"The Folsom Emigration to America: Educated Guesses on Motivation"

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The first traceable ancestors of the Folsom family in America were John and Mary Folsom of Norfolk, England. Existing accounts suggest that the Folsoms faced religious and civil strife that forced them to emigrate from England to Hingham, Massachussetts. Recent research suggests other reasons. Why did this twosome come to America? Most of what anyone would have to say would be an educated guess because we know of few records at Hingham, either in England or America.

It is possible, however, that more can be learned on early ancestors than is currently known. There are numerous parish and diocesan records, as well as other manuscripts, that many historians and genealogists have only recently discovered or used. Just a month of thorough research could uncover much more than the association has printed in its first volume of the Folsom Family Genealogy. Only recently I located a puritan diary that describes intimately what many puritans were doing and thinking in East Anglia during the first great wave of migration to America. I will refer to this diary of Samuel Rogers later on because it holds a lay to how and why many people like the Folsoms decided to emigrate.

So why did the Folsoms emigrate to America in 1638? Last August Del Wilkes in his speech at the Folsom Grave Marker Ceremony in Exeter stated that "religious and civil strife drove the young couple from England". His observation is probably in some sense correct and certainly it is consistent with what most historians have said about the causes for the migration. As Carl Bridenberg has written in Vexed and Troubled Englishmen, (p. 399):

> *During the 1620's, nearly all the discontents of the lower orders came to a head: crop failures, plagues and hardships . . . Parliament had been dissolved, and the personal rule of Charles I inaugurated. The Bishop of London, William Land, was proceeding relentlessly against all Puritan lecturers. The juxaposition of social grievance with depressing economic conditions severely jarred a home-staying people who had long suffered silence . . . This was an age of listeners. Most Englishmen had either heard or read about New England. They began to reach a state of mind that made them receptive to oral and written propaganda.*

Were the Folsoms subject to harsh economic conditions, crop failures, or other hardships? Did they refuse to pay ship money in 1637? In other words, were they forced out? Or were they pulled by the attractive propaganda about the new world? We do not know, but what we do know with a fair degree of certainty is that they were puritans.

How do we know they were puritans? The best evidence is John and Mary grew up in one of the most zealous puritan parishes in England, and they emigrated with a small company led by others who wanted to purify the Church of England. From early in their lives it was hard for them to avoid being exposed to criticisms of the unreformed, unpurified Church of England. As early as 1624, the minister who baptised them, Robert Peck, accused the Bishop of Norwich of idolatry, popery, simony and violating God's ordained preaching of the word. The Bishop of Norwich, Abraham Harsnet, had cited and fired Peck for holding a conventicle, which was illegal, in his home. A conventicle was a worship service held at unauthorized times and places, often led by unordained laymen. Peck was praying and preaching to over twenty or so zealous people of Hingham on Sunday afternoons and even on weekdays. Naturally Peck thought the bishop was restraining God's ordinances to preach and to pray. But that was not the end of the matter. Peck and Hingham parishioners, which probably included Adam Folsom, signed a complaint against the bishop and had it brought to their parliamentary representation in the 1624 parliament. Such political activism was rare by puritans until the so-called Puritan Revolution of the 1640's in England. These Hinghamites were activists, and to bishops they were troublemakers.

We know even more of what puritans taught to John and Mary Folsom. They, like all reformed people, were not to kneel as they entered the church. They considered it a superstition to bow at the name of Jesus. Peck had taught them that the chruch was no more sacred than any other building, and he ordered that the rails that surrounded the altar to be pulled down and the altar to be lowered to below ground level, so it appeared to be a table. Thus Hinghamites grew up in an unusual, independent religious climate.

The bishops finally got back at Peck and some of the people in the church. By the mid 1630's the bishop forced Peck to stop leading worship services, but Peck lingered in the area. He probably preached and prayed in homes. On November 4, 1636 the chancellor of the diocese reported to the infamous Bishop Wren that "young Peck who officiated at his father's church" observed none of the rigorous orders for ecclesiastical conformity to the Church of England. The chancellor tried to apprehend him but failed. Then the chancellor made the following comment about Peck's son to Bishop Wren. "Young Peck . . . returned to Essex and it is rumored the old Fox, his father, is kennelled there." In April of 1637, the report of the chancellor said that the elder Peck still stood excommunicated but "his parishioners are so addicted to him that they pay tithes to him". So the Anglican bishop was stirring up much trouble, but the parish responded by supporting their ministers.

For a time the Hingham parish brought Peter Hobart in to preach. Hobart was the son of a prominent family in Hingham that went to New England. Hobart had served as lecturer in Essex and Haverhill, Suffolk. At Haverhill he got in trouble for having no license to lecture. Wren said his lecture on market day caused such a commotion that it had to be changed to another day. By the summer of 1635 Hobart had led a group to New England. By 1638, most of the other puritan parishioners at Hingham, including the Folsoms, had decided to emigrate.

It is my theory that the Folsoms left largely for religious reasons. Other reasons may have become part of the process of deciding to leave. It is true that land in the Hingham area did not produce good grain crops in the 1630's. Since it was also an overcrowded area, people could have been persuaded the there were more abundant productive opportunities in New England. And certainly the plague always made people insecure. But there is no evidence of a pestilence or economic disaster that would force people out of Hingham. Economic or social conditions may have added to their insecurity and fears, but their motivation was probably more related to religious fears and hopes. They were probably convinced that they did not have the religious freedom they needed and saw New England as a place of refuge where the whole saintly community could carry on with God's ordinances.

It is also my theory that Robert Peck with the assistance of the Hobarts and the Gilmans organized and persuaded the Folsoms and others to emigrate. To the people of Hingham, these were the patriarchs, like Moses and Aaron of old. But I suspect that the Folsoms migrated for even more personal reasons than attachment to their ministers or town leaders. They belonged to a distinct religious community that resisted outside interference with their affairs. The Folsoms emigrated because of many ties: household, family, church, and these intertwined with spiritual brotherhood. Motivation is usually a very complex series of blending external conditions with personal values and relationships.

In other words, the Folsoms probably emigrated for more complex reasons than most historians have described. Yes, they faced harsh religious conditions but so did many other puritans. Therefore, religious persecution is not a sufficient explanation. Thousands who faced harsh conditions stayed in England rather than emigrate. We have no evidence of direct legeal or official religious citations against the Folsoms. So it is probably true to conclude that overt religious and civil strife did not drive them out of England. My speculations is that attachment to their spiritual leaders and more personal, religious reasons made them decide to leave.

How do I come to this conclusion? It may be sheer folly, but my educated guess is that the Folsoms acted and thought very much like Samuel Rogers whose diary has recently come to light. This diary gives historians a glimpse into the personal side of life that they rarely see for the early seventeenth century. Rogers himself agonized over the decision to emigrate. He decided in favor of the move but drew back from that decision in order to honor his father who did not want him to go. The deeply spiritual and interpersonal considerations of Rogers were probably similar to those that entered the decision-making of the Folsoms, and a few details on the Rogers case may be instructive.

Like other puritans, Rogers knew about the experiment in New England for years before he became interested in joining the emigration. It was not until 1636, when Rogers was experiencing difficulties with his work as a chaplain at Bishops Stortford, Hertfordshire, that he found New England as an option. Diary entries for September second through fifth in that year give a sense of his thinking.

2. Much rejoicing still in my dear Christian friends: uncle, Mr. Wilson, and uncles many cordial and thorough. Christ is sweet to him. My soul enlarged with him in secret and with his discourse. Oh Lord some way that I may glorify Thee among some that fear Thy name, such as excel in virtue. Oh, Christ is very sweet this evening and the promise. Oh, more Lord; more, more of Thy self of whose love I have tasted. But oh the vail, the vail to be removed. (Folio 153)
3. The savor of my uncle remains in family. Something, oh that there were such a heart, and in my soul. He speaking so much of the sweetness of Christ hath encouraged me to run to heaven to find more of it; for I have tasted of some of it, and oh more, more. It shall be my heaven upon earth. Lord away with these mists. The light of Thy countenance reveal, and that fully. Ravish my soul with loves. I bless the Lord that the burden lies not so heavy upon me.
5. I cannot go on faithfully in my particular calling. I see not God clearly before me in any way. Lord chart out Thy way. Oh, that I might declare Thy name in and among Thy congregations with liberty and peace of conscience. Oh, make a way for I have no joy, every day less and less, in this hotchpotch. Shall I one day see New England and the beauty of the countenance in Thy lovely and pure ordinances?

His uncle was Ezekiel Rogers who was planning to go to New England and led a migration to Rowley in 1638. Clearly his uncle's visit had filled him with "sweetness" and a sense of God's love, so against the burden of his calling and the pollution of English religion, the possibility of a free and pure ministry in New England seemed attractive indeed.

Through the fall and winter of 1636, Rogers frequently entertained the idea of emigrating and continued to observe both the barrenness of his calling and the situation in England. A week after he first raised the possibility of emigrating, Rogers made the following entry:

I am in a great straight in point of studies. If I think of divinity, I am quashed with the first thought. Times grow worse every day; sorrows abound with sin; if physic no helps, books nor parts. I think that way. If on New England, for many there, and what shall I do?

Rogers had become a distraught young man. Later in the year he expressed bitterly the burden of his calling, but he also noticed the public distress forced on puritans by Bishop Matthew Wren in the diocese of Norfolk. As the diary for 5 December 1636 reads:

A deep sadness has taken hold on me; many motives: 1) the church of God held under hatches, the walls of Jerusalem beaten down; poor Suffolk and Norfolk lying desolate by that cursed, wretched Wren, the plague abroad;
2) this woeful place in whose company I am afraid to be for fear of some evil speech out from an evil heart; oh my burden is intolerable; future accomodations much perplex me. Oh Lord some way for preaching; oh my soul is in New England.

Thus Rogers recorded two convincing motives, one public and the other private, for moving to New England; yet he was still perplexed over what his future course should be.

Association with those involved in the exodus continued to influence Rogers. On 10 January 1636/7, he met with Samuel Shepard, who along with the Cooks had registered as a servant to Roger Harlakenden when they all emigrated in 1635. Shepard, who was the half brother of Thomas Shepard, may have returned to England with one of the Cooks to recruit settlers. On this occasion Rogers remarked that it was "a great joy to see any that excel in virtue. Oh that my habitation might be among them." Indeed, as the winter warmed into spring Rogers had almost convinced himself that a move to New England was the best alternative open to him.

Just after the spring equinox, while with the Barringtons at Hatfield Broad-oak, Essex, Rogers heard further favorable reports about New England. In Rogers's own words on 24 and 25 March:

24. I go to Hatfield, revived and conforted in sweet friends, and the Lord drew near. Yet there is a difference between myself abroad at home; that I might love home better.
25. Still ther; my heart rejoicing in the Word, good company, and heart leaping at New England. A friend came from New England with good news. Blessed be God who yet prospers His; oh Lord show me Thy way and I will walk in it.

In another week Roger met with Sidrach Simpson, who was planning an exodus out of England. A Puritan lecturer in London, Simpson had run into trouble with agents of Archbishop Laud. Later one of the five famous "dissenting brethren" of the Westminster Assembly, he was gathering a group for emigration. Although Simpson's followers eventually ended up in Holland, at this meeting Rogers's "heart (was) marvelously enlarged for New England in the company of Mr. Simpson and other such friends." As Rogers concluded, "Lord, Thy way, show it to me and Thy loving kindness." On the very next day Rogers became ecstatic:

New England, New England is in my thoughts. My heart rejoices to think of it. Lord, show me Thy way in it and bow the heart of my father. I am Thyne; I lie down in the shadow of Thee, my Almighty.

As ensuing entries for the next three days suggest, Rogers had convinced himself to emigrate, but he worried about both opposition from his father and the way God would work out for him to make the journey. During the first three days of April, Rogers further commited himself to New England and found peace in his decision:

April 1 (1637). This day I set apart for fasting and prayer in private in especial records about New England, etc. The Lord has sweetly drawn near to me and given me an heart to bless His name for His goodness to me. The more of New England I have, the more of God I enjoy. Lord, yet further show me Thy self, Thy loving kindness, and also the way wherein I shall walk.
2. Sabbath comfort at Hatfield. My heart is above, rejoicing in God and his saints. These two days have been sweet to me. The more I have of God, the more I sigh after New England, and the more I think of that, I think I find more of God. Lord, find then out my way to that place, if it be Thy will.
3. Strong for New England; my peace much in the love and smiles of God upon me. My hope is only in Him. I will walk before Him in a perfect way until I come to Sion.

In a personal way, after many previous impressions and highly religious exercises, Rogers reached a point where he thought that God was directing him to New England. God had to direct him because reliance on personal powers of decision or human conditions was not sufficient. Puritans required godly rather than self-direction. Christian friendship, shared commitments, and certain personal conditions and judgments had moved him toward a decision to emigrate, but in the last analysis all of these perceptions had coalesced to convince him of God's will. All of these resources helped Rogers to know the mind of God; ultimately Rogers believed in a deeply personal way that God wanted him in New England.

Therefore, Rogers had public reasons but he also had private reasons for moving to New England. Association in prayer with other puritan saints disposed him to join with them in the emigration. Call it the support of a peer group, the Holy Spirit leading God's people. However it be interpreted, the friendships, the loving relationships, the numerous goal-oriented interactions seem a more sufficient explanation to me than people being forced out of their homeland. As a hostile witness testified in 1640:

Almost it exceeds a wonder, how many of fair quality alienate and sell their whole estates in their old England to shuffle themselves, wives and children in to their New England. Blinde zeal, and more Blinde seducers doe so gull and Cheate their conscience, that willingly they make exchange of their Reason and Knowledge for credulous simplicitize, willful Ignorance.

My speculation, therefore, on why the Folsoms left is as follows. First, Edmund Hobart led the way with the first settlement in Hingham, Massachussetts, (1633), and then told Peter Hobart that the land was worthy for settling. Robert Peck probably began meeting with those who returned to England and were recruiting ministers. Peck, convinced that he would have no profitable ministry in England, began to organize a company from Hingham for the journey. Peck joined with the other elders, such as the Gilmans, to organize the Hingham group. And John Folsom had been married to Mary Gilman for just two years. The Folsoms had close ties to those involved in the emigration. The Folsoms may have had frequent prayer and spiritual discourse with Peck. And through the love for and suggestions of Hobarts, Gilmans, and Peck, they decided that England was the land of perdition, and they needed to set their sights on the promised land of America. So besides the attachment to their pastors and lay elders, who clearly provided the organizational means for the emigration, the Folsoms, like so many other puritans, made up their minds through the inner dynamics of saintly group meetings and through the insights of personal faith. In a sense the Folsoms had blind zeal at least in the eyes of the rational, critical world. They sold their properties at half value before leaving England. Religious zeal can appear to be irrational or at least nonrational, but it can be the most powerful of motivational forces.

Religion tied these people together in bonds like no other. Even the mutual support between husband and wife had religious significance. For these puritans meaning centered in the church but also in the family. In contrast to the recent concept of the home as a refuge from the competitive world, puritans saw the family as the basis for most of their meaningful activity. Repeatedly their handbooks stressed that the home and household was a miniature church. So even as Mary and John decided to emigrate, their decision became tied to their marital obligations to one another, their servants and other members of the community. Their prayers together, family worship with their two servants who accompanied them to New England, were undoubtedly part of the decision-making process. And since puritans believed deeply the commands of Jesus to love one another and to love their neighbors, the bond of family quickly moved beyond family to community. It is no wonder that most of the able-bodied inhabitants of Hingham left together. They were putting into practice their sense of mutual love: for family, household, church, and neighborhood community.

So despite the classical view of the emigration as a movement of young, unattached persons in flight from economic deprivation of religious persecution, the evidence in the Folsom case tends to suggest another interpretation. John and Mary Folsom made up their minds to emigrate through the complex and inner dynamics of small group meetings with neighbors and through their insights of personal faith. From the first days of decision to emigrate until the present day, the Folsoms have seen it as their obligation to remain a close, committed family.

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IN CONCLUSION:
by Del Wilkes

Suspicious of the high Anglican Church and relatively free of manorial controls in County Norfolk, the Puritans of old Hingham consciously set their goal by "groupthink". This process was formulated by the family and pressure from the community. The community, during this period of English history, was often nothing less than the extended family in thought and bloodline. Regional English inbreeding, among all social classes, was already a centuries old custom. John Folsom's marriage to Mary Gilman attached him to an "old" puritan Hingham family. The affiliated. Oilman family connections we do know are Jacob, Cushing and Lincoln. The reverend Robert Peck was their religious and social authority. He baptised John and Mary and was their teacher. His brother, Joseph Peck, may have been Mary's uncle. Joseph's first wife was Rebecca Clark. Comparative birthdates suggest she could very easily have been the sister of Mary's mother, Mary Clark. Daniel Cushing was already in Hingham, Massachusetts in 1638 when John, Mary and the Gilmans immigrated. He chronicled the Diligent's passenger list by heads of family. Topping the list were Rev. Robert Peck, Joseph Peck, Edward Gilman, and John Foulsham. This detail helps substantiates Dr. Shipps' belief that ties were spiritual, social and familial.

Partial Reference List:

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