Avery.

In 1650, according to the Dedham town records:

“It was granted unto Wm. Avery to set his shoppe in the highway in the east street, . . . always provided that whensoever the said shopp shall be no longer used for a Smythe’s shopp, by the said William at any time hereafter then it shall be removed out of the highway, if the town shall require the same.”

In 1664, according to Savage, William Avery was a member of “The Military Company of the Massachusetts,” now so well known as “The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company.” I find this statement corroborated in the History of the Company, published in 1895. He was called Sergeant in 1669 and this year he was sent from Dedham as Deputy to the General Court.

In 1675 he was appointed by the court to examine Indians who were suspected of some base designs against the English, and it is in connection with this entry in the town records that he is first given the title of Doctor. “History is silent,” say the compilers of “The Dedham Branch of the Avery Family in America,” “as to the date of his commencing the practice of medicine, other than this. He seems to have stepped into the ranks of medical men while carrying on his daily labor at the blacksmith’s forge.”

In 1677 Dr. Avery was freeman. The next year, 1678,



twenty-eight years after their settlement in Dedham, his wife Margaret died. Soon after this Dr. Avery left Dedham and made his home in Boston. Here he was a bookseller at the Blue Anchor, not far from where the Old South Meeting-house stands to-day.

These are a few of the incidents in Dr. Avery's life, but the one which interests us most, and which will forever connect his name with Deerfield, is yet to be told.

"In 1670 William Avery was one of the original Proprietors who took possession of the 8000 acres of land at Pocumtuck, granted to the town of Dedham in lieu of 2000 acres taken from the town by the General Court for the Indians at Natick."

We learn from the "History of Deerfield" that Sergeant Avery drew, May 14, 1671, house lot No. 22, the lot which afterward became the home for a longer or shorter period of four generations of Catlins,—the ancestors of Miss C. Alice Baker,—and which is now owned by Mrs. Elizabeth W. Wells.

There is no evidence to show that Sergeant Avery ever came to Deerfield. "In 1696, and probably much earlier," his house lot was held by Philip Mattoon. Afterwards it was owned by the Catlins and from them passed to the Wells family in 1819.

Although Dr. Avery took up his residence in Boston, yet he did not forget his old Dedham home. Worthington, in his "History of Dedham," says:

"In 1680 captain Daniel Fisher and ensign Fuller report that Dr. William Avery, now of Boston, but formerly of the Dedham Church, out of his entire love to this church and town, freely gives into their hands sixty pounds, *for a latin school*, to be ordered by the selectmen and elders." The cause of education was an especial interest, and during his life "he made liberal donations to various public charities, among which was one to the college at Cambridge."

On March 18, 1686, Dr. Avery died, being about sixty-five years old. His tombstone may be seen in King's Chapel Burying Ground in Boston near and facing Tremont Street, but I wish here to quote from a letter of his very great-





grandson, Walter T. Avery, the subject of this sketch. He says: "It is likely that this stone does not stand where it was originally placed, as a number of tombstones were taken up and set in a row by some person. A barbarism that should never have been sanctioned." These words, "*A barbarism that should never have been sanctioned,*" throw strong light on the true character of our stranger guest.

Dr. William Avery left his Dedham homestead to his descendants. Around his old house and the old red oak his broad acres extended far, and until within a comparatively short time the estate has been held by the Avery family. The tree of four centuries or more still stands, bearing the name of "The Avery Oak." As I stood a few days ago under the storm-beaten boughs of this grand old tree, my heart leaped with joy within me that there were such men as these Averys, who, generation after generation, had guarded this tree as a precious trust,—men who could not be tempted by money, for when, in 1794, the builder of the frigate "Constitution," our old Ironsides, offered \$70 for the tree, it was refused by the owner who in this way said most emphatically the tree shall live.

2005154

So close is the union between nature and human nature that there are few who can look upon this sacred oak without a revelation of the truth that we are not creatures of the hour, not mushrooms of a day's or a night's growth, but that our roots reach back, *back* into the centuries, and for this reason and this reason only, do our branches extend upward and outward into the free air of the future. Let us rejoice and be glad that the Avery Oak is to-day cherished as a priceless legacy by the Dedham Historical Society.

Of Dr. Avery's seven children, only Robert, the second son, concerns us. He was a baby, as I have said, when his father settled in Dedham. He became a blacksmith, learning the trade of his father. When twenty-seven years old he married Elizabeth Lane. She was a daughter of Job Lane, a wealthy and influential citizen of Malden, Mass., and a Representative to the General Court. They had six children, of whom John was the fourth. Ensign Robert Avery died in 1722, in the seventy-third year of his age. At



the death of his widow in 1746 their descendants were five children, thirty grandchildren, fifty-two great-grandchildren, and two great-great-grandchildren.

Among the interesting relics of the Dedham Historical Society is a silk flag which was probably carried by Robert Avery.

Little can be found regarding the life and the personal traits of Robert and Elizabeth Avery, but we may judge somewhat of the parents by their son John, of whom much is known. This son, born in Dedham, February 4, 1685-86, graduated from Harvard in 1706.

True, indeed, it is that history is the record of human lives which cannot be represented by parallel lines that never converge, but rather by lines that cross and recross one another until an intricate network is formed. It so happened that the minister of Deerfield, Rev. John Williams, was appointed chaplain in June, 1709, in the futile expedition against Canada. He was probably away from home through the summer, as he was paid in September, £24 8s. 8d., for his time and expenses. During a part of his absence his pulpit was filled by no other than John Avery, the young Harvard graduate, and the great-great-grandfather of Walter T. Avery.

In Deerfield then, John Avery was brought face to face with the stern actualities of life. Only five years had passed since the town was laid low. The shadow of that dark cloud still rested upon her and filled the hearts of her people with sadness. He stood in the pulpit of John Williams,—a man who had himself seen the fiendish horrors of the Indian attack and who had sounded its depth of infinite woe,—a man who even now was with the army destined for Canada where he vainly hoped to find his lost child. As John Avery preached his Sunday sermon he saw before him the wrecks of once happy families; he knew that the absent dear ones lay in a nameless grave near by, or were dragging out a dreary existence under their French or Indian masters.

There is little doubt that the young minister made his home, while in Deerfield, with the parson's wife, Mrs. Abigail





Williams, in the very house now standing on the old Albany Road. Samuel, Esther, Stephen and Warham, children of John Williams, had all been rescued from the savages and were full of tales of Indian tragedies. From his window, it may be, the minister looked out upon the ruins of Benoni Stebbins's home, and beyond to the hatchet-hewn door of Ensign John Sheldon's house. When he crossed the threshold of this desolate home, did he not linger to hear from the Ensign's own lips the story of his three long journeys to Canada to redeem the loved ones? Here, too, came Capt. Jonathan Wells, with his tales of Indian warfare; John Smead, carrying a bullet in his thigh received in the Meadow Fight, after the massacre; Thomas French, whose wife and six children had been captured or slain; John and Dorothy Stebbins, whose five children were still in captivity; Mary Hinsdale, wife of Mehuman, whose child had been killed and whose husband was captured a second time that very summer; Ebenezer Warner, Samuel Barnard, Hannah Beaman, and many another. Thus did John Avery come into the presence of men and women who could suffer and be strong.

What imprint, think you, did these experiences leave on the brain and the heart of young John Avery? I, for one, believe that such *living* experiences, which stir the nature to its very depth, must perforce give a tone, a strength of fiber, and a potent directive impulse, that may be handed down to children and to children's children.

July 16, 1709, the town of Truro on Cape Cod was incorporated, and in February, 1709-10, "it was unanimously agreed upon and voted to invite Mr. John Avery . . . to tarry with and settle amongst us" in the work of the ministry. This invitation was accepted June 21, 1710.

Although 1709 was the date of incorporation of the town, yet eighty-nine years before this time the land on which Truro was built became historic. Here the first party of Pilgrims sent out from the Mayflower to explore the region encamped for the night; here they found a spring and being "most distressed for wante of drinke," they "refreshed them selves being y<sup>e</sup> first New-England water they dranke



of." Probably one of this exploring party was Richard Warren. He was "one of the ten principal men," who set out in the shallop, December 6, 1620, on their final exploring trip, and who first discovered Plymouth Harbor and fixed upon a place of settlement.

In the strain and stress of that desolate winter of 1620 would that Richard Warren might have caught a vision of the days that were to be. Would that he might have seen the sunny home in Truro near the refreshing spring that the Pilgrims discovered, where on November 23, 1710, his great-granddaughter, Ruth Little, came as the happy bride of John Avery, a good man and true. But alas! Richard Warren lived only eight years. He was "a useful instrument and bore a deep share in the difficulties attending the first settlement of New Plymouth."

I love to think of the simple home of John and Ruth Avery close by the dear, blue sea; of the ten little children who came to bless it, all of whom, save one, grew to manhood and womanhood. The kind husband and father was not only a preacher but also a doctor, a lawyer, a farmer, and a blacksmith.

"His smithy where the good minister clad in leather apron 'shaped the glowing iron with muscular arm' stood just southwest of his house by the road. It is a fact that has been handed down from one generation to another, that Minister Avery, if busy at work when parties came to be married, would take off his leather apron, wash his hands and perform the ceremony." "He belonged," says the "Avery Family in America," "to a race of blacksmiths, physicians and clergymen, who, though they held high positions in society did not think it beneath themselves to perform hard manual labor in connection with their higher duties."

The loving wife and mother was busy with her brood and was also active in the church. The communion service, still used, was her gift. The pewter tankards are inscribed "Ruth Avery to Truro c<sup>hh</sup>, 1721"; each of the six solid silver cups bears the inscription, "This belongs to y<sup>e</sup> Church in Truro, 1730."

For twenty-two years John and Ruth Avery loved each



other and labored together, then in 1732 the dark day of separation came while she was yet in her prime. Twenty-two years after, on April 23, 1754, John Avery died, having preached forty-four years in Truro. Rev. James Freeman wrote of him in 1796, "As a minister he was greatly beloved and admired by his people, being a good and useful preacher, of an exemplary life and conversation. As physician he was no less esteemed. He always manifested great tenderness for the sick, and his people very seriously felt their loss in his death."

The second son of John and Ruth Avery was Ephraim, born April 22, 1713. When eighteen years old he graduated from Harvard, and in 1735 was ordained as the first minister of Brooklyn in Pomfret, Conn., his father, John of Truro, preaching the ordination sermon. The ordination dinner was served two miles away over Blackwell's Brook, which was still without a bridge, so that all the ministers and messengers forded the stream on their way to the repast.

Ephraim Avery married in 1738 Deborah Lothrop, daughter of Samuel and Deborah (Crow) Lothrop, and nine children were born to them.

In 1754 a malignant disease raged in Brooklyn with great violence. The minister seems to have been the only physician in the region. He "day and night ministered to the sick and dying till he was prostrated and . . . fell a victim to the disease." Mr. Ebenezer Devotion, who preached the funeral sermon, said of him:

"As to his natural endowments, he was calm, peaceable, patient, open hearted, free of access, sociable, hospitable, cheerful but not vain, capable of unshaken friendship—not a wit, but very judicious, not of the most ready and quick thought, but very penetrating, capable of viewing the relation of things, comparing them and drawing just conclusions from them. In a word, the Author of Nature had dealt out with a liberal hand to him, humanity and good sense. As to his acquirements in learning: he was esteemed . . . a good scholar, a good Divine, and no small proficient in several of the liberal sciences."

It is interesting to note in passing that the widow of



Ephraim Avery married for her third husband Gen. Israel Putnam of Revolutionary fame, so that by marriage General Putnam was the great-grandfather of Walter T. Avery. Mrs. Deborah Putnam accompanied her husband in most of his campaigns until her death in 1777.

John, the eldest child of Ephraim and Deborah Avery, and the grandfather of Walter, the subject of this paper, was born in Brooklyn, July 14, 1739. He graduated from Yale in 1761, with the hope of becoming a minister, but his health failing, he turned to the profession of teaching. He taught in Rye, N. Y., and in Huntington, L. I. He married, June 26, 1769, Ruth Smith, daughter of Jehiel and Kesia (Wood) Smith. They had three children, but their married life was all too brief, for on August 20, 1779, John Avery died followed six months later by his wife, Ruth. Their little son, John, the father of Walter, was thus left an orphan when two years old. This child was brought up by his aunt, Mrs. Kesia (Smith) Titus, the wife of Joseph Titus of New York. We find nothing relating to his boyhood. In 1813 he married Amelia Titus, daughter of Israel and Temperance (Norton) Titus of Huntington, L. I. Their only child was Walter Titus Avery. John Avery became a New York merchant, in partnership with his brother-in-law, Walter Titus, in the firm of "Titus and Avery." In 1816 the firm was "Titus, Avery, and Weeks." I judge that Mr. Avery was a successful merchant, as he retired from business at the age of forty-seven. On April 14, 1857, he died when eighty years old, and his widow on January 6, 1863, in the eighty-ninth year of her age. Both breathed their last in the home of their adopted daughter at Old Mill, Bridgeport, Conn.

I have now given, as I proposed, some of the hereditary influences of the life of Walter Titus Avery. Born in the early part of the nineteenth century, on January 18, 1814, he was bred amid the stirring but distracting scenes of a great city. At eighteen he graduated from Columbia College, having chosen a scientific rather than a professional career. As civil engineer, he began work in 1836 on the location of the Croton Aqueduct, and in 1847 he was Assistant Engineer





in the survey, location, and completion of the upper part of the New York division of the Hudson Railroad. In 1850 he went to San Francisco, Cal., and the next year to Stockton, remaining there five years, selling supplies to the miners under the firm of "Avery and Hewlett." In 1856 he returned to New York and formed a partnership with an old friend as Importers and Commission Merchants under the firm of "H. E. Blossom & Co."; at the death of Mr. Blossom, in 1863, he continued the business with a former clerk under the name of "Avery and Lockwood" until 1885.

It was at this time that the President of this Association, while in New York, had the pleasure of calling upon Mr. Avery.

About 1885 Mr. Avery retired from business. He never married. He spent his winters in New York and his summers at Moriches, a quiet village just out of the city.

These facts concerning Mr. Avery's career are given by the compilers of "The Avery Family." Mr. Avery would not allow his portrait to be used, nor more than a single page to be devoted to his life. But actions speak louder than words, and scattered through all the book are records of his truly beautiful and worthy deeds.

Whether Mr. Avery, when he came to Deerfield in 1871, knew of the connection between this town and his remote ancestors, we cannot learn. He could not have heard from his grandfather the true stories of Indian life which doubtless this grandfather heard from the lips of John of Truro. Neither could the father of Walter have heard them from his father or grandfather, because they were both dead when he was two years old. The chain of tradition was so broken that probably Walter did not even know that John of Truro ever preached in Deerfield, since this fact is not recorded in "The Avery Family." But even if Mr. Avery did not possess this knowledge, would not a man in whose veins flowed the blood of William, the emigrant, of Richard Warren, the Pilgrim, and of John, the preacher, be drawn to this historic town as surely as the needle is drawn by an irresistible force toward the magnet!

Certain it is that at some time Mr. Avery became deeply



interested in the history and genealogy of his family. He spent time and money in searching for information "not only in all parts of this country but in England as well." "His valuable books of records" which he had "taken such infinite pains to gather" he placed at the disposal of the compilers of "The Avery Family in America," published in 1893. Many of the facts here given are the results of his investigations.

Mr. Avery showed that he placed a true value on old family papers, by presenting the Dedham Historical Society the original deed of gift of land by Rev. John Avery of Truro, to Ephraim his son. It bears the minister's signature, and is the only specimen of his handwriting known to exist.

Rich, in his "History of Truro," tells us that "Mr. Walter T. Avery of New York has reconsecrated the graves of his ancestors by enclosing the lot with granite posts and heavy iron rails." These were the graves of John Avery of Truro and his wife Ruth. These and similar acts prove that Mr. Avery's interests reached out beyond the confines of his city home, that he had a just appreciation of the past, and a rare sense of gratitude to those who, very largely, had made him what he was. In his death, which occurred June 10, 1904, he emphasized his living faith by legacies to several historical societies whose object it is to bring into harmonious and permanent relations the past and the present, that, thereby, the future may be worthy of the founders of New England.







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