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## The Hastings of Watertown, Mass. & Ipswich, England A Creation Theory



I've whiled away about 25 years of genealogical endeavor without ever making the trip to the Sussex town of Hastings, the presumptive English village of ancient record for my mother's family and all descendants of Thomas Hastings. Finally, last month I remedied that sad fact. Seeing the place and walking and driving around the county fired in me a desire to set down a plausible and realistic scenario that is consistent with other facts we know. To be sure, the facts and the assumptions I made based upon them do not all lead to one linear and unimpeachable solution. At the same time, there is value, I think, in putting forth an informed hypothesis that will stimulate thought and debate. I hope you enjoy this story of how our family may have come to be.

We in the western world tend to look at Greece and Rome as the apex of ancient civilization and then leap forward in our imagination a thousand years to the time of the Renaissance and begin the tale anew. There is good reason for this. As Thomas Hobbes, the 16<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher, said so well when describing the state [life] of man in his time and before, it is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Even so, it is worth knowing that hominids were in Sussex as early as 780,000 years ago. They had bad posture, too much body hair and were not good around ice so we need not dwell on their passage.

Thus let us start with our ancestors who were probably Anglo-Saxons (i.e., the modern label for the ancient tribal mix of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes). Admittedly

it's a broad term, but one that essentially corresponds with today's Germanic peoples. Our ancestors were Saxon, that is, until a fateful encounter with a Viking.

Our story begins with the Corded Ware culture that thrived in north Eastern Europe for about 500 years, beginning circa 2,900 B.C and spanning the Copper and Bronze ages. In the male line, these were our people. They lived in southern Finland, the area in and around modern day Helsinki. Time moved glacially in those days so we'll jump ahead.

Finland endured Viking raids like the rest of the medieval world, although the Vikings don't appear to have established settlements there like they did in so many other locales. They raped and pillaged, as was their way, and certainly impressed men to fight in their armies. Sometime after impressment, our ancestor was probably part of a raiding party that attacked the southern coast of England. It is here in The Weald, a large swath of land between Chichester and Canterbury, that they encountered the Haestingas (or Haesta's People in Old English). This was probably between 830 and 860, but almost certainly not later than 886.

The Haestingas were a tribe who established themselves circa the 5<sup>th</sup> century with a distinct territory along the coast and inland in today's Sussex. The creation of Haestingas coincided with the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons who, among other things, were filling the void left by the departing Roman legions. These unwanted Saxon interlopers were pagans and resisted Christianity for several generations after their arrival. Theirs was an autonomous realm apart from the rest of Sussex until 771. Today's town of Hastings was known as Hestingorum and it and the surrounding kingdom were brought to heel by King Offa of Mercia in that year. At some point several centuries distant, probably around the 13<sup>th</sup> century but not before, our ancestors acquired the surname relating to their distant and archaic tribal affiliation. This was not unique although location based surnames were much more common among the aristocracy and occasionally the people in their service.

The Haestingas eventually became Christians like their fellow Anglo-Saxons and had been since at least 691. True to the time, theirs was religion by rote (few could read), authoritarian, pious and bloody in practice. It had more in common with the Old Testament than the New.

First the Romans, then the Anglo-Saxons, did their best to displace the various Celtic tribes who had settled England. Those Celts who survived wisely fled to the high ground in Wales, Scotland, the far reaches of Cornwall or even over the water to Ireland, but not before a bevy of assignations took place. When the Vikings began their raids on the Emerald Isle their mating options (consensual or not and probably NOT) were limited to the Anglo-Saxons. These days genealogist refer to these as non-paternity events (i.e., the father isn't who you thought it was). This is where our Anglos grow Finns.

When William the Conqueror prevailed at the Battle of Hastings in October 1066, it was a bloodletting of epic proportions. They camped near Hastings and burned the town before going off to battle. There was so much Norman carnage that the Pope ordered William to build an abbey on the site where King Harold was killed and so many were slaughtered. Until the Reformation several hundred years later, Battle Abbey remained a place of contemplation and calm in a troubled and cruel world.

The Hundred Years War began in 1337; it became an inferno that reignited with regularity and required knights and peasants to serve as cannon fodder in France. It was very difficult for one to avoid service so it is quite likely that our ancestors fought in one or more of the great man-devouring clashes such as the Battle of Crécy or Agincourt. When they were home in Sussex licking their wounds they had to still contend with regular Norman raids along the coast. Hastings was burned several times; the last being in 1377.

The demands of and damage from wars, raids, plagues, and floods caused a general economic decline in Hastings and other coastal towns. Although Hastings was

among the so-called Cinque Ports, its usefulness as a harbor ended with the 14<sup>th</sup> century. At this point, hungry and war weary, our Anglo-Viking (Finn) ancestors were probably of a mind to move, but where?

Up until at least 1534, they remained Catholic but under the reign of Henry VIII that became a dangerously consequential path to follow. The destruction of Battle Abbey and thousands of other abbeys and monasteries around the country were visible reminders that the Anglican way was the healthy choice. As England went, Sussex was less religious than most, but this was potentially a matter of life and death or at least privation, so God-fearing pragmatism ruled. Thus, our people almost certainly followed the masses and became Protestant and Anglican. Henry VIII and Martin Luther were not part of a mutual admiration society so Anglicans made their own way in the Protestant wilderness.

By around 1580 though, our Hastings drifted from the relative safety of Anglicanism (restored after a brief return of Catholicism under Queen Mary) and toward the Puritanism that was burning brightest in East Anglia. The Church of England tried, perhaps half-heartedly, to keep the Puritans within the Anglican Communion but that failed before the end of the century. While still Protestant, they were fiercely independent and not the least bit tolerant of established doctrine or ecclesiastical authority. One thing they did share in common with the new Church of England was a strong distaste for anything that smacked of religious idolatry. Henry VIII and his acolytes did a lot of damage to ancient places of worship, and our holier-than-thou Puritans continued the rampage by, among other things, breaking every stained glass window that a stick or a sling could reach.

Burning with unorthodox religious fervor and perhaps desiring a more hospitable and economically vibrant area (Sussex was in a slump), Colchester in Essex may have been an attractive choice for a new home and not ever so difficult to reach via London and the old Roman roads. Another advantage of Colchester that would be

exploited some decades later by our ancestor Thomas was that the port of Ipswich was but 18 miles to the north, just over the line in neighboring Suffolk.

We have yet to find a paper trace of Thomas Hastings before his departure from Ipswich in April 1634 but the records of that time are irregular and incomplete. This could be our family's story.

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## **Known Facts Relevant to our Story**

The male Hastings Y-DNA haplogroup is extremely rare in the U.K.

Among European peoples, the haplogroup is most common in the Baltic region and specifically Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The oldest and nearest haplogroup found thus far among the growing number of ancient burial sites is from 830-980 B.C.E (from a sample group dating back 6300 years) and located in modern day Hungary and specifically central and slightly northeastern Hungary within what is known as the Hungarian Plain.

The Vikings raided their neighbors in all directions but some more than others. Of the lands where the Hastings haplogroup is most common, southern Finland had the greatest frequency of attacks.

The Vikings attacked England on and off between 793 and 1066. Smaller incursions continued, especially in East Anglia, for a few hundred years after that. The last major attack on Hastings by any outside force was executed by the French in 1377 (last time the town was burnt to the ground).

A Viking chieftain, Alstagnus vel Hastings, vulgo Gormundus, was known to have ravaged the southern coast of England between 855 and 893.

For the most part, the Finns are not synonymous with the Vikings as are the Norwegians and the Danes. However, the Vikings were known to impress males to join their warring parties.

No knight or soldier by the name of Hastings was known to come over with William the Conqueror in 1066.

There is an area in Sussex once called Haestingas that includes the present town of Hastings and the surrounding countryside. It was actively flourishing between 700 and 800 A.D. and was still mentioned as late as the 11<sup>th</sup> century. They were ethnic Saxons.

Pope Celestine III launched the Northern Crusades to bring Christianity to the Baltic region. Finland was largely converted between 1154 and about 1249.

Although no physical evidence remains, the Romans established a settlement in or near today's Hastings.

The Roman road network tended to converge on and spring forth from London. For one to reach East Anglia, they would almost certainly do so via Colchester in Essex.

Patronymic surnames came into vogue beginning around the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The Domesday Book of 1086 records as under-tenants, Robert of Hastings in Sussex and Ralph of Hastings in Essex.

Henry Hastings, 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Huntingdon (no known connection) sold the “Honour, Castle, Barony, Lordship, etc. of Hastings, Sussex” to a Thomas Pelham on 2 April 1591.

The term Anglo-Saxon generally includes the Germanic tribes known as the Angles, Saxons and Jutes and lesser related groups who came to Britain in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and who held sway until the Norman Conquest.