Sherrill’s Lost Dauphin Hill and the Kinsley Farm
by Tony Wonderley

This issue highlights two of the most striking features of Sherrill’s landscape, both on the north side of West Hamilton Avenue near Robertson Road. The first is a low, tree-covered ridge directly across the road from Fairway Lane. This knoll, the only topographical relief on the otherwise flat plain, was associated two hundred years ago with an Indian preacher claiming to be the “Lost Dauphin” -- the heir, that is, to the throne of France.

About 150 yards east of the ridge, the second is more difficult to see. If you peer beyond recent housing fronting both Hamilton and Robertson roads, you can see part of an enormous barn that seems to loom up out of the past in this subdivision setting. It is the biggest feature of the “Kinsley Farm” or “Farms,” a place connected to the story of the Oneida company and, more distantly, to the Oneida Community.

Church of the Lost Dauphin
The Oneida Indians sold their land to New York in a series of landcession treaties extending from 1785 to 1842 (Wonderley, Oneida Iroquois Folklore, Myth, and History, pp. 19-24). A provision of the state-tribal agreement of 1817 specified that land-sale money would be applied to building a church for the Second Christian Party, that being the Oneida faction living in future Sherrill. The result was “St. Peter’s Chapel,” erected in 1819 and presided over by Eleazar Williams, a Mohawk Indian minister from St. Regis.

Williams was a charismatic leader who, after arriving here in 1816, converted most of the Oneidas to his brand of Episcopalianism. Quietly cultivating the rumor that he was born of royalty, Williams encouraged the Oneidas to remove beyond the reach of white interference to a new Iroquois homeland which would be ruled by -- well, Williams. He did, in fact, initiate the Oneida
emigration to Wisconsin by moving there in 1822. Nearly half the tribe followed Williams to Green Bay in the 1820s.

As for the church on the knoll, the New York-Oneida treaty of 1840 provided that state agents would sell the building and distribute the profits to the Indians. “This mission house was sold in 1840 to the Unitarian Congregational Society at Vernon,” former Oneida Community-member George E. Cragin reported, “and removed to that village. It is now used as a town hall” (Quadrangle, February-March 1914, p. 10; and see Quadrangle, April 1909, p. 7). Razed in the early 1960s, the Oneida chapel was replaced by the fire station now standing on Route 5. The old church is commemorated on a historical marker at that location.

Barnes Davis Hill and the Kinsley Farms

When the Oneida Community started up in 1848, the site of St. Peter’s was known as the “Barnes Davis Hill.” “This Barnes Davis was a sporting man and kept fine horses,” former Community member Orin D. Wright recalled (Quadrangle, February-March 1914, p. 9). “In fact, he bred some of the fast horses in this vicinity of the day. My recollections of him were that he was a very jolly man.”

The Oneida Community turned out on two occasions to battle fire on Barnes Davis’ place. “The first was his large barn on the hill, the second one was his smoke house and pig pen on the side hill below his house. At the latter fire, Ransom Reid distinguished himself. In spite of flames and smoke, the squealing of the burning pigs, and the shouts of the crowd, he climbed into the loft and began pitching hams out of the window at a rapid rate. We saved most of the contents of the building, but there was more or less roast pork for sale about that time” (George E. Cragin, Quadrangle, February-March 1914, p. 11).

By the 1880s, the Barnes Davis residence on the hill had passed into the hands of a farmer named Jason Duross (H. V. Noyes, unpublished company history, p. 22). Another former Oneida Community-member purchased the Duross farm along with several adjoining properties in 1892. Myron Kinsley seems mostly to have let the land out for others to farm. Myron’s brother, Martin, had purchased the Hubbard place at the corner of Sherrill Road and Hamilton in 1884. Hence, the siblings owned virtually the entirety of a large triangle bounded by Sherrill Road and Hamilton Avenue, and Route 5—an area appropriately known as the “Kinsley Farms.”

Sometime around 1895, Myron Kinsley had the old Duross-Barnes Davis residence moved off the knoll to the east where it would be used as a two-family tenant home. Various farming outbuildings—built perhaps by Barnes Davis, Duross, Kinsley or others—existed just north of the relocated tenant house (H. V. Noyes, p. 22; Quadrangle, February-March 1914, p. 9).

Burt Olney’s Oneida Canning Co. and After

The Kinsley Farms were purchased in 1902 as the start-up of the Burt Olney Canning Company. Specializing in the growing and processing of tomatoes, peas, beans, and corn, Olney was a successful agro-business. Within a few years, the firm employed some 3,000 workers at several plants and properties.
across the state. Former Community-member Orin Wright said Olney “improved and rebuilt” the existing structures north of the tenant house (Quadrangle, February-March 1914, p. 8). In all probability, the impressive complex mapped at that location in 1918 was built by Olney.

The Oneida Community, Ltd. purchased the Olney “Kinsley Farms” in 1914. “We now secure from Olney some 350 acres of a farm in the best of condition, thoroughly underdrained, all nooks and corners cleared of underbrush, carefully fertilized under soil analysis, and capable of yielding magnificent crops,” George Cragin noted at the time.

Cragin assumed the Oneida Community, Ltd. would use the land for its fruit-canning business. “It would seem as though Fate or Providence had ordained that we should again unfurl our old flag that we so confidently flung to the breeze some sixty-five years ago--‘Horticulture a leading means of subsistence.’ It is true that we have never made any money by either Horticulture or by Farming; or even by Horticulture and Farming combined with Canning, but who knows what the future has in store for us? Possibly the lowly non-paying Fruit business may yet become the ‘head of the corner’ of our temple of industry.” (Quadrangle, February-March 1914, pp. 9-10).

In fact, Oneida’s canning-related operations were very short-lived. After 1916, the company operated the farm as a dairy operation managed successively by Holton Noyes and Jerry Wayland-Smith. The largest barn (still standing) housed some 90 head of Holstein cattle. The barn immediately to the east (also still standing) was home to several Belgian draft horses.

Farming on the Kinsley Farm ceased in 1946. Thereafter, the property was developed residentially under the supervision of Wayland-Smith. During the early 1950s, Oneida Ltd. built housing for employees and opened the streets west of and parallel to Kinsley Avenue (information from Barbara Nurnberger and Lang Hatcher).
The Oneida Community’s Lost Dauphin

Mark Twain introduced most of us to the Lost Dauphin as one of the colorful rogues Huck Finn meets as he rafts down the Mississippi: “Yes, my friend, it is too true--your eyes is lookin’ at this very moment on the pore disappear Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen, son of Looy Sixteen and Marry Antonette...Yes, gentlemen, you see before you, in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin’, exiled, trampled-on and sufferin’ rightful King of France.”

Although antebellum America may have been filled with lost dauphins, the most famous real pretend prince was Eleazar Williams. The Oneida Community followed his career with interest. Their writings about Williams convey the national context of his pretensions as well as the personal links the Perfectionists had to him through Community members Horace Burt and Sewell Newhouse.

1. From *The Circular*, February 23, 1853
Rev. Eleazar Williams

The story of the discovery of the legitimate heir to the throne of France, in the above named gentleman, is briefly this.

Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the royal martyrs of the French Revolution, had a son named Charles Louis. He was born in 1785. After the execution of his father and mother, he was consigned by the Jacobites, in 1793, to the care of Simon, a miserable cobbler… “The existence of the royal child was a sore trial for the republicans, who at the same time could frame no excuse, even to themselves, for putting him to death. In Dec. 1794, a decree was passed in the Convention, ‘that the committee of government should devise the means of sending the son of Louis out of the territories of the republic. On the 9th of June,
1795, it was reported to the Convention that he was dead.” But the truth of this report was doubted…In 1848 a French gentleman died at New Orleans, named Belanger, “who confessed on his death-bed that he was the person who brought the Dauphin to this country and placed him among the Indians, in the northern part of the State of New York.”

“Eleazar Williams, at the present time a portly gentleman of advanced age, (resembling Louis Philippe) and a minister of the Episcopal church, commenced his career (apparently) at St. Regis, a small Indian village near Montreal. He was reputed to be the son of Thomas Williams, a half-breed Indian: but his supposed mother (still living) declines answering questions about his birth; and it is affirmed by many witnesses that he never bore any resemblance to the other children of the family…”

He was sent to school at Long-Meadow, Mass., where he was under the charge of Rev. Dr. Ely several years. The bills for his board, tuition, &c., were regularly paid, and it is supposed by some unknown person, as it is incredible that his reputed father should have been able or disposed to bear his expenses. Respecting this period of his life, we received a few days since a note from Horace Burt, a member of the Oneida Association who formerly lived at Long-Meadow, from which we extract the following:

“My mother was well acquainted with E. Williams and his reputed brother John. They were both brought to Long-Meadow, when they were boys. Eleazar, was 13 or 14 years of age. My grandfather Bliss, then a tailor, made their first suits of clothes—measuring their naked bodies, as they had nothing on but Indian-blankets. Mother was a school-mate with them for several years; I have heard her say that there was a great contrast between the two boys; they did not look alike, nor act alike. Eleazar was fond of his book, was an excellent scholar, and did not appear to have much, if any, Indian blood in him; but John was all Indian. They never could get him to love his book. They labored hard with him, and took every possible pains to make a scholar of him; but could not succeed. He would rather go hunting or fishing; and as soon as he grew up, he went back to the Indians again, and resumed their manner of life. Eleazar, on the contrary, pursued his studies and made great proficiency in learning, and is well acquainted with several different languages. I have seen him, and heard him preach. I remember hearing it said of him in Long-Meadow, that he was very extravagant in dress and living.”

Williams remained at school till the war of 1812, when he engaged in the service of the United States, was present in several actions, and received a severe wound at the battle of Plattsburgh. After this he joined the Episcopal Church, and from 1816 to 1822 officiated as pastor of the Oneida Indians, near the present site of the Oneida Community. We learn that he is well remembered in the neighborhood, and by several of the members of the Community. They remark generally that he was honest and worthy, but extravagant in dress and expense, fond of having servants, &c. In 1822 he removed with a part of the Oneida tribe to Green Bay, [present Wisconsin], where he has since continued his pastoral labors. In 1841, he was sought out by the Prince de Joinville, son of Louis Philippe, and informed privately (as he alleges,) that he was the veritable lost Dauphin, Charles Louis, legitimate successor of Louis XVI…

We will conclude this sketch with an extract from that article [in the February issue of Putnam’s Magazine], giving Williams’ account of his interview with the Prince de Joinville—which indeed is the pivotal fact of the whole story…[Williams claimed that De Joinville asked him to renounce his royal inheritance.] “The document which the Prince placed before me was very handsomely written, in double parallel columns of French and English. I continued intently reading and considering it for a space of four or five hours. During this time the Prince left me undisturbed, remaining for the most part in the room, but he went out three or four times. The purport of the document, which I
The read repeatedly word by word, comparing the French with the English, was this: It was a solemn abdication of the crown of France in favor of Louis Philippe, by Charles Louis, the son of Louis XVI, who was styled Louis XVII, King of France and Navarre, with all accompanying names and titles of honor, according to the custom of the old French monarchy, together with a minute specification in legal phraseology of the conditions, and considerations, and provisos upon which the abdication was made. These conditions were in brief, that a princely establishment should be secured to me either in this country or in France, at my option, and that Louis Philippe would pledge himself on his part to secure the restoration, or an equivalent for it, of all the private property of the royal family rightfully belonging to me, which had been confiscated in France during the revolution, or in any way got into other hands.

[Williams indignantly refused to sign the document.] “I said that as he, by his disclosure had put me in the position of a superior, I must assume that position, and frankly say that my indignation was stirred by the memory that one of the family of Orleans had imbrued his hands in my father’s blood, and that another now wished to obtain from me an abdication of the throne. When I spoke of superiority, the Prince immediately assumed a respectful attitude, and remained silent for several minutes. It had now grown very late, and we parted, with a request from him that I would reconsider the proposal of his father, and not be too hasty in my decision. I returned to my father-in-law’s, and the next day saw the Prince again, and on the renewal of the subject gave him a similar answer. Before he went away he said, ‘Though we part, I hope we part friends.’”

2. From The Circular, April 2, 1853

The Bourbon Question

We published not long since, in The Circular, an abstract of a somewhat extended article which appeared in Putnam’s Monthly for February, 1853, from the pen of the Rev. J. H. Hanson, of New York; the object of which was, to prove that the Dauphin of France, or Louis XVII, supposed to have died in prison, is not dead, but (having been brought to America,) is now living among us, in the person of Rev. Eleazar Williams, an Episcopal Clergyman, formerly a missionary among the Oneida Indians. Nearly simultaneous with the publication of this article, a book appeared in Paris, written by M. Beauchesne, purporting to be a faithful record of the last days of the young Prince, entering into all the particulars of his imprisonment and death. The publication of this book, together with a reply from Prince de Joinville, denying absolutely certain statements made by Mr. Williams, relative to his interview with the Prince, have elicited from Mr. Hanson another quite lengthy article in the present (April) number of Putnam’s Monthly,

[De Joinville’s rejoinder to Williams’ account is then quoted.]

Claremont, Surrey, Feb. 9, 1853

“Sir,—The Prince de Joinville has received the number of the Monthly Magazine, of New-York, which you have kindly thought fit to transmit to him, and has read the article to which you have called his attention. His first thought was, to treat with that indifference which it deserves, the absurd invention on which this article is founded—but on reflecting that a little truth is there mixed with much falsehood, the Prince has deemed it right that I should in his name, give a few lines in reply, to show the exact portion of truth there is in this mass of fables...

“It is very true, that in a voyage which he made to the United States, towards the end of the year 1841, the Prince finding himself at Mackinac, met on board the steamboat, a passenger whose face he thinks he recognizes, in the portrait given in the Monthly Magazine, but whose name had entirely escaped his memory....
“But there ends all which the article contains of truth, concerning the relations of the Prince with Mr. Williams. All the rest, all which treats of the relation which the Prince made to Mr. Williams of the mystery of his birth, all which concerns the pretended parentage of Louis XVII, is from one end to the other, a work of the imagination, a fable woven wholesale, a speculation upon the public credulity…

“Signed, Aug. Trognon, Secretary for the commands of the Prince de Joinville.”

[The Oneida Community authors--probably John or George Noyes--end this article by saying the question of Williams’ dauphin-ship has not been settled definitively by this letter.]

3. Summary of items in The Circular, September 9 and 30, 1858

The Oneida Community reported that a new fruit house was being constructed from materials taken from a house thought to have been the dwelling of Eleazar Williams. An outside newspaper picked up on that and embroidered it wonderfully. Williams, the other source alleged, was fated to die when his house was taken down, and that is precisely what had just occurred. A good story, the Community retorted, but not true. Williams’ house, it turned out, was still standing.

4. From The Circular, June 28, 1869

Dauphin Williams

The mystery of Eleazar Williams, the so-called Dauphin, has not yet been fully cleared up. The claim made in his behalf some years ago that he was the son of Louis XVI of France, has lately been revived by Dr. Vinton, who adduces what he considers new proofs in support of the theory. As Williams was for a long time a resident of the vicinity of the O.C., if not an occupant of its very domain, it would seem that inquiries from persons hereabouts who know him personally would tend to throw light on his origin. As a specimen of the evidence that exists in this neighborhood, we give what is said by one of our associates, Mr. S. Newhouse, who knew Mr. Williams well.

“He was,” says Mr. Newhouse, “a man of elegant figure, straight and portly, with broad shoulders, and limbs tapering to very small hands and feet.” One peculiarity in which he differed from the Indians was, that he never “toed in,” which is almost universal with the red men. Mr. Newhouse says [this] is caused in part, by the custom of strapping them while infants, to a “carrying board,” and is retained in after life as a strategic measure. It causes them in walking, to step with one foot directly before the other, thus concealing their numbers when a band is marching single file on the “war-path.” Mr. Williams never showed this peculiarity. He was an educated man, polished in manners, dressed well, was rather luxurious in his tastes; would direct persons in his employment, but not belabor himself; had a French woman for his wife, and was somewhat noted for irregularity in paying is debts. His reputed brother, who had the same opportunity for education with himself, returned from school to the bow-and-arrow habits of his tribe, and became lost in the general level of Indian life; but Mr. Williams, with greater self-respect, or for some other reason, took a different course and served reputably as an Episcopal minister for many years. All this may have no bearing on the question of his Bourbon origin, but it at least gives us some of the outlines of a man who has been raised by literary art and certain coincidences into a semi-historical interest. Mr. Newhouse confirms the fact of the visit of the Prince de Joinville to Oneida Castle some years ago, and of a reputed interview between him and Mr. Williams at that time.
Jerry Wayland-Smith (left) and unidentified Oneida Ltd. employee, Kinsley Farm, 1943