

Seldom do we find a memorial erected to a man who at one time stood disgraced and despised by his fellow townsmen. Such a monument in memory of Sergeant Daniel Bissell, courageous patriot spy of the American Revolution, stands on Palisado Avenue. The site chosen was the farm of his ancestor, John Bissell, founder of the family in America and owner of the famous Bissell Ferry.



If Daniel Bissell could retrace the steps of his childhood, he would be amazed to find the honor that Windsor history has accorded him.

Daniel Bissell was born in 1754, oldest son of Daniel Bissell, Jr., and Elizabeth Loomis. He and his brothers

lived a happy outdoor life in Windsor, typical of the pioneer family. They learned woodlore for their safety. They were taught to fish in the Great River and hunt in the surrounding woodlands to provide sustenance for the family. While this was essential to a full larder, they also spent many happy days swimming in the Rivulet and picnicking on the shore. As boys will, Daniel learned to imitate the speech of a Negro companion. This ability was to play a vital part in his future.

He attended the local school, but as the oldest son he would inherit the family farm and so his formal education ended in Windsor. However, he was a great lover of books and Oliver Ellsworth and Roger Wolcott were generous in lending so avid a reader books from their extensive libraries.

When the news of the Boston Massacre spread through the colonies, Daniel, now 20 years old, wished to join the volunteers from Windsor, but was persuaded by his father to wait for further developments. After the Battle of Bunker Hill, Daniel did enlist under the command of Colonel Huntington. A short time later he returned to Windsor and resumed life on the farm.

After the Declaration of Independence which united the colonists in a strong

desire for liberty, Daniel re-enlisted and was soon promoted to Sergeant.

There is a tradition that he was first married before the war and that his wife died, leaving a son. This has never been verified, but it is definitely known that he married Rhoda Hurlburt at Windsor on Dec. 30, 1789.

Rupert Hughes, the noted author, wrote a delightful tale about Daniel's war-time romance. According to the story, while at a dance for soldiers, Daniel met a very charming girl named Rhoda Hurlburt, who later became his wife. She wore a purple silk gown trimmed with lace. During the festivities a clumsy Dragoon caught his spur in her skirt and ripped off a long strip of it. Daniel secured the piece of silk and placed it inside his blouse. Later he fashioned it into a heart and wore it as his lady's favor!

In 1781 Daniel Bissell was summoned by George Washington. It seemed the sergeant's sterling qualities had not been overlooked and there was an important mission to be undertaken. A dependable and capable man was needed to secure information relating to the forces and plans of the British army then occupying New York City. Washington appealed to Daniel Bissell as he had turned to Nathan Hale earlier in the war under similar circumstances. Daniel was instructed to

wear his army uniform in order to appear as a deserter from the American army, and a price of 50 pounds was set for his discovery and return. To accept this assignment which would bring shame to him and his family was a very difficult decision for Daniel to make. It meant isolation from everyone. But his love of country and desire for service made him sacrifice his personal feelings.

Daniel was successful in evading the American sentries and penetrating the British lines. On his way to New York he gained admittance to General Benedict Arnold's headquarters by disguising himself as a lame, bent, old Negro, who pretended British soldiers had ransacked his farm. While in Arnold's headquarters he overheard the plans for the attack on New London being discussed. Knowing that any written information found upon his person would be his death warrant, he committed all that he had heard to memory. The next day a sympathetic Dutch farmer carried Daniel in his wagon loaded with produce to the recruiting office of Arnold's Corps, where he was passed off as a drunken deserter. This brought him immunity for three days and then Daniel was taken ill with a fever and sent to a British hospital. Later he was put in a barn with other soldiers where he was dreadfully ill.

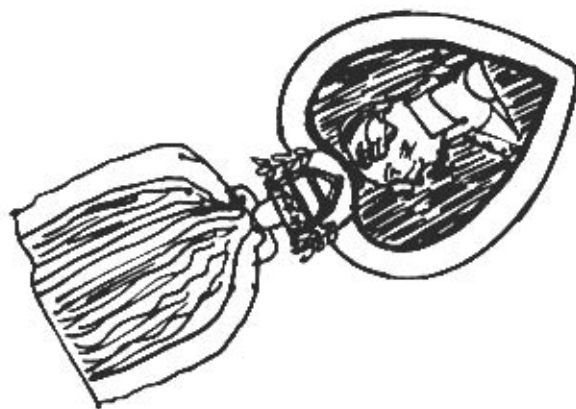
Of his experiences here Daniel Bissell wrote: "Here my suffering was truly great; without fire the greatest part of the time, only wood allowed for the purpose of cooking our pork and pease; without attendance, but an additional blanket to two men; without shifting my clothes for three months; covered with head and body lice; unable to walk".

During his illness he became delirious and betrayed the fact that he was a patriot spy to his attending physician. When Bissell's youthful strength returned, he became anxious to complete his mission. Acting on the suggestion of the doctor who had become very fond of him and who had decided to help him, he confided in another soldier who also wished to escape. Pretending to search for a stray pig, the pair managed to leave camp. After crossing two rivers they were traced down by bloodhounds. The dogs lost the scent when the fugitives hid in a swamp. Days of evading discovery passed but finally the American lines were reached. Daniel went immediately to Washington's headquarters to make his report.

The General told him that he could not be rewarded by promotion as he had intended. Congress had ordered that no more commissions be given, and the army had no money for medals or other decorations.

As Rupert Hughes related in his story, Daniel had worn Rhoda's purple silk heart pinned to his blouse all during the war and when General Washington learned of this, he murmured to himself: "A purple heart! A purple heart!"

On August 7, 1782, George Washington issued a badge of merit with the following order: "Whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed, the author of it shall be permitted to wear on his facings over the left breast, the figure of a heart in purple cloth or silk, edged with narrow lace or binding....Men who have merited this last distinction to be suffered to pass all guards and sentinels which officers are permitted to do. The road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all."



This badge was the only one issued during the Revolution and only three men are on record as having won it, all of them sergeants of the Connecticut Continentals. This award was highly prized by Daniel and he kept it carefully pressed between the leaves of the family Bible.

In the year 1810 upon returning from Sunday service, the Daniel Bissells found that their house had been struck by lightning and had burned to the ground. The Order of the Purple Heart was destroyed with all of their other possessions.

Briefly this is the story of Daniel Bissell, a patriot, a pioneer, a true example of early Americanism.

Windsor's Bicentennial Fife and Drum Corps will be named in Daniel Bissell's honor and the color purple will appear in their uniforms.



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SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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