

My Beach Heritage

My great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather George Darrow came to America from either England or Ireland sometime before 1674. My great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather John Beach arrived in New Haven in 1638. My great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather Edmund Fanning came to New London in 1653. These family ancestors followed the lead of the very first Pilgrims who came to this land from England on the Mayflower in 1620. The Pilgrim's departure was from Plymouth on England's southwestern coast, so they named their American settlement Plymouth on the coast of "New England." One earlier group of pioneers had established a more southern settlement on the shore of a river that was named after their King James of England. This James River and their 1607 settlement, Jamestown, is on the coast of Virginia near Williamsburg.

Most of the European immigrants of the 1600's came from England. And did they come! Seven years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, the settlement had twenty-two homes. Fifty years later, 230 ships exceeding 60-ton capacity claimed Boston their home port and by 1700 many towns on the Atlantic coast had a shipyard and 2000 ships carried on a vigorous mercantile trade in slaves, lumber, ironware, agricultural produce, spices, furs, etc.¹ There were obviously major motivations driving this rapid growth of the new colonies. One would not take lightly the decision to load family possessions and compelling dreams into a boat and set sail into an unknown future filled with risks and fears. What were they leaving and what did they hope to find?

England in the 1600's was an established society with rich and enduring traditions and history. Great institutions anchored her culture and power. Windsor Palace was built in the 1000's, Oxford and Cambridge Universities in the 1100's and 1200's. Westminster Abbey and many great cathedrals were built in the 1200's and 1300's. Political, cultural and creative heroes were abundant. One recalls names like Henry the Eighth, Queen Elizabeth, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Newton, Milton, Gibbons, Tallis and many, many more. In 1588, the English navy had established its preeminence on the seas by defeating the Spanish Armada. Why would one want to leave this land of such great accomplishments?

In fact, the life among the nobility and a broad class of gentlemen land owners was magnificent, but life of the peasants was wretched and middle-class life was bleak and routinely unrewarding. A great motivation was to become a land owner who might then join the ranks of the governing class, perhaps even become a justice of the peace, or a knight, lord, baron, count, earl, marquis, duke or even a member of Parliament. Becoming a land owner, a country gentlemen, meant joining the upper or governing class. The key to upward mobility in this class-structured society was found in the acquisition of land. The new world had land, lots of cheap or free land!

¹ Blow, Michael. "The American Heritage, History of the 13 Colonies." *American Heritage Magazine*, (1967)

It must also be noted that the very earliest Pilgrims to this new land came for religious freedom. Members of a strict sect of Protestantism, the group known as the Puritans brought their Calvin-inspired doctrine to these shores with the words of their leader, John Winthrop, "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." These and other groups of self-selected conformists came and lived in small communities which provided some security and support for the rigors and dangers of life in the wilderness.

Most of those who came were from England's middle class. They were farmers, shopkeepers, craftsmen, carpenters and workers of many other trades. They were young or middle-age and most were married. Family was of considerable importance to building a secure life in the wilderness. Also, they came in groups, many in religious congregations with strong convictions and charismatic leaders. Of course the journey to America did take some money or an indentured agreement which meant giving certain years of labor in return for passage to the new land. Taking possession of large tracts of new land in the colonies created a need for cheap labor such as was provided by England's peasant class. Indentured laborers from England and slaves from Africa were an important ingredient of the economic and social development of the colonies. The first slaves were brought to Virginia in 1619 and by the time of the Revolutionary War, Connecticut had 6000 slaves, New York, 21,000 and Virginia, 200,000. When George Washington died, he owned 200 slaves at his Mount Vernon plantation.²

It did not take long for word to get back to England of the necessities, hardships and possibilities which they would face upon reaching the American shore. They came prepared to make the adventure a success. They brought tools, guns, foods and seeds, household necessities, sheep, cattle and even horses. It would not be easy to turn back.

My great (8 times) grandfather Beach was the first of my ancestors to reach the new world. He was born in Devonshire, England in 1623 and died in 1677 in Stratford, Connecticut. In family genealogy he is referred to as "John the Pilgrim" and his occupation is given as minister. With his two brothers, Richard and Thomas, he came to New Haven in 1638 on the ship Elizabeth and Anna. The three young boys were brought to the new land by Reverend Peter Prudden.

John Beach's first known record was from 1643 when he was fined "two shillings for twice late coming" and another two shillings for having a defective gun. Town meetings in colonial America were of importance and every adult male was expected to own a gun, keep it in good repair and report regularly for drill and training. John became a householder in 1647 and in 1650 married Mary Staples who was born in Denmark. John and Mary had ten children. In 1660 he bought a house on two acres of land in Stratford, CT. Later he was a land owner in Wallingford, where he was one of the organizers of the church. He died on June 16, 1677 in Stratford.

² Blow, Michael. "The American Heritage, History of the 13 Colonies." *American Heritage Magazine*. (1967)

The next four generations of my Beach ancestors were born and lived in the Stratford area. "Pilgrim John" and Mary's fifth child was Nathaniel, born in 1662 and died in 1747. He married Sarah Porter and they had ten children, one of whom was my great (6 times) grandfather Ephraim Beach. Ephraim's son Joseph, born in 1720, was the father of Timothy, who in 1784 was the first of my Beach line to head west.

Gently rolling hills and inviting river valleys west of Stratford offered intriguing opportunities for new farm land and commerce. About forty miles west of Stratford was the Hudson River while forty miles farther was the Delaware River. By following these rivers north one might come as close as twenty miles to the Susquehanna River. These river valleys were filled with Indian trails and settlements. At various times they were the home of the Mohawks, Iroquois, Oneidas, Cayugas, Onondagas, Senecas, Delawares, Mobicans, Shawnees and other tribes. Crossing these territories and following the rivers and trails brought a wide variety of encounters with these native people.

When my great-great-great-great grandfather Timothy Beach headed west with his young son, he followed the Hudson River north to village of Catskill where his brother Ebenezer had settled. From there he followed an Indian trail westward to the Susquehanna River at Wattle's Ferry, now the village of Unadilla, thirty miles north of Binghamton. Timothy and Abigail's eldest child, Deborah, married Joseph Priest. Their son, a writer, Josiah Priest, published Stories of Early Settlers in the Wilderness, Albany, N.Y: J. Mursell, 1837. The stories are interesting accounts of life on the frontier in the late 1700's.

Immediately after the close of the war, a spirit of emigration prevailed among the people of the New England States toward Western wilderness, which still continues, and will continue till the Rocky mountains are passed, and the shore of the great Pacific receives the augmenting tide of human population . . . Deborah's father, Timothy also partook of this general impulse, sold his farm which he had acquired after abandoning a seafaring life, and prepared to remove to the banks of the Susquehanna—the hunting grounds of the Delawares. But before he actually removed his family, he took the precaution to go and explore the lands of that river. On this journey her eldest brother (Richard), then a lad of about twelve years accompanied him.

After crossing the broken and wild region of country lying between the North River and the sea, they came to a place on the Hudson called Catskill, where a few families had already settled. At this place he entered the woods, with a view of coming to the Susquehanna at a place then known as Wattle's Ferry, a distance of nearly one hundred miles. It was however considered dangerous to penetrate that distance without a guide, as there were little or no traits of human industry to mark the way, being almost a continued wilderness. Here he was so fortunate as to find a half-breed Indian, who knew the way, and was willing to become his conductor, appearing to be a fleet, shrewd and intelligent native.

The first day after leaving Catskill they advanced to somewhere near the place which is now called Osbornville (now Windham), and as near as can be calculated a distance of about twenty-five miles. Here they encamped for the night, having gathered grass for the horses on the margin of the head waters of the Schoharie Creek. Along this stream there runs a gloomy gulf, the haunt of wolves, bears and panthers as well as deer and some few elk. Beneath a huge clump of hemlocks near the creek, they scraped away the brush, built a fire, refreshed themselves from their sacks of provisions, and from a small green glass bottle, which had been filled with the true West India Jamaica. They now addressed themselves to rest beneath heaven's canopy. The hour of midnight had nearly arrived, the fire had waned to a few coals amid the ashes, when a shrill but loud and terrifying scream of some animal awoke the slumberers from their dreams. They now listened, when again it struck the ear from another quarter, but somewhat nearer. The guide, being an Indian, knew instantly what kind of animal it was and whispered, "A painter, a painter;" meaning a panther. With its habits, and the best manner of encountering the animal, he was perfectly acquainted, and therefore seizing his rifle, examined the load and priming, bid his companions be silent, but to cover the fire. During this time the screams of the creature continued at short intervals, but still nearer. It was, he said, calling its mate, on account of the scented game—themselves and horses—with the view of an attack by a leap from some tree or from some favorable position of the ground. The agility of this creature is not exceeded by any other animal of the whole earth, it being able to spring, when hard pushed or frightened, nearly forty feet on a level. Their strength is amazing, as well as their ferocity, and untamableness of nature.

The Indian had directed Beach to have his rifle in order, as he might have use for it, although not much acquainted with its power as a hunter. He did so, when they remained silent, not even breathing as loud as was natural, listening with the expectation of more yells. But in this they were disappointed, as no sound of the animal could be heard. As to this, the Indian said in a whisper, that so much the more was their danger, and that the animal was creeping on its belly toward them for a leap, unless it had gone entirely off. They waited however, but about fifteen minutes, when there came suddenly on the darkness of the night, the continued bleat of a deer, together with the suppressed yell of some creature which had the mastery of it, and was sending it to death. Now was the time for the Indian, who instantly, while the animal was destroying the deer, bent low down and glided off in that direction as silent as a spectre of darkness; while Beach in the same manner, and as near as he could followed after, rather shyly however, feeling inwardly a strong reluctance to venture very near the scene of action.

It was now but a few moments, while the feeble cry of the deer, still struggling with its enemy, was heard, when the flash and the report of the Indian's shot, gave notice that the crisis had arrived. All was now still except the rustling of some creature on the leaves and dry brush, which showed that a change had passed over the parties of the conflict. The Indian stirred not till all was still, when he gave a yell, such as Indians do when the battle is won, and at the same time returned to the fire and reloaded.

They now gathered from the shaggy trunk of a yellow birch growing near, an armful of its dry and pendant bark, of which they made several torches, and lighting one, ventured boldly to the spot, being assured by the Indian that all danger was over; for, he added, he had put a bullet between the eyes of the creature.

In the morning they skinned the panther, which measured eight feet from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail. Its hide they carried with them, as a trophy of the adventure. But the deer they left as was, except that they cut a steak from its haunches, for their breakfast, which they easily cooked over the coals.

But after the panther was killed, the residue of the night was passed by no means in silence; for the wolves had scented the blood of the conflict, and ran howling about till nearly daylight. And also the scream of another panther was heard several times, but at a greater distance. These noises were but sport for the Indian, which he often imitated at the top of his voice, but effectually prevented their too near approach by the violence of the fire, and the frequent shots of their guns.

This and other stories of my great-great-great-grandparents Timothy and Abigail Beach have been published in History of Delaware County, New York, NY: W. W. Munsell and Co., 1880 and in The Old New York Frontier, by Francis Whiting, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917.

My great-great-great grandfather, Jesse Beach was born in Unadilla, NY, the ninth and last child of Timothy and Abigail Bennett Beach. Jesse was born in 1788, the year after his father's death as told in the above books. In 1799, Jesse's mother, Abigail, married Jehiel Ferris and they brought their families, including Jesse, Ebenezer and Esther Beach and Jehiel's daughter Margaret to Bradford County, PA. Jehiel, Jesse and Ebenezer cleared many acres of land near Troy and divided it into six farms. In 1807, Jesse married Margaret Ferris, Jehiel's daughter. Jesse's sister, Esther, married James McKean who was, with Isaac and Abraham DeWitt, one of the first settlers in Burlington. James McKean built a cabin across Sugar Creek from the present County Manor and Old Church and about three-fourths mile from the George and Jeanette Darrow homestead where my folks lived and my siblings and I were born. Jesse (1788-1871) and Margaret (1789-1867) Ferris Beach and also Margaret's father Jehiel Ferris are all buried at Hilton Cemetery in West Burlington.

Jesse and Margaret Beach's son Ebenezer Beach, my great-great grandfather, was born 1810, died 1848 and is buried at Hilton Cemetery. He and his wife, Sarah (1815-1892) had children Myron, Peter, Susan, Mary Jane, James (my great grandfather), Alonzo and Horatio. These last three sons all served their country in the Civil War. Alonzo died at Chancellorsville in the 141st PA Volunteers, Company E. Horatio lost his life serving in the 161st New York Volunteers. My great grandfather, James enlisted in Company E, 141st PA Volunteers. For his service at Chancellorsville he was awarded the "Kearney Cross" by General Berney.