

PETER BROWN OF WINDSOR, CONN.

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For over a century, the claim that Peter Brown of Windsor, Conn., was son of Peter Brown of the Mayflower has vexed the genealogists. The following is an impartial attempt to assemble the known evidence, pro and con, and to evaluate it.

I. THE DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

(1) Plymouth Colony Records

Vol. 12, p. 1. Land laid out to Peeter Brown, 1623.

Vol. 12, p. 11. "Division of Cattle" 1627. In the list of inhabitants:

Peeter Browne

Martha Browne

Mary Browne

[These are supposed to be the wife and only child (Mary) living in 1627.]

Vol. 1, p. 17. Mary wife of Peter Browne deceased without will, presented Inventory 28 Oct. 1633.

Vol 1, p. 18. Court action on estate, 11 Nov. 1633. "Peter Browne dyed wthout will, having divers children by divers wiues, his estate amounting to an hundred pownds . . . Mary, his wife, who is allowed the administratrix [to] pay downe fifteen pownds for the use of Mary Browne, daughter of the said Peter, to M^r Joh. Done, of Plymouth

aforesaid, wth whom the said Court haue placed the said Mary for nine yeares . . . [and to] pay . . . into the hands of M^r Will' Glison . . . fifteen pownds, for the use of Prisilla Browne, another of the daughters of the said Peter, the Court having placed the said Prisilla wth the said Will' for 12 yearesAnd for the rest of the estate, the widow having two children by the said Peter, together wth her owne 3^d, it is allowed her for bringing up the said children, provided that shee discharge . . . debts. . & the legacies given by the court."

Vol. 2, p. 89. 28 Oct. 1645. Priscilla Browne, daughter of Peter, deceased, chose John Browne, "her vnckle," to be her guardian.

(2) Bradford's Account

Gov. William Bradford, in his history of Plymouth, gave a record of the "increasings and decreasings" of the Mayflower passengers, which is considered to have been written between 6 March and 3 April 1651, because of its mention of certain persons who were living or deceased at the time he wrote. He states:

"Peter Browne married twice. By his first wife he had 2 children, who are living, and both of them married, and the one of them hath 2 children; by his second wife he had two more. He dyed about 16 years since."

(3) Plymouth Deeds

27 Oct. 1647. Ephraim Tinkham and wife Mary sell a third part of the land of Peter Brown.

8 June 1650. William Allin of Sandwich (with consent of wife Priscilla) sells to John Browne of Duxburrow, weaver, 30 acres, "being the one part of three of the land which appertained unto the Children of Peeter Browne, brother unto John Browne aforesaid."

7 Nov. 1679. William Snow of Bridgewater (with consent of wife Rebeckah) sells to John Browne of Duxburrow "my one third p^{te} of" five 20-acre lots (33 acres) "which were the Lots formerly of Peter Browne Deceased."

(4) Matthew Grant Record ("Old Church Record." Windsor) (Published verbatim in Some Early Records and Documents of . . . Windsor by the Connecticut Historical Society)

Pages 33-34

"Peter Brown married mary Gillet . July . 15 . 1658."

[Births of their children]

Mary, b. 2 May 1659
Hannah, b. 29 Sept. 1660
Abigail, b. 8 Aug. 1662
Hepsibah, b. 19 Nov. 1664
Peter, b. 2 Mar. 1666
John, b. 8 Jan. 1668
Jonathan, b. 30 Mar. 1670
Cornelius, b. 30 July 1672
Hester, b. 22 May 1673
Isabel, b. 9 Jun 1676
Deborah, b. night before 12 Feb. 1678
Sarah, b. 20 Aug. 1681

Pages 51-52, with correction p. 197

"John Moses married mary Brown . may . 18 . 1653."

[Births of their children]

John, b. 15 June 1654
William, b. 1 Sept. 1656
Thomas, b. 14 Jan. 1658
Mary, b. 13 May 1661
Sarah, b. 2 Feb. 1663
Margaret, b. 2 Dec, 1666
Timothy, b. Feb. 1670
Martha, b. 8 Mar. 1672

Mindwell, b. 13 Dec. 1676

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Anthony Hoskins married Jesabel Brown . July . 16 .
1656.”

[Births of their children]

Isabel, b. 16 May 1657 [spelled “Jesabell”]
John, b. 14 Oct. 1659
Robert, b. 6 June 1662
Anthony, b. 19 Mar. 1663/4
Grace, b. 26 July 1666
Rebecca, b. 3 Dec. 1668
Jane, b. 30 Apr. 1671
Thomas, 14 Mar. 1672
Joseph, b. 28 Feb 1674

(5) Births Marriages and Deaths Returned from Hartford Windsor and Fairfield (from early Land Records of Colony of Connecticut, published verbatim 1898)

Page 41. “John moses . and mary Browne . both of Windsor were married May 18th 1653”

Page 42. “Anthony Hoskins & Izabell Browne both of Windsor were married July the 16, 1656,”

(6) Windsor Land Records (see Hartford Times, 3 July 1911, genealogical column)

“June 28, 1658. Peter Brown hath by purchase of Robert Howard his dwelling house standing neer the mill. . . .”
[This was his first purchase and seventeen days before his marriage.]

(7) Cemetery Inscriptions in Windsor, Connecticut
(Published by the D. A. R., 1929)

Peter Brown aged neer / 60 years / he dyed the / 9th
daye of March /1692

II. THE CASE "FOR"

No son Peter is mentioned in the contemporary records at the Plymouth end, and no contemporary evidence has been found at the Windsor end to indicate that the Peter Brown of that town was son of Peter of Plymouth. Nevertheless, there is considerable evidence for the identification, though it is traditional rather than documentary in character. There are some favorable arguments.

Phelps's History of Canton (Conn.) Church, published in 1845, definitely states the Mayflower connection of Peter Brown of Windsor. So far as I have learned, this is the earliest printed statement.

Hinman's Early Puritan Settlers of Connecticut, published 1852, p. 352, states the Mayflower connection with the qualification, "by tradition."

Abiel Brown's Genealogical History of West Simsbury (Canton), edited and published by Rev. J. Burt in 1856, states the Mayflower descent "as appears by traditional accounts, in connection with many historical facts and other sketches of record, with other corroborating circumstances." Abiel Brown was a descendant of Peter of Windsor, and we wish that his statement could have been more precise and less vague.

John Brown, the abolitionist, claimed descent through Windsor Peter from Mayflower Peter, in two letters, one dated 15 July 1857, the other written from Charlestown, Va., jail, just before his execution, 19 Nov. 1859. His descendants state that his family Bible does not throw any light upon the matter, that he did however in life often inform his children that his father, Owen Brown, often told

him personally of the truth of this descent. Owen Brown was born 1771, and was 19 years old at the death of his grandfather, John Brown (1700-1790), who in turn was a grandson of Peter of Windsor. If the tradition in this branch actually does go all the way back to Peter of Windsor, it would have had to be transmitted by Peter to his son, then from the son to the grandson John (1700-1790) who was not born until after Peter died, and finally from John to his grandson Owen, the father of John the abolitionist. This means that the story would be heard in youth and retold late in life by five persons over a stretch of seven generations, roughly 170 to 180 years.

Relics alleged to have descended from Peter of the Mayflower through the Windsor Browns have little importance in themselves, since there is no documentary evidence whatsoever to prove that any of these relics go back as far as claimed. However, their importance is that they show how widely diffused the Mayflower tradition was among the descendants of Peter of Windsor, and that it goes well back of 1800. So we will consider them briefly.

A chest containing the written inscription that it once belonged to Peter Brown of the Mayflower has been preserved since about 1867 in the Episcopal Church at Windsor. It apparently descended from the Browns into the Moore family, Joseph and Elisha Moore, through whom the chest came to the church.

"Peter Brown's Spectacles" are preserved in Pilgrim Hall, Plymouth. Their history goes back to a Stephen Brown who is said to have been born on the Connecticut River and to have moved in 1816 to Stephentown, N.Y., to live with his son Ezekiel, and to have died there in 1820 or 1821 aged 99 $\frac{1}{2}$. If the age is correct, Stephen would be born not long after 1720, and I see no place for him in the Peter Brown family; but there was a Stephen born 1742 descended from Peter who may be the man if his age at death was greatly exaggerated. The story is that just before his death Stephen Brown gave these spectacles to his son Ezekiel, with the statement that they came over in the Mayflower in the family of his ancestor, Peter Brown. From Ezekiel Brown they descended to his niece, Mrs. D. C.

Sheldon of Reedsburg, Wis., from whom they came to the Mayflower Society in 1865. Peter Brown was evidently a young, unmarried man when he came on the Mayflower in 1620, and he died only thirteen years later. Young men very rarely wore spectacles in those days, and spectacles are not mentioned in the inventory of Peter of the Mayflower, though at that time when every pot and pan was appraised, spectacles were of value and often do appear in inventories. They may, however, have belonged to Peter of Windsor, who lived to be sixty. The important thing, again, is the Mayflower tradition in another branch of the family at an early date.

As actual evidence, none of the above has very great weight. The only conclusion that can definitely be based on these statements and reliocs is that the tradition of Mayflower descent goes back in the Windsor Brown family to a period well before 1800. But even that is hardly far enough to prove the parentage of a man who died in 1692, over a century before.

In certain respects, however, the traditional claims may be viewed with some favor. Considering together the probate records and Bradford's statement, the "divers wives and divers children" of Peter of the Mayflower boil down to two wives and two children by each wife. The first wife ws named Martha, and the probate identifies her two children as Mary and Priscilla, who later appear with their husbands in deeds. The two children by the second wife, Mary, are not so readily identified, except that one of them was certainly Rebecca, who, as wife of William Snow, conveyed her third of Peter Brown's land in 1679. The other child by the second wife has never been identified.

Peter Brown of Windsor, by the age at death given on his stone, was born about 1632. Peter of the Mayflower seems to have married after 1623, and in 1627 had a single child, Mary, and she may have been born about 1624. She was apprenticed for 9 years in 1633, and as girls reached their majority at 18, we may conclude she was about 9 when apprenticed and that would place her year of birth as roughly 1624. Priscilla was apprenticed in 1633 for 12 years, and on the same basis

she would then be 6, hence born about 1627, a little after the "Division of Cattle." We must allow sufficient time for the death of the first wife and marriage to the second wife after 1627, so the two children by the second wife would be born around 1630-1 and 1632-3. One was Rebecca, we do not know who the other was. The dates fit closely enough for Peter of Windsor, born circa 1632, to have been the other child.

We have then, the following factors favorable to the identification: 1st the name, Peter; 2nd, his age, which would agree with the probable age of an unknown child of the Mayflower Peter by his second wife; 3d, a very old tradition, very widespread among the descendants of Peter of Windsor, that he the son of Peter of the Mayflower.

III. THE CASE "AGAINST"

The really damaging evidence against the identification consists of the three deeds given by the three daughters of Peter Brown of Plymouth. Brief abstracts of these deeds were given supra. One daughter in 1647 sold a third part of the land. Another daughter in 1650 sold 30 acres of which were "one part of three." The third daughter in 1679 sold 33 acres which were he third part of five 20-acre lots. This certainly sounds as if only the three daughters survived and as if each had a third part of 100 acres, or roughly 30 to 33 acres apiece. There is no deed from Peter of Windsor to a right in any land that had belonged to Peter of Plymouth.

Savage, whose Genealogical dictionary (vol. 1, p. 274) was published in 1860, after the works of Phelps, Hinman and Abiel Brown had appears, enters Peter Brown of Windsor without a suggestion that he had any connection with Peter of Plymouth; but he does suppose that the latter had a son Peter. However, this seems to be based on the appearance of Peter's name in th Plymouth records in certain connections after Peter of the Mayflower was dead, and he took such references to be to a living Peter. It must be remembered that all original proprietors of towns had proprietary rights to later distributions, and the

appearance of the name in a later distribution does not prove that a man was living or had a son of the name living, but simply that the estate or heirs of the original proprietor shared in the distribution.

Since Ernest Bowman, editor of The Mayflower Descendant, printed the deeds of the three daughters in 1900, the claims of descendants of Peter Brown of Windsor have not been favorably viewed by the Mayflower Society. Books which flatly assert that he was son of Peter of Plymouth were mostly published before these deeds were disclosed in print, such as Stiles's History of Ancient Windsor (2d edition, 1892). Charles E. Banks, in The English Ancestry and Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1929, p. 41, says of Peter Browne that "He died about September, 1633, leaving only three female descendants." In short, most recent authorities accept the deeds as precluding the belief that a fourth child was living when the deeds were given.

The first two deeds are earlier than 1651, when Bradford wrote his account, and Bradford distinctly states that Peter Browne of the Mayflower had two children by his second wife. That is confirmed by mention of two children of the widow in the probate records in 1633. Hence, if we accept the deeds as showing that only the two girls were living in 1647, the date of the first conveyance to a third of the land, it is necessary to conclude that the fourth child, whose age and sex are unknown, had died by 1647.

Quite a point has been made of the fact that Bradford did not state in 1651 that one of the two children by the second wife was already dead. He was writing of the increasings and decreasings of the Mayflower passengers, and it was his usual practice to specify when children had died. Hence if he followed his usual custom, his statement would mean that a fourth child was living in

1651, after two of the deeds had been given. Bradford is excellent authority, but no writer is infallible, and the true explanation may simply be that through oversight Bradford forgot to mention that one of the two children by the second wife had died.

If it is insisted that Bradford's statement implies that a fourth child was living, then such child could be Peter Brown of Windsor as well as any other Brown born at the proper date. In that event, it is necessary to explain how the three daughters could convey three equal portions of the Brown land. It cannot be explained by the theory that a son Peter had conveyed his interest by an unrecorded deed, because we have shown that the fourth child must have been born about 1630-1633, hence would have been only 14 to 17 years old (Peter of Windsor was in fact 15) when the first deed was given by a daughter in 1647, so it is impossible that Peter had quitclaimed his interest to his sisters. Hence, if there was a fourth surviving child, whether Peter of Windsor or another, the deeds of the daughters conveying equal thirds can be explained only by the supposition that there was a distribution (unrecorded) of the estate, and that the putative son Peter may have received the homestead while the three girls received the 100 acres in equal shares.

In that event there should be a deed from the son Peter, and no such deed exists. It is, however, a fact that on 4 May 1653 one James Lendall of Duxbury conveyed land formerly "of Peeter Brownes Children." Actually, that is not the date of the conveyance, as James Lendall died before that date, and it is rather a memorandum by the Assistant that Lendall had acknowledged this sale, the date of which does not appear. Lendall died before 1 Mar. 1652/3 when the estates of James and Mary Lendall were administered [Plymouth Colony Records 3:22; for the memorandum, see The Mayflower Descendant, 2:169]. It is not known how Lendall acquired a right to his Browne land. It is therefore a fair question, could Peter, Jr., have

conveyed to Lendall in an unrecorded deed, and was this Peter's share in his father's estate?

Such a theory seems most unlikely. Peter of Windsor was barely 21 in 1653 and we do not know how much earlier the actual sale by Lendall was made. The deed was to only two acres of meadow, and it is inconceivable that a son would receive only two acres, while the three daughters each had a third of 100 acres. How then did Lendall acquire his interest? His wife was named Mary, and it is possible that she was Mary the widow of Peter Brown. In that case the sale may have been by the stepfather in connection with adjusting accounts for the care of the Brown children.

The deeds therefore constitute almost certain evidence that by 1647 only the three girls were surviving of the four children of Peter Brown

In the documentary evidence supra, I have included all the early Browns who appear in Windsor records. It will be noted that in 1653 and 1656 two Brown girls married there and had large families. Both girls were called of Windsor in the colony record of their marriages. Peter Brown did not marry until 1658, and did not buy his first land in Windsor until seventeen days before he married. There was no early Brown proprietor in Windsor, so there is actually a problem, not only of the origin of Peter, but of the origin of the two Brown girls who were "of Windsor" when they married there. They could not have been of Windsor unless they lived there prior to marriage, and they definitely had no father Brown living in Windsor.

The most common solution of this type of problem is that one of the early settlers married a widow and that her children by her former husband lived there with the

mother and stepfather. If the surname were a rare one, it would be an extremely likely assumption that Peter, Mary and Isabel were a brother and two sisters whose widowed mother married a Windsor man and brought them there to dwell. With a name as common as Brown, it would be possible to explain the presence of the two Brown girls in Windsor on that hypothesis, while it might be only coincidence that a Peter Brown of different origin came to Windsor to settle. Two young unmarried Brown girls could hardly have turned up as residents in Windsor unless they were living there with a relative, but Peter could have come to Windsor "on his own" and may or may not have been their brother.

For that reason, I drew off (supra) the full lists of children of Peter, Mary and Isabel, to see how far the same names might be repeated. With one notable exception (Isabel), the names do not correspond. Neither Mary nor Isabel Brown named a son Peter, and that is somewhat against the theory that he was their brother. Furthermore, I have run through the probate of the three families in Manwaring's Digest, and fail to find any connection suggested in these records, such as acting as administrator or being appointed executor or being named guardian of minor children, between the Brown, Moses and Hoskins families. This is entirely negative evidence, for sometimes the same names were not used in closely related families, and it is largely a matter of chance whether a brother-in-law figures in estate records as administrator, executor, or guardian of children. It is good evidence when such mention is found, but it is not disproof when not found.

I confess, the fact of one of the early Brown girls having the name Isabel, and of Peter Brown conferring that name on a daughter, impresses me. Isabel was not one of the common names of the period and place, and is more significant for that reason. But it is the only evidence seen to connect Peter with the Brown girls who were of Windsor and married there shortly before his own marriage. If it could be proved that Peter was a brother of either or

both of these Windsor Brown girls, that would prove that he was not son of Peter of Plymouth, because it is established by record that the later had but four children who were living in 1633, and of these four, three are identified as Mary (wife of Ephraim Tinkham), Priscilla, and Rebecca.

Aside from tradition and family belief, there is no evidence for placing Peter of Windsor as son of Peter of Plymouth, and the deeds of the daughters are strong evidence against that theory. It seems more likely that he was brother of Mary and Isabel of Windsor, and possibly a stepson of some early Windsor settler.