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GOVERNOR RICHARD BELLINGHAM AND THE FOUNDING OF OUR TOWN



*This article is a combination of content from research conducted by Bellingham resident Bruce Lord, and the book **History of Bellingham 1719-1919** by George F. Partridge and other sources.*

Bellingham was not a typical Massachusetts town at its founding. The Pilgrims in Plymouth and the Puritans in Boston moved out from their areas to settle in like minded towns throughout the future Commonwealth of Massachusetts. These settlements were centered around the Puritan church, now more commonly called Congregational. Puritanism was a way of life based on the belief that the Bible was the word of God, and the whole word of God. Each town had a minister to “oversee the souls” of the settlers. These hard working men and women were shunned and even persecuted in England and now were spreading in an area where they felt secure in the practice of religion. Security in their own religion did not lead to tolerance in the belief of others. To believe differently was to tempt banishment. Many went to Rhode Island, Connecticut or were imprisoned or hanged. Most of the first settlers of Bellingham fell outside the tolerated sect. The settlers of Bellingham were willing to accept and tolerate other religions, but their neighbors and the colonial government were not.

By 1719, as part of the Dedham Grant, as the settlers built their homes in what was to become Bellingham, the need for roads and other services led to the conclusion that a new town should be formed. A petition went to Dedham, and there was little debate. The area that became Bellingham was not crucial to Dedham, nor was it particularly desirable.

On May 11, 1719 the response to the petition was received, and it stated: “*This day the inhabitants of this town in the track of land lying between Mendon and*

FOUNDING OF BELLINGHAM (CONTINUED)

Wrentham presented a petition to this town praying that they may be set off from this town in order to a township the town have granted provided they can unite and encorporat together with the farms adjacent and some Assistance and Inlargement from the towns of Mendon and Wrentham so as to capassatate them to manage the affairs of a town and have approbation of the General Court."

The area incorporated included the Rawson Farm, located north of the Charles River and portions of Mendon, located east of the Charles River and west of the Farms.

On November 26, 1719 "A Petition of John Darling, Nicholas Cook and 30 others, Inhabitants of a remove part of Dedham, some Farms and 4 Inhabitants of Mendon" was presented to the legislature and read, praying, that they may be constituted as a Township. No name for the town was requested within the petition.

The tradition at the time was that the petition first went to the House. A vote was taken and it was "Ordered, That the prayer of the Petition be Granted, and that the Township be Erected and Constituted accordingly thereto, and the Plat therewith exhibited, with all Powers and Privileges belonging to a Town. Provided, They procure and settle a Learned Orthodox Minister, within the space of three Years next coming, and that John Darling, John Tompson and John Marsh be Impowered, to call a Town Meeting at any time in March next, to choose Town Officers and manage the other prudential Affairs of the Town; the name of the Town to be called Westham..."

Westham's final vote came the next day. The Council of the General Court (similar to today's State Senate) did not grant Westham the independence requested. Less than 24 hours after its birth, Westham went down to defeat. The reason is not in the records, only the following statement of the Council's action.

November 27, 1719: "The Vote of this House on the Petition of John Darling &c. Pass'd the 26. Currant, Sent down from the Board pass'd on there, viz. In Council Nov. 27th 1719. Read and Concurr'd with this Vote excepting the Name to be Bellingham. Read and Concurr'd."

The towns in Massachusetts were initially named after towns in England. After the colony ran out of names

familiar to the hometowns of settlers, they started naming the towns after their and other similarly named towns. And thus, we have Bellingham, probably named after Richard Bellingham, the third Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. There is no actual evidence that he was the benefactor of the Town's name, after all there is a Bellingham, England, but that is in line with the other names given at the time.

Rev. Abial Fischer, Jr., one hundred years later, indicated the town was named after Governor Bellingham. The truth will probably never be known, but it is assumed that Rev. Fischer, being closer to the founding had more compelling evidence. One possibility is that the unorthodox religious beliefs of many of the town's early inhabitants was recognized, particularly by the legislators from Mendon, Wrentham and Medway, and a joke was played on them by naming their town after the most rabid Baptist persecutor of the 1600s.

As to Westham, for one brief day it was a town in Massachusetts. Alas, the Council rejected it and going forward, Westham would be a lost town in Massachusetts.

Who was Governor Richard Bellingham?

Richard Bellingham (c.1592-December 7, 1672) was a colonial magistrate, lawyer and several-time governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the last surviving signatory of the colonial charter at his death.

The role of Governor Bellingham in the religious community was strong. He was a steadfast Puritan, as were most of his fellow settlers. His public image was as a defender of faith, often to a greater degree than his fellow magistrates.



FOUNDING OF BELLINGHAM (CONTINUED)

The death of his sister without his attempting to save her, is a good example of this blind faith, as well as a lack of devotion to his sister. His sister, Ann Hibbens, was brought before the Court of Assistants, in 1655 tried before a jury, she was condemned as a witch and hanged on June 19, 1656.

The first Baptists in Boston were also the target of Bellingham's faith. Considered heretics by the established church, the Baptists attempted to start their own church in Charlestown and Boston. The founders of the first Baptist church in Boston were "allowed" to enter into a debate with the Puritan church. The result of the debate was the banishment of Thomas Goold, the Baptist leader, and two others from the colony. The banishment was never carried out, but after 30 months of imprisonment, they were released to a Baptist sanctuary on an island in Boston Harbor. After Governor Bellingham's death in 1673, the Baptists returned to Boston.

Governor Bellingham is buried in the northwest corner of the Granary Burial Ground in Boston, in a tomb made of two slabs of sandstone separated by 6 columns.

Bellingham's Early Days

Bellingham at its founding was a frontier town. The roads were unpaved and remained so for another century or more. There were no public utilities. Water came from a well that was dug by hand. Transportation was by horse and wagon. It was hard living and most were dependent on the land for their food and whatever money they could make.

Even the few that were not farmers planted their own food. There were inns and taverns early in the town history. Because of the Post Road from Boston to Hartford, which ran along the current Hartford Avenue, there was a need for establishments to cater to the traveler. One, now known as the Pelitiah Smith house on Hartford Avenue, (pictured to the right) next to St. Brendan's Church, is still standing. Inns and taverns were a convenient means of raising money. Travelers expected little, except a meal and a bed.

The town meeting house was not the Town Hall of present day. There were no offices for town officials.

The meeting house was just that, a place for town inhabitants to meet to discuss their needs and those of the Town. The most important use of the meeting house however was not even civil or political, it was religious.

Colonial towns were formed with the specific purpose of providing a religious center for a group of settlers. Because of the difficulty of travel, houses in which to worship needed to be convenient to the worshippers. As previously noted, the incorporation of the town required the town to hire a minister, and in order to do so, they needed to have a meeting house. The exact location of the first meeting house has been lost to time.

In 1750 meetings were held at a new north meeting house. It was constructed by the newly formed Baptist Church in 1743 and was located on the western end of High Street. The use of a Baptist building for a town meeting was unusual in Massachusetts at the time. The largely Puritan (Congregational) settlers did not easily accept any other religion. The Puritan faith was as close to a state religion as was to be found in the early colonies. Bellingham, with a large Baptist population, was an exception, although not always a harmonious one.

Finally, in 1802 the town built another meeting house, the one that survives to the present day.



Plymouth England Tied to Bellingham Native

by ITC Charles D. Rhodes, USN Retired

On a day in October, Charles Rhodes visited the Historical Museum and told us this story, and we asked him to document the story for Bellingham History. We are glad to share his story with you!

As a child living on Locust Street my vision of the world did not reach much further than the big windows of my Grandma's living room. I remember so vividly awakening to the morning sun glistening between the many trees to welcome my happy days living in Bellingham.

For as long as I can recall each generation of our family, at least one or more persons served in the military. My father served in the Navy and later in the Air Force. Growing up all I wanted to do was go into service for the country. In 1981 my desire to join the service had finally arrived and I was to become a sailor in the U.S. Navy.

In 1983, while stationed aboard the USS Mount Whitney Second Fleet Flag Ship, I extended my ship-board duties as a member of the Honor Guard. Aside from the many At Sea burials and other honor ceremonies came one of the most unique memorable occasions.

Our ship made port in Plymouth, England in 1983 and during this port visit the local Pilgrim Elementary School requested the ship's Honor Guard perform at the groundbreaking ceremony for the building of a 1/3 scale replica of the Massachusetts Plymouth House, recognizing America's ties to England. The Plymouth House was to be built by hand using the same skills and hand tools as the Pilgrims had in Plymouth, MA. What a true honor. A child from Bellingham, having visited Plymouth so many times, would now stand on the very wharf from where the Pilgrims left England and share America with the children of England attending a school built on the very grounds once covered with fruit trees that provided various fruits as nourishment to the Pilgrims on their long voyage to what would become America.

Joining John Pugh, Headmaster Pilgrim Elementary, we presented the school with an American Flag and a few other items from the Flag Ship U.S.S. Mount Whitney. We spoke with over 300 students, played with them and then performed the groundbreaking ceremony for the start of the Pilgrim House. Wow, how wonderful it felt to be a part of something so big, the once small Bellingham boy had now grown and travelled past the windows across the sea to be a part of something touching back home.



Ground Breaking Ceremony

A year later Pilgrim Elementary School's 1/3 scale replica of the Plymouth House was now complete. Invitations to the 13 Honor Guard members having attended the groundbreaking ceremony were sent from the Plymouth Lord Mayor, appointed by the Queen of England, to attend a dedication ceremony. Recently stationed in New Orleans, LA, I would have to request permission to attend. My Commanding Officer granted permission for two weeks as long as I paid my own way.

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Using military Space A Travel, trains and cars, I finally arrived in Plymouth, England.

The Pilgrim House, smaller than that which the Pilgrims of Plymouth, MA fashioned, was truly amazing. The detail placed in the fireplace stone and neatly thatched room, my thoughts quickly returned to my youth in Bellingham and the many visits to Plymouth, MA's shores.

Not to miss an opportunity, I would now share my experience growing up in the New England States, especially my then small world at 40 Locust Street, Bellingham, MA.

The school children were very attentive, they wanted to hear from a real American as to how life was like growing up in America. At the end of the ceremony, the school children presented me with a clay sculpture fashioned in the shape of a church window with glazed, green color-stained glass. On the back was a thank you from the Pilgrim Elementary School.

Thanks to John Pugh, his family and the Plymouth Lord Mayor, my two weeks were wonderful. I travelled by Rolls Royce to the York Faire, explored Sir Francis Drake Buckland Abbey, scoured the English Moors, visited Buckingham Palace and so much more.

Exciting as all my many Naval travels have been, my heart has never left Bellingham and soon I will return to rest in the beautiful hometown of my childhood.



Dedication Ceremony

Bellingham Cemeteries



There are nine cemeteries in town, two of the oldest are the North & Center Cemeteries.

The North Cemetery, located on Hartford Avenue, east of the Route 495 intersection, was in use as early as 1718, before the founding of the town, and is the oldest cemetery in town. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Here is the text of some of the epitaphs from the North Cemetery of members of Bellingham's founding families.

Sacred to the memory of
Doct. Samuel Lesley Scammell
Who died Dec 5, 1805
In the 67 year of his age

Here lies Interr'd
Ye body of Ye Rev Mr.
Elnathan Wight Deceased
Novbr 6th 1761
In ye 46th year of his age
& 12th of his ministry
While you are standing here to read
Prepare for death with care & speed
For sure it is that you must die
And hasten to Eternity
Prepare for Death he often said
Who in this Silent Grave is laid

Julia Holbrook, daughter
Of Mr. Joseph Holbrook &
Meletiah his wife, who died
October ye 9th 1785 aged one year
And 23 days
Happy happy babe
How hasty was thy flight
Unseen disaster quenchth
The pleasant light

In memory of
Mr. Stephen Holbrook
Who died June 11th, 1812
In the 76 year
Forbear my friends, dry up your tears
Here I must lie 'til Christ appears

Lucy Partridge widow of
Mr. Joseph Partridge
Who died Dec 3 1829
In the 46th year of her age.
Farewell to all, my days are ore,
With you I meet on earth no more,
Cease to weep or shed a tear.

North & Center Cemeteries (continued)

The Center Cemetery is located on Mechanic Street, Route 140, east of the Town Center.

The land for the Center Cemetery was given in 1778 by Jonathan Thompson and David Jones and it was laid out by Elisha Burr. The first person buried there was Burr's daughter, Rebekah, aged 14. Her gravestone states: "She died 1781 Aged 14 The first here buried."

Other epitaphs from the Center Cemetery include:

Ruth

Widow of Capt Elias Thayer

Aged 76 yrs

Ath the setting of the sun,
on a beautiful Sabbath eve
on the 10th of August 1851, she
calmly fell asleep in Jesus

General

John M. Thayer

1818-1892

Interred at Lincoln, in Nebraska
the state he helped to create

His wife

Mary T.A. Thayer

1818-1892

A noble woman

Pioneer, soldier

U.S. Senator

Governor

Sacred to the memory of
Elder Noah Alden of Bellingham

Who departed this life
May 5, 1979 in the 72
year of his Age and 43
Year of his Public Ministry,
31 of which he spent in this
place. His labours have been
Blessed in this and many other
Places to the good of
many souls.



The other cemeteries in town include:

Oak Hill Cemetery - adjacent to North Cemetery
On the National Register of Historic Places

Union Cemetery - adjacent to Center Cemetery

Scott Cemetery - Center Street

Ukrainian-American Cemetery - Center Street

Depot Street (Scammell) Cemetery

Wilcox Cemetery, also known as Rakeville
Cemetery - Lake Street

St. Jean Baptiste Cemetery Wrentham Road

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Bellingham Historical Commission
3 Common Street
Bellingham MA 02019
Check [website](#) for current hours
Also open by appointment

Telephone: 508-966-5838

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