

Bottskill Baptist Church History Minute

Church Historian Ken Perry

September 2026- Elder Nathan Tanner, Part 2



If Elder Tanner had remained calm, followed the directives that were given him and exhibited what was termed “true Repentance,” he may have weathered the storm that had arisen against him. While the

re may have been a different outcome, his zeal and determination to remain a pastor became his undoing, and other forces were at work against him.

A very charitable set of observations were made in Thurston’s history of Greenwich when he was discussing the controversy within the church, saying that when he accepted the pastorate on June 4, 1782:

“Elder Tanner thus entered upon a ministry, which, though fruitful and good... brought him more of sorrow and bitterness, more of poverty, more of unmerited reproach, than usually falls the lot of men.” Thurston later implies that he became an object of pity in the community and

lived out his years here in that fashion, but that might not be true.

Attempts to unravel who he was and his ancestry are about as messy as the scandalous charges made against him. To the information that I have found, I would add the word “probably.”

It was the visit in late June of Ron W. Germaine, who had a direct family ancestor in Elizabeth Tanner, who married James Germain, which hurried along discoveries which may or may not be as accurate as we might wish. James and Elizabeth were married on January 2, 1782. At the time, according to him, Elizabeth was only

15 years old, which establishes 1767 as her year of birth, which was one additional marker in discerning the family ancestry. She later gave birth to James Germain, Jr. in that year.

An additional revelation, from charges made against her father, indicates that he had two married daughters by 1793 who lived nearby, which would make it three daughters, as the Germain family was living in the town of Kingsbury by 1790. It was also noted that a son, Thomas Tanner, resided next to him in the 1790 census. That would suggest that Elder Tanner had at least four children, one son and three daughters, probably born in the 1760s and 1770s, and that he and his spouse were born in the 1730s or 1740s.

One other thing that Mr. Germain pointed out was that when he did the family DNA was that it did not match the Tanner DNA. Instead, it matched the DNA of Deacon Elisha Bentley's family. That would suggest that Deacon Bentley or some other Bentley residing in the area had an illicit or nonconsensual relationship with Elizabeth Tanner prior to her marriage to James Germain. This would appear to be sufficient motive for Deacon Bentley to remove Elder Tanner and his family from the immediate area in order to protect his family name. When James Germain moved his family to Kingsbury is unknown, but it would have been convenient for Deacon Bentley as no one locally might have the opportunity to notice any resemblance of James Germain, Jr. to the Bentley, rather than to the Tanner family.

A 1774 colonial census of Rhode Island shows 16 Tanner households, five each in the towns of Hopkinton and W. Greenwich. In the multiple volumes of the early vital records of Rhode Island the birth of Nathan Tanner, Sept. 1737, occurs in S. Kingstown, a son of Nathan Tanner and Mary Cottrell. This individual might be our Elder Tanner.

Two marriages for Nathan Tanner occur in Hopkinton, both in 1757, to Elizabeth Foster, on Oct. 19, and to Elizabeth Thurston, on Dec. 29. Thurston's history claims that Elder Tanner married a daughter of Jonathan Foster, the original ancestor of most Foster families in this area, a point repeated in our county history, which was published in 1878, two years after Thurston's history, and therefore probably accepted by Crisfield Johnson when he was collecting information for his own work. There isn't any substantiation for this assertion, but this is how information is passed down that might not be accurate. My own preference is for Elizabeth Foster, a daughter of Thomas Foster, because she names one of her sons Thomas.

Here is where it gets trickier, because the Hopkinton records enter the births as children of Nathan and Elizabeth, but which Elizabeth? A son named Thurston was clearly in Elizabeth Thurston's family. Mary was probably named after Elder Tanner's mother. Mary and Thurston were both born in 1758, Mary on January 7, and Thurston on April 15, quite an unusual feat for one mother! So Mary and Thomas both were likely to be in Elder Tanner's family. Many of the remaining births occur in years after Elder Tanner was then living and preaching in New York, including Elizabeth, entered into Hopkinton records as born in 1770.

James Germain, Sr. (1763- 1849) was a soldier of the Revolution who served in Col. Seth Warner's Green Mountain Regiment and fought at the battles of Hubbardton and Bennington. On January 10, 1851, his widow, Elizabeth Tanner (1762- 1852) applied for a Widow's Pension for his service, then a resident of Ithaca, N. Y. Both were buried in the South Hill cemetery outside Ithaca, N. Y. At the time, Elizabeth gave her age as 89 years old, meaning that she was actually born in 1762 and was 20 years old at the time of her marriage rather than 15 years old.

Following prompts connected with James Germain's Find a Grave site, it's possible to arrive at a site reserved for Elder Tanner and uncover other online sites associated with his name. In this case, FamilySearch. As you can see, all of the children found in Hopkinton are lumped in under his name. This gets compounded further when the Elizabeth Tanner, born in 1770, is noted as married to James Germain at the age of 12, when she was most likely Elizabeth Thurston's daughter, and not the daughter of Elder Tanner and Mary Foster.

A problem with online genealogical research is that it might start out with an accurate record and then fall off the rails, which is the case here, giving the accepted birth date and parents and concluding with his connection to our church.

Elder Tanner's biography initially looks impressive but there is one item, among others, that immediately stands out, the reference to his wife dying in 1766 or 1767. If that were the case, then he would have to have remarried, as one of the charges against him in 1793 was that he and his wife were living separately.

One helpful thing that does emerge here is that the Tanners had two sons, Thomas and Nathan (Nathan III), both of whom settled in the town of Marcellus. Onondaga County, N. Y., and were landowners there, having adjoining lots.

Coming from Easton, Nathan first purchased land in Marcellus in 1796, and also named a son Abel, which was the name of one of his father's brothers.

On August 10, 1800, Elder Tanner wrote a letter to the church which relates his laying "the foundation of this church 33 years ago," which is to say, in 1767. Was this letter the basis for establishing the year of the church's organization or do we have some other document that confirms this? Reflecting upon his time here and noting that he grew the church to "about 200 Members," he notes that the war and his loss of his first lease lead to his fall into poverty. He further attributes his impoverishment to having "worn out much Horse Flesh in the Public Service." This is clearly not a letter from someone who has been incapacitated by the traumas he has experienced, but a firm and cogent assessment of his life experiences. It's likely that Thurston was not aware of this letter and made his own conclusions about Elder Tanner's final years based upon the fact that he seems to evaporate in the public eye.

Near the close of this letter he states, "I am about to Remove to a Different Land to Spend the Remnants of my Days."

A more legible copy of Elder Tanner's letter. As nearly as possible the spelling and punctuation have been copied as written in the original letter.

Nathan Tanner

Argyle August 20, 1800

To the Church of Christ at Battenkill, Send the greetings wishing Grace, mercy and Peace, Truth, Righteousness, True Piety and Salvation maybe and abound among you, Amen.

Dearly Beloved, I Thought meet to Stir up your Pure minds in Remembrance of Some things. I hope you will not be offend with me for So Doing. Whereas God made Use of Me as the Chief Instrument of Introducing the Gospel into this Land, While it was a wilderness and of Laying the foundation of this Church 33 years ago. The Church prospered under my Administration to the Number of about 200 Members. But in Several Branches and I Caryed them in the Boosom of my affection and fed them in the Sincere milk of the Word. And built them up in good and Holsome Doctrine in their most Holy faith Where by they Grew in the Knowledge of God our Savior. It was in the Prime and Vigor of my Life and by Reason of My Misfortunes and the war, vow I have gone through Hot and Cold, wet and Dry, Hunger and almost Nakedness, Yea my own family has Been Deprived of my Labour, while they have Labored to Support me while I have Served you in the Gospel. I have not been Missing Except in Extraordinary cases, and I have gone where ever you Sent me when it Lay in my Power, Both to assotiations and Councils and also to Visit the Different Branches of the Church, and I Never Spent Half a Dollar of the Churches money in Crosing ferrys or for Refreshment on the way(I mean money that was handed out for that Purpose). I have worn out much Horse flesh in the Public Service, and as my time was Taken up for many years and Could not be with my Business, By these means I Became Involved in Debt, when my first Lease was out I owed near 200 pounds York money, when the Difficulty first began with me in the Church, and it has Cost me Since Considerable more then One Hundred pounds to Support my Small family and Stock, that I have had a Hard Row to Carry Through. But out of it the Lord Has Delivered me. and I am about to make a Remove to a Different Land to Spend the Remnant of my Days. Wherefore I thought to Put you in Remembrance of the Covenant you made with me Before God and the Council the Day I was ordained your minister. VIZ: that you would Do your Duty to me in the Administration of Temporal Things Which I Suppose your are Sensible you Came Very Short, for it Cannot be Computed that I have Received 40# in Consideration for all my Services from the first foundation of This Church to the Time of your withdrawing from me. Excepting what was Cald Bees and they cost me almost as much as they Came to.

You have acknowledged to me in Some of your writings that I was a faithful Servant and I Believe I was So in General. I have not much that Lies with Regret on my Mind Respecting my Doctrine or administrations in the Church and now as I am Advance in years if I Live I Shall Need Something to Live on and I Know not where to Look for it than where I have Labored. Indeed it would be hard to turn away a good Servant without any Reward it would be hard for a number of Children to Turn away a father in his old age without anything to Live on when he had been Laboring to Bring them up and feeding them with milk and Butter and Honey. It doth not Require the wisdom of a Philosopher to Know what is Right in this case it only Needs the Qualifications of a Good Christian that will Pay his Vows and Do unto all men even as he would have them Do

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Nathan Tanner (cont.)

Argyle August 20, 1800

unto him. I therefore Desire you to Take this matter into Consideration and make me up a Donation that may Do me Some good So as I may not be Burdensom to others in my old age and that will be an Honor to a People profesing Godliness.

When this Comes to hand I Desire you to give the Church in General the opportunity of hearing it Read and Deliberating on the Subject So as to Do Righteousness. Doubtless one Reason why I was not Helped was because you was not then So able as you have been Since, and you was Struggling to git an Interest for your Selves but Now you are able and you ought to be Rich in good works--

I Desire an answer to my Request and if you Desire me to meet with you on the Subject Let me Know when and where and I will give my Attendance These Lines are from Your old Friend and Antient Servant in the Gospel.

To the Church of Christ in Battenkill.

Nathan Tanner

It seems likely that he intended to live in Marcellus with one of his sons. Or possibly his daughter, as Hannah Tanner supposedly married a Samuel Kenyon, who appears in the vicinity of Elder Tanner in the 1790 census and afterwards in the town of Otisco, about 13 miles from Marcellus in Onondaga County. The information given states that Samuel Kenyon died in 1822, and the 1830 census of Otisco shows a Hannah Kenyon as head of a household, so that it looks quite possible that Elder Tanner had three of his children living in Onondaga County.

This would be an arduous journey taken mostly on foot, as the Erie Canal had not yet been built, over primitive roads, and especially daunting for someone in his mid- 60s and not well. Did he finally accomplish this journey? The biography here says No, that he died here in 1807.



Despite that, while searching through the Tanner file at the Wash. Co. Historian's Office, I found a letter inquiring about an ancestor, Joshua Tanner, who died Sept. 12, 1807, at N. Greenwich. His gravesite (12) is in a small farm cemetery on Hartshorn Road on land previously owned by the Ellsworth family. According to the letter, Joshua Tanner was prominent in the church and because of that, often referred to as "Father Tanner."

Coincidentally, Joshua Tanner was the father of John Tanner, who married Tabitha, the daughter of Deacon Elisha Bentley, and Elder Tanner's nemesis. Father Tanner, Elder Tanner, the terms are close enough to have been merged. This leads me to believe Elder Tanner probably made his trip to this "Different Land" and ended his years in either Otisco or Marcellus, living with one of his children in Central New York.