

THE SEARCH FOR THE ENGLISH ORIGINS OF
MAYFLOWER PASSENGER GEORGE SOULE
PART I: ECKINGTON, CO. WORCESTER

By Caleb Johnson

Before any attempt is made to ascertain the English origins of *Mayflower* passenger George Soule, it is important to briefly summarize what is known about him. Many of the more significant facts were recorded by William Bradford, governor of Plymouth. In 1651, Bradford wrote several pages containing "The names of those which came over first, in y^e year 1620 and were (by the blessing of God) the first beginners, and (in a sort) the foundation, of all the plantations, and colonies, in New-England. (And their families)." On this list is found:

Mr. Edward Winslow
Elizabeth his wife, &
2 men servants, caled
Georg Sowle, and
Elias Story; also a little
gilde was put to him caled
Ellen, the sister of Richard
More.¹

George Soule was one of the signers of the "Mayflower Compact," according to Nathaniel Morton who first recorded the names of the signers in his 1669 book, *New England's Memorial*.² George Soule received one acre in the 1623 Division of Land at Plymouth "on the South side of the brooke to the baywards."³ In the 1627 Division of Cattle, George Soule is listed with his wife Mary and eldest son Zachariah, joined with the family of Richard Warren. They received shares in "one of the 4 black Heyfers that came in the Jacob caled the smooth horned Heyfer and two shee goats."⁴

Since children during this time period were very regularly named after their parents and grandparents, it is worth noting the names of George Soule's children. He and wife Mary had nine children: Zachariah, John, Nathaniel, George, Susanna, Mary, Elizabeth, Patience, and Benjamin. The names Zachariah, Nathaniel, Patience, and Benjamin appear to be Puritan-influenced names that are not probably to be found in George's parents. Children George and Mary were presumably named after their parents. That leaves only John, Susanna, and Elizabeth as names that could have been inherited from a grandparent.

¹ William Bradford, *History of the Plimoth Plantation ... Now Reproduced in Facsimile from the Original Manuscript*, John A. Doyle, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896), p. 526.

² Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial* (Cambridge MA, 1669; facsimile reprint, Heritage Books, 1997), p. 26.

³ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff and David Pulsifer, *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth*, 12 vols., (Boston, 1856), 12:4 [Hereafter cited as PCR]

⁴ PCR 12:12

Others who have searched English records have had trouble determining the age of George Soule—a necessary piece of information to accurately formulate a theory on his origins and eliminate unnecessary candidates. Charles E. Banks, writing in G.T. Ridlon's *History, Biography and Genealogy of the Families Named Soule, Sowle and Soulis* (Lewiston, ME, 1926), at page 141, states that because "his age is not known and no document has survived here which connects him with an English parish, two prime clues are lacking." Nils Wilkes, in his *In Search of George Soule of the Mayflower* at page 43, notes with a little more precision, "George Soule must have been born in England somewhere between 1590 and 1600."

However, it is possible for us to considerably narrow his age from that given by Banks/Ridlon and Wilkes. First, George Soule signed the "Mayflower Compact." In order to have done so, he needed to have been of legal age. On 8 September 1623, William Bradford wrote a letter to the English investors in the Pilgrims' joint-stock company to answer some of their concerns and complaints about the government the Pilgrims had established. Bradford wrote: "Touching our government you are mistaken if you think we admit women and children ... for they are excluded, as both reason and nature teacheth they should be; neither do we admit any but as are above the age of 21 years, and they also but only in some weighty matters, when we think good."⁴ In other words, the men over 21 in the colony were only allowed to participate in government for "some weighty matters," and women and those under 21 were barred from participation. George Soule, therefore, was over 21 years of age on 11 November 1620, and thus was born in 1599 or earlier.

Additionally, George Soule came in the capacity of a "manservant" to Edward Winslow. Manservants were essentially apprentices, except in many cases they were not being taught a specific trade, but were simply housed and fed by their master for a contractual period of time, in exchange for labor. This was often done when a father died, leaving a wife and children without enough estate to care for themselves; or when a family became too large to support itself. The contractual period of service ended at age 25, or sometimes earlier. So when George Soule came on the *Mayflower* as a manservant for Edward Winslow, he must have been under 25 years of age, meaning he was born sometime after 1595. These facts place George Soule's birth at between 1595 and 1599.

Additionally, it can be noted that George Soule was not married in 1623. He only received one share in the Division of Land; if he were married he would have received two shares. His future wife, Mary Buckett, arrived on the ship *Anne* in July 1623. She is listed elsewhere in the Division of Land, receiving one share "on the south side of town towards the eele-river."⁵ However, George and Mary were married and already had one child by 22 May 1627, the date of the Division of Cattle. So he was married at least by 1626. George Soule would not have been eligible to marry until his contract was up, which normally would occur when he reached the age of 25. His marriage right around 1624-1626 fits in perfectly with the chronology given above for a birth between 1595 and 1599.

Previous researchers seem to have assumed that George Soule's origins should be found in co. Worcester, near the birthplace of his master Edward Winslow. However,

⁴ R.G. Marsden, "Letter of William Bradford, September 1623," *American Historical Review* 8(1903):294-301.

⁵ PCR 12:6

this need not be the case. Edward Winslow left co. Worcester for London by 1613, where he became a printer's apprentice, and then left for Leiden, Holland by 1618.⁷ Winslow probably made his contact with the Soule family through one of the other Pilgrims in Leiden, or through one of the London investors that were underwriting the voyage.

THE PREVAILING THEORY: ECKINGTON, CO. WORCESTER

The most popular theory on the origin of George Soule has him coming from Eckington, co. Worcester. This theory was worked primarily by G.L. Ridlon and Charles E. Banks through the 1920s⁸, and was further investigated by Nils Wilkes about 1986.⁹ Though none of the researchers came to any conclusive conclusion, both Ridlon and Banks offered tentative theories and suggestions, which over the intervening 75 years have often been presented as if they were documented fact. A closer examination of the Eckington Soules is thus a necessary beginning-point for any investigation.

A careful examination of the records of Eckington, co. Worcester, reveal that there are three different George Soules living there in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Research is hampered somewhat by the fact that the parish registers for Eckington do not begin until 1678, and only the pre-*Mayflower* years of 1612, 1615, and 1617 are available in Bishop's Transcripts. So most of the information about the Soule family of Eckington comes from probate and manor records.

Let us now take a look at each of these three Georges, to determine if any meet the necessary qualifications to have been the *Mayflower* passenger.

GEORGE SOULE, SON OF ROBERT SOULE, SALTER OF LONDON.

On 5 February 1580, Robert Soule "citizen and salter of London" sold to his brother Thomas his lands in Eckington, co. Worcester. The deed was witnessed by his sons Edward and George.¹⁰ On 20 September 1581, George Soule of Evesham leased land in Eckington and the neighboring parish of Birlingham.¹¹ On 17 August 1583, George Soule had a daughter Mary baptized at All Saints, Evesham. This is his only child of record for him. Robert Soule was a gentleman, and had his coat of arms confirmed by the College of Arms in London on 18 June 1591.¹² Robert Soule, salter, made out his will, proved 17 April 1595 at St. Giles Cripplegate, London.¹³ In his will, he bequeaths son George £10, and mentions George had received a "great house or inn" at Evesham, co. Worcester.

⁷ Jeremy D. Bangs, *Pilgrim Edward Winslow: New England's First International Diplomat* (Boston: NEHGS, 2004), p. 3-5.

⁸ G.L. Ridlon, *History, Biography and Genealogy of the Families Named Soule, Sowle and Soulls* (Lewiston, ME, 1926), and Charles E. Banks, *English Ancestry and Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers* (Baltimore, 1929), at pp. 80-81.

⁹ Nils Wilkes, *In Search of George Soule of the Mayflower* (n.d., c1986). Typescript deposited at the Worcester Records Office, and available from the Soule Kindred of America.

¹⁰ Worcester Records Office 899:637/BA 7852

¹¹ Wilkes, p. 6, citing Worcester Records Office 850 / BA1615 / Box 4

¹² G.L. Ridlon, p. 25, citing "The record of grant of arms to Robert Sole, salter, found in the College of Arms in London."

¹³ Prerogative Court of Canterbury PROB 11/85.

This George Soule could not be the *Mayflower* passenger. He was an adult in 1580, so clearly was born well outside the 1596-1599 window calculated previously. It has been suggested that perhaps he had a son George. But there is no record of any such son. Additionally, this George Soule had a fairly high social status and wealth, being the son of an armorial gentleman and having received a "great house or inn." If he ever did have a son George, he would not make a likely candidate to have been a manservant to Edward Winslow.

GEORGE SOULE, SON OF ROBERT SOULE, HUSBANDMAN OF ECKINGTON

On 5 February 1612/3, Robert Soule, husbandman of Eckington, made out his will. He bequeathed to wife Elizabeth his lease of land in Eckington, and upon her death it was to transfer to his son George. Son Thomas received a malt mill, cistern, and watering trough, while son Robert received the "residue" of his goods that were not otherwise disposed of. Daughters Alice Warde, Anne, and Eleanor are also mentioned. An estate inventory was made on 12 March 1612/3, and the will was proved the next day, 13 March 1612/3.¹⁴ On 10 October 1613, George Soule and his mother Elizabeth signed a lease of land in Eckington.¹⁵

Charles Banks noted that this George "answers best of all the candidates the demands of identification, in point of time, locality and relationship to a Sole family which had contact with Governor Winslow both in London and Worcestershire."¹⁶ Nils Wilkes denoted this man as "George ?Pilgrim?" on his tree of the Soule families of Eckington.¹⁷

However, this George Soule is almost certainly not the *Mayflower* passenger. He signed a lease agreement in October 1613, which would indicate he was 21 years of age or older at the time. This puts his birth at sometime before 1592. His brother Thomas—presumably a younger brother since he received only a malt mill, cistern and watering trough in his father's will—was married on 2 May 1606 to Winifred Moore. If younger brother Thomas was married in 1606, then he was probably about 25 years old, putting his birth at 1581-1584—so this would push George's birth to sometime before 1584 at least. Once again, this is far too old to have been the *Mayflower* passenger. In addition, as will be discussed under the next George Soule, this man was probably still living in Eckington on 31 August 1647.

GEORGE SOULE "THE YOUNGER" OF ECKINGTON, MOLECATCHER

On 5 June 1631, Eckington parish registers record the marriage of George Soule to Susan Nash. If he were about 25 when he married, this George would have been born about 1606—right about the same time period that Thomas Soule, mentioned above, was married to Winifred Moore. Because of the timing, I therefore suspect this George is probably the son of George Soule discussed above. George and Susan had a daughter Frances baptized on 13 November 1636 at Eckington. A few years earlier, the parish registers record the marriage of Grizzigon Soule to Thomas Roberts on 2 February 1627;

¹⁴ Worcester Records Office, Consistory Court of Worcester 1612:191.

¹⁵ Worcester Records Office, 850 / BA 4401 / Document No. 26. "Elizabeth Sole and George Sole have putt their hands and seales even the date and yeare first above written."

¹⁶ Ridlon, p. 150.

¹⁷ Wilkes, p. 51.

Grizzigon was perhaps George's sister. On 13 February 1633/4, George Soule, molecatcher of Eckington, had a legal dispute with Mary Taylor. Mary was ordered to keep the peace with George, and George signed a release indicating Mary had paid her debt for molecatching.¹⁸ On 9 June 1637, George Soule was in trouble for having stolen a sheep from Thomas Roberts—presumably his brother-in-law.¹⁹ Apparently the family dispute was mended, because George was a witness to Thomas Roberts' will in February 1643.²⁰

On 31 August 1647, George Soule "the younger" is listed on an account of men of Eckington that were quartering troops and horses during the English Civil War.²¹ Because he is referred to as "the younger," we can presume there was an older George Soule still living in Eckington at the time: probably George's father George, as I surmised above. Since both Georges are living in Eckington in 1647, they obviously were not the *Mayflower* passengers. Younger George made out his will on 17 October 1651, proved ten years later on 22 June 1661. His will mentions wife Susanna, and daughter Frances, as well as kinsman Thomas son of Thomas.²² I presume that is Thomas, son of his uncle Thomas.

These three George Soules (son of Robert the salter; son of the Robert the husbandman; and the molecatcher), can thus all be eliminated as candidates for the *Mayflower* passenger, because they were either too old, or still living in Eckington after the *Mayflower*'s departure. There are no other known George Soules in any Eckington records. Therefore, we must discard the theory he was from Eckington, and move on to search for his origins elsewhere in England.

There are more George Soules somewhat to the west of Eckington in the parishes of Berrow, Dymock, and Redmarly D'Abitot, in co. Worcester, as well as Asperdon, co. Hereford. Additionally, there are some George Soules living in Flitwick and Tingrith, co. Bedford, which is not too far from Henlow, the origins of the *Mayflower* Tilley, Samson, and Cooper families; and the Bedfordshire Soules appear to have reached across into northern co. Hertford, into the parishes where *Mayflower* passenger Richard Warren is thought to have originated. These families will be investigated as this research, funded by the Soule Kindred of America, progresses.

Caleb Johnson is the author and webmaster of the MayflowerHistory.com website. a website he has researched and maintained for the past eight years. He previously has discovered the English origins of Mayflower passenger Stephen Hopkins, and this last year discovered the origins of Mayflower passenger Peter Browne. He is currently working on a book, The Mayflower and Her Passengers, due out in August 2005. His research into the ancestry of George Soule is being funded by the Soule Kindred of America. Simon Neal of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, is accessing English records, and translating them where necessary, in support of this project. Simon is a noted genealogist and records researcher in England, has an M.A. in Latin, and has worked with Caleb on several Mayflower-related projects in the past.

¹⁸ Worcester Records Office. Worcester Quarter Sessions Rolls, 1/110/24/54.

¹⁹ Worcester Records Office. Worcester Quarter Sessions Rolls, 1/110/84/37.

²⁰ Wilkes, p. 9, citing Worcester Records Office 008.7/BA.3585/1647 Nu. 157.

²¹ Wilkes, p. 10, citing Worcester Records Office 705:877 / BA 8081.

²² Worcester Records Office. Consistory Court of Worcester: June 1661:26.