

Mystery in the Making

August 1737

David bolted up the muddy path leading to his home, almost skipping with excitement. As the sunlight danced on the ground through the waving branches from the large oak trees lining the path, he tried to only run in the shadows as if he were playing a game with the trees.

An afternoon thunderstorm had blown through an hour before and David's wet clothes suctioned around his body, although he couldn't tell if it was more from the rain or his sweat. Either way, he didn't care. He was finished for the day and enjoyed the thought of kicking his feet up and reading a book down at the public library.

As David got closer to his house, he began to feel out of breath and eventually slowed to a shuffle; where his feet didn't leave the ground at all. All of a sudden, he felt a sharp pain in his side and bent over. "Just a stitch," he thought to himself, trying to take a couple of deep breaths, his throat burning a little.

Like every young man his age, he loved working hard and getting dirty. It made the cool water of the washbasin so much more refreshing! He stood up

and looked at his calloused hands, remembering how the plowing had taken a toll on them earlier in the springtime. At once, he felt like an old man – with years of living, and growing and farming. He looked up the path toward his home and smiled. “But I am not that old yet!” He sprinted the rest of the way, up the front steps and barged through the open doorway. “Home!”

Summers in Durham, Connecticut—as in most of southern New England—were generally hot and humid and the afternoons occasionally brought a thunderstorm. There was nothing really special about Durham except that it was home to one of the first public libraries in America, called “The Book Company of Durham,” established only four years earlier in 1733. Many of the original books of the library were donated by the Rev. Nathaniel Chauncey, Jr, who had inherited his father’s religious and theological book collection. Settlers first arrived in Durham in 1699, which at that time was a hunting area used by the Mattabeset Indian tribe. They called the land Coginchaug, which meant “long swamp” because much of the area was swampy and low-lying—a perfect kind of place for mosquitoes!

David had inherited the Durham farm from his family a few months earlier and was hoping to really enjoy the work. He grew up in a town called Haddam, located ten miles east of Durham and where most

of his family still lived. It was only a few months earlier that he began tilling the ground and planting corn and all sorts of vegetables. The Coginchaug River provided Durham's farmlands with adequate water and the children a constant source of summer swimming!

That afternoon, the sun peeked over the nearby Metacomet Ridge, creating an orange glow throughout town. After David changed clothes, he grabbed some ink, a quill, and some paper and walked out the door toward the library. The library was actually in the home of one of Rev. Chauncey's relatives, Nathan Chauncey, and only people who lived in Durham could become members.

Tilling the ground, removing rocks and planting vegetables caused David to reconsider a life of farming. "I do not believe I can do another summer here!" he thought to himself as turned down Fowler Avenue. "I feel like I was created for more than this. But what? Maybe a trade business up and down the river to Boston."

As he made his way along, he came to a spot on the road where he could see the river below and suddenly saw a group of Indians fishing. He stopped and just looked, amazed by their simplicity and ... their *otherness*.

There wasn't anything new about seeing Indians, but he was nevertheless intrigued. Growing up, David had always heard about them and would even see

them from time to time in Haddam; usually trading food or furs for metal tools. But every time he saw one, he wanted to know more about them.

As the English moved further westward, deeper into the heart of America, they would often come into contact with various Indian tribes. Some of the Indians were interested and cordial; and some were not. Too often, the result of the westward expansion by the English brought conflict, disease, killing and new landowners.

You would have thought the Indians were part-animal by the way the people of New England talked about them sometimes. They were known as “savages” or “heathens”. While many labeled them and saw them as lower class, David had compassion on them. They were fellow human beings who needed the gospel of Jesus Christ, just as much as any man or woman, boy or girl.

Still watching from the road, David thought about whether or not they knew Jesus. “They probably do not attend church anywhere,” he thought to himself. “I wonder if they have ever even heard of Jesus before.” Though David had always attended church as a boy, he hadn’t really felt a deep love for God before—like he heard about from other people.

During the early to mid-eighteenth century, just about everyone went to church. In fact, much of life centered around involvement with the local church and conversing with the local minister. People talked about the sermon throughout the week and would use

the Westminster Confession of Faith to catechize their children. David had been catechized a little, usually by his older brothers. It was a simple question and answer study tool that described the basics of the Christian faith. To David, learning his catechism was more of a duty and chore than anything, though at times he liked learning the definitions of big words—”justification,” “sanctification” and the like.

As he stood on the bank of the river, enjoying the shade from a large oak tree, he continued to watch his Indian friends. Some used blowguns while others used a series of nets that seemed to trap the fish in a confined area. The Indians were excellent hunters, fishermen and farmers. Although they hadn’t learned some of the latest techniques of the trade in Europe, they had inherited centuries of hunting and farming wisdom passed down from their ancestors. It was not uncommon for them to teach the “white man” how to grow various crops in the New England climate.

David couldn’t help thinking of his farm. All farming seemed to do was take away from him his time reading, which he considered a great privilege and joy. In a time when not everyone could read and books were quite expensive, David found that his affection and interest in all sorts of subjects grew and deepened through reading. So when the new library was set up in Durham, he was eager to move there even though he had to work the farm.

Among the many subjects he enjoyed reading about—including adventure stories—he really enjoyed learning about the English Puritans and the great Reformers of Europe, like Luther and Calvin, who had broken away from the Roman Catholic Church two hundred years earlier. Though he didn't feel a strong love for God in his heart, he, nevertheless, took interest in theology and church history.

David took issue at times with Calvin's teachings on predestination, though he knew that Scripture clearly taught it. Nevertheless, he studied and read all about God's electing love. Rev. Chauncey, the library's donor, was a Calvinist, which meant that (among other things) he believed that God was in control over all things, including a person's eternal salvation. God chose his people even before the creation of the world—the "elect"—as the Bible calls them.

The study of God and the Bible intrigued David, but it remained nothing more than simple intrigue. His heart was often turned off godly things and he even doubted if he really believed that Jesus was his Savior and Lord. However, he was grieved when people claimed to be a Christian and lived such awful and openly sinful lives.

By this point, the Indians were beginning to count their catch and David figured he probably better get on toward the library. He continued down Fowler Avenue until he reached the rather large two-story house.

“Good day, Mr. Brainerd,” greeted a tall gentleman, tipping his dark hat a bit.

David looked up. “Good afternoon, sir.”

He walked in and, quickly finding a book, sat down in a large oak chair in the corner of one of the rooms. “Mr Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion,” he read softly, opening the cover. He flipped to Book Two, which concerns the revelation of Jesus Christ, and began to read. But for some reason he couldn’t concentrate. His mind began to re-trace his childhood and how he got to where he was—in an oak chair, reading Calvin’s Institutes and working a farm in Durham.

David was born the sixth child and third son of his parents, Hezekiah and Dorothy Brainerd on Sunday, April 20th, 1718. Like his brothers and sisters, he had his fair share of chores around the family farm and home, but also enjoyed fishing, swimming and ice-skating in the winter. His education was done through his parents who taught him in history, Latin, grammar, reading, math and, of course, catechism.

Morning and evening, his father would lead the family in devotions and worship, which included either talking about the previous week’s sermon or explaining a particular passage of Scripture. The worship would also include singing hymns together. Being that both of his grandfathers were officers in the local church in Haddam obviously dictated his regular and punctual attendance at church each week. The

church of that day did not have lights or a fire to keep it warm in the wintertime and it wasn't uncommon for sermons to extend nearly two hours in length. But church life was part and parcel of eighteenth-century New England life.

Though he had a rather large family, he didn't have many friends. In fact, he often felt lonely and depressed—not taking the initiative to get to know boys his age. When he was only nine years old, his father got sick and died suddenly. In the years that followed, David had to pick up extra duties around the home, such as tilling the land, harvesting crops, and repairing the house. Four years later—just before his fourteenth birthday—his mother also passed away. Orphaned from that day, he had been living with different family members and he felt like a nomad, with no true home.

As he sat in his chair, daydreaming back to his childhood life, his mind began to shift to thinking about the Indians he had seen that day. For some reason, he wanted to know if they had heard of Jesus. “What would I tell them anyway?” he whispered to himself. “What if they asked me about the Bible? I don't really know it at all.” While he had studied the Bible in pieces, he had never taken serious time to actually read it all the way through. That, however, was about to change.

The summer faded into fall and the fall into winter. Though he didn't know it at the time, David's

life would take him on a wild adventure into the mysterious plan and purpose of God. And perhaps, too, God would even draw David into a close relationship through suffering and hardship. It is, no doubt, how he often works.