

The Regicides, Conclusion

Last week we began telling the story of the three judges who had taken part in the overthrow and subsequent death of King Charles I of England in 1649. While fleeing for their lives after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, they sailed from England to America; one version has one of them finding his final resting place in Colebrook. I'm not so sure about the facts of the matter, and give my reasons at the conclusion. We resume with Mrs. Eleanor Smith Teesdale's 1953 account. RLG

“Mr. John Dixwell went to New Haven, living unmolested under the name of John Davids. He won the respect of his neighbors, and when a certain Mr. Long was on his deathbed, he asked Mr. Davids to look after his wife. This he did, later marrying her. When she died, she left him a handsome property of £900. He later married Bathsheba Howe, and had several children. Before his death at the age of 82 he revealed his true identity to his family and friends. He died in New Haven, is buried there and a street is named for him.

William Goffe wrote several letters to his wife in England, signing them ‘Walter Goldsmith’, and she replied addressing him as ‘her dear son.’ After his 12 years in Hadley, he was known to have come back to New Haven. He went about openly at times and enjoyed the respect of his friends. In the City of New Haven at one time there were four gravestones, presumably marking the graves of the regicides, one rating two stones. However, it was found later that only one body was there, that of John Dixwell. The grave of Edward Whalley was found and marked in Hadley, Mass. So far as is generally known, no grave has been found marking the final resting place of William Goffe, and this is where my particular family history comes in.”

“The house where my father was born was built in 1793 by Elder Rufus Babcock, my father's great uncle. *[Today, this would place it directly in front of 41 Prock Hill Road.]* My grandfather, Milton Smith, bought the farm and house from Rufus Babcock, and it was still standing among other beautiful old houses in North Colebrook, Connecticut, about 80 miles from New Haven, until it was destroyed by fire around 1930. I used to go there with my father, Rufus Babcock Smith, and one of the things we always had to do was to go and see the ‘grave of the regicide’. We used to drive up a steep hill, crawl through underbrush, climb fences, and then through more underbrush to see the stone standing on a rocky hillside, all alone, with the inscription, ‘William Goffe, Regicide.’

Our supposition is that owing to the nature of the country there, there would be no safe resting place for one so hunted in the flat, well cultivated lands comprising the valley of the Connecticut River, and the first wild, uncultivated region to the west is the foothill country of the Berkshires, where my father's farm was situated. We like to think that devoted and loving friends carried Major General William Goffe to his last resting place, a spot probably owned by one of his friends, a spot remote and hidden, where he could sleep undisturbed after sixty years of terror and unrest”.

“We are certain that no one outside of our family knows of this grave. I have given this information to the Connecticut Historical Society, and it has caused quite a bit of interest. My husband and I went to see the grave in 1925, and the old stone was then standing all alone on the rocky hillside. My son and his wife tried to locate it two years ago, but the tangle of underbrush and leaves made it hard to find anything there and their time was so short that they had to leave without locating the stone.

What a thrill if and when someone does find it!

Eleanor Smith Teesdale, 1953”

As you may have reasoned out, there are several points in this argument that do not hold water, beginning with the dates. The time period spans the years between 1660 and 1720. If there were still those who would have been disposed to persecute Goffe for his role all those years before, why did they not disturb the graves of the other two, both of which are in public places? The date of 1720 poses insurmountable problems; none of his or anyone else’s friends could have owned land in Colebrook. It would be another 12 years before the legislature made the first tentative move toward organizing what would become our corner of Litchfield County, and it wouldn’t be until 1760 that the proprietors in Windsor divided up what was to be Colebrook. The problem of moving something as bulky as a coffin 80 miles away from New Haven and into and through virgin forest that was not to see its first rudimentary road until 1761 renders the argument untenable.

What then did Mrs. Smith’s family see that convinced them of the special nature of an upright “headstone” on a hillside just south of the Massachusetts – Connecticut boundary? A clue can be found in the writings of Reuben Rockwell (the first) in his historical paper on Colebrook’s origins, written in 1835. He says: “January 30, 1732 – the Windsor proprietors formed a committee to perambulate Colebrook. After this the proprietors did not meet again until May 22, 1756; a period of 24 years.

The township was surveyed and laid out in 1760, but as they did not know exactly where the Colony line ran, made an arbitrary line called The Northern Line. *About the year 1795, some of the ancient monuments made by the committee who ran the line between Massachusetts and Connecticut in 1717, were discovered.* [The italics are mine; RG]

No one made an attempt to identify the material the upright stone was composed of, but it certainly had to be native fieldstone, so often employed by the early settlers for headstones. This type of metamorphic granite weathers out quite often with fairly deep striations, caused by the weathering process that can easily be interpreted as partly obscured engraved words; it does not seem a stretch to me that the words “William Goffe, Regicide” appeared to the viewer.

I have scoured the hillside just south of the Sandisfield town line, and I can’t find any of the markers. That in itself doesn’t bother me, as native fieldstone certainly doesn’t stand out on a hillside composed of nothing but native fieldstone. I’m convinced that they are there, and some of you may well discover them someday, but be thrilled by them for what they are historically; a monument to the committee who established the Colony line in 1717.

Historic Bytes