

Biography of WILLIAM NICKERSON (d 1690)

Posted by: Rich Houghton Date: November 02, 2000
<http://genforum.genealogy.com/nickerson/messages/647.html>

This is the information I have collected on William Nickerson of Barnstable County, Massachusetts. Each factual statement is footnoted with the source from which I acquired the material, but GenForum does not support footnotes so if you have a question about sources please e-mail me and I'll be happy to provide them to you. Of course, I also welcome corrections or additions to any of the information which I do have.

William Nickerson, the immigrant ancestor, was born in Norwich, Norfolk, England, around 1604. He was the son of William-A Nickerson and his wife Alice -----.

On 28 April 1621, at the age of about eighteen, his father took William and his brother Richard on as apprentices in the tailoring business. William learned the craft of weaving, and was admitted a worsted weaver and freeman in Norwich on 18 May 1632. He continued to practice his craft after leaving England, since he often signed his name as a "weaver." In his will dated 20 July 1567, his father-in-law Nicholas Busby -- also a weaver -- left William one of his looms.

Around 1630 he married ANNE BUSBY, the daughter of Nicholas Busby and Bridget Cocke. She was baptized at St. Mary's Coslany, Norwich, England, on 2 February 1607/8. The couple had at least nine children, the last five born in the New England:

i	Nicholas	bpt. 10 August 1628	m. Mary Derby
ii	Elizabeth	bpt. 1 January 1629/30	m. Robert Eldred
iii	Robert	bpt. 27 November 1631	m.
iv	Anne	bpt. 7 May 1635	m. Tristram Hedges
v	Samuel	b.c. 1638	m. Mary Bell
vi	John	b.c. 1640	m. Sarah Williams
vii	Sarah	b.c. 1644	m. Nathaniel Covell
viii	William	bpt. 1 June 1646	m. Mercy Williams
ix	Joseph	b. December 1647	m. Ruhamah Jones

William's decision to emigrate to America probably was a result of the persecution visited upon Puritans and other nonconformists by Bishop Wren of Norfolk, coupled with a rise in taxes and a slump in the economy. These forces joined to drive over 3,000 small craftsmen out of the country over a period of several years. William and his family -- including his in-laws the Busbys -- were "desirous to go to Boston in New England and there to inhabit," and prior to their departure were examined by customs officials on 8 April 1637, in the port of Yarmouth, England. William gave his profession as weaver, his age as thirty-three, and that of his wife as twenty-eight. They sailed from Yarmouth aboard the ship John & Dorothy on 15 April 1637, and arrived at Salem, Essex County, Massachusetts Bay Colony, on 20 June 1637, after a voyage of sixty-six days.

On 2 May 1638, he took the freeman's oath at Boston; records indicate that he was living in Watertown with the Busbys at the time. On 1 December 1640, though, he was proposed as a freeman at the Plymouth Colony Court, which shows that he intended to move to that Colony. He took the Plymouth oath of fidelity on 1 June 1641, and settled in Yarmouth where he is later listed as serving as a grand juror.

His home in Yarmouth was in the northeast part of town, near Follen's (Little Bass) Pond at the head of the Bass River. In the final land allotment on 14 May 1648, he received ten acres of upland and six acres of meadow at Little Bass Pond. This was the farm he had lived on for eight years, and it appears that the 14 May allotment simply confirmed him in those lands. He had, however, also acquired new lands -- six acres of meadow -- at Nobscusset Meadows, later known as Hockanom.

His nonconformist religious views, partly responsible for his leaving England, also got him into trouble with the colonial authorities. In 1641, he was complained of as being "a scoffer and jeerer of religion." Records show that for the next few years he had several run-ins with the church authorities. His outspokenness and temper also caused problems with his fellow citizens. On 2 October 1650, several suits for defamation by and against William were brought before the court. In two of them, both parties were found at fault. In one by Edward Dillingham and sixteen others, "the court doe judge yt the said William Nickerson, in regard to his offensive speeches against sundry of the towne, to have carried himselfe therein unworthily, and desire him to see his evell therein, and to bee ready to acknowldg it; and yt those hee hath offended in that behalfe should rest therein."

Despite these problems, he held a series of civil offices. In March of 1643/4, he was listed as able to bear arms in defense of the colony in Yarmouth, and he served on a committee chaired by Capt. Miles Standish to settle land boundary disputes. In 1641, 1647, and on 7 June 1651, he served on grand juries, and on 8 June 1655 he served as Deputy from Yarmouth to the General Court.

Around 1656, William purchased a sizable tract of land -- about 4,000 acres -- on Cape Cod at a place called Monomoy just west of present-day Chatham, Barnstable County. The sellers were a chief named Mattaquason and his son John Quason, and the deal was consummated without the permission of the colonial government. This was contrary to a law passed in 1643, which provided that no one could "purchase rent or hire any lands, herbage, wood, or tumber of the Natives but by the Magistrates consent." Although William could therefore not register a written deed with the authorities, he moved onto the land and built a house a short distance from the lodge of Mattaquason. The two were about the same age, "and lived out their days as good friends and neighbors"

On 3 June 1656, the matter was brought before the court:

" Att this court William Nicarson appeered, being summoned to answare for his buying of land of the Indians, contrary to order of Court, and for selling of a boat to the Indians, against a warrant directed to Yarmouth strictly prohibiting the same, haveing left the boate to bee the Indians; concerning his breach of order in buying of land, hee lyeth under the fine and penalty expressed in the order for the breach thereof; and for his contempt of the warrant, he is disfranchised his freedome [right to vote]."

Actual title to the land was not quieted until many years -- a kickback to the colonial magistrates, and a lawsuit -- later.

During this period, Anne was caring for her aged parents in Boston. William purchased a house and land there from William Snelling for £58 on 12 September 1657. As William later described it:

" My wife came to Boston the first of March 1657 and my wife did sarves [service] to her father and mother till the latter end of August following and then hur father departed this life. And since their fathers death my wife have done sarves her mother daily and watching with them in the night

as their necessities called for untill her mother departed this life, which was in July last 1660. All of which time my wife did serve to her father and mother and the time being somed up it contains three years and four months or there aboute."

After the death of his mother-in-law and the settling of the estate, William sold their Boston home -- along with an attached orchard -- on 27 November 1661 to Phillip Gibbs for £150. They returned to Yarmouth prior to 15 January 1661/2.

In the Spring of 1664, William -- although sixty years old -- finally left the established community at Yarmouth and settled on the Chatham lands he had acquired from the Indians. His title remained clouded for several years, so in 1672 he filed suit against Mattaquason for withholding the deed. The suit was a collusive one intended to force the authorities to recognize his title, and he and Mattaquason remained friends during its pendency. The suit resulted in the deed being approved after a payment of £90 was made to the Royal Grantee (the English peer to whom all the land had been granted by the King, without the knowledge or consent of the Indians). As soon as the title was quieted, William transferred forty acres of upland and ten acres of meadow to each of his children; in fact, the first deed recorded in the Chatham area was from William to his daughter Elizabeth Eldred.

Chatham at this time was described by Rev. Joseph Lord, who wrote in his diary: "In his lifetime [William] was ye father of ye place and ye inhabitants of it were his children, either by consanguinity or affinity and he exercised as a teacher among them." For almost twenty years hardly another family settled there, and the area was more like a clan stronghold than a New England township.

His problems with the authorities continued. On 2 April 1666, and 23 February 1666/7, he wrote letters to Gov. Nicolls of New York complaining of the treatment he had received over the years from the Plymouth government. The Plymouth authorities regarded these letters as defamatory, and mildly seditious, and found that William "very scandalously reproached this his ma[jes]ties court of New Plymouth and the freemen of this jurisdiction." The matter was in court several times, and on 30 October 1667 he was fined £10 for his offense. Similarly, on 5 March 1666/7, he was censured for writing letters to the authorities at Barnstable and Plymouth complaining that Thomas Hinckley (No. 285:8:5792; No.), an Assistant, had denied him justice. The letters were deemed defamatory, and he was fined. Finally, on 3 June 1668 he and several others were charged with affronting Thomas Howes, the Constable of Yarmouth, and he was compelled to sit in the stocks. As the ringleader, William was further compelled to find financial sureties to ensure his good behavior through the next year. He refused, and was committed to jail for three days until he agreed.

He was involved in several suits involving his neighbors as well. He was on the losing side of several, including one in 1662 to recover "his share of whale blubber" from the town of Yarmouth. On 30 October 1674, Francis Baker of Yarmouth sued him for the price of six meat barrels and work on some tar barrels. William brought a countersuit, contending that the barrels leaked, were of the wrong size, and that Baker overcharged him sixpence per barrel. William lost both suits. In 1679, he brought suit against an Indian for possession of a horse. He lost, and was required to pay an additional fifteen shillings in silver to the Indian. He lost another case on 1 November 1679, when he sued Josiah Cooke Sr., Constable of Eastham, for a pair of andirons and a silver dram cup which Cooke had levied on for the payment of taxes.

Although at constant odds with various parties in court, he was chosen as one of the rate makers in 1671, 1672, 1673, and 1675. This was the last public office he held. One of the last times William is

mentioned in the town records was in connection with a deed dated 12 February 1685/6, by which he conveyed all his property to his daughter Sarah Covell. On 2 December 1687, he and his daughter Sarah conveyed to his son William his lands at Manamsett and a one-half interest in the lands William Sr. had purchased from the Indians. The impetus behind this mass divestment seems clear: "This action on his part was perhaps due to his distrust of the public authorities, produced by his years of conflict with them."

It is presently unclear when Anne died. William died sometime between 30 August 1689, when he signed a deed of acknowledgement, and 8 September 1690, when he is listed as deceased in a deed by his daughter Sarah. He was about eighty-six years old. He was buried on his home site, and the plot was later deeded to the town by his daughter Sarah.

A later biographer summed up his life:

" Thus passed a man of intelligence, education, great energy and strength of will. The difficulties of planting a frontier settlement in the wilderness would have appeared insuperable to most men of sixty. His indomitable will and perseverance were exemplified in the spirit with which he fought through the court to final victory to acquire undisputed title to his lands. His expressed principle was "For I desire not to wrong any man of his just rights, nor would I be wronged myself."

Another described him thus:

" William Nickerson was a man of intelligence and of great energy and strength of will, which degenerated into obstinacy. He could not brook opposition nor readily accommodate himself to his neighbors. He was litigious, insisting upon the letter of what he thought his rights. He was no doubt a religious man, and at Monomoy acted as a religious teacher to the infant settlement, but he could not agree with his Yarmouth brethren and had at least one of his children baptized in Barnstable. His purchase of land at Monomoy was doubtless in part dictated by a desire of Independence and his intention to found a settlement of which he should be the head. After his removal to Monomoy he resisted the authority both of Yarmouth and Eastham, which the colony court successively extended over the place. His purchase at Monomoy was contrary to a salutary law of the colony, of which he could not have been unaware, although when confronted with its penalty, he claimed ignorance. He more than once expressed regret that he had violated the law, but at no time did he alter his course. His persistence in the end, it is true, brought him substantial victory, but his unaccommodating spirit made many years of his life a series of conflicts with the colonial authorities and others, in which he was almost uniformly worsted."