

The Ancestry of Thomas Hastings of England and Watertown, Mass. ©
(Revised November 2014)

By *Scott Hastings-Billigmeier*

The accepted ancestry of Deacon Thomas Hastings (c1605-1685) has long needed the scrutiny of a focused, probing eye. If one looks past the generous assumptions of the past century, we see more gaps than facts. Regrettably, in this article at least, I can only hope to shore up the ratio; eliminate the improbable but not conclusively prove its' opposite.

It has long been thought that Thomas Hastings descended from the aristocratic Hastings family of Leicestershire, England. Two of the most notable proponents of this theory have been Lydia Nelson (Hastings) Buckminster in her 1866 genealogy, *The Hastings Memorial*, and Professor Herbert Baxter Adams in his 1880 Genealogy, *The History of the Thomas Adams and Thomas Hastings Families of Amherst, Massachusetts*.

These and many other publications, both family specific and general New England, have forwarded this line of descent as fact. The most oft repeated version says that, "George, the 3rd Lord Hastings, was, in 1529, created Earl of Huntingdon. Sir Henry and George, grandsons of the Earl of Huntingdon, had sons who became puritans, and were obliged to leave their native land and find homes in the New World. As early as 1634, we find Thomas Hastings and wife had arrived on this shore; and in 1638 John* and family followed."

(L.N. Buckminster, The Hastings Memorial, A Genealogical Account of the Descendants of Thomas Hastings of Watertown, Mass. from 1634 to 1864, Boston, 5-6).

It is important at the inception, where claims begin to immediately collide, to delineate between what can be proved and what cannot. Given the period, there is much we may never know for sure. While fair weight should be given to verbal record, it is far better to rely on surviving documentation. I have chosen, for simplicity sake, to organize my findings under two basic headings: Fact and Conjecture.

I. Fact

We know that Sir Henry Hastings (1535-1595), the 3rd Earl of Huntingdon, died without issue ten years before the birth of Thomas the immigrant. Sir George (?-1604), his brother and the 4th Earl, married Dorothy Port and had issue: Lord Francis, Sir Edward (died without issue), Catherine, Dorothy, William (died without issue), Hon. Henry. Again, Sir George died near or before the birth of Thomas and had no recorded child by that name. (*Henry Nugent Bell, Esq., The Huntingdon Peerage, London, 1821*).

The names of the 4th Earl's grandchildren, via sons Francis and Henry, also show no Thomas. (*The Huntingdon Peerage and Claire Cross' The Puritan Earl, The Life of Henry Hastings, 3rd Earl of Huntingdon, New York, 1966*).

In fact, while the name Thomas occurs with reasonable frequency in the preceding history of this family, there are none by that name in this line (unaccounted for) since about 1500. A corollary survey of surviving records of births and marriages at the Leicestershire County Records Office (hereafter referred to as LRO) revealed no feasible candidates that could be Thomas the immigrant.*

A far broader search of English records using the Mormon Church's International Genealogical Index (IGI), 1992 version, also fails to support the Leicestershire link. There are two interesting, but nonetheless erroneous, entries in this latest iteration however. In Leicestershire an entry has been made for a Thomas Hastings, annotated as "altered from source" that lists him as being born in 1605 and related to a Warren S. Snow. This information does not come from original parish records and probably results from some misinterpretation of secondary source material. Misinterpretation is definitely the case for a similar entry made on the Essex fiche. Here, Thomas Hastings, "of Ipswich", is listed as being born in 1605 and as the spouse of Margaret Cheney. This information was clearly derived from a superficial reading of the *Hastings Memorial*.

The IGI does, however, identify some East Anglians of that era who fit the general description of Thomas the immigrant. Since East Anglia provided most of the early settlers, this seems a logical place to look. According to the IGI (which is only as reliable as the data that it receives and is not a complete historical archive--many records have been lost or destroyed through the centuries) the following lived in the County of Norfolk during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I:

- Thomas, son of Thomas and Mary(e) (Ryell) Hastenes or Hastings, was Chr. 28 Sept 1608 at Witton, near Walsham. His parents were married there on 16 Aug 1603. There is no further reference to this Thomas in the IGI. This may indicate that he immigrated although we know that he was married before he left. In any case, this stands out as the best lead available and deserves closer investigation.
- Thomas, son of Thomas and Jhonne Hastyns, was Chr. on 28 Sept 1600, also at Witton.
- Thomas Hastings married Jane Ladle on 10 May 1624 at West Rayham. It is thought that Susan(na) was the first wife of Thomas but this could conceivably (but not likely) be an incorrect assumption.
- Thomas Hastings married Cicilia Daughy in 1574 at Bacton. There are no listings of a Thomas Hastings in Bacton after this point.
- The Hastings family of Attleborough had son's born there and named Thomas through at least 1657. Dates, where available, were not in reasonable proximity to the year 1605.

Surprisingly, no likely candidates were discovered in the nearby counties of Cambridgeshire, Suffolk or Essex; The latter two being the largest suppliers of immigrants to Watertown. Cambridgeshire is identified by a modern genealogist and author named Carol Clark Johnson. Ms. Johnson advanced the following theory in her 1970 Hastings related genealogy:

- John Hastings of Little Eversden, Cambridgeshire, is believed by circumstantial evidence to be the father of Thomas although the parish records covering 1605

were missing and he has no recorded child by this name. Her contention is based largely on the occurrence of the common names John and William in John's family and that of Thomas the immigrant. She further claims that John is a likely descendent of Sir Robert Hastings (fl. 1250), Steward to the Earl of Oxford. (Carol Clark Johnson's, *A Genealogical History of the Clark and Worth Families, and other Puritan Settlers in the Massachusetts Bay*, 1970). [Author's Note: I visited this village in 1996. It is very tiny and seemingly unchanged for centuries. There is no sign of any commercial activity other than agriculture. If (and a big IF it is) Thomas Hastings came from this village he was almost certainly a farmer of common means. The fact that he was highly literate seems inconsistent but could be attributed to the village's close proximity to Cambridge University. Personally, I think this link is as speculative as any other set fourth for him].

The IGI also gives some valuable information on the geographical dispersion of the surname. We know that the Midlands and East Anglia regions each have relatively dense and aristocratic concentrations of Hastings'. It is also widely accepted that these "branches" of the family were of the same Sussex stock. They split sometime in the 12th Century; The Midlands branch eventually earning the title Earls of Huntingdon (among others) and the East Anglians becoming the Earls of Pembroke. (*The Huntingdon Papers, The Archives of the Noble Family of Hastings, London, 1826, XV*). What the IGI provides is a good county by county breakout of where this fairly uncommon surname is most common. The densest concentrations (covering several centuries) were found in Berkshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Devonshire, Durham, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, City of London, Norfolk, Northumberland, Nottinghamshire, Surrey, Warwickshire, and Yorkshire. Note that only Norfolk is in East Anglia.

Thomas Hastings sailed from Ipswich, Suffolk with his wife Susan(na). The roads of that country, then as now, were much better suited to north-south travel. A Leicestershire man would almost certainly choose to depart from London. The fact that he sailed from an eastern port, while not conclusive, does not lend support to his purported Midland roots.

Not only did he choose an eastern port, but his shipmates on the Elizabeth that spring of 1634 (at least those that can be traced), were almost exclusively of eastern stock. As we know, people at that time tended to enter into this great adventure with neighbors and kinfolk from their local area. No passengers have been identified from the midlands.

Thomas arrived in Watertown with no noble title or other mark of distinction (such as "Mr." which denoted later gentlemen such as William Goddard). He is often referred to in Watertown records as "Deacon Hastings," a not uncommon recognition of religious leadership. While it denotes a certain elevated standing in the community, it in no way compares to the standing of a noble family like the Leicestershire Hastings. (*Watertown Records Comprising the Third Book of Town Proceedings and the Second Book of Births, Marriages and Deaths to the end of 1737, Watertown, 1900, and Dr. Henry Bond's, Genealogies of the Families and Descendants of the Early Settlers of Watertown, Massachusetts, Vol. 1 & 2, Boston, 1855*).

Deacon Hastings married (2nd) Margaret Cheney (1628-c1690) of Roxbury, and had issue: Thomas, John, William, Joseph, Benjamin, Nathaniel, Hepzibah and Samuel. These names do not correlate with any particular branch of the Leicestershire Hastings descending from George, the 1st Earl. Their children married into the following families of East Anglian descent:

Coolidge (Cottenham, Cambs.); Bond (prob. Bury St. Edmunds, Suff.); Hammond (Lavenham, Suff.); Rice (Bury St. Edmunds or Berkhamsted); Hawkes (?); Woodward (worked in Suff.); Graves (?); Church (?); Nevinson (E. Horsley, Surrey).

The early settlers of Watertown were largely (approximately 68%) from the counties of East Anglia. The Midlands, of which Leicestershire is a part, accounted for a statistically tiny percentage of the population. The odds are greatly against Thomas having come from the latter. (*David H. Fischer, Albion's Seed, Four British Folkways in America, Oxford, 1989, 36*).

At his death, the estate of Thomas Hastings was comfortable but not vast. He left less than one would reasonably expect (even assuming he wasn't the first born son) given his supposed aristocratic parentage. (*The Hastings Memorial, 6*).

II. Conjecture

There is a strong oral tradition in the family that says that the immigrant Thomas brought his coat of arms (identical to that claimed by the Earls of Huntingdon) to America engraved on a copper plate. The plate was passed down through the line of the oldest son until it reached Dr. Seth Hastings, Jr. The plate was lost by a brother of Dr. Hastings sometime between 1835 - 1840. This story could be an important clue but, unfortunately, it proves nothing. If Thomas did indeed bring the engraving from England it could mean that he was somehow linked to the Leicestershire Hastings; perhaps descending from some lesser and as yet unknown branch. On the other hand, it is not inconceivable for a family coming to America, hoping to impress their new neighbors, to falsely claim noble birth but the chances for success are slim and the social consequences harsh. Ultimately, the weight of this family tradition is open to debate. However, as the saying goes, extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof. (*Francis H. Hastings, Family Record of Dr. Seth Hastings, Sr., of Clinton, Oneida County, NY, Cincinnati, 1899, 5-6*)

There may also be some meaning in the fact that the Leicestershire Hastings and immigrant Thomas were both active in the puritan cause. It would be hard to read too much into this however since puritanism was sweeping England in the early 1600's. (*Edmund S. Morgan, The Puritan Dilemma, The Story of John Winthrop, Boston, 1958*).

To conclude this recitation of the sure and the unsure, we must recognize that, barring discovery of a direct DNA connection and perhaps even then, the best we can hope for is certainty beyond a reasonable doubt. If we manage to clear the air of innocent and perhaps wishful errors of the past and reflect on what we do know for certain, there is value in that. Thomas Hastings was undoubtedly a strong and righteous force in his community--of that we can be sure. Maybe, in the end, that is as much certainty as we will ever have.

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