

Genealogy by *Ellen Onorato*

“It is astonishing how little is preserved of some of our ancestors” remarked Leverett Saltonstall to his sister Anna in 1815. Genealogical sites abound on the internet these days, but in the early 19th century, it was almost verboten to speak of the past ancestors. Why would this be, we wonder?

The knowledge of colonial ancestors was a complete contradiction to the bright future of the new republic – post Revolutionary America was all about cutting or at the very least, loosening the ties to the social status from the home country of Great Britain. The pursuit of common good and equality was no longer determined by rank or social status, but by character, ethics and work habits.

Even George Washington affirmed that “he paid little attention to this subject” when presented with a genealogical sketch from his ancestors in England. He, in fact, sought to ignore the pre-eminence of social or professional office by birth.

In 1828, Worcester’s prominent merchant Daniel Waldo stated that “such inquiries may be deemed vain and useless in a Country & Government like our own: where all distinction among the members of the Community is derived from personal worth, and where no man can claim influence or consequence from the Wealth or station of Ancestors who possessed those Advantages.”

The new Republic looked to the dreams and opportunities of the future, not the history of the past. Yet in 1791, the Massachusetts Historical Society evolved followed by the American Antiquarian Society by 1812. Shortly after, histories of the American Revolution started to recall the glorious struggle and emerging Fourth of July celebrations started to instill a special pride in the new Americans.

But Saltonstall wasn’t the only American who started to ask discreet questions as to their ancestral past in the first few decades of the 19th century. By then, the connection of our past to present in America, post British rule, now had some history that was all-American. Educated writers such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Emerson and Hawthorne fed the appeal for eager readers. In fact, it was primarily the northern states which produced groups of interested antiquarians, interested in mostly local history. Though historical societies began in southern and mid-west states, their popularity was inconsistently scant, especially when compared to thriving New England societies and associations.

The first histories of New England towns also started to be published, such as John Farmer’s *Historical Memoir of Billerica* or Saltonstall’s *Historical Sketch of Haverhill*. Obsessive pursuits of preserving old documents and town information spread in local communities. Rhode Island and other N.E. states, followed Massachusetts’s initiative and started their own historical societies in the early 1820s – especially popular as the first bicentennial of the Revolution approached.

One of the early and ardent genealogists we can all be grateful to today was the fragile and reclusive John Farmer. Though a New Hampshire resident, by 1813, he was a corresponding member of the Massachusetts Historical Society. He also published a *Register of the Descendants of Edward Farmer* along with local histories of Amherst and Billerica. By 1824, he had partnered with a printer to publish a three volume set, *Collections, Historical and Miscellaneous*.

But it was Farmer's 352 page 1829 volume, *The Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England*, which immediately thrust Farmer into the role of pre-eminent genealogist in America. The Register details every magistrate, minister and freeman who came to the colonies before 1643.

It is with great thanks to Farmer that I finally discovered the multi-generational use of the middle name of Holden that came down in my family – yet had long ago lost its meaning to our bewildered generation. Though many of my ancestors touched America's shores in the early 20th century, John Farmer's *Register* details the arrival of Justinian Holden by ship to the Bay Colony in 1632. Another most patient and noted antiquarian, Dr. Samuel Green gives further insight with his genealogical research on a broad array of towns, including the details that the Holden lineage became one of the original proprietors of Groton, MA:

“The Groton township was eight miles square or 40,960 acres. There were 755 acre rights in total and each acre right was 54 acres. Some owned 50 acre rights, others 5 acre rights. In 1713, the General Court passed “An Act directing how meetings of proprietors of lands lying in common may be called.” No distinction was made until after the passing of this statute between the inhabitants and the proprietors of Groton. Their transactions and records were all considered as those of the town, and kept in one book. In 1717 the proprietors called a meeting according to the provision of the statute, and from that time, separate records were kept.

Though Green lists all original proprietors of Groton, here a just a few:

Captain James Parker: 50 acre right
William Martin: 20 acre right
Sargeant John Larkin: 20 acre right
Lt. Wm Lakin: 20 acre right
Robert Blood: 20 acre right
Richard Blood: 60 acre right
James Blood: 20 acre right
Joseph Blood: 10 acre right
Timothy Allen: 20 acre right
John Page: 20 acre right
Wm Longley: 30 acre right
John Longley: 10 acre right (later kidnapped and ransomed)
Richard Holden: 18 acre right
Simon Stone: 18 acre right

About 80 others own land, derived from the original proprietors

But it is to Dr. Green that perhaps I owe the greatest debt thus far with his research here in the History of Groton where he documents sparse anecdotal genealogical rumors that are actually fact.

“Cotton Mather says that one man was killed at Groton, in the year 1697, and another with two children, carried into captivity. (Magnalia, Book VII, page 91.) He does not state the date clearly but inferentially it is June. The prisoner was Stephen Holden, who was captured with his two oldest sons, John and Stephen, Jr. John was released in January, 1699, at which time the father and the other boy were yet remaining in the hands of the savages. It was not long, however, before they too were freed; for, in the following June, the House of Representatives voted three pounds and twelve shillings for the expenses that had been incurred in bringing them back.

Holden’s petition to the General Court to be reimbursed for buying his own freedom is as follows:

To The Honored & Great Assembly now setting in Boston. The humble petition and Request of Stephen Holden of Groton

Honored Srs It having pleased the Almighty God to order it that my selfe & my two biggest sons tho small were taken captiues by the Indian enemyes from our towne of Groton and being with the Esterne enemy & my 2 sons about one year & ten moneth when tho it was my portion to escape with my life thro Gods mercy beyond what I did expect or look for & I think I fared better than some other English yet great hardship and difficultyes I underwent. But being very desirous with one of my sons that was there to gitt home if it might be fore the English vessels came I was necessitated to give my promise to my Indian Pilates whom I satisfied att Richmans Island by English that I borrowed of there thre pound and twelue shillings If I might haue ye boldnesses I would humbly craue That It might be payd out of Publiq stock I should take it thankfully att your hands Thus with my thankfulnessse to God that both my selfe & both my children he hath graisously returned to our home againe commend your honours and concernments into ye hands & wishing ye Presence & benediction of ye soveraine God I take Leau & subscribe my selfe your humble servant & suppliant

Stephen Holden

June 6, 1699 one read. & Voted by the house of Representatives that the aboves.
Peticoner Stephen Holden of Groton be paied out of the publick Treasury Three pounds
& twelve shillings money
Sent up for Concurrence,

JAM.s Converse Speaker

19. July, 1699. Read and past in Council

Is.A. Addington Secry

Consented to BELLEMONT

(Massachusetts Archives, LXX.400)

To confirm this account, another fine historian labored to document “Among the names of the captives received on board the Province Gally, January 17, 1698-9, at Casco Bay, were “John Houlding of Grotten” and “Tamasin Rouse of Grotten.” It is recorded, a week later, that “Stephen Houlding of Grotten” and “Steven Houlding Jun’ of ditto” are “yet in the Indian hands.” (Archives, LXX. 398, 399.)

“It is evident that the early settlers were still having a hard time during this period. All of the records go to show that between the assaults of the savages and the short crops they found it difficult to obtain a livelihood. Again, they were obliged to ask the General Court for an abatement of their taxes in a petition. (*Page 82-83 King William’s War*)

From 1697 to 1702, the inhabitants of New England had a respite from savage warfare. But upon the accession of Queen Anne to the throne of Great Britain, a war with France ensued, and of course their colonies in America were involved in the general contest between the two nations. In 1704, the frontier towns in Massachusetts were again exposed to tomahawks, scalping knives, fire and torture.” (*Page 94-95 John Longley Ransomed*)

These crucial histories, developed by devoting months and years of untold hours of painstaking detail and dedication not only reflect insight into personal genealogies but present a broader gift to all of us to understanding the flavor of life and its profound challenges in early colonial days. These, too, are the veterans that made America the country all have cherished.

Thanks to all the John Farmers, past and present, that have helped us all understand our lineage – regardless of which century, which country or which challenges were faced.