

THE ANGLO-AMERICAN ISHAM ANCESTRY ASSOCIATION

1654 - THE US JOHN ISHAM LEGEND - 1713

GENERATION ONE (A)

Charles Dickens had his “Mystery of Edwin Drood.” The Isham family has the mystery of John Isham.

Who he was is a matter of public record. To a point. That he “popped” up some time in Barnstable, MA around 1670 has been part of history for more than 300 years. The mystery has been less about who he was, although that continues to intrigue family historians, but more about who his parents were and what branch did he sit on in the Isham family tree.

THE MYSTERY HAS YET TO BE SOLVED.

Some historians, rather than acquiesce to the fact that there is no proof as to the true identity of John Isham, continue to state that there really is no mystery. A number of Isham records...in print and online...claim that John Isham of Barnstable was none other than the son of Sir Gregory Isham, who in 1632, married an Elizabeth Cateline. These historians go on to name Gregory and Elizabeth Isham’s three sons as John, Henry and William. The story continues with the Isham brothers emigrating to the American colonies in 1660 where they settled in Barnstable. William, according to the story died in Banstable unmarried.

Henry (1628-1675) removed to Virginia where he prospered, married and became the great grandfather of Thomas Jefferson

That there was a Henry Isham who was Thomas Jefferson’s great-great grandfather is a fact, but that he was the same Henry in the concocted story of the three Isham brothers is not true. Henry’s father was William Isham, a direct descendant of Gregory Isham, but not his son. There are dozens of different stories about John Isham of Barnstable, but none of them have been proven beyond a shadow of a doubt. One John Isham story that has been accepted as a possibility is the story of a young James Percival of Virginia who stole a ship and sailed it to Massachusetts. Owing to the fact that it was a rather large boat the story goes that young James enlisted the help of John Isham of Virginia.

And while that story might very well be true, or at least close to true, it still leaves some unanswered questions.

Who was John Isham of Virginia and where did he originally come from?

Professional genealogist Clare McVickar Ward did an exceptional job trying to sort out the John Isham ball of yarn, but unfortunately was only able to rule out more than she could rule in. She did an amazing job following leads and contacting people to help unravel the mystery of John Isham. Her obstacles were many. To begin with there were hundreds of Ishams in England and many of them include a “John Isham,” but she could not guarantee that the John, who is the progenitor Isham of this story, was any of the John Ishams she had identified.

Thomas Jefferson’s “Henry Isham” of Virginia had no sons who married and had, therefore, no legitimate children.

Ms. Ward also had to deal with many record fragments. Despite the many detailed passenger manifests of ships arriving in the Colonies between 1609 and 1660 there are many names, for one reason or another, missing.

In addition, a number of 17th century historical Massachusetts records were destroyed in a fire.

Numbered among the lost documents are those related to John Isham of Barnstable.

Excuses and exceptions do not help solve the mystery of John Isham. As unacceptable as that is, there is still room for conjecture...those possibilities that have yet to be proven or refuted.

The Virginia and Massachusetts colonies, while not only separated by hundreds of miles, they were also separated in philosophical fundamentals. The men and women who settled in New England were largely people seeking religious freedom at any cost.

Those who settled in Virginia weren’t seeking religious freedom as much as they were seeking financial opportunities.

Was John Isham one of the many puritans who sailed the Atlantic to settle among men and women who rejected the Church of England or did he have his eye on the many financial rewards to be found in the fertile fields of Virginia?

If he had, consider, for a moment, the agreed upon date of John Isham’s birth. Most records say he was born on March 31, 1654.

The records fail to say where John was born. Some say in the Colonies. Some say in England.

If John were born in England it would be safe to say that if he came over with his parents his family would have arrived sometime after 1654, a date that would have to be considered late by colonial emigration standards because the Puritan migration began in 1609 and continued until 1638, a period when more than 150 ships arrived in Virginia and Massachusetts bringing the English colonial population to 28,000.

John Isham had been born in the colonies it is highly unlikely that he was born in Massachusetts since there are no records of any Ishams in Massachusetts before John Isham’s name first appears in New England around 1675.

Could John Isham have either been born in Virginia or emigrated there from England?

If so, why is there no record of a Virginia Isham other than Henry Isham? There is!

In 1635 the Globe arrived from England carrying a little over 100 passengers. Unlike most pilgrim ships of that time the Globe’s passenger list was different in that 30 of the passengers were under 18 years old and not associated with a parent or older sibling. Research shows that some English parents at the time were unable to care for their minor children so they made arrangements to have them go to the colonies as indentured servants. One of the passengers arriving on the Globe in Virginia in August of 1635 was 14-year old Robert Isham. The names of his parents have been lost to history.