

V.F. : Places : Piscataqua River

PISCATAQUA  
by Bruce E. Ingmire

The history of the settling of the Piscataqua River Valley has been presented as the effort of John Mason, his associates, servants, and Factors at Newichannock and Strawberry Banke. A third and separate settlement on Dover Neck by Edward and William Hilton is often cited as well. Most recently histories of the town have accepted the premise for settlement as private enterprise surrounding the fishing industry and this to the exclusion of the common belief that settlers came to Massachusetts for religious freedom. The majority of arrivals to both colonies came with clear ideas of seeking work and with success wealth. While religion was a foremost concern in the minds of some, it is also true that the time was one of general religious concern. The Englishmen that came to the Piscataqua were no exception to their century. All of these men sought financial success and with rare exception all of them aspired to godliness.

The earlier historians have promoted the idea that Englishmen set out for New England with specific destinations in mind. Some of them therefore set out for the Piscataqua. The research suggest that as New York was a general port of arrival in the 1800's for immigrants, so Boston served the same function in the 1630's. Once there after some time they moved further into New England. The research indicates that a quarter of the first settlers to the Piscataqua landed in Massachusetts or Maine and then moved to the Piscataqua. Eleven percent moved to the Piscatqua from Maine. Another nearly ten percent came to the river from Hampton and Exeter and thus had come from Massachusetts as well.

Of the remaining percentages nearly ten per cent do appear to arrive directly from England. the remaining forty percent have left no indication of their previous residence or were born in the valley. By assuming family ties or other circumstantial evidence, nearly fifteen percent of this last group also came from Massachusetts. Thus nearly half of all the settlers on the Piscataqua between 1623 and 1660 came from Massachusetts. Adding to these the men that were banished from Massachusetts and settled in Exeter and those who left that same Commonwealth to settle in Hampton a figure of nearly 75% of the people who settled here in the first forty years exiles or refugees from the excesses and orthodoxy of the Massachusetts way.

The founding of Dover should more precisely be dated from the signing of the Dover Combination in 1640. Dover had been called Bristol and Northam. The formal granting of land occurs in 1642. The founding of Portsmouth should be dated from the formalization of its land grants, the beginning of the record keeping, and the adoption of the name Portsmouth all of which occurred in 1652-1653. The founding of Exeter and Hampton occurred in 1638 and 1639 respectively. In the tradition pattern of the Puritan towns of Massachusetts, the settlers arrived in a group led by a minister. The organization of each Hampton and Exeter town was linked to religious issues. In the case of both towns land holdings of earlier arrivals were honored. A case in point is Thomas Wiggin who arrived in 1633 with Richard Waldron. Wiggin took land south of Dover Neck. Eventually his land fell into the bounds of Exeter.

The distinction between settlement and founding is to suggest that while the formal organization of and founding of Massachusetts towns was most often simultaneous, the first four New Hampshire towns were settled and then subsequently founded. Founding was the act of Massachusetts men anxious to

insinuate the form and the inspiration of the town model of Massachusetts. Far more of the organizers came from previously organized towns in Massachusetts than has been recognized by historians heretofore.

In 1652 Portsmouth was comprised of three centers. They included Sandy Beach (present day Rye), Great Island, and Bloody Point. Strawberry Banke amounted to the original plantation of Masons Factors and Stewards. This estate, farm had been abandoned by his employees. The town record book clearly refers to a common on Great Island. There were also common fields for grazing near the neck then called Portsmouth Neck (Today's South End).

The analysis of the original populations of Dover and Portsmouth reveals the chain of events that led to the formation of separate towns and defines the influence of Massachusetts in that process. The results differ from the current position held by historians in that it refutes the date of 1623 as the date of the first permanent settlement, argues that of those who "came to fish" were almost immediately lost in the scramble for lumber and furs. The paper suggests that the founding of Portsmouth and Dover resulted from refugees from the Puritanism of Massachusetts who did not dismiss the Puritan world view but sought some further breadth in the individual expression allowed.

The majority of citizens on the Piscataqua allowed the hegemony of Massachusetts over New England from 1640 until 1679 because the organization, leadership, and formal charter of Massachusetts were important in establishing title and authority to the colony. These future citizens of New Hampshire also rejected the ideas of royalist sympathizers like Champernown and Neale who looked to the region in the hopes of duplicating a manorial system of prerogative.

Historians have tied the settlements to a host of royal companies whose

charters form a confusion of authority and rights to the land between Boston and Maine. David Thompson a Scot who arrived at the mouth of the Piscataqua in 1623 began a short lived colony. The names of the settlers of Pannaway as it is reported to have been called have been lost to history but the chroniclers agree that everyone of those inhabitants abandoned the settlement. Like the failed settlement of Raleigh's colonizers in Virginia, the effort should never have been hailed as a permanent settlement. As the source of the claim that 1623 marks the permanent settlement of the valley,<sup>1</sup> Pannaway should be reconsidered.

After the failure of Pannaway an effort was spearheaded by fishermen from the west coast of England led by the Hilton brothers. Edward Hilton was a member of the Fishmongers' Guild of London. His brother William was associated with the Separatists who settled at Plymouth Bay on Cape Cod. William arrived at Plymouth, was awarded land, saw his wife and child arrive, and experienced the birth of a son Robert in Plymouth. It was a decision to baptize the bay in 1624 that caused the family's banishment from the colony. Even one of the most prominent fishermen arrived in the Piscataqua more as a result of religious convictions than specifically for private enterprise. At a date during the late 1620's (most authorities say 1628), the Hilton's initiated a settlement which eventually sustained a year round community. There are no remaining

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<sup>1</sup> See Brewster, Charles, Rambles. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Lewis Brewster, 1856. Also Davis, Charles, The Ancestors of Joseph Waterhouse. Davis describes a tampered document that Brewster used as proof that his family was related to Elder William Brewster of Plymouth Colony. It appears that his fondness for Plymouth led him then to assert that the history of his native city was next in line only to Plymouth in importance. The aliterativeness of the names may in fact be the thing the cities have most in common.

records that suggest that any village was established at this time.

Dispersals of land throughout New England were recorded by Englishmen anxious to create a basis of wealth and permanence in the new world. That no such records exist before 1642 or were the source of challenges to later land grants suggest that a permanent settlement was not initially envisioned by the Hilton's.

By 1631 Fernando Gorges and John Mason were attempting settlements in the region. Mason's men arrived in 1631. Led by Captain Walter Neal, they set themselves up in two positions on the river. The upper settlement was in present day South Berwick on the Cocheco River and the settlement was called Newwichannock. The second and lower settlement included a Great House called Rendesvous.<sup>2</sup> Belknap puts this house at Little Harbor but most historians assume the Great House was just northwest of present day Prescott Park and was the beginning of the plantation the emissaries of Mason established.

As events in England worsened, the Puritans among the Parliamentary leaders pressed for the Petition of Rights. This 1629 document curbed the excesses of the unpopular King. The unsavory atmosphere that marked the opening of the decade of the 1630's encouraged many Puritans to abandon the British Isles for the New World. One party, the Waldron-Wiggin party, were part of the wave of Puritans who had made the decision to come to New England. These Englishmen disembarked from the ship, "James" at Salem, Massachusetts. The leaders of this group were Richard Waldron and Thomas Wiggin. Unlike the land hungry image developed by some historians, these Puritan sympathizers followed the pattern of various Englishmen arriving in New England. Once in

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<sup>2</sup> Langstaf's Deposition. Also

the Boston-Salem-Plymouth hub, they set out to for a formally unorganized region. In contact with the Hiltons, these men based their land dispersal on the Hilton patent for their authority to settle the Piscataqua. The location the Hiltons' called Bristol soon became Northam. These 1633 arrivees intended the settlement as an outpost of Massachusetts and maintained contact with Pilgrims in Plymouth and the Puritans in Salem and Boston.

Precisely what arrangements were planned for the Mason colony have not come to us, but it is clear that husbandry and planting were paramount in the plans for the Lower Colony or Strawberry Banke as the later settlers came to know it. Lumbering was the clear purpose of the Upper Colony. Fishing was well under control by the Hiltons. The Mason men did some fishing, but it would seem that the goal may have been to organize the lumbering at the upper colony, trap for furs, and create self-sufficiency in food for the region at Rendesvous.

Since there had as yet been no formal government arranged on the Piscataqua, the majority of settlers appear to have appropriated land for themselves around the shore of the river and the great bay. Once certain hearty individuals began to independently avail themselves of this land, some sold the land. Roger Knight is an example of one who having occupied the land a short while, began to sell some of it. Any list of settlers to Dover Neck during the sixteen-twenties again has been lost to history. The list of settlers that does survive is from a 1642 dispersal of land. This list includes the names of men who arrived from Salem, Massachusetts in 1633.

Most of the first settlers to the Shoals and to the settlements north at the Spurwink River and Trelawney settlements in the 1630's were fisherman. And most of them were West Coast British. The majority of Puritans arriving in

Boston were from East Anglia. A review of the signatories to the Dover Combination and a review of the men in the list of first land grants to Portsmouth reveal a greater emphasis on farming and husbandry than has been believed.

One of the first independent arrivals to the Piscataqua was Thomas Walford and his son, Jeremiah and their families. These men had been at the ill-fated Mount Wollaston. The Puritans and Pilgrims had destroyed the settlement because of reports of licentious behavior but acted over the concern that guns had been sold to the Indians. From there the Walfords were, as early as 1629, in what came to be Charlestown, Massachusetts. With the arrival of the settlers who would organize Boston the Walfords repaired to the Piscataqua.

Of the 48 names reported to have an association with Mason only ten remain in either Dover or Portsmouth. Most returned to England. The Hiltons' do not appear on early Dover lists or land grants. The Walfords are examples of independents who begin to filter into the area apparently because of the looser organization of community life.

The Mason enterprise flopped. In 1635 Mason and Gorges personally divided their claim to the region but King Charles I never ratified the plan. That same year Mason slipped into his grave. The Mason family lacking any proof that the colony was a wise investment ceased support. The employees who felt they were owed wages appropriated goods, livestock, and land in exchange.

By 1640 there were a number of settlers in the region. Lumbering flourished, fishing was concentrated on the Shoals, and the plantation sustained itself at Strawberry Banke. The settlements at Casco Bay to the North were involved in the same activities and there was contact between the

settlements. The arrangement of islands and necks provided the strategic locations for successful husbandry and it is my conjecture that the Piscataqua with its abundance of marshes and marsh grass, its large fields became a source of food, dairy products for the northern settlements. The attention to the dispersal of grazing land in the first years records of the Portsmouth Town Records is further proof. Not only was there a common on Great Island but there was a grazing common at the plains.

The settlement at Dover Neck organized the first government for the valley. Originally called Bristol, Northam, from the name of the home of one of the ministers was used next before Dover was finally adopted. The first land was granted in 1642. The locations of these grants were on Dover Neck and across the river on the opposing Neck then called Bloody Point. The mills of the upper colony came under the control of Leader, Broughton of Boston, and Waldron.

In 1638 and 1639 the idea of a refuge to the north was reinforced as a result of the Antinomian Crisis. The Puritan leaders of Massachusetts reaffirmed their scriptural, rational religious emphasis and squashed the enthusiast predisposition of Anne Hutchinson and her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright. Wheelwright led a group of his followers north and formed a settlement on a branches of the Piscataqua. There were so many claims to the region, Wheelwright, in a bow to his professed liberalism and as a slap to any authority, signed a treaty with Indians of the area. The town of Exeter was founded in the tradition of a band of religious enthusiasts led by their minister.

While one might assume that there had been a religious consensus among the founders, no church was gathered. In retrospect the variety of experiences



of men like Wheelwright of some Puritans while they appeared to threaten Puritanism, the acquisitiveness of all the Puritans would be the real challenge.

After the founding of Exeter a group of dissenters from the Lynn, Massachusetts congregation appealed to the Massachusetts Assembly requesting permission for the right to move north along the coast to the next available territory. Incensed by the Wheelwright settlement the smug solons of the Assembly surveyed their Charter and decided that the future site of Hampton was indeed within their boundary and issued the good Puritans the right of settlement in direct conflict with the right that Wheelwright thought he had to the land. The citizens of Hampton conducted themselves as citizens in Massachusetts. Within a year however the citizens throughout the Piscataqua all decided to join forces with the Bay Colony.

One of the men who had been involved with the Antinomian crisis was John Underhill. He had been at Plymouth, then he was commander of Winthrop's forces in Boston, and finally the officer in charge of delivering the warrant to Roger Williams in Salem when Williams ran afoul of the Puritan leadership there. Underhill however fell in with the Hutchinson group. As a result he came north with Wheelwright, left for England, and returned to Dover with Hanserd Knollys in 1638. During their period of influence in Dover they were instrumental in formally bringing the entire valley under the influence of Massachusetts.

Over the decade of the 1640's the royal government was abolished and Puritan supremacy established. The exodus to New England halted as Civil War raged at home. After the decision of the residents to join Massachusetts, Norfolk County was organized and the court began sitting in Dover. In 1647

because of disorderliness at the Isles of Shoals, the government forbade the presence of women at the islands. This became an incentive for the fishermen and their wives to move to the mainland.

A variety of difficulties beset the settlers to the north and five settlers, Richard Cummings, William Ham, John Wotton, Thomas Turpin, and John Moses moved from Casco Bay south and occupied land on the Piscataqua. Francis Small in a deposition made in 1685 reports that a fire in approximately 1645 did a great deal of damage to the plantation at Strawberry Banke.

In 1650 John Tufton, the grandson of John Mason, arrived at his majority and empowered Joseph Mason to travel to New England and press in the courts for the rights of the Mason family to the land that now, as trade among the colonies grew, was producing profits. Since the royal prerogatives of the Mason family were of no value, the family saw this legal approach as viable. English courts had ruled that the legal maneuvers had to take place in courts where colonials could defend themselves.

The Puritan leaders of the Bay Colony were aware of the conflicting array of claims to the land in the Piscataqua Valley and the merchants of Boston were covetous of the raw materials especially the lumber which was in demand in the Southern colonies, West Indian Islands, and Barbados. In 1651, Joshua Child empowered his agent Captain Brian Pendleton to go north and arrange for the area to be secured on behalf of the Bay Colony. Richard Leader formerly involved with the Saugus Iron Works arrived to operate the upper valley sawmills. Elias Stileman who had experience in the courts of Salem was encouraged by 1654 to move north and became the clerk of the newly organized town. John Jones, Henry Beck, and Henry Sherburne were Boston residents who had moved north in the previous decade. With the ascendancy of Common Law

under Coke and the position of the Puritans in Parliament, there seemed every reason to assume the balance would not swing in favor of the claims of the Mason family. The Massachusetts men made a concerted effort to hold onto the location of the former Mason Plantation.

Dover itself had awarded a second group of 20 lots in 1648 and a tax rate was collected the same year. Among those paying Dover taxes that year were several men who owned land on the neck of land just south of Dover Neck and construed as part of Dover while actually contiguous with the land called Strawberry Bank. Arrayed with a number of farms and grazing fields, this neck had been the sight of conflict between Neal of the Banke and Wiggin of Dover and had been facetiously called "Bloody Point" ever after. Eventually Massachusetts would rule that the neck belonged to Portsmouth and a number of citizens who had appeared in Dover lists begin to appear in Portsmouth lists. What might appear to some as an exodus is simply a change of jurisdiction, but a change that helps swing the balance of power to Portsmouth and begins the ascendancy of Portsmouth among the four towns.

Beside the settlements of Dover Neck, Bloody Point, and Cocheco which had been the Upper Plantation of the Mason group, there were settlers on Great Island, Sagamore Creek, Strawberry Banke and just to the north of Hampton in a settlement called Sandy Beach.

Over the years a variety of ministers had served the valley in what was vaguely an itinerant position. These ministers included William Leverich (1633-1635) who was a dissenter from Yarmouth and who arrived with the Waldron and Wiggin party, George Burdette (1637-1638) who also served as leader, Reverend Richard Gibson who had come with the refugees from Casco Bay and is associated with the lower settlements, Hansard Knollys who arrived in concert with John

Underhill(1638-1641), and Larkham. Several of these men came under the scrutiny of their fellow citizens for sexual misconduct as did the settled minister of Hampton, Stephen Bachelor. Bachelor's conduct had caused the original split in the Lynn congregation that had led to the settlement of Hampton. Daniel Maud was the last to serve the joint communities and he served from 1643 until 1655.

The success of the Puritan way in Massachusetts had been accompanied by a close knit organization of the communities with common field farming. The settlement of the Piscataqua had been based on the practice of settlers to arrange for scattered homes with enclosed fields. The original properties were arranged along the shoreline of the water. There does not seem to have been either regular town meetings or church services.

In 1652, the Pendletons formerly of Sudbury arrived with a program to challenge the threat of the Mason suit. Under Captain Bryan Pendleton's leadership and with the assistance of his sons, Joseph and Caleb, the established settlers, new arrivals from Massachusetts, families resettling from the Shoals, and several others like Oliver Trimmings, George Walton, and Francis Trikee who had all been in Exeter made a concerted effort to organize a working community on a Massachusetts model. The townsmen began meeting on a regular basis. In order to derail the threat of Mason's suit, they formalized the assignment of land. The assignments were carefully recorded in a book that was alleged to be a copy of a previously existing book. Massachusetts law then recognized possession of the land as tantamount to title. Five years was a recognized period of time after which land holdings could not be challenged. Any previously existing book would have been invaluable evidence in any court proceeding and it is therefore unlikely that any such book was destroyed. In

the pursuit of title to land these men from Puritan Massachusetts were willing to promote a falsehood in fighting the threat to their possession of land. Any arrangements that had been promoted by the former King were seen as sinful in origin and worthy of disavowal by falsehood as long as it represented the ascendancy of the Puritans and righteousness of these men before God.

The first list of land assignments established formally the preexisting assignments. The town then requested a new name and the name of Portsmouth was granted by the Massachusetts Assembly. While the precise explanation was never recorded the confusion of names was apparently seen as an aid to the cause. The settlers to the river valley had managed to take possession of all the major islands. The largest being Great Island was chosen as the most strategic location for the main settlement of homes. Common grazing fields were then allotted at the Plains. A commons was created on Great Island. A regular list of officers was elected.

Since the calendar year at the time ended on March 24; the New England wide habit of annual meetings at this time of year were initiated. In the interim Dover had invited John Reyner as its minister. So Portsmouth set about organizing a church. Several invitations were issued. A James Browne of Ipswich served for a short time. James Weymouth who had been a clerk and who was not ordained was also issued and invitation. The citizens asked a Mr. Worcester and Samuel Dudley of Exeter, but to no avail.

During this period a number of second sons unlikely to gain land at their fathers' deaths moved to the Portsmouth area to take advantage of land grants being issued to help Massachusetts secure the area. A number of families from Ipswich and Newbury were thus soon represented in the growing town of Portsmouth. It is likely their influence brought the name of Joshua

Moodey, a native of Newbury, into the forefront of the search. A call was issued and accepted. As the Puritan era was coming to a close in England and the Bay Colony was reviewing its Puritanism, a man who represented the new Congregational ideas was invited to Portsmouth.

