Peter Bulkeley: Deacon and Co-Founder of Concord, Massachusetts

By Paul D. Kilburn

One of the more important deacons to migrate to New England during the Great Migration of 1629–1640 was Peter Bulkeley. Peter (b. 1583) graduated from Cambridge University in 1608 with an MA from St. John's College. Peter's line can be traced back to Saher de Quincy, one of the barons who signed the Magna Charta in 1215, and also King Henry II. [i] He succeeded his father as deacon at the Odell Church in Cheshire (Bedfordshire), England, where he served until being forced out in 1634 during the purge of many of the "tainted'" Puritan deacons at that time of religious upheaval. Peter and his family somehow managed to slip out of England, and, with the exception of eldest son Edward, who made the journey the year before, they sailed to America on the ship Susan & Ellen, arriving in Boston during the summer of 1635. Peter was one of the founders of Concord, Massachusetts, and he would become one of the major ministers in New England. Part of his fame rests on the fact that many of his sermons and writings have been published.

Bulkeley Genealogy in England

The Bulkeley surname can be traced to the town of Bulkeley, Cheshire, some twelve miles southeast of Chester and immediately south of the Bickerton Hills. Approximately five miles north in the Bickerton Hills is Beeston Castle, which affords a magnificent view of Bulkeley country in all four directions. Southwest of the town of Bulkeley on Bulkeley Hall Lane is a large manor house called Bulkeley Hall. Robert de Bulkileh was lord of this manor in 1200. His son William received a quitclaim from his two sisters in 1233 that provides solid evidence of their ownership of the property at that time. [ii] The family retained ownership of the manor for several generations (and through several surname variations) until Peter de Bulkylegh (b abt 1325), who held Haughton, Cheshire, in right of his wife, Nichola le Brid, moved there with his family. It was Peter's son who left Cheshire for Woore, Shropshire, and this is where grandson Hugh was born (abt 1405). For several generations the family remained in Woore, and it was here that Peter's grandfather, Thomas, was born about 1515. He later married Elizabeth Grosvenor (abt 1539) in Bellaport, and they had five children. Elizabeth's mother was Ann Charlton, who was born about 1480 at Apley Castle, Shropshire, and it is her ancestry that leads back to royalty.

Edward Bulkeley (b abt 1540) was the second child of Thomas and Elizabeth. Edward married Olive Irby (b abt 1547) about 1566 at Goldington, Bedfordshire. They had eleven children, the youngest of which was Peter, our emigrant ancestor.

The Reverend Edward Bulkeley had a distinguished academic record. He matriculated at St. John's College in Cambridge, in 1555, when he was fifteen. He was a scholar by 1555 and proceeded to earn four degrees over the course of eighteen years, concluding his efforts with a DD in 1578. He became rector at Odell, probably in 1571, and remained in that post until 1609 when he resigned at the age of sixty-nine. He died at Odell early in January 1621. Dr. Bulkeley was a moderate Puritan and passed his love of academics and books, as well as his Puritan leanings, to his son Peter.

Peter Bulkeley in Odell

Peter was the most famous rector of the Church of All Saints in Odell, because of both his religious writings and his immigration to America. [iii] The youngest child of Thomas and Olive, Peter was born in Odell on January 31, 1583, and died in Concord, Massachusetts, March 9, 1659. [iv] Peter was admitted to St. John's College, Cambridge, when he was about sixteen. Cotton Mather, in his Magnalia Christi Americana, wrote of Peter's education as "... learned, it was genteel, and, which was top of all, it was very pious." He became a Fellow of St. John's in 1605. He was also a university preacher and canon of Lichfield in 1609, but returned to Odell in 1610 to assist his father. His father resigned the same year and Peter became rector, a position he retained until "suspended" by church authorities in 1634.

Peter married Jane Allen at Goldington, Bedfordshire, on April 12, 1613. She was baptized at Goldington on January 13, 1588, and died at Odell about December 8, 1626. They had nine [v] children but only six survived childhood. They undoubtedly moved into the rector's house where his father and mother lived. His mother died two years after

the marriage, on March 10, 1615. His father probably lived with the son and his growing family in the large house until he died on January 5, 1621.

Five of Peter's sons lived to sail to America. Their first son, Edward (bap August 5, 1614), was born the year after Peter and Jane were married. He preceded the family to Boston in 1634 and arranged for them to move directly into a house in Cambridge after they arrived. He succeeded Peter as minister at Concord when his father died. The second son, Thomas (bap April 13, 1617), my ancestor, married Sarah Jones, daughter of Reverend John Jones, and moved from Concord with the Reverend in 1644 to Fairfield, Connecticut, where he became a landowner. The third son, John (bap February 6, 1620), was a member of Harvard's first graduating class in 1642. He stayed at Harvard and taught, but eventually returned to England where he became rector of Fordham, Essex. The fourth son, Joseph (bap May 4, 1623), and the fifth son, Daniel (bap August 28, 1625), also came to America with the family.

Jane died on December 8, 1626, and was buried at Odell. She died during or shortly after childbirth, as the ninth child, Jabez, was baptized on December 24, 1626 (he died in 1629).

In addition to his personal tragedies in the 1620s, Peter was struggling with his faith. Puritanism was a growing religious force and no preacher in the land was unaffected by this new religion. Its appeal of simplicity, earnestness, and definite ideas about reform appealed to many devout and sincere clergymen. Many felt that the English church of the day was too much concerned with ritual and ceremonials. Jacobus states it thus: [vi]

"In brief, the ideal of the Puritans was to get away from formalism, to eliminate the trimmings and trappings, to appeal to the conscience of the individual, and to make the Bible (rather than church doctrine) the basic guide and authority for the religious life."

The crisis for Peter came in 1634 when he was suspended for not attending the visitation of Sir Nathaniel Brent, Vicar-General. Peter himself later admitted that he did not wear a surplice, nor make the sign of the cross in baptism, regarding them as superstitious ceremonies. The Bishop of Lincoln did not seem to object to what he considered token nonconformity, but Archbishop Laud would not tolerate any deviation from church doctrine, hence the suspension. Peter knew that if he did not apologize and reform he would lose his rectorship. Peter chose not to yield but to continue his Puritan approach. He laid plans to migrate to New England, where, despite being over fifty years old, he could preach completely from the heart and not be subject to constant eavesdropping and concern about deviation from church doctrine. It must have been a momentous decision, for he was wealthy and lived nearly all his adult life in a large and comfortable house in the village where he had grown up. He would be giving up physical comfort for religious freedom.

Today Odell's population is less than two hundred. When my wife and I visited the village in 1997, the Church of All Saints was definitely the prominent feature. Immediately to the east of the church was the modified rector's house where Peter was probably born and raised. A small village green and a thatched-roof public house with a sign reading "since 1716" are located a block from the church. A small stream runs through the village, with a side channel through the inoperative mill in the old mill house. The gears and wheel still remain.

We visited the church on Sunday and the churchgoers welcomed us, as a Bulkeley descendant was not a frequent occurrence. They showed us around the church, explained the stained glass windows, and showed us the font where Peter and his children were baptized. Peter was their most famous reverend and an area in the rear of the church had a table displaying books, scrapbooks, maps, and copies of various documents (including Archbishop Laud's 1634 report on Peter's "subversive" activities). Many Americans have visited the church in the past, and their interest is primarily responsible for assembling this collection.

Peter remained an unmarried widower for eight years before marrying Grace Chetwood in April 1635. [vii] That same year he liquidated his holdings and assembled £6000 for the voyage to America. The trip took careful preparation. Anyone leaving the country had to obtain certificates from the justice of the peace and the church, and being a non-conformist minister he would not have been allowed to leave. Fortunately, some members of the clergy were sympathetic to non-conformists and were willing to provide them with the required papers. Furthermore, most ship captains were interested in passage money, not religious matters.

The main challenge for Peter and his family was to avoid government spies, and to this end Peter took special precautions. On April 13, 1635, "Jo:Backley" [John Bulkeley] was placed on the ship's approved passenger list. Five days later "Ben Buckley" (11) and "Daniell Buckley" (9) were accepted [undoubtedly Joseph and Daniel]. It is presumed that friends, perhaps those sailing with Peter, took these boys separately to the shipping office to give the impression they were part of their families. Almost a month later, on May 8, his new wife, Grace, age 33, was put on the passenger list of the Elizabeth & Ann, while on the following day Peter, age 50, put his own name on the Susan & Ellen list. Both ships were to sail at about the same time, and in this way the family could exit England with less chance of discovery. However, Grace, who was pregnant at the time, definitely sailed with her husband on the long voyage of the Susan & Ellen, as written stories of her illness on the ship reveal. It is likely that Grace simply changed places with another woman, who took her place on the Elizabeth & Ann.

Edward, the eldest son, had sailed the year before and was making preparations for the arrival of Peter and his family. The second son, Thomas, does not appear on any passenger lists found to date, though he probably sailed with his father under another name. Another theory is that the seventeen-year-old sailed with his older brother in 1634.

The trip was not without trauma. As previously noted, the pregnant Grace was very ill for most of the trip and, according to one account, had died, but was resuscitated just before landing in Boston. She was carried from the ship as an invalid, but fully recovered and bore four children: Gershom, born in Concord the next January, Eleazer (b 1638), Dorothy (b August 2, 1640), and Peter (b August 12, 1643). Grace died in 1669 the age of sixty-seven.

The ship arrived in midsummer and the family repaired to Cambridge where Thomas had obtained accommodations for the family. The leadership in Boston, including Governor John Winthrop and Reverend Cotton Mather, agreed that Bulkeley and Simon Willard should lead an expedition of about one hundred families some fifteen miles west through the wilderness and establish a new church and settlement in the Musketaquid area, later to become Concord, Massachusetts. Although only twelve families actually made the trek, they accomplished what they had set out to do.

Settlement in Concord

Musketaquid was at the confluence of two rivers and was, in many respects, like Odell, where Peter Bulkeley came from. [viii] Reynolds wrote of the similarity, "The same green meadows, the same upland plains, the same tranquil stream, meet the gaze in the one case as in the other." Scudder describes the site as having

"...seven natural ponds; more than nine miles of beaver-haunted fish-abounding river, bordered by meadows of lush grass . . . excellent for cattle; any number of lesser streams on which to build mills; several small cornfields already under Indian cultivation, and plenty of rich bottom land for clearing . . ."

Peter may have heard of Musketaquid in England, for his son Edward may have presented this idea to the Great and General Court, the governing body of the colony of Massachusetts. On September 2, 1635, the town of Concord was incorporated by this court, not long after Peter's arrival.

Peter became acquainted with many of the colony's settlers and several ministers in the Boston area. He and the well-known minister John Cotton, of Boston's First Church, were both Cambridge graduates and residents of the same diocese in England. Peter was known as a courageous, well-educated leader who possessed a strong faith. His leadership was unquestioned, particularly in religious matters, and he worked closely with Reverend Jones, who held the title of Minister, in establishing the first church. Peter was initially appointed Teacher by the Boston authorities and did not become Minister until Jones left in 1644. Jones was another disposed deacon from England who arrived in Boston a few weeks after Peter and his family.

While Peter became the key religious leader, the secular leader and co-founder of Concord was Simon Willard, a "thirty-year-old Kentish soldier, shrewd trader, expert surveyor." As a leading citizen of the town, he was appointed to several prestigious posts, including captain of the militia company, the town's first assistant to the governor, and its first magistrate. Willard later led the colony's forces against the Indians and was made commissioner of the colony's fur trade.

Led by Bulkeley and Willard, twelve families made the original trip to Musketaquid, which consisted of thirty-six square miles, six miles on each side. The route they traversed, later called the Great or Bay Road, was rough, swampy

in places, rocky in others, yet they forced their oxen with supplies and belongings and finally arrived at the former Musketaquid and the new Concord. Scudder describes the scene and the first years thusly:

"In front lay the little river. To the right, cutting off winds from the north, stretched a long, uneven, sandy ridge with a crook in its elbow, the forearm bent northward. In this ridge, the . . . dozen families scooped crude dugouts, where they lived through that first hard winter. Simon Willard knew all about wigwam dugouts, copied from Indian storage pits by ingenious white men.

"Probably the first real house built was the minister's, or the trader's. Right afterwards would follow the meetinghouse for congregational worship. After the minister's house came other permanent dwellings along the sunny side of the Bay Road beneath the ridge where the dugouts were caving in. Small houses, smaller than most yeomen's cottages in Kent and Suffolk and other British shires, from which their lines were copied, built of boards instead of English brick or stone, the wood soon seasoning to a wasp-nest gray. Sedge from the river meadows, in place of English thatch, for roofs … [ix] "

Each household was granted a land allotment of six acres. The portions of the grant most suitable for plowing and planting were divided into planting fields and within them strips were divided equally among the settlers. Soon the common fields were exchanged and traded so that each person had his own block of land, a much more economical way of managing the agricultural land.

The first order of business, however, was the treaty with the Indians, which took place at Jethro's Oak, which today is marked with a sign. Simon Willard led the negotiations. They eventually purchased "6 myles of land square" from the squaw sachem with the following:

…for one parcel of wampum, several knives and hatchets, some hoes to replace their cultivating sticks and clamshells, some cotton clothes and shirts . . . .To the medicine man—the squaw sachem's husband—a suit of cotton cloth, a high-crowned hat of heavy English felt, shoes, stockings, and a greatcoat. [x]

With these negotiations and token payment the new settlers gained title to a large area.

Peter Bulkeley, the wealthiest of the group, reserved gristmill rights and located his millhouse at the "milldam," now in the center of town where part of the brickwork for the old millhouse is still present. This had been the site of an Indian fishing weir.

On July 5, 1636, the Concord Church was officially organized in Cambridge (itself only six months old). The new church was the fifteenth established in Massachusetts. At the organizational meeting Peter Bulkeley and John Jones were chosen as Teacher and Pastor (now called Minister), respectively, as each church was supposed to have two elders.

Concord did not prove the paradise anticipated by the town's inhabitants. Establishment of new farms and a new community in the midst of the New England wilderness required enormous effort by all. The second winter was even harsher than the first. Going barefoot in the summer, as many had to do, was bad enough, but many lacked shoes even in the cold winter. Snow came early and disappeared late in the spring. For several years late spring frosts killed some of the early crops, and the subsequent summers were often wet and cool, which resulted in rotten grain. Fish were abundant, but wolves often dug up the fish placed around corn hillocks to fertilize the new corn. Flooding by the river often destroyed crops planted in the fertile soil of the flood plain. The meadow grass proved too rich for the cattle and many became sick. Hogs escaped from Hogpen Walk and were killed and eaten by lynx. In these harsh conditions many children died.

Concord was severely affected and the small population could no longer support two ministers. At the same time, victory over the fierce Pequot Indians in Connecticut opened its interior to safe passage. In 1639 the newly established town of Fairfield, Connecticut, needed a new minister. A separation took place in Concord and Reverend Jones led a sizable group overland to Fairfield in 1644. Only thirty families remained in Concord, but the winter following this first mass exodus was warm, and the new town survived and gradually grew in population.

After the exodus of 1644 a new problem arose affecting all of Massachusetts. Cromwell's victory in the English Civil

War resulted in the downfall of King Charles and his Archbishop Laud. In Massachusetts, ministers exulted the victory from the pulpit. The striking changes in England, however, meant that the main cause of emigration ceased and, accordingly, shipping both to and from England fell off sharply. Conditions worsened as prices for cattle and timber fell, while prices for imported necessities rose alarmingly.

Peter became an even more important leader of the colony. He often fulfilled special tasks for the leadership in Boston, such as investigating high prices and assembling and publishing the laws of the colony. He was the first of six prominent men in the colony to turn down Oliver Cromwell's offer to found a Puritan stronghold in Ireland with aid from England. These men preferred to remain in New England and handle the many challenges in their own colony.

Peter lost one battle in the town. He could not get the town fathers to support a schoolmaster, a requirement for towns with more than fifty householders. They preferred to pay the five pound fine levied each year by the General Court, because they felt their children should work and help support the family rather than attend school. Many of the literate settlers raised children who, as adults, could not sign their names on land deeds.

On another matter, the support of Harvard College, he fared better. Some forty-two citizens pledged five pounds annually for seven years to support the new college. The citizens also sent their ablest sons to the Harvard. John Bulkeley, son of Peter, was one of nine young men who made up the first graduating class.

Peter's most important work, The Covenant of Grace Opened, was published in 1646. In it Peter expressed some of his most sincere religious ideas. A small portion is extracted here:

Whatever salvation and deliverance God gives unto his people, his setting them free from this misery, he doth it be virtue of, and according to his Covenant.

God conveys his salvation by way of covenant, and he doth it those onely that are in covenant with him . . . this covenant must every soule enter into, every particular soule must enter into a particular covenant with God; out of this Way there is no life. In the covenant of works a man is left to himselfe, to stand by his own strength. But in the Covenant of Grace, God undertakes for us, to keep us through faith. God comes and sayes; For my owne sake will I do thus and thus unto you in an absolute promise; here is a ground for the faith of adherence to cleave unto . . . There be also conditional promises (He that believeth shall be saved) by meanes of which (we having the experience and feeling of such grace in our selves) we grow to an assurance that we are of those that he will shew that free grace upon. Now we can never know the things which are given unto us of God, but by knowing of the covenant which conveys all the blessings which God doth impart unto his people. ...

We (in New England) are as a city set upon a hill, in the open view of all the earth. The eyes of the world are upon us, because we professe ourselves to be a people in Covenant with God. [xi]

While this covenant was Peter's major written product, he also authored many sermons and short poems. A year before his death in 1657 he wrote the following poem: [xii]

I've reached the evening of my mortal day;
A sluggish mass of clay is this my frame;
Yet grant, O God, that while I live, I may
Live to the glory of thy holy name.
And if in life I may not honour Thee,
From such dishonour may Death set me free.
Whether within Thy holy courts below
I preach salvation unto dying men—
Or in Thine Upper Temple, with the flow
Of angel-quirings blend my raptured strain—
Living or dying, Thine I still would be:
My life and death alike are due to Thee.

Peter wrote his will April 14, 1658, and later added two codicils, the second of which was prepared shortly before he died on March 9, 1659. [xiii] In it he states that his estate is "very little in comparison of what it was, when I came

first to this place," for he had borne a disproportionate share of town expenses during the formative years. His estate was significant despite his introductory remarks in the will. Peter was undoubtedly buried in Concord's Old Hill Burying Ground, likely in the old unlabelled crypt at the southeast corner of the cemetery, which still remains.

Bulkeley Descendancy Chart

ENDNOTES

---

[i] Information in this introduction taken from Donald Lines Jacobus, 1933, The Bulkeley Genealogy, an excellent book detailing not only Peter's descendants but his ancient ancestry as well. This book was a major forward step in genealogy because of the author's meticulous footnoting of the evidence used. It also made use of F.W. Chapman's 1875 The Bulkeley Family, an earlier book on this famous family. Material in this article adapted from Fathers and Mothers, Ch 13 by and available from the author.

[ii] See Ormerod's History of Cheshire v2 p652 and the Publication of the Harleian Society v19 p164.

[iii] The booklet by Penelope Campbell, 1983, The Church of All Saints, Odell: A Brief History provides considerable information on Peter's life in England including the 'most famous' comment and much of this section is based on this booklet.

[iv] See also Cotton Mather, 1702, Magnalia Christi Americana, quoted in its entirety in Jacobus pp92-99, for birth date and additional detail on the life of Peter; the "most excellent scholar . . ." quote is from p93.

[v] Campbell says ten, but Jacobus lists only nine. Five boys came to America, two boys (Nathaniel and Jabez) died before 1630, and the Odell church records list two Marys that died.

[vi] See Jacobus, The Bulkeley Genealogy p100.

[vii] The extensive Chetwood genealogy goes back many generations and connects with essentially all the English royalty. Jacobus devotes thirty-four pages (pp. 55-89) to her genealogy, but since she is not in my line, the reader is referred to his book for further information on the Chetwoods.

[viii] See J.W. Teele, ed, 1985, The Meetinghouse on the Green: A History of the First Parish in Concord and its Church, especially Ch 1 by D.M. Greeley, "The Church and its Ministers," and Ch 2 by M.R. Fenn, "The Church in the Colonial Period," though the idea of Peter aware of Musketaquid is from Greeley, p7, as is the 'similarity' quote in this paragraph; the following longer quote is from T. Scudder, 1947, Concord: American Town, p5, and much of this section is from this source, especially Ch. 1; see also Ruth Wheeler, 1967, Concord, Climate for Freedom which is the source for the map in Figure 10.

[ix] This quotation is from Scudder p6 as is much of this early Concord material.

[x] Scudder p6.

[xi] From Teele, pp73-74.

[xii] Jacobus, p97.

[xiii] Printed in full in Jacobus pp107-110; and summarized in R.C. Anderson, G.F. Sanborn Jr., and M.L. Sanborn, 1999, The Great Migration. Immigrants to New England, voI. A-B.