



## The Roberts Farm

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Roberts Farm for 300 Years Passed from Father to Son  
 Almost the First Settled in New Hampshire, Claim Is Made For It of Holding Record in America For  
 Continuous Family Possession.  
 By W.H.W. Benedict, Boston Sunday Globe, September 9, 1928.

DOVER, NH- New Hampshire believes it is justified in claiming to have within its borders the oldest farm in the United States- oldest in the sense of having been owned, occupied and tilled as a family possession continuously from its beginning. This is the "Gov Thomas Roberts Farm" at Dover Neck. It dates from almost the beginning of the white men's settlement of New Hampshire territory.

Dover Neck is that narrow tongue of land between the Piscataqua on the east and the Bellamy, or Back River, on the west and sloping gently southward to the confluences of the rivers and Great Bay at Dover Point.

Here in the Spring of 1623 New Hampshire had its beginning in the little settlement formed there by Edward Hilton, William Hilton, Thomas Roberts and a few others, whose names, if ever recorded, have been lost in the lapse of centuries.

### Acquired in 1628

The Roberts farm's claim to the hoary age of three centuries of uninterrupted family ownership and occupancy is based on available colonial and family records more or less fragmentary, but authentic and supporting the local tradition.

While its exact age as a family possession is not known, owing to the disappearance of the record of its acquisition by the pioneer, Thomas Robert, other historical data point to the probability that it was acquired by Roberts in 1628, when the land became available under the David Thomson grant, as will be later explained.

It is possible, however, that Roberts did not come into possession of it until 1631, the year Edward Hilton received a special grant from the Council of Plymouth, Eng., called the Swamscott patent, confirming and defining the bounds of the territory he had acquired under Thomson's grant of 6000 acres in 1622.

It may be reasonably presumed that the quest for the country's oldest farm will have to end here. Fred H. Roberts, its present owner, eighth in descent from Gov. Roberts, who was the last Governor or Chief Magistrate of the Dover Colony before it came under the rule of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1642, thinks it must end here.

It appears altogether improbable that the owner of any farm outside of New England can trace as far back into the distant past ownership by pioneer forbears of the present owners. In Virginia, where a permanent

settlement was begun 13 years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth, the lands were held by corporate interests in England until after New England was settled.

### **Purely a Business Enterprise**

Unlike the Plymouth settlement, which was established by the Pilgrim Fathers primarily as a refuge from religious restraint and which had a precarious existence, with pestilence and starvation threatening, and with hostile Indians to contend with during its early years, the Dover settlement was singularly free from such handicaps up to the time the Indian wars started in 1675.

It was begun purely as a business enterprise by Englishmen who had visions of amassing wealth through direct contact with this newly discovered land of great resources, which had already been found exceedingly rich in fisheries, in timber for ship-building and land for planting, and inhabited by friendly Indians with whom profitable trade was anticipated.

Captain John Smith in 1614 had found the waters along this part of the coast teeming with fish. Up the Piscataqua River, too, he had sailed on his prospecting voyage. He was a promoter of the fishing industry at the Isles of Shoals and along the New Hampshire coast, which flourished before the mainland was settled.

David Thomson of Thomsons Island, Boston Harbor, had been over here early in, or before, 1622, and set up salmon fishing stages on the Piscataqua at a point of land in Dover territory where the Cocheco River joins it, and later that year had secured a patent upon it from the Council of Plymouth, England, which he had been serving as confidential agent.

### **Enter David Thomson**

Three months after obtaining his grant of the point, ever since known as Thomsons Point, Thomson secured another grant from the Plymouth council of 6000 acres of land and an Island, in New England. Why he applied for an island, undefined and un-located as part of his grant, has puzzled historical writers, but the explanation is found in a deposition made by William Trevour in 1650 concerning the island in question in Boston Harbor, which was originally called Trevours Island.

According to the deposition, which was made in connection with a suit against the Massachusetts Bay Colony by Thomson's son, John to establish his title to the island, Trevour had taken possession of the island in 1619, and two years later had bargained it to David Thomson in London. On the strength of that bargain Thomson had included the island in his application for a 6000-acre grant. Thomson lived on the island the last three years of his life, dying there in 1628.

These references to David Thomson are pertinent since he was the prime mover in the enterprise which resulted in the establishment of the Dover colony by the Hiltons, Thomas Roberts and their associates.

Through an indenture signed Dec 14, 1622, by him and three wealthy merchants of Plymouth, Abram Collmer, Nicholas Sherwill and Leonard Pomery (later spelled Pomeroy), the four undertook to start a settlement of Thomson's 6000-acre grant, establish fisheries then one of England's most important industries, engage in trade with England and her colonies and develop plantations. Shipbuilding also offered great possibilities.

This was the first act in the exploitation of the region north of Massachusetts, which a decade later became a land boom of considerable magnitude, a colonization project, under the direction of Lords Say and Brooke, with Captain Thomas Wiggin as their colonizing agent. Up to that time the settlers by the terms of the Thomson indenture were just enough to execute the projects named in it.

### **An Early Romance**

The indenture provided for the landing of only seven men besides Thomson at the beginning. Two of the seven came over in the ship Jonathan of Plymouth with Thomson. They landed at Little Harbor, near the mouth of the Piscataqua, a place called by the Indians Pannaway, where Thomson lived until in 1626 he retired to his island in Boston Harbor.

The other five men, including the Hiltons and Roberts, came over afterward in the ship Providence of Plymouth, owned by Pomery, and landed in Pomery's Cove at Dover Point, called at the beginning Hilton

## Point.

The fourth article of the Thomson indenture provided that before the end of five years after the first landing there should be an allotment of 600 acres of land around the buildings of the settlement, which with the buildings should be divided equally between the parties. It was from this allotment that Thomas Roberts obtained his farm.

Romance played an important role in Roberts securing one of the choicest locations, apart from Edward Hilton's for his plantation. In 1627 Roberts married Rebecca Hilton, a sister of Edward and William Hilton.

The Hilton brothers were members of the aristocratic Fishmongers' Guild of London when Thomas Roberts, according to the guild's archives, became apprenticed to it in 1622. The friendship then formed between the three young men led them to associate themselves with David Thomson's New England enterprise. Roberts and Edward Hilton were nearly of the same age, each slightly past his majority.

### Had the First Choice of Farms

William was five years older than Edward, and married. He had come over to Plymouth in 1621, but had returned to England the following year. It was therefore natural that Edward Hilton, who had been made the head of the settlement by Pomery, should give his brother-in-law first choice for his farm of approximately 150 acres. Roberts selected high ground on Dover neck about two and a half miles above Hilton Point.

William Hilton was evidently not interested in Robert's selection, as he had settled on the opposite side of the river, now Eliot, Me. But William fared ill for he was dispossessed of his corn field and his house destroyed in June, 1633, by Capt Walter Neal, governor of Capt John Mason's Strawberry Bank (Portsmouth) settlement, who set up the claim that the land where Hilton settled belonged to Mason under a grant to Mason by the Plymouth Council.

Hilton, however, recovered the judgment for damages in court against Mrs Mason 20 years later. But for that episode Thomas Roberts might not have fared so well in picking his plantation.

The Roberts farm was laid out along the bank of the Piscataqua, or Fore Back River, as it is commonly called to distinguish it from the Bellamy or Back River. To this was added a substantial tract on Back River by grant of the town in the middle of the 17th century.

When Capt. Wiggin came with 30 or more colonists in 1633 under the provisions of the Lords Say and Brooke colonization patent, the colonists took land adjoining the Roberts farm, which Hilton and his associates had sold to the English promoters.

### Ancient Oak the Boundary

Thomas Roberts had two sons, John and Thomas. The four children who followed them were all daughters. Equally between his sons, about 1660, Roberts divided his farm, John receiving the southern half and Thomas the northern. On the division line about 200 yards from the Piscataqua stood a great white oak, monarch of the primeval forest that covered this region. This oak, now in the last stages of dying, has from this time been known as the "Bound Oak."

The tree was old when Columbus came on his voyage of discovery. Its buttressed trunk measures 23 feet 8 inches in circumference one foot from the ground. A few years ago its great top had a spread of 78 feet. Its height was about 60 feet.

Thomas Roberts Sr built his home on the high bank of the river about 150 yards northeast of the Bound Oak. The land was on that part of the farm which he afterward gave his son, Thomas. The cellar excavation is still well defined and the site has been marked with a granite stone bearing a bronze tablet, placed there by the New Hampshire Society of Colonial Wars.

Immediately after his marriage Roberts lived in a house at the Point near Hiltons. It was not until sometime in the following decade, after his farm had been partially cleared of timber, that he began the erection of the Dover Neck dwelling.

### Last of Early Governors

In 1640 Thomas Roberts succeeded Capt John Underhill as the fourth Governor of the Dover colony. Roberts served until the Massachusetts Bay colony achieved its ambition of annexing, in 1642, the Piscataqua River settlements, Dover, Strawberry Bank and Exeter, also Hampton, and making them a part of Norfolk County.

He had a leading part in the formation and establishment, in 1640, of “[The Dover Combination](#),” an improved scheme of local self-government. He was one of 21 of the 42 signers of the Combination agreement in 1641, a protest against annexation to Massachusetts.

Gov Roberts was not of Puritanic mold. He possessed a liberality of thought which led him 20 years later to embrace the teachings of the Quaker missionaries, who had come here early in the '60s, and secured a following from among the orthodox Church people, only to be driven out of Dover in mid-Winter under harrowing conditions in accordance with Massachusetts laws against Quakers.

While he sympathized with the missionaries and was fined by being deprived of his cow for attending their meetings and staying away from public worship, his two sons, John and Thomas, both constables, zealously executed their appointed part of Massachusetts' order expelling the missionaries from its jurisdiction.

### The Fate of The Quakers

The missionaries, Anne Coleman, Mary Tomkins and Alice Ambrose, were led out of Dover Dec 22, 1662, with ropes to the tail of an ox cart. According to the warrant issued by Maj Richard Walderne, the women were stripped to their waists and whipped on their naked backs “not exceeding 10 stripes apiece” as they passed from one town's jurisdiction to another.

This process of expulsion was repeated until the Merrimack River was reached at Salisbury, where Maj Pike in pity forbade further whipping and arranged with Dr Walter Barefoot of Dover, a sympathizer, who had accompanied them all the way, to take charge of them and get them out of Massachusetts' jurisdiction. The doctor took them in a boat to Kittery, Me, and to the home of another sympathizer, Maj. Nicholas Shapleigh.

Recuperating there from their ordeal, these missionary women returned to Dover and resumed their preaching. They were not again driven from town, but constable Roberts, who, a contemporary Quaker writer declared had administered to the women 11 strips for good measure instead of 10, undertook a project of some of the more illiberal members of the community, that of taking the missionaries down river and out of Dover bound in an Indian dugout.

According to the Quaker narrative the women were taken from a house and were dragged through the deep snow to the river, Alice Ambrose was plunged into the icy water and made to swim beside the boat to escape drowning. A sudden storm rising prevented this attempt to rid the community of the women from succeeding.

Quakers eventually became numerous in Dover and established a church and the Roberts family down through the generations have been divided between the Quaker and Orthodox faiths.

### By a Never Failing Spring

After New Hampshire was cut off from Massachusetts and became a separate province in 1679, John Roberts, the elder son, received royal appointment as marshal of the province. He was commonly called Sergt Roberts.

His house stood near the river on his half of the original farm and close by a never failing spring.

Overshadowing this spring stands a giant Elm, which was planted there while the house was being conducted as an inn by Mr. Roberts' grandson, Stephen. The tree is today 15 feet 9 inches in circumference six feet above the ground, and though more than two centuries old shows no sign of decay.

The oldest dwelling extant on the original Roberts farm is the handsome colonial house on the John Roberts section, known for many years as the Hanson Roberts house, as Hanson Roberts, grandfather of the proprietor of what remains of the Roberts acres in the family name, was born in it in 1793.

The house was built about 1775 by Hanson's father, Joseph, fifth in descent from Governor Roberts. It passed from the Roberts family possession in 1912.

#### Now An Apple Orchard

The present Roberts land holdings include about one-third of the original farm, portions of which have been sold from time to time. Fred Roberts, a descendant of Sergt John owns the famous Bound Oak and more than 40 acres south of it. It was the farm of his father, [Howard Millett Roberts](#), who left two sons, the younger being Stephen W.

Fred, who has devoted his energies for many years to apple culture on a large scale, added to his ancestral farm a 20-acre orchard tract on the opposite side of the State Highway several years ago. After the death of their father Stephen sold his interest in the farm to his brother.

That half of the original farm, which was given by Gov Roberts to his younger son Thomas came into the possession of William M. Courser, a farmer of Dover Neck in 1912.

From the earliest times the Roberts family have been intimately associated with the progress of Dover. It was Gov Roberts who was the first to turn the soil of New Hampshire with the plow. He was taught by the Indians how to raise Indian corn and fertilize the hills with alewives, which swarmed up river in the Spring. A tannery on the Roberts farm was one of the first established here. Brick-making, which came later, was conducted by Roberts descendants.

The ancient burying ground, in which all the first settlers were buried, occupies a niche taken from the Roberts farm close by the highway. The graves are mostly unmarked, but that of Gov Roberts is marked with a slate headstone suitably inscribed, placed there about 25 years ago to replace the original. Gov Roberts died in 1674.

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