

“Almost-Mayflower” Descendants in the Carolinas

By John Anderson Brayton

Indigenous Southerners rarely feel the kinship with the Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock that they do with the Jamestown colonists. There is something that seems so remote about New England, its settlers, and its cold winters that most Southerners are content to ascribe to geography this historical lack of interest. The other excuse is in some ways prejudice: the typical Southerner feels that his ancestry has very little to do with the Northern “cradle of civilization.” Few of us aware of our “Carpethagger” roots readily boast of descent from the early generations of Puritans who settled the North. But nearly anyone in the South with Quaker connections will find, with some research, that he or she is a descendant of any of scores of northern Quakers who drifted southward - first to Philadelphia, then Maryland and Virginia, and finally to the Piedmont area of North Carolina, where they were well entrenched by the 1770s. The point is that most Southerners have “Yankee” ancestry, like it or not; they may simply be unaware of it. Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on which side of my family one might ask) one of my father’s lines can be easily traced to William Warren, Peter Brown, and trusty John Billington - whose exploits can be counted on to raise an eyebrow or two during family gatherings. Thus I can claim some partnership with those prestigious *Mayflower* descendants who can - aided and abetted by vital records that were kept, court-houses that exist, and the Aspinwall collection at NEHGS (among other sources) - pinpoint ancestors with relative ease.

In order to surprise some Tennessee relatives whom I always thought a bit smug about their Southern heritage, I wondered if I should ever be able to prove their descent from some Northern Puritans, thus demonstrating that everybody’s background contains widely distributed genealogical elements. I had almost despaired of doing so until I stumbled in Salt Lake City upon a microfilmed manuscript, compiled in 1823 by Dr. Rossiter Cotton of Plymouth, Mass., which was said to be presently at the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah [1].

In the seventh grade I had responded to a “My Most Famous American” history assignment by writing a controversial biography of my great-great-great-grand-mother, Mary G. (Williams) Bright, born in Currituck Co., N.C., in 1815. To the horror of my family, I repeated (complete with documentation) every yarn I had ever heard spun about this woman, and somehow was chosen to present this concoction before the local DAR chapter. (I did not win their award for “most interesting paper.”) However, Mary Williams has always been something of a family legend - a ghost treated by my older relatives with great affection - and even at an early age I began to collect what information I could find about her. Mary Williams was born to a well-to-do family in Currituck and was married at 15 to an adventurer who took her money and went to New Orleans where he died of cholera. Thereafter she moved with some of her second cousins to Hinds Co., Mississippi, and by the outbreak of the Civil War to Haywood Co. Tennessee, where she died in 1906.

Being only 13 or 14 at the time, I was quite limited in the research I might do. No one knew anything of Mary’s parents, and even less about her forebears. Only much later, as an adult (after years of beleaguering some very patient clerks with long-distance request for deeds and wills) did I discover her to be the great--granddaughter of Thomas Sawyer of Pasquotank, who died in 1765, and his wife Margaret, about whom nothing seemed to be known after the probate of her husband’s will [2]. Thomas was a sea captain, as were his father Caleb and grandfather Thomas; his will includes the bequest of several ships to his sons. I did not realize how extensive his travels were, or how typical it would be for coastal Southerners to have connections in the North or abroad, until I came upon the microfilm (“Extracts from the Cotton Manuscripts”) mentioned above. Subsequent visits to the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Plymouth [Mass.] Historical Society, and the Savannah Historical Society have failed to uncover anything faintly resembling the full “Cotton Manuscripts.” It would be interesting to know the whereabouts of the full compilation.

Margaret (Cotton) Sawyer, b. Plymouth, Mass. 23 January 1730, was the daughter of Rev. Josiah Cotton (1680-1756), Register of Deeds for Plymouth Colony [3], and his wife Hannah Sturtevant (1687-1756), the daughter of John Sturtevant (b. 1658) and his wife Hannah (Winslow) Crowe (1644-1684). Margaret married Thomas Sawyer at Plymouth 14 September 1749. One can only imagine what kind of nerve it took for a minister’s daughter to take up with a Southern sea-trader, leave what she probably considered to be “civilization,” and embark upon a journey to a part of the world that for most New Englanders only dimly existed. In his will [5] Rev. Cotton added a codicil, date 14 March 1750, which touchingly bespeaks the distance that Margaret would put between herself and her family.

“Inasmuch as my Daughter Margarett is gon to No. Carolina, where I suppose she may be well Provided for as to Temporall Enjoyments, I do upon a full consideration of that affair from first to last, utterly retract, Revoke and Disanull That part of my aforewritten Will wherein I have made her an Equall Legatee with her Sisters and do allow her what she had had; and if She come again to thi[s] Country a Living or dwelling in my House if she see cause, and Twenty shillings in money and her part of the Books in full of what She is to receive of my Estate; and my said will in every thing else to stand good....Only if she hath any Children at my decease I give to them (or it) Sixty pounds Old Tenour.”

It is difficult to say whether the old minister approved of this union, but connections between the families were scrupulously maintained until at least the third generation, judging from the manuscript extracts that I have seen. A deed written two years later by Josiah [25] Cotton and his wife in order to distribute the property of John Sturtevant mentions Margaret Sawyer as a full legatee [5].

Hannah (Sturtevant) Cotton’s grandfather Josiah Winslow, brother of Edward Winslow the *Mayflower* passenger, provides the necessary link for an “almost-*Mayflower*” connection. Below is a chart of the Plymouth descent of Mary G. Williams, with whom I began my discussion:

Mary G. Williams, 1815-1906: Samuel G. Williams & (1) Elizabeth ____; Thomas Pool Williams & Elizabeth Sawyer; Thomas Sawyer & Margaret Cotton; Rev. Josiah Cotton & Hannah Sturtevant; John Cotton, Jr. & Joanna Rossiter, John Sturtevant & Hannah (Winslow) Crow; Rev. John Cotton & Sarah (Hawkrigde) Story, Dr. Bryan Rossiter & Elizabeth Alsop, Samuel Sturtevant & Anne ___, Josiah Winslow & Margaret Bourne; Roland Cotton & Mary Hurlbert, Anthony Hawkredd & Isabel Dowse, Dr. Edward Rossiter & ___ Combe, Rev. John Alsop & ___, Edward Winslow & Magdalen Olyver, Thomas Bourne & Elizabeth ____.

Thomas and Margaret (Cotton) Sawyer had the following children, b. in Pasquotank Co., NC.: 1-3. *Three children* who d. as infants; 4. *Caleb Sawyer*, b. 6 October 1756, d. in Hispaniola 1777; 5. *Lucy Sawyer*, b. 8 September 1757, m. 9 July 1774 William Scarborough; 6. *Thomas Sawyer [Jr.]*, b. 28 January 1760, d. 1784 at sea near Cape Lookout; 7. *Elizabeth Sawyer*, b. 31 October 1762, m. ca. 1780 Thomas Pool Williams; 8. *Margaret Sawyer*, b. 19 December 1764, m. (1) 3 March 1785 Abner Lamb, (2) 20 April 1795 Gen. Peter Dauge. Mrs. Margaret (Cotton) Sawyer m. (2) ca. 1770 John Sawyer and had by him a daughter, *Sophia Sawyer*, born in Pasquotank Co. 13 August 1771, who m. prob. Pasquotank Co. 15 August 1790 Joseph Scott [7]. Margaret (Cotton) (Sawyer) Sawyer d. Camden Co., N.C. (set off from Pasquotank) 23 November 1789[8]. All the children except Lucy (Sawyer) Scarborough remained in eastern North Carolina, as did their descendants for four generations. Lucy’s progeny migrated widely.

After the discovery of the microfilmed manuscript extracts in Salt Lake City, I happened upon an entry in the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* for William Scarborough, Jr., son of William and Lucy (Sawyer) Scarborough. The Scarborroughs settled in Barnwell Co., South Carolina, from which area their children scattered. William Scarborough, Jr. moved to Savannah, Georgia, where he made a fortune as the builder and owner of the first steamship (the sidewheeler *Savannah*) to sail the Atlantic, in 1819 [9]. Other notable descendants were Charlotte de Bernier (Scarborough) Taylor, a well-known author and entomologist of the middle nineteenth century [10]; Preston Saylor, better known as “K.O. Duggan,” a crazed Georgia prizefighter who murdered his brother in the 1930s [11]; and Dr. Julian Edward Wood, a Civil War hero his second year at VMI, and one of the founders of Pi Kappa Alpha National Fraternity [12].

The other, less well-known descendants of Thomas and Margaret (Cotton) Sawyer have scattered over Mississippi, western Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, the English Midlands, Brazil, Australia, and even Africa. Fortunately they have left a documented trail, so tracing them is relatively easy. As this example shows, many Southerners can, with a bit of research, find roots and interesting relatives in unexpected parts of the country. And many Yankee families figure in the ancestry of Mississippi belles, gentlemen planters, Confederate soldiers, and molders of the New South.

NOTES

1. “Copies of Family Bibles, in possession of the Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Chatham Co., Georgia,” film #203240 (hereafter “Cotton Manuscripts”), Family History Library, Salt Lake City.
2. Will (Pasquotank Co., NC. Will Book “HIK,” pp.270-73 of Thomas Sawyer, dated 21 May, proved 31 July 1765.

3. LaVerne C. Cooley, *The Rev. John Cotton of Boston and a Cotton Genealogy of His Descendants* (1945), pp. 30-31.
4. Rev. Josiah Cotton d. Plymouth 19 August 1756; his will, dated 14 March 1750, was proved 6 October 1750 (Plymouth Co. Docket #5075).
5. Plymouth Co., Mass., Deed Book 44, P. 225, dated 19 August 1752, recorded last Tuesday in September, 1756.
6. See Eugene Aubrey Stratton, *Plymouth Colony: Its History & People, 1620-1697* (1986), pp. 375-76, for a thorough treatment of his life and family.
7. Cotton Manuscripts, p. 1.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 16 (1935), p. 410; *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 2 (1899), pp. 237-38. According to the latter source, which includes a portrait of Scarborough and a picture of his ship, some suspected that the steamer was intended for Napoleon's escape from St. Helena.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 164 (William Scarborough, Jr. & Julia Bernard; William Scarborough & Lucy Sawyer).
11. See Medora Field Perkerson, "Murder at Ghost Castle," in *White Columns in Georgia* (1952), pp. 205-12, for the gothic tale of this branch of the family (Preston Saylor: ___ Saylor & Adelaide Baltzelle; James Peter Baltzelle and Julia Bernard Barnsley; Godfrey Barnsley & Julia Henrietta Scarborough, William Scarborough, Jr. & Julia Bernard, as above [#10]).
12. See Dr. Jerome V. Reel, Jr., *The Oak, A History of Pi Kappa Alpha* (1980), p. 142, for a biography of J.E. Wood, a great-great-grandson of Thomas and Margaret (Cotton Sawyer (Julian Edward Wood: William Edward Wood & Sophia Dauge Trotman; Ezekiel Trotman & Emelia Sawyer Dauge; Gen. Peter Dauge & Mrs. Margaret (Sawyer) Lamb; Thomas Sawyer & Margaret Cotton).

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