Episode 810, Story 2: Universal Friends

Gwen Wright: Our next case asks what this document can tell us about a controversial religious group in 18th century New York. 1790's: Western New York. For the new nation, this vast expanse of forest is the great unknown, a barely charted territory fought over by Seneca Indians, British agents and land speculators. But for small bands of religious believers this is the Promised Land, its isolation fertile ground for religious revival and spiritual awakening. For one group of pilgrims, the vision of a new life in the wilderness is made even more alluring by their charismatic — and unlikely — female leader. Now, more than 200 years later, Jeanie Waite from Bethel, Maine, has come across a document that may shed light on the early days of a radical Christian group and its pioneering female founder.

Jeanie Waite: I always wondered why my great-great-grandmother hid it in her letter portfolio. Because if I wasn't as nosey, I would never have found it. Come on in.

Gwen: Thank you.

Jeanie: Gwen, here's what I was telling you about.

Gwen: What do you think this is?

Jeanie: I don't really know. I do know that it was written in 1791. So it's fairly old. And in the blue paper that it was wrapped in: The Universal Friends Society Act of Incorporation.

Gwen: What do you know about it? Have you read it through?

Jeanne: I think it's some kind of a legal document but I'm not sure what kind.

Gwen: Jeanie tells me she's done a little research on the Universal Friends Society. It was a controversial religious group founded by a woman named Jemima Wilkinson.

Jeanie: But her name doesn't appear anywhere in the document which I find very curious.

Gwen: Now how did you find it?

Jeanie: I found it tucked, kind of secreted in my great-great-grandmother's letter portfolio. Her name was Martha Elisabeth Gallett, and she was born in western New York.

Gwen: She's curious why her great-great-grandmother held on to this, and hid it, but she's never found any family connection to this religious group.

Gwen: Tell me exactly what you'd like for me to find out about it.

Fran: I'd like you to find out what the document really is, and how it relates to my family.

Gwen: Well I'll have to take it with me. But I'd like to look at it very closely beforehand. Is that alright?

Jeanie: That'd be fine.

Gwen: Okay, thanks. I'm concerned that I won't feel any weaknesses in the paper if I handle it with gloves, so I'll just examine it briefly. Well this does look like an original document from the late 18th century. I think the document's been folded a number of times, because there are some tears along the folds. Now let's look closely. "Whereas by an act of the legislature of the State of New York." Well this does seem to be a legal document. It's clearly a religious group, too. They speak about the church congregation, and coming together in a church meeting house for divine worship. And it says, "Universal Friends Society Act of Incorporation." Incorporation simply meant that a group or organization was recognized under the law. Here it lists the group's trustees. Richard Smith, Isaac Nichols, Able Botsford, Jonathan Danes. But there's no mention of Jemima Wilkinson, and Jeanie had said Wilkinson seems to have been the leader of the congregation. So, that's a bit confusing. And there's also no mention of Martha Gallett or anyone in the Gallett family. The document was signed in Jerusalem, New York. Today this area of western New York is mainly farmland, but in the 18th century, it was Indian country, a mosquito-infested forest considered the Wild West. Local historian Preston Pierce has agreed to meet me at the Genesee Country Village and Museum.

Preston Pierce: Good to see you again.

Gwen: Nice to see you, too. He takes me to a Quaker meeting house. Well Preston, here's the document that I told you about. It was found up in Maine. What do you make of it?

Preston: Well it's clearly a religious incorporation. It's made out for the Society of Universal Friends which I believe was a group originally composed mostly of former Quakers.

Gwen: Well, what do you know about the Universal Friends?

Preston: It was founded by a woman named Jemima Wilkinson who had been a Quaker.

Gwen: Reportedly born in 1752, Jemima was raised in Rhode Island, and found her calling early.

Preston: There was plenty of controversy around her. Starting with the fact that she was a woman who was the head of a church. There were a great many that thought that was very strange. And there were a few that thought that there was something absolutely wrong about it.

Gwen: So what did she believe?

Preston: She was advocating a simple life. A life that was free of ostentation. She felt that her followers should live rather communally.

Gwen: This communal existence represented Jemima's belief that everyone was equal — women and men, and people of all races.

Preston: Basically she was rejecting the old New England idea of pre-destination, that some were saved and some were lost. She believed that there was an inner light in every human being that was the Spirit of God. It was a combination of most of the beliefs of the Quakers and those beliefs of the Baptists that had been influenced by the enthusiasm that went along with the preaching of the Great Awakening.

Gwen: Preston explains that the Great Awakening of the late 18th and early 19th centuries — also known as the second great awakening — coincided with a time of tremendous ferment and change in the young nation. Many people believed that the spread of secularism and materialism demanded a renewed religious commitment in American life. The result was a wildfire spread of tent revivals and emotional, evangelical preachers like Jemima Wilkinson.

Preston: Those who witnessed her preaching said that she was very knowledgeable about the Bible. That she could bring together whole passages from memory.

Gwen: Preston says that Jemima's message was not new. It was the force of her personality that moved people, and made her the first American-born woman to lead a religious group.

Preston: She was a very charismatic individual. And in the end hundreds of people chose to follow her.

Gwen: What exactly was the purpose of this document?

Preston: New York State Legislature passed an act in 1784 that was a general incorporation act for religious societies. It was passed for the specific purpose of promoting religious freedoms. This document allowed a religious group to meet and form itself together into a formal body.

Gwen: Preston explains how the act had been signed seven years before the ratification of the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guaranteed religious freedom. The New York Act protected the religious groups drawn to the New York frontier by the bountiful land.

Preston: The Quakers were here, the Shakers showed up. Baptists came in. There were Methodist circuit riders who were coming through the area. It was an area where religious revivals actually resulted in the establishment of some new religious doctrines. The Universal Friends here and also just to their north, the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons.

Gwen: Now, I'm curious, in the document it's an organization run by a woman, but all the signatures as trustees are men. Why would that be?

Preston: Well the simple answer to that is that the state law that provided for this document specifically said that only men would be trustees.

Gwen: I want to learn more about Jemima Wilkinson. Preston suggests I speak with curator Chuck Mitchell. He asked me to meet him at the local Oliver House Museum, which holds a collection of Jemima Wilkinson artifacts.

Chuck Mitchell: This is Jemima. This is the only image we have of her painted from life. She would have been in her mid to late 50s.

Gwen: Well what's very striking is that there's a combination of male and female attributes that her hair up here is like a man's wig and then there are these feminine ringlets coming down.

Chuck: They would say that she dressed like a man.

Gwen: Chuck explains this androgynous style of dress was no accident — Jemima held unusual beliefs about her identity.

Chuck: When she was young, when she was like 18, she had an illness. Prior to the illness she never showed any indication of a religious bent, if you will. She was actually a bit of a wild child.

Gwen: He explains that Jemima was in a coma for days. When she woke, she claimed that she had died and been resurrected as a genderless spirit sent by God.

Chuck: Her detractors took that a step further and said that she was claiming to be the second coming. Which she did not.

Gwen: In her new, genderless form, she swore herself to celibacy to keep her body pure for God. She also rejected the name Jemima Wilkinson, and instead renamed herself, simply, "the Public Universal Friend".

Chuck: From that she started preaching. Almost immediately she started preaching and gained a following throughout New England.

Gwen: “The spirit of life from God has descended to earth,” she preached, “to warn a lost and guilty, perishing, dying world, to flee from the wrath that is to come.” But a woman in a position of power was seen by some as a threat to the norms of society. Critics latched onto the stranger aspects of her personality and vilified her, accusing Wilkinson of emasculating her male followers by treating them like animals and forcing them to do her chores. By the late 1780’s, Jemima decided to move her flock to the wilderness of western New York, where they would live communally.

Chuck: She was seeking the New Jerusalem. She was looking to get away.

Gwen: I want to learn what happened to the fledgling congregation. And I still don’t know why Jeannie’s great-great-grandmother owned this document. I’ve arranged a visit with Fran Dumas, who is writing a book on Jemima Wilkinson. We are meeting at a house the Universal Friends built for their leader.

Fran Dumas: Come on in.

Gwen: Thank you. Fran explains how some 260 Universal Friends arrived in what is now known as the Finger-Lakes region of New York in the late 1700’s. They began clearing virgin forests and planting crops together. They erected a grist mill and a saw mill. This home, which was built in 1814, is now a private residence. It is where the Friend lived at the end of her life.

Fran: This is her bedroom. This is in fact the room that she died in.

Gwen: She tells me several people — mostly women — once lived together in this house.

Fran: You have to remember that this house was designed specifically for the Friend. And where we’re standing is where she stood to preach. She could preach to people down below her and she could also preach to a hall full of people up here.

Gwen: Well I’d sent you that scan and now I’m going to show you the original document.

Fran: Oh, Beautiful.

Gwen: Isn't it? So what do you think?

Fran: It's really remarkable that this document still exists. I didn't realize at all that they had incorporated.

Gwen: Fran believes the reason why they incorporated wasn't just their desire for religious freedom. She explains how the document was signed at a time when Jemima and her followers were searching for a safe haven from critics and land speculators.

Fran: I have a letter, or a quotation from a letter that the Friend wrote.

Gwen: What she shows me next will certainly surprise Jeanie. I've arranged for her to meet me in what was once Jemima Wilkinson's New Jerusalem. Well Jeanie, you have a remarkable document that tells us a great deal about competing ambitions for the New American Republic. Jemima Wilkinson was the founder and the leader of the Society of Universal Friends, and this was her house. The last house that she lived in.

Jeanie: What a beautiful place.

Gwen: It was a house built in 1814, after the organization had moved out here, when it was total wilderness. They felled trees, and made farms, and made houses. And they had a good reason to incorporate.

Fran: I have a letter, or a quotation from a letter that the Friend wrote. "I have longed prayed that there might be a peaceable habitation for me and all my friends to dwell somewhere. A tract of land where none but our Friends hold any title or profession."

Gwen: Fran tells me Jemima imagined a settlement of families with their own private tracts and common land for those less fortunate.

Fran: As a corporation, they could own the land collectively.

Gwen: That makes a lot of sense.

Jeanie: That's amazing. She was a young woman and able to draw people to her with a brand new idea and they followed that concept into the wilderness. She must have been really charismatic.

Gwen: Jeanie, you had another question: You wanted to know the connection between your family and this document. I've got something I want to show you. Come with me. Fran had recognized the name Martha Gallett, and had shown me a small cemetery near the house. And if you don't mind just pushing through this, there's something back here that I think you will find quite extraordinary.

Jeanie: Omigod, there's all kinds of headstones in here.

Gwen: And this is the footstone of Martha Gallett. Here's a whole part of your family, Jeanie. I explain that this gravestone belongs to an earlier Martha Gallett — an ancestor of her great-great-grandmother.

Jeanie: Oh, her initials are right here on the back. Oh my goodness, that's amazing.

Gwen: And Jeanie, over here is John, her son.

Jeanie: John A. Gallett. Oh my goodness. I guess I don't know what to say. I'm kind of like, wow.

Gwen: I tell Jeanie that Fran believes many of these Gallett's were part of Jemima's flock; although the Friend preached the virtues of celibacy, she welcomed married couples and their children.

Jeanie: So they were part of the Society of Friends. Wow. I think I'm really proud of them, that they exercised their beliefs and left behind the safety and security of New England, and were willing to take a risk, and to go to the frontier and practice their beliefs; that took a lot of courage. My relatives stood and listened to Jemima Wilkinson preach. That's pretty special for me.

Gwen: It also helps you understand why your family has had this document for so long.

Jeanie: Well, thank you for all your effort. And I'm hoping that I can give this document to an organization that will take good care of it and allow other people to study and appreciate it.

Gwen: Although the group incorporated so they would be able to buy land communally, they never did. Instead, they purchased land in the name of a few trustees. This proved to be their downfall. Lawsuits between the Friends and the trustees and their heirs dragged on for decades and fractured the group. Jemima Wilkinson passed away on July 1, 1819. She was buried in the basement of her home, then secretly moved to an unmarked grave. Without their charismatic leader, the group gradually died off, ending in 1863.