

THE STORY OF THE MATHER HOMESTEAD ... as told by docent Gordon Hastings

Persons reading this blog know of my great interest in American History. I am a volunteer docent at the Stephen Mather House in Darien, Connecticut. Stephen Mather was the first director of our National Parks, appointed to the post by Woodrow Wilson. Prior to that he was a very successful business person, having developed and marketed 20 Mule Team Borax. This post is the story I use with visitors to the house which puts in perspective the Mather family history and how they came to Darien, Connecticut and of the influence the family had over many years.

STEPHEN MATHER HOMESTEAD NARRATIVE:

Now that you are all sitting comfortably, I want to ask you to leave the 21st Century and go back with me 240 years and picture yourself here with Deacon Joseph Mather, son of Reverend Moses Mather, his wife Sarah and eight of their 11 children still living at home. One child is an infant, another just two years old. It is 15 degrees outside with a 25 mile per northeast wind blowing snow through tiny cracks in these walls and around the windows. Candles flicker, as there is no electricity. A fire glows in the hearth and in the pot above the hot coals is a rich stew which Sara prepared this morning and will be ready for an early dinner after Joseph and the oldest boys return from the barn following milking their four cows and making them safe for the night. The Mathers were typical of a self-sufficient eighteenth-century New England colonial farm family. We will return to the hearth for supper. Now, you might ask yourselves who are these Mather people and where did they come from and how did they end up here in this place?

In discussing the settlement of New England in the 17th Century, it is common to reference those hearty 120 brave souls who came here aboard the Mayflower and made landfall first on Cape Cod, then finally in what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts. They survived and established a colony primarily because they came as nuclear families, held deep religious beliefs, and brought with them tools and talent to feed themselves and survive in the wilderness. Despite some altercations and thievery, they were smart enough to befriend the Native Americans, without whom they would not have made it through the first year. In another migration fifteen years later, there were both similarities and differences.

Now I ask each of you to rekindle your imagination and embark on another voyage across the treacherous Atlantic Ocean and go back with me 363 years and stand on a wooden pier on a bitter cold and rainy April morning in Bristol, England. A mother, father and four children all under ten years of age are peering through the fog out at an old wooden ship destined for the New World that these six brave souls had only seen in their imagination.

The ancestors of Stephen Mather came to American shores in 1635, some fifteen years after the Mayflower. They were part of the very first mass immigration to America in what would later be called The Great Migration taking place between 1630-1635. Over that period of time some 20,000 souls, mostly Puritans seeking relief from the persecution of King Charles, left England bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Their leader, Puritan Minister John

Winthrop would later become governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In 1635 The Reverend Richard Mather with his wife and four children, Samuel, Timothy, Nathaniel and Joseph boarded the sailing ship James with 110 other men, women and children. It would be a three-month journey to the New World. The James was a three-mast vessel capable of sailing only with the trade winds. Conditions aboard the ships of the Great Migration were deplorable. There were no sanitary facilities, no privacy, rotting food, scurvy and of course unending seasickness on the stormy seas. Animals were carried aboard along with the human cargo. The stench was oppressive.

Luck was with Richard Mather and his family on the Atlantic crossing through the Azores, the Caribbean and up along the Atlantic Coast of what would become America. However, upon nearing Boston, the James ran directly into the Great Hurricane of August 1635 that raged along the coast of New England. It stands as among the worst ever recorded. The ship and all of its passengers and crew were thought lost by those anticipating its arrival in July. They were forced to ride it out just outside the Isles of Shoals, New Hampshire and lost all three anchors, as no canvas or rope would hold. As if a miracle, on Aug 13, 1635, torn to pieces, but not one death aboard, all one hundred plus passengers and the James managed to make it to Boston Harbor.

The family established a homestead in Dorchester near Boston and quickly became part of the religious community there. It should be remembered that ministers in colonial times were poorly paid, if at all. Very likely then, the Mather family depended a great deal on the

largess of their parishioners for their sustenance. Aside from a place to live they had very little and lived a truly hardscrabble life.

Upon the death of Richard Mather's first wife Catherine, he married Sarah Hankridge who was the widow of Reverend John Cotton of Boston. That is how the Cotton name became part of the Mather collateral ancestry.

Richard and Sarah had three children together not including the four older children from Richard's first marriage, all of whom came from England with him on board the James. One of the three children of Richard and Sarah was Increase Mather born in Boston in 1639. Increase Mather became a most prominent clergyman in Boston and in 1685 he briefly served as the first American born President of Harvard College. In 1661 Increase Mather further extended the ties to the Cotton family by marrying his stepsister Maria Cotton.

Maria Mather gave birth to a son Cotton Mather in 1663. Cotton was an extremely bright child, home schooled by the fireside in his early years by his mother and then incredibly, graduating from Harvard College at the age of fifteen in 1678. Of course, he could have had a little support from his father, Increase as president of the college.

Both Cotton Mather and his father Increase played important roles in the Salem Witch Trials in 1692-1693. The trials were without doubt due in great part to religious tyranny and Puritanical beliefs and suspicions. Both Cotton and Increase helped fuel the flames. Somewhere between 12 and 20 so-called witches were put to death, mostly by hanging, in the towns of Salem and Andover,

located about 20 miles north of Boston. While the trials are another entire subject, writings of both Cotton and Increase Mather in their later lives indicate they had misgivings about the trials and the lack of true evidence.

Timothy Mather, who was born in England in 1628 and had sailed with his father Richard and mother Catherine on the James in 1635, did not become a clergyman. To this day, his descendants refer to Timothy as The Mather Farmer. He lived until 1685. Timothy and Catherine resided in Dorchester. They had a son Richard born in 1653. He was named for his grandfather and after his marriage to Catherine Wise in 1680 he moved to Lyme, Connecticut. Richard died in 1688 at the young age of 35. He and Catherine were married for eight years and had four children, the oldest being a son Timothy born in 1681 and who died in 1755.

Timothy, known as Captain Timothy, married Sarah Noyes. Captain Timothy served with the colonists in the wars with the Piquant Indians. Timothy and Sarah had a son Moses born in 1719. Moses Mather grew up on the family farm in Lyme. However, Moses was not destined to become another Mather farmer. He enrolled at Yale in New Haven and graduated in 1739 and became a Congregational minister. After graduating from Yale in 1739 Moses struck out to what was then Stamford, Connecticut, an area that is now the Town of Darien. Moses had broken from the long-standing Puritanism of his ancestors as had many New England clergy seeking greater freedom of religious expression and was ordained a Congregational Minister. Moses built a farmhouse in Darien and shortly thereafter was installed as the pastor of the First Congregational Church in Darien that had been erected in 1740. The First Congregational

Church and the original brick structure remains today at the corner of Brookside and the Post Road in Darien.

Over his lifetime Moses married three times, first to Hannah Bell, then to Elizabeth Whiting and his third wife Rebecca Raymond. Together with his three wives he fathered eleven children, one of whom a girl named Clara who died in infancy. One of his five children from his marriage to Hannah Bell was a son named Joseph who would later in life be called Deacon Joseph Mather.

During his sixty-year tenure as the pastor of First Congregational Church Moses Mather was an outspoken early firebrand for the cause of independence. Young Joseph while growing up in Connecticut would have seen his father Moses arrested at least five times and taken off by Tories, British sympathizers, across Long Island Sound and imprisoned there for various lengths of time. Moses was never deterred in his advocacy for independence.

In 1777, Deacon Joseph married Sarah Scott of Ridgefield and she moved with him to Darien. Ownership of land was critically important to large colonial families and as children approached adulthood they needed to strike out on their own as there was little room left at the family homestead. Joseph was fortunate in that in 1778 he inherited from his mother Hannah Bell, the very tract of land upon which we are sitting today. The 100-plus acres was a sizable parcel and large enough upon which to establish a farmstead to support his family. The farm extended past Dorchester Road to present day Pilgrim Road.

In 1778, in the middle of the Revolutionary War, Deacon Joseph built this farmhouse. It was prescient that Joseph, Sarah and their child Hannah, named after her grandmother, moved in over the July 4th weekend. The house was truly on the edge of the wilderness being some four miles from town along a well-worn cart path, originally an Indian trail. Joseph and Sarah raised eleven children over their lifetime in this small farmhouse. The original barns and other out buildings have long since been destroyed. Their total sustenance came from the family farm, from the wood to heat the house, to the fields that provided vegetables, flax and wheat and farm animals providing milk, eggs and meat. Game, particularly deer, turkey and rabbit, was also plentiful. It was a difficult existence made even worse by the bitter winters that plagued New England during the 18th century. All of the housework, cooking, making of clothes, care of the children and the keeping of the "kitchen garden" fell upon Sarah. For a family of that size it would not be uncommon for Sarah to bake a dozen loaves of bread a week in the oven here in the central hearth.

During the Revolution Deacon Joseph would often be gone during the fighting seasons in the spring and summer for extended periods of time. At one time he served in Canada and was also part of the Militia guarding the Stamford coastline. The nearest neighbors were over two miles away and children were put to household chores as soon as they were able. Of the eleven children, all lived to maturity and all except Hannah were born here. Sarah was a strong and resourceful woman and like most colonial period wives raised the children ran the household. One can only imagine the amount of work placed upon Sarah's shoulders particularly when Deacon Joseph was off with other Patriots fighting in the Revolutionary War.

While the Native Americans had long since been driven across the Hudson River there was another threat during the revolution. Tory raiding parties came across Long Island Sound and confiscated valuables from the farmhouses of the Patriots living along the Connecticut shore. Despite the fact that Joseph and Sarah's house was four miles inland it was indeed a target during one of Deacon Joseph's absences. A group of Tories came to the house demanding valuables at the point of a bayonet. Sarah had kept some items hidden in the well that the raiders found immediately. However, they did not find the family silver, which had been hidden, in a false top chest that you will see in the dining room. As the legend goes and to add to the insult, the raiders demanded Sarah serve them dinner before they departed.

In the course of time the Mather children married and established homesteads of their own in Connecticut, others moved away. The family always returned here for the holidays with the house overflowing with grandchildren all gathering for a wonderful holiday meal prepared by Sarah. The family was deeply religious, no smoking, no liquor and plenty of prayer and reflection upon the Lord's blessings. Deacon Mather and his wife lived here for the remainder of their lives. He died in 1840 and she in 1843. They are buried in the Mather Cemetery nearby across Brookside Road alongside their daughter Clara who died in infancy in 1786.

Upon Sarah's death the house was left to Joseph's two maiden daughters, Rana and Phoebe. A widowed sister Ann Elizabeth Lockwood also lived for many years here with Rana and Phoebe.

Upon their deaths Elizabeth sold the house and 12 acres in 1887 to her cousin Joseph Wakeman Mather, grandson of Deacon Joseph Mather. Under Joseph's ownership and that of his wife Bertha Walker the house first became a summer home because he, his wife and his aged sisters could not stand the cold winters with no central heat. They lived in Brooklyn in the winter. Joseph Wakeman Mather died in 1905. He left the property to his one surviving son, Stephen T. Mather of Chicago and to a niece Bertha Mather who was the daughter of his Joseph Wakeman's brother Henry.

Stephen Tyng Mather was born on the Fourth of July in 1867 in San Francisco, which was appropriate for a child whose ancestors were colonists and indeed revolutionaries. Stephen represented the eighth generation of Mather's in the New World. Stephen's parents moved to New York after he graduated from Berkley in 1887. He expressed no interest in the ministry. He worked as a reporter for the New York Sun in the 1890s. In 1893 he married Jane Thacker Floy. They had a daughter Bertha Floy Mather a portrait of who hangs in the parlor. They first occupied this house in 1907 and used it only as a summer home until Stephen's death in 1930.

Stephen Mather abandoned his career as a newspaperman and joined the Pacific Coast Borax Company, where his father Joseph was administrator and chief executive. Though the company was based in New York, all of the Borax at that time was mined in California. Borax was a compound used in early detergents. Stephen and his wife Jane at the request of his father moved from New York to Chicago to establish a marketing effort for the company's products. Stephen created the famous advertising slogan "20 Mule Team

Borax," which quickly became a household name throughout the country.

Mather saw the potential of Borax as a commercial product and together with a friend Thomas Thorkildsen, much to his father's consternation, formed the Thorkildson-Mather Borax Company. It was a huge success and by 1914 both men had become millionaires. Now in his mid-forties, Mather was financially independent and decided to retire from the company.

Stephen and Jane chose to travel and pursue their love of nature and the outdoors. He and his wife traveled extensively and became acquainted with the great naturalist John Muir, the savior of Yosemite National Park. Muir had been an enormous influence upon Teddy Roosevelt in convincing him to preserve millions of acres of pristine national resources. Roosevelt's successor Howard Taft did not share Teddy's keen interest in the outdoors and during his administration nothing had been done to build an organization to administer these vast natural resources. Upon the election of Woodrow Wilson, Stephen Mather was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Interior and lobbied Wilson to create a permanent bureau to operate the National Parks. On August 25th, 1916, Wilson signed a bill authorizing the creation of the National Parks Service. At Wilson's request Mather agreed to become the first director of the National Parks Service. For Stephen Mather it was truly a labor of love. He was instrumental in extending the National Park Concept to the east and in 1926 the Shenandoah and Great Smokey Mountains national parks were authorized. Mather served with distinction until in January of 1929 when he suffered a severe stroke, had to leave office and died a year later in 1930 at age sixty-three.

Before his death he began the modernization of this house while at the same time preserving its core. Stephen and Jane's daughter Bertha inherited the property. She married Edward R. McPherson and they made the Mather Homestead their year-round home for seventy years. Stephen's widow Jane lived with Bertha and Edward until her death in 1944. All of the McPherson children grew up in this house. Bertha was a graduate of Vassar and also earned a certificate in Architecture granted by Smith College's School of Architecture in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Upstairs, there is a certificate of certification of this accomplishment.

While Stephen and his wife Jane made substantial changes to the original Deacon Mather Homestead. They raised the rear roofline and made additional improvements including heating, modernization of the kitchen and additional bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs. Bertha and Edward continued to make improvements and restoration of the home exposing much of the original woodwork that you see here at the hearth. For the first time since 1905 the house once again became a full-time home. During this period Bertha founded the Darien Historical Society.

Great family gatherings at Thanksgiving and Christmas were held around the hearth. Their three children, Anne McPherson Tracy, Stephen Mather McPherson and Jane McPherson Nickerson grew up in the house, becoming the ninth generation connected to the old homestead and continuing the tradition of the home always filled with children. In 2017, 25 years after their mother's death the children made possible the transfer of the property to the Mather Homestead Foundation to be preserved in perpetuity.

And so, beginning with Richard Mather's stepping aboard the sailing ship James in 1635 during the Great Migration, we now, eight generations later, gather in the home of the distinguished gentleman whose portrait hangs on the gathering room wall. Stephen Tyng Mather. When you and your children visit a National Park, tell them you visited his home

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Well, Sarah's stew cooking on the hearth is nearly done and the roaring blizzard outside has snowed us in for a day or two, so we have the time now before dinner at the multi-generation Mather communal table here in the gathering room to take a tour and envision the original home. Imagine all the fireplaces burning, the windows frosted over, the cold floors creaking underfoot and when you reach upstairs throw privacy aside, pick a bedroom with a chamber pot because high drifts block the path to the outhouse. It may well be a couple of days before the storm subsides and you can brave the four-mile trek back into town. Sarah and Joseph would have been delighted with your company.