

UNCLE GEORGE BUILDS a "CHIMBLY"

Gleason L. Archer, LL.D.
Pembroke, Massachusetts.

My father, John S. Archer, was the only blacksmith in the north woods of Hancock County, Maine. His shop was patronized by logging camps and river drivers. He was a great grandson of Joshua Williams, a Revolutionary soldier who had been lured by a land promoter into the remote and almost inaccessible region of mountains and pine forest at the headwaters of Union River. Joshua had hopefully cleared land on the western slope of an oval hill overlooking the river. But no promised forty families followed him into the wilderness. Betrayed and forsaken the brave old soldier maintained his ground against Tarratine Indians and roving wolf packs. His children, his grandchildren and now his great-grandchildren stubbornly held the rocky acres of Joshua's original grant.

My mother Frances (Williams) Archer was a great-granddaughter of old Joshua. She was a first cousin of my father and a rare and beautiful soul. A bride at seventeen, seven years younger than her husband, she had given birth to four sons of whom I was the third when in 1884 a great emergency arose in the home of the blacksmith. The humble cottage in the rear of the blacksmith shop would soon be overcrowded.

The Williams clan had always been self-reliant, building the nineteen cottages of the settlement from home grown pine lumber milled at a saw mill ten miles down river. To meet his obvious need my father, with some cousins who owed him money for blacksmithing work, built a sizable addition to his cottage which to my four years and nine months understanding seemed a new and glorious barn in which to play. I soon learned that if a brick

chimney would be built in the centre of the addition it would be finished off into a kitchen-living room, rear chamber and attic rookery for us children.

But none of the Williams kindred had ever built a brick chimney. Since the death of my brick-mason grandfather Samuel Archer, who had erected all the chimneys now standing in the settlement, no chimney had been built or needed.

Five of the grandsons of Joshua Williams were still living in the hamlet, - James Williams, seventy-two who had bossed the settlement for fifty- years; James Collar, sixty-four; Simeon Williams, Jr., my mother's father, sixty-four; George Williams, sixty and Asa Williams, fifty-six. Deeply concerned by their nephew's predicament the five worthies gathered in the cellar of the "addition."

My older brothers being at school no one ordered me into the house so I was privileged to behold my aged relations in earnest conferences with my father. Great Uncle Jim Williams did most of the talking. Great Uncle George Williams was drafted to build the chimney.

"Easy as pie," scoffed Uncle Jim. "Johnny has built a stone foundation in this 'ere cellar and has sawed the openin' in the roof where the chimbley will pop out. If you're any good at all, George, you kin do it."

"Well, I kin try," grinned Uncle George, pulling his white chin whiskers reflectively.

"And I'll haul the bricks from Ellsworth," agreed Uncle Asa whose farm cart and gray horses did all the heavy downriver errands for the settlement.

For my dear patient mother the prospect of a new kitchen and sorely needed room for expansion of living quarters brought gladness of heart. When female cousins or aunts called the beginning of the

enlarged home was proudly displayed. Not even the spotted cow and her newly born calf or the burgeoning vegetable garden could rival the growing accumulation of bricks in the new cellar. The narrow circle of life of our wilderness hamlet gave even the slightest event out of ordinary in any home an importance to all the kindred. Few members of the clan had ever ventured more than ten miles from home down the difficult forest trail toward Ellsworth. Since the nineteen cottages had been thickly clustered for mutual protection on either side of the original trail they overlooked the Union River Valley and the chain of wooded hills across the river. Some cottages lacked even this tiny outlook upon the great world for the shadow of the deep woods - "Bears woods" we children called it - crowded in from every side.

At my tender age the dooryard and the blacksmith shop, the hay barn and half an acre of land thickly studded with pine stumps were the limits set upon my exploring zeal. But toads and grasshoppers in summer time furnished excitement for barefooted hunter. Then too, blueberry bushes grew in fairy circles around these ancient stumps where forest giants once reared their heads. Blossom time brought delight to eyes and nostrils but when the blue fruit offered itself my instinct called for action. Even at four years old, armed with a tin cup, I would sally forth to garner blueberries to be eaten with sugar and cream.

The great day came when father and Uncle George mixed the mortar for the building of the chimney. I remember my amazement when the cold lime and sand in the bin, being doused with water from our well, turned into hissing porridge that cast up steam and dangerous spatters from which my father snatched me just in time.

My brothers came home from an errand in time to witness the final throes of chemical action.

Uncle George had finished his haying and it was arranged that on the following Monday he would start to build the chimney. Sunday was a solemn day in our hamlet for the blue laws of Colonial New England had lived on in this out of the world place. Joshua the founder and his good wife had brought the customs and beliefs of Middleboro and Taunton, Massachusetts in Colonial times declaring it wicked for children to play on Sunday or for grown ups to indulge in sports of any kind. To fish or hunt on the Lord's Day was strictly forbidden.

Mother used to read from the Bible, verses for each of us in turn on Sunday afternoon and ask us to tell her afterward something of what she had read. There was no church in the settlement but the red schoolhouse was utilized for prayer meetings and social gatherings. I had never attended a meeting but I well knew that Uncle George was the acknowledged leader of the faithful and that he enjoyed the title of Deacon. For this reason I stood somewhat in awe of the kindly old man but I liked him because he looked like his brother, my mother's father, Simeon, Jr.

I was eagerly awaiting Uncle George when he arrived Monday morning. My father had gone away for a few days on a blacksmithing job. My brothers, eight and six years old, had gone to my grandfather's house on an errand for mother. Deacon George greeted me kindly, then made ready to start work. When he filled a bucket with mortar and stabbed the mass with a trowel I understood perfectly what it meant. When he brought a quantity of bricks to the stone foundation his intention was clear.

Perhaps the old man was nervous in facing this unaccustomed task but he reached into his pants pocket and produced half^a/handful of brownish "delicacy" into which he set his teeth like a dog gnawing a bone.

"What you a eatin', Uncle George?" I gasped.

"Aint eatin' nothin'," retorted the old man.

"Lasses candy?" I persisted hopefully. I liked molasses candy.

"Not candy," he snorted. "Terbacoy." His morsel successfully gnawed he restored the plug to his pocket. I regarded him with wide eyed amazement.

"Do you like it, Uncle George?"

"Taint, half bad," he grinned setting to work by dumping his pail of mortar onto the stone foundation and spreading it with his trowel. Then he fetched another load and continued the laying of a bed of mortar. The time had now come to apply mortar to bricks and begin the first course of red^w building blocks, fitting them into place with plastered edges. It was a fascinating sight and when he had set the sides and ends of the chimney I cried out with joy.

"A little house, Uncle George!"

"So it is youngster," he agreed spitting a yellow contribution into his bucket of mortar.

My cry of dismay amused the worthy deacon. "That makes this 'ere mortar more workable," he explained. I watched him set the second course then wishing to be helpful I began to bring bricks to him one by one. He again made his mortar more "workable" then he grinned at me.

"You'n me makin' a chimby. A right smart youngster you be for a fact."

Gratified by this praise I continued to carry the rough eight-by-four bricks until the novelty of the task ceased and the tender skin of small boy fingers called for first aid from my dotting mother.

"Good-bye, Uncle George, Mama wants me to help her now."

In the kitchen with my mother I proudly related my exploits as a helper for Uncle George and showed her my brick grimed hands. She praised with lavish praise as dotting mothers will, washing my hands and face the while. Then I confided to her a great secret.

"Uncle George chews nasty stuff and spits in the pail."

"In the mortar pail, baby?"

"Don't call me baby. He is the baby now," pointing to my sleeping brother. "Yes, in the mortar - awful big spits."

Mother laughed merrily.

"Yes, I know he chews tobacco. It is the good man's only bad habit. I hope you will never chew tobacco."

"I never will, Mama. Papa doesn't chew tobacco."

"No, nor smoke nor drink. I hope you will be like your father when you grow up."

I promised most fervently just as Uncle Jim Williams came into the kitchen.

"What's this I'm a hearin' from this young rascal?" he demanded.

"He has just promised me that he wont chew tobacco, smoke or drink rum."

Uncle Jim coughed and wheeling to the open door spat out a jet of amber fluid.

"You, too, Uncle Jim?" I cried accusingly.

The old man had a sense of humor. He winked at mother as he addressed me.

"Youngun, I'm a witness to that promise and if you ever dast to take a chaw or a drink or a smoke I'll tan your hide, I will."

I promised again and presently followed Uncle Jim down the stairs into the cellar where Uncle George was working. He had made some progress since I was there but Uncle Jim, eleven years older than his brother, seemed very critical of what was going on.

"Where in Hell is your plumb line, George?" he demanded.

"Don't need one - not yit, I don't," Uncle George defended.

"There 'ere brick are square - easy 'nuff to build 'em up straight."

"But the mortar aint square, George."

George Williams spat defiantly into his mortar pail.

"Don't do that no more, George," grinned the older man. "This 'ere boy don't like chewin' terbaccy nor smokin' nor rum."

Uncle George raised his eyebrows as he looked at me in mock dismay.

"He wanted a chaw offen my plug a spell back and he puts yaller eyed beans up his nose and I had to fish one outen it with his mother's hairpin. Aint that so, young un?"

"It's so 'bout the beans but not 'bout the plug - I thought it was lasses candy."

My humiliation would have been complete without what followed. My oldest brother Samuel had come down the stairs into the cellar and he was my constant enemy.

"That aint the worst of his wicked doins, Uncle Jim. Know what he done Sunday morning? He ruinated Mama's little measuring cup."

"God sales alive! And how'd he do that?"

"He peed in it to find out much he could pee."

Uncle Jim could never laugh out loud but on this occasion he grinned from ear to ear and seizing me in strong arms bore me into the house to my mother. On the way he whispered in my ear.

"You're a doin' all right, boy."

Setting me down in front of my surprised mother, he said, "Frankie that measuring cup o' yours will be all right if you wash it in soap suds."

"I've done that already," she laughed. "It is young Samuel who is worried."

My next expedition to the cellar found Uncle George up on a platform that he had built around the chimney and my two older brothers were busily supplying him with bricks. My offering of aid was indignantly scorned and as I was about to leave the cellar my grandfather Simson Williams, Jr. came down the stairs. He solemnly and critically inspected the ungainly column of bricks that his brother was creating.

"Ain't she a real chimbley, Sim?" inquired the proud builder.

"Too soon to say, George, but when Jim went past my house he tole me you was goin' to make a botch of it not usin' a plum line."

"I don't need no plum line. I'm a buildin' her straight as a ramrod."

"Come you down here and take a squint at it."

Grumblingly the gray stoop shouldered builder backed down his rickety ladder. Guided by his brother he took "squints" from various angles and grudgingly admitted that it leaned toward the northwest corner of the building.

"I kin fix it all right, Sim. I kin hit that hole in the roof slick's a whistle."

"Sure hope so, Deacon. If you can spare this boy I'll take him in to see his mother."

"Take him along," grinned Uncle George as he added moisture to the mortar pail.

Grandfather Williams lived in a little farm house about a quarter mile distant. His orchard bore delicious red apples with which he usually filled his pockets before coming to our house but this was midsummer and no apples were ripe. Memory of past delights and anticipation of future feasts kept me close to his heels. My mother was his favorite child - his "Frankie" whom he loved to visit and learn the latest news.

"Jim tells me this holy terror of yours has give the Deacon fits for chewin' terbaccy."

"Uncle Jim does, too, Grandpa, I saw him spit. I'm not goin' to use tobacco - my papa doesn't."

"Good for you, young un. Bad habit, expensive too."

"Goin' to leave off smokin', Grandpa?"

"You got me there, you little rascal. You don't want me to take up chewin'? Now what are you laughin' at?"

"How would you bite it off," I chuckled. "Your front teeth are gone."

"He's a bright little cuss," grinned Grandfather Simeon as I made my exit from the kitchen.

My two older brothers had become as fascinated as I with the upward progress of the chimney. They continued to carry bricks while Uncle George was at work. Whenever he went home we three youngsters climbed the ladder to his stagings which rose from time to time until our anxious mother, fearing accidents, forbade me to climb even a few rungs, which resulted in unbrotherly strife.

Uncle Asa, the youngest of the four brothers, came on the second day to inspect the chimney.

"You're a buildin' that chimbly crooked. She slants some-
thin' awful," he called to the busy Deacon, who was gathering a
hodful of bricks.

"Now Asa, don't you put in your ear. Jim and Sim hev been
a-pesterin' me. I don't have fur to go. I'll make it, Asa."

"You wont, George, unless you shift your direction."

The two men argued and Deacon George finally conceded that he
must make adjustments in order to steer his chimney through the
opening in the roof. Victory attained, our chimney reached the
ridge of the building and Uncle George went out sides and continued
his labors on the roof. The three youngsters rejoiced with vocifer-
ous delight and called to our mother to witness the final topping
of the chimney.

It so happened that my blacksmith father returned as Uncle
George was setting the final course of brick. It was a truly im-
pressive addition to the building from the outside but when my
father went indoors and took down the staging that had screened the
brick work he fairly roared with rage at his hapless Uncle.

"Do you call that damn thing a chimney? How in God's name
could you make square bricks do such twisting and turning? It's
a wonder it didn't fall down on you."

"Don't get excited, Johnny - don't swear at me."

"I 'm not swearing at you, Deacon. I'm swearing at that
chimney. It's so crooked smoke wouldn't go up. I callate the thing
will fall down before morning."

"No! No! It fits tight in that roof hole. It can't fall,
I tell ye."

"Uncle George, if you didn't owe me for the logging sled I done for you, I wouldn't pay you a damn cent for such a botchy job as that."

Not even my gentle mother could soothe my father's rage. My great Uncles Jim, Asa and distressed Deacon George with my grandfather Simeon gathered for a stormy session with my father in the cellar of our new ell. Uncle Jim and Uncle Asa agreed that the chimney was doomed to collapse while Grandfather Simeon joined with the pious builder in faith that the stack would stand firm, however, its spine may have been twisted in its erection. So positive was the embarrassed Deacon that he vowed to eat his old hat should the chimney collapse.

Anxious for the safety of her children my mother had listened to the acrimonious debate.

"What will you do, Johnny, if the chimney falls?"

"Do? I'll build it up myself and use a straight edge from bottom to top. But now we are stuck with that hellish thing. The devil of it is we can't have that kitchen and rooms so long as there's danger of the chimney falling down."

"How soon will we know?"

"God only knows and the Deacon don't dare ask Him."

Day after day my father made profane inspection of the offending chimney forbidding us children to venture into the cellar. The Deacon's bricklaying became the sport of the hamlet and since my father's blacksmith shop was the natural lounging place of young and old I had contact with uncles, great uncles and cousins. I was relied upon to give them the latest news concerning the chimney.

"Sagging worse and worse" was my report day after day but one morning I heard my father say that if the chimney didn't fall down

during the Line Gale he would go ahead and finish the building into rooms.

I had no idea what he meant by Line Gale except that gale meant big wind. When I reported this to one of the young hellions of the hamlet he evidently spread the word for thereafter every lounge asked me daily when the chimney would fall down.

"We are waiting for the Line Gale," I would answer and then join in a gale of laughter.

Since our settlement was located at forty-five degrees North latitude the wind storms that usually accompany the transit of the sun in the latter days of September and March were unusually severe - hence the Line Gale. I became intrigued by this mysterious expression and asked my father almost daily when the Line Gale would "blow."

"You'll know when it comes. It will shake the shop, the shade trees, the house, the shed and that damn chimney," - all of which I passed along word for word to the grinning cousins and uncles.

September came - night and day became of equal duration and one day winds arose to scatter autumn leaves through our dooryard. The sky filled with angry clouds and rain seemed immanent. I raced to the shop where father was at his anvil hammering red hot iron. His dirty leather apron protected him from spitting stars that answered his hammer strokes. He wore an old derby hat for he was bald. His blue eyes were intent on the steel forging and the noise of his hammering warned me that this was no time to give him my great news.

He shoved the iron back into the fiery forge, winked at me, removed his hat and with a red bandanna handkerchief wiped his perspiring bald spot.

"Is it the Line Gale?" I screamed.

"Not yet but she's a-blowin'. I callate."

Exultantly I dashed into the dooryard and ran to the house.

"Mama, the Line Gale is a comin'," I cried.

She nodded and smiled.

"It always comes," she said looking up from pinning baby brother's diaper. He smiled up at me raising his head like a turtle from his awkward position.

"That damn chimney, may be it will fall down."

"Don't use swear words, son."

Papa says it and you - - "

"Never you mind," she smiled. "Of course I want you to be like your father but wait till y-u're a man before you use cuss words."

"Your mother is right, Toady," spoke up a clear masculine voice and I turned to see that my mother's only brother, Leonard Williams, was in the room. He was a handsome young man, Uncle George's assistant in the Sunday School, already determined to be a minister or Elder as ministers were called in Eastern Maine.

"Oh, Uncle Leonard," I cried and running to him climbed into his lap.

"Yes, Toady, you should be a good boy and not use swear words."

"But Uncle Leonard, it makes me want to use swear words when anybody calls me Toady."

"So ? As bad as that. But we have always called you that since you were big enough to catch toads in the field. I've seen you with one in each hand."

"That was when I was little. But I don't do that any more."

"The toads will be glad to hear that news. Well, when you come to my school (he was the school teacher of our little back-woods hamlet) I will tell them that your name is Gleason and help you get rid of that horrid nickname."

I kissed him to seal the bargain, then ran back to the shop. The wind was blowing harder than ever and a flying leaf came in the shop door with me. Charlie Williams, one of Uncle George's numerous sons was sitting on a stool watching my father, still making red sparks with his sledge hammer.

I liked Charlie for he used to box with me, get me to tell him stories, pump me for news. My story telling propensity, imaginary battles with bears and "Injuns," had already won for me great popularity among the loungers in the blacksmith shop. That propensity had also caused extreme grief to my Grandmother Harriet (father's mother) and Great-aunt Fanny, the two living granddaughters of Joshua Williams. Uncle Leonard, however, never reproached me for "telling lies" when I launched into a bear story. Charlie Williams, however, was my most ardent listener.

"How is the damned old chimbley a doin'?' It is a damned old chimbley, aint it?"

"Mama wont let me use damned any more."

"Whew! I've gotta talk to your mother about that."

Charlie was one of his father's chief critics. I tagged along when he went to inspect the dizzy column of brick in our shed.

"Hope to God she comes down before mornin'," he commented, then sauntered toward home whistling merrily if not tunelessly. Charlie was then twenty, a happy go lucky lumber jack and river driver who loved old cider and "stronger stuff." Uncle George had six sons,

the oldest thirty-four, the youngest seventeen. He had six daughters ranging in age from forty-one to thirteen. Numerous grandchildren ^{had} ~~was~~ ^{been born} already in his branch of the family. My friend Charlie was the wildest of his offspring.

The rising storm evidently troubled Uncle George. He arrived shortly after noon and padded silently around his "masterpiece."

"What do you think, Uncle George?" I demanded. "Is it goin' to kerflummox?"

"Where did you hear that word?" he demanded.

"Charlie said it. He thinks she's goin' to kerflummox."

"I though so. Charlie's a bad boy, he is, no respect for his father."

"But he said it about the chimney."

Uncle George spat an emphatic yellow stream as he went out the door and moodily shuffled toward home.

Before dark that night the rain was falling in torrents and great gusts of wind were causing our windows to rattle in their wooden frames.

"What do you think, Johnny?" asked Mother anxiously as he came in from a final inspection of the chimney.

"The wind is blowing great guns, shakin' the shed and the chimney is teeterin' somethin's fierce."

"While there's life there is hope. Every dark cloud has a silver lining," observed my pious mother.

"Frankie, there's no life in that damn chimney and there's no silver lining in it. I wish to God it would come down so I could build a real chimney."

The gloom of the supper table continued until story telling time and I was the usual spokesman in demanding a story from my father. It required much coaxing but I was an adept at that and

finally persuaded him to tell us the "Old Pine Stub Story" a wierd yarn that we heard frequently of the hunter who saw claw marks on an old pine stub and climbed it to investigate. The old pine was as empty as that teetering chimney in our shed and I always shud-dered when the hunter fell into its cavernous depth where the old bear lived. The bear was not at home and the hunter was down there helpless and starving. Then the bear returned, climbed the stub and started to ease himself down into his den. We knew the story perfectly. How the hunter got out his hunting knife, grabbed the bear by the tail, stabbed him in the rear and how the bear went wooshi wooshi out of the ^{stub} /with the hunter hanging to his tail. For us children this was always a tremendous climax but tonight in the midst of a virtual hurricane that shook the thin walls of the house father's wooshi wooshi of the bear was blasted by a thunderous earth-jarring shock. All Hell had broken loose in the shed.

The chimney had kerflummoxed!

"By Godfrey's she's done it at last," yelled father. Baby Perley screamed with fright and my mother cowered with fear.

"It's all right, Frankie - it's all right. There's a silver lining in that cloud - thunder and no lightning."

Beside himself with joy my father dropped me from his lap, lighted the barn lantern and darted into the rain. In breathless suspense we waited until he returned drenched to the skin.

"Tons of it in the cellar," he exulted, "but what a Hell of a job to clean the mortar off them bricks."

"Can't we have a cleaning bee?" asked Mother.

"By Godfrey you're right! The Deacon and all his boys - and every man and boy in this God forsaken settlement can help us clean it up."

Chopping bees, paring bees and barn raisings had been hilariously held in our hamlet but never before a brick cleaning bee. Every soul in the nineteen houses had agonized over the long continued suspense of Deacon George's crooked chimney. When the Line Gale had blown itself out and the clouds had emptied their burden of water the Archer Cleaning Bee made history in the north woods.

Charlie Williams and Uncle Leonard were to be father's helpers when the new chimney, this time straight as a ramrod, climbed to the roof and beyond. Cousins who owed for blacksmithing jobs, Gus Collar and Uncle Jim Collar, laid the floors, framed the partitions of the new rooms and Uncle George covered himself with glory and gobs of plaster while finishing the walls.

Thus the emergency in the home of the only blacksmith in the northwoods of Hancock County, Maine, was successfully met and living quarters provided for his eight children who survived cradle days in the cottage beside the blacksmith shop.

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