

John Robbins
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole

Richard Robbins, Great, Great Grandfather of John Robbins, the subject of this essay, was born in England about 1610 and came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony sometime in the 1630s. He married about 1639, Rebecca, maiden name unknown. They were admitted to the First Church of Charlestown, MA on May 24, 1639.¹ Their first child was born in Charlestown, but before 1643 they moved to Cambridge, MA where their other three children were born. Richard was a selectman of Cambridge in 1651 and 1655.² He was a Tithingman in 1680.³ On December, 1674 while serving as a Grand Jurymen, the case of Richard Swan for drunkenness was reported to him, with Swan eventually being found guilty.⁴

He also sat on the grand jury that on May 24, 1680 found Elizabeth Morse of Newbury (now Newburyport) guilty of witchcraft for which crime she was sentenced to death by hanging on May 27, 1680 by the Governor of Massachusetts. She was given a reprieve until October and her husband then forwarded two petitions to the General Court to free her from the accusations. Although Elizabeth was not acquitted of the charges, her sentence was changed from death to confinement in her home in Newburyport with the restriction that "She was forbidden until her death to travel more than 16 rods (264 feet) from her property unless accompanied by a pastor or a deacon." The terrible stigma of being convicted of witchcraft remained with Elizabeth for the rest of her life. The date of her death was not recorded and it is said she was denied burial in consecrated ground.⁵

When Cambridge was originally set out, it included the current towns of Brookline, Brighton and Newton, south of the Charles River. It is stated that Richard and Rebecca "settled on the south side of the river until about the period of his second marriage; after which he res. In the body of the town perhaps on the Crackbone place."⁶

His move to the center of the village would have been in 1673, when following the death of Rebecca, he married Elizabeth Cooley Crackbone, widow of Giles Crackbone. The reason for his move to the Crackbone place may be explained by the terms of the will of Giles Crackbone in which he left his estate to his widow and the children of his only son, Benjamin, of whom he said, *"it is my sore affliction that his disobedient carriage have obstructed the manifestation of my fatherly compassions towards him."* In essence, he disinherited his son. This being the case, with no recognized male heir, it was natural if not necessary for Richard to join his new wife on the Crackbone estate.⁷

Richard and Rebecca had four children: 1. **John**, born May 31, 1640 in Charlestown; 2. **Samuel**, born May 23, 1643 in Cambridge; 3. **Rebecca**, born in 1647 in Cambridge; and 4. **Nathaniel I, Great Grandfather of John the subject of this essay**, born in December, 1649 in Cambridge.⁸ During Richard's lifetime, he deeded land to his children. On March 14, 1678/79 he gave thirty-six acres to his son Samuel, and thirty-four acres to son Nathaniel. On June 7, 1681, he deeded thirty acres to daughter Rebecca.⁹

Richard and Rebecca's eldest son, John,

"was probably the same who was killed 8 July 1680, in what is now Lex. Judge Sewall, under that date, writes thus: 'In the afternoon a whirlwind ariseth (at first in a small body), near Samuel Stone's, passeth on to Mat. Bridge's (taking part of Stone's barn with it), kills John Robbins, who was at hoe, breaking his arm and jawbone. It hurled stones, and brake off and transported trees in an unusual manner.' The jury of inquest on the same day rendered their verdict concerning the death of John Robbins, whose body was found on the ground 'within the bounds of Cambridge, about seven miles towards Concord.' 'We find him very much bruised, and his jawbone broken and one of his arms, and several other wounds about his head; which we judge to be by a most tempestuous storm or whirlwind, that after a most formidable

manner blew up trees round about him, and removed great stones from under the fence that was just by him, with other most dreadful and amazing effects which many were eye-witnesses unto.”¹⁰

“Eyewitness Matthew Bridge declared that a thick black cloud in continuous circular motion produced a great noise in the process of tearing down trees and picking up bushes, trees and large stones.”¹¹ Samuel Stone, described it as a tornado that up rooted trees, threw up hay, tore off a large piece of a barn roof, and made a singing noise so very loud that the people around could not hear the falling objects.”¹² The Bridge home stood on Marrett Road, just east of Waltham Street, while the Samuel Stone home was near the junction of Middle and Lincoln Streets.

Richard died about April, 1683, and Elizabeth probably died later. Grave markers have not yet been found.

Nathaniel Robbins Sr., Great Grandfather

Nathaniel Sr. married Mary Brasier on August 4, 1669, recorded at both Cambridge and Lexington.¹³ He was a Hog reeve on the south side of the River in 1679.¹⁴ They had eight children all born in Cambridge: 1. **Rebecca**, born January 6, 1671/72; 2. **Mary**, born May 31, 1673, died September 30, 1676; 3. **Deborah**, born June 6, 1674; 4. **Nathaniel Jr., Grandfather of John**, born February 28, 1677/78; 5. **John**, born November 21, 1680; 6. **Thomas**, born November 6, 1683, died January 31, 1700/01; 7. **Samuel**, born May 30, 1686; and 8. **Joseph**, born November 8, 1689.¹⁵

Nathaniel Sr. signed his will on March 25, 1715, and died in Cambridge in 1719. The will was submitted for proof on June 22, 1719. He bequeathed all his real and personal estate to his widow, Mary, “for her comfortable maintenance during the time she Remains my widow.” Nathaniel Jr. was bequeathed the homestead and two acres of salt marsh bordering on the Charles River, while the remaining children received varying amounts of property.¹⁶ Nathaniel Sr. and Mary are buried in Cambridge’s Old Burying Ground in Harvard Square. No photo of Mary’s gravestone was found.



Nathaniel Robbins Sr.
Here Lyes the
Body of Mr.
NATHANIEL ROBBINS
Senr; Decd.
1719 in the 71st
Year of His Age¹⁷

Nathaniel Robbins Jr., Grandfather

Nathaniel Jr.'s first wife was Hannah Chandler, born February 5, 1673 in Andover, MA, daughter of William and Mary Clarke Dane Chandler.¹⁸ Nathaniel and Hannah had eight children, all born in Cambridge: 1. **Nathaniel**, baptized June 19, 1698; 2. **Mary**, born July 22, 1701; 3. **Thomas, father of John**, born August 11, 1703; 4. **Hannah**, born January 30, 1705; 5. **Rebecca**, baptized September 7, 1707; 6. **Philemon**, born September 19, 1709 baptized September 25, 1709; 7. **Deborah**, baptized March 30, 1712; and 8. **Sarah**, baptized January 2, 1714/15.¹⁹

Hannah died on September 15, 1718 at age 45 in Cambridge. Nathaniel Jr. then married Mary Batson Prentice, widow of Thomas Prentice. Nathaniel died on January 16, 1741 in Cambridge and his will was probated on March 9, 1742. Mary, his widow, and sons Thomas and Philemon were appointed executors. His estate was valued at 358 pounds, 4 shillings and 9 pence. Subtracting debts, charges and expenses, the total was reduced to 116 pounds, 5 shillings and 7 pence.²⁰

Mary then married Samuel Lyon of Roxbury on November 24, 1742. She died as his widow, as related in the Cambridge vital records. "Lyon, Mary, Mar. 2, 1760 in her 84th y. Her first husband was Thomas Prentice, whom she survived more than 50y."²¹

Hannah and Nathaniel Jr. are buried in Cambridge's Old Burying Ground in Harvard Square, Cambridge.²²



Here lyes Buried
ye Body of Mr.
NATHANIEL ROBBINS
Who Departed this
life Janry. 16th 1741 in ye
64th Year of his Age.



Here Lyes the
Body of Mrs.
Hannah Robbins
Wife to Mr.
Nathaniel Robbins
Dec^{ed} September
The 15th 1718 in y^e 44
Year of Her Age

Thomas Robbins, father of John

Charles Hudson stated that Thomas arrived in Lexington about 1744 since his name appears on the 1745 tax rolls.²³ He served during the French and Indian War as a Private from April 15 to December 18, 1755 in Captain Jonathan Fellows Company of Colonel Ichabod Plaisted's Regiment. The regiment took part in Sir William Johnson's Crown Point expedition and participated in the Battle of Lake George on September 8, 1755.²⁴

Thomas served as Town Assessor in 1745 and Selectman in 1749.²⁵ He married twice. His first wife, who he married in Woburn on May 22, 1723, was **Ruth Johnson**, born in 1702, **daughter of William and Esther Gardner Johnson**. She died on June 22, 1737 at age 35. He married second at Cambridge on October 24, 1737, **Xenia**

Jackson, born April 2, 1708 in Cambridge, daughter of **Lieutenant John and Deborah Fifield Jackson**. "Exene, Xene, was a common way of writing Christina in the eighteenth century."²⁶

Thomas was the father of sixteen children. He and Ruth had six children: 1. **Thomas**, baptized February 23, 1723/4 in Cambridge; 2. **Nathaniel**, baptized April 17, 1726 in Cambridge; 3. **Mary**, baptized June 16, 1728 in Cambridge; 4. **Stephen**, baptized June 28, 1730 in Cambridge; 5. **Susanna**, baptized December 9, 1733 in Cambridge; and 6. **Esther**, baptized January 16, 1736/7 in Cambridge, perhaps died, not mentioned in will.²⁷

Thomas and Xenia then had ten children: 7. **John the subject of this essay**, baptized August 6, 1738 in Cambridge; 8. **Philemon**, baptized August 19, 1739 in Cambridge, died August 10, 1749, aged almost ten; 9. **Ruth**, baptized September 26, 1741 in Cambridge, died August 20, 1748, aged almost seven; 10. **Ebenezer**, baptized July 4, 1742 in Cambridge, who either died or moved away before his father's will was written; 11. **Ezra**, baptized August 12, 1744 in Cambridge, perhaps died before will; 12. **Exene**, born September 13, 1749 in Lexington; 13. **Deborah**, born November 9, 1750 in Lexington; 14. **Ruth**, born November 11, 1752 in Lexington; 15. **Hannah**, born December 6, 1753 in Lexington; and 16. **Sarah**, baptized February 26, 1756 in Lexington, died in Menotomy (Arlington) October 12, 1770 aged 14 years 7 months 14 days.²⁸

Thomas died on June 30, 1791 in Lexington. His will written on December 11, 1779 was probated on October 4, 1791. He made his sons, Thomas and Stephen co-executors and left bequests to each of his ten surviving children.²⁹ To John he made the following bequest:

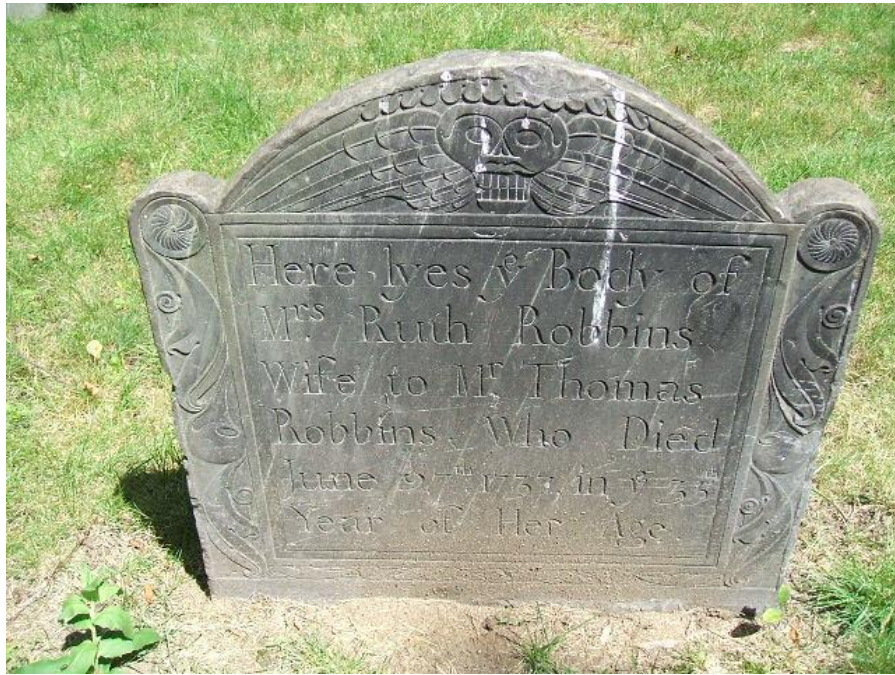
I give and bequeath to my beloved son John his heirs and assigns forever about fifteen acres of land being in Lexington aforesaid bounded northeasterly on the road leading to Cook's Farm (so called) near two Rods and Northeasterly on John's own land to the Bars leading to Charles Brown's Land thence on said Brown's land to the nearest corner of my son Thomas's land thence on sd Thomas's land thence to the Northeasterly corner of the same, thence on land herein given to my son Stephen to the road and stakes and stones first mentioned. Also I give to my son John and his heirs my great Bible.³⁰

Thomas was buried in Lexington's Old Burying Ground. The following epitaph is recorded in Francis H. Brown's listing. However, Find a Grave does not offer a photo.

In Memory of
M^r THOMAS ROBBINS
Who departed this life
June 30, 1791
Aged 89 years
"Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."³¹

I have not found a grave for Xene who died February 5, 1786.

However, Ruth Johnson Robbins grave is located in Cambridge's Old Burying Ground in Harvard Square,



Here Lyes y^e Body of
M^{rs} Ruth Robbins
Wife to M^r Thomas
Robbins Who Died
June y^e 27, 1737 in y^e 35th
Year of Her Age³²

John married on May 14, 1761, **Sarah Prentice** of West Cambridge, born August 20, 1741, daughter of **Ebenezer and Sarah Pierce Prentice**. She was 19 and John 22. They had six children, all born in Lexington: 1. **Sarah**, born March 2, 1762; 2. **Elizabeth**, born May 25, 1765; 3. **John**, born October 16, 1769; 4. **Anna**, born March 27, 1772; 5. **Ruth**, born July 9, 1774; and 6. **Hannah**, born March 14, 1778.³³

On the morning of April 19th, 1775, John was 36 years old with a wife and 5 children when he stood in the front rank of Captain Parker's militia company on Lexington Common facing off against the onrushing British Regulars. He left a deposition on April 24, 1775, describing the engagement.

"I John Robins being of lawfull age, do Testify & say that on the nineteenth Inst. the Company under the Command of Capn. John Parker, being drawn up, (sometime before sun Rise) on the Green or Common, And, I being in the front Rank, there suddenly appear'd a Number of the Kings Troops, About a Thousand as I thought, at the distance of about 60, or 70 yards from us Hazzar[d]ing and on a quick pace toward us, with three officers in their front, on Horse Back and on full Gallop towards us, the foremost of which cryed, throw down your Arms ye Villains, ye Rebels, upon which said Company Dispersed. - The foremost of the three Officers orderd their Men, saying fire, by God fire, at which Moment we Received a very heavy & close fire from them, at which Instant, being wounded I fell, Several of our men were shot Dead by one, Capn. Parkers men, I believe had not then fired a Gun and further the Deponant saith not -John Robins"³⁴

Lexington April 24th 1775

19

I John Robins being of lawfull age, do testify & say that on the nineteenth Inst. the Company under the Command of Capⁿ John Parker, being drawn up, (sometime before sun rise) on the Green or Common, And I being in the front Rank, there suddenly appeared a Number of the Kings ^{troops}, About a Thousand as I thought, at the distance of about 60. or 70 yard from us thuffaring and on a quick pace towards us, with three Officers in their fronts on Horse Back and on full Gallop towards us, the fore most of which cryed, throw down your Arms ye Villains, ye Rebels, upon which said Company Dispersed. The fore most of the three Officers orderd their Men, saying fire, by God fire, at which Moment we Received a very heavy & close fire from them, at which Instant, being wounded I fell, & several of our men were shot dead by one, Capⁿ Parkers men, I believe had not then fired a Gun and further the Depoⁿant saith, Not

John Robins.

Middlesex ps. April

I John Robins within named appeared and being duly cautioned to testifye the truth & Nothing but the truth made solemn Oath to the truth of the within Deposition subscribed by his special order, he being so maim'd & wounded, that he thought he could neither write his Name nor Make his Mark

Co^m W^m Reed & J^{es} Parris
Joseph Johnson

John's terse statement "being wounded I fell" gives no hint of the devastating wound he had received. Given it's severity, I do not know how John was able to give the deposition he did just five days later. However, the petition he forwarded to the General Court on June 14, 1776 seeking a pension does offer a picture of the dreadful nature of his wound. An excellent discussion and forensic analysis of the nature and severity of John's wound was posted at "Historical Nerderly" on Tuesday April 30, 2021. The study describes both the terrible nature of musket ball wounds and provides insight into the moment that John was injured and appears at <http://historicalnerderly01.blogspot.com/2021/04/your-petitioner-is-so-much-hurted-john.html>

The following entries are excerpted from the study

“To the Honorable the Colony Council & the Honorable the House of Representatives in general Court assembled The Petition of John Robbins of Lexington Humbly Sheweth, That your Petitioner was on the memorable 19th of april 1775 most grievously wounded. by the Brittish Troops in Lexington, by a musket ball which passed by the left of the spine between his Shoulders through the length of his neck making its way through and most miserably Shattering his under jaw bone, by which unhappy Wound your Petitioner is so much hurted in the Muscles of his shoulder, that his Right arms is rendered almost useless to him in his Business and by the fracture of his under jaw the power of Mastecation is totally destroyed and by his, low Slop diet, weakness, and total loss of his right arm, and the running of his wound, his Situation is rendered truly Pitiable being unable to Contribute any thing to the Support of a wife and five small Children but is rather a Burden upon them, & has no Encouragement from his Surgeon of his being Materially better He therefor is under the disgrable Necessity of begging relief & assistance of this Honrrable Court by a Pension or other wise as your Honors Great wisdom & compations may suggest, and your Petitioner as in duty bound will Ever pray Lexington 14th June 1776 John Robbins”³⁵

Being so terribly incapacitated and with a wife and five young children to support, his petition was received with sympathy and he was given a pension.

“The Committee on the Petition of John Robbins have heard The Petitioner Examined his wounds considered his deplorable Circumstances and Report by way of Resolve---- In the House of Representatives Nov 4th 1776-----

Resolved that there be allowed and paid out of the Publick Trust to and for the use of the Petitioner John Robbins the sum of thirteen Pounds six Shillings and Eight pence yearly untill the General Court Shall otherwise Order it, to Recompence him for his sufferings by wounds which he recd on the 19th of Aprill 1775”³⁶

John continued to submit petitions through 1778, supplementing his appeal with a statement from his doctor that he was never going to recover from his wound. By this time, he and Sarah had a sixth child, Hannah , born March 14, 1778.

“To The honorable Council of the State of Massachusetts Bay. This Certificate humbly sheweth that the Bearer Mr John Robbins of Lexington receiv,d such a grevious Wound thro: the Muscles of his right shoulder Neck & Jaw Bone which last was miserably fractured: by which Wound the unhappy Man is yet so debilitated in his right shoulder that He is unable to perform but very little labor as Fatigue upon his small Farm for the support of a numerous Family of young Children and in the Opinion of the Subscriber who was his surgeon He is unhappily like to remain in such a weakned hopeless Condition during life and is a proper Object of the gracious Bounty of this State----- Watertown July 5th .1778 sign,d Marshall Spring, N.B. He was wounded in the Morning of the 19th of april 1775 at Lexington.”³⁷

Below, is the excerpt from *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolution* concerning John’s petitions for a pension.³⁸

ROBBINS, JOHN, Lexington. Petition addressed to the General Court, dated Lexington, June 14, 1776, signed by said Robbins, stating that he had been grievously wounded by a musket ball on the 19th of April, 1775, which shattered his jaw bone and also rendered his right arm almost useless, so that he was unable to contribute anything to the support of his wife and five children, and as there was no encouragement for any improvement in his condition, requesting that some relief or assistance by pension or otherwise be granted him; a grant of £13 6s 8d yearly to commence from April 19, 1776, was allowed said Robbins by resolve of Nov. 1, 1776; similar petitions dated Lexington, June 4, 1777, and July 14, 1778, respectively, were presented on behalf of said Robbins.

At this time, it is not known where John was buried. After 1778, John, Sarah and the children appear to disappear from the records, and I was not able to trace them further. It is hoped that additional research will reveal further details of the family.

Footnotes

¹Paige, Lucius R., *History of Cambridge, Massachusetts with a Genealogical Register*, H. O. Houghton and Company, New York: Hurd and Houghton, Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1877, p. 462.

²*Ibid.*, p. 463.

³Vital Records from the New England Historical and Genealogical Register, Volume 5, April 1851, p.172

⁴Middlesex County, MA: Abstracts of Court Records, 1643-1674 volume 2, p. 198.

⁵*The New England Historical and Genealogical Register for the Year 1847*, Volume 1, Number 2, Boston, Samuel G. Drake, Publishers, 1847, p. 139; Drake, Samuel Adams, *A Book of New England Legends and Folklore in Prose and Poetry*, "The Strange Case of Goodman Morse," Boston, Little Brown and Company, 1901, pp. 315-18; also, <https://www.geni.com/people/Elizabeth-Morse-Witch-of-Newbury/600000003656684080>

⁶Paige, *op. cit.* p. 642.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 518.

⁸Baldwin, Thomas W., Compiler, *Vital Records of Cambridge Massachusetts to the Year 1850, Volume 1. Births*, Boston, Wright and Potter Printing Company, 1914, p.605 at

<https://archive.org/details/vitalrecordsofca01cambr/page/604/mode/2up?view=theater>

⁹Paige, *op. cit.*, p. 642.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Narramore, Jen, "First Recorded Tornado in the U.S., Published March 19, 2018 at

<https://www.tornadotalk.com/first-recorded-tornado-in-the-u-s/>

¹²tornado history.com <https://sites.google.com/a/stevensonschool.org/nithweather/history>

¹³Vital Records of Cambridge and Lexington, *op. cit.*

¹⁴Paige, *op. cit.*, p. 642.

¹⁵Vital Records of Cambridge, *op. cit.*

¹⁶Middlesex County, MA: Probate File Papers, 1648-1871, Volume Middlesex Cases 18000-19999, pages 19313:1-19313:5, at <https://www.americanancestors.org/databases/middlesex-county-ma-probate-file-papers-1648-1871/image?volumeld=14466&pageName=19313:1&rid=38379456>

¹⁷Find a Grave Cambridge, MA at https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery-browse/USA/Massachusetts/Middlesex-County/Cambridge?id=city_58132

¹⁸Vital Records of Andover, ma

¹⁹Vital Records of Cambridge, *op. cit.*

²⁰Middlesex County Probate File Papers, *op. cit.*, pages 19315:1-19315:9

²¹Cambridge Vital Records, *op. cit.*

²²Find a Grave Cambridge, MA, *op. cit.*

²³Hudson, Charles, *Bi-centenary Edition History of the Town of Lexington Massachusetts in Two Volumes, Volume II, Genealogies*, Lexington Historical Society, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, 1913, p. 577.

²⁴*Year Book the Society of Colonial Wars In the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, 1917, at <https://archive.org/details/yearbooksocietyo00soci/page/n3/mode/1up?view=theater>; “Provincial Troops in the French and Indian Wars,” at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Provincial_troops_in_the_French_and_Indian_Wars

²⁵Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 578.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Vital Records of Cambridge, MA, *op. cit.*

²⁸Vital Records of Arlington; Vital Records of Cambridge; Vital Records of Lexington; *op. cit.*

²⁹ Middlesex County Probate File Papers, *op. cit.*, pages 19333:1-19333:9

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Brown, Francis M. M.D., *Lexington Epitaphs, A Copy of Epitaphs in the Old Burying Ground of Lexington, Massachusetts*, The Lexington Historical Society, 1905, p. 118.

³²Find a Grave, Cambridge, MA, *op. cit.*

³³Hudson, *Genealogies, op. cit.*, pp. 579-80

³⁴<https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/deposition-john-robins>

³⁵<http://historicalnerdery01.blogspot.com/2021/04/your-petitioner-is-so-much-hurted-john.html>

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, A compilation from the Archives Prepared and Published by the Secretary of the Commonwealth in Accordance with Chapter 100, Resolves of 1891*, Boston, Wright & Potter, 1896-1908, volume 13. P. 280.