

Phineas Stearns
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole

The first of the Stearns family, and **Great, Great, Great Grandfather of Phineas Stearns**, the subject of this essay, was **Isaac Stearns** who came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony with the Winthrop Fleet of 11 vessels carrying between 700 to 1000 Puritans from England to New England, led by John Winthrop the first governor of the colony. It is said that Isaac was on board the *Arbella*, the flagship of the fleet along with Governor Winthrop and other passengers who would become famous in New England history such as Sir William Saltonstall, leading founder of Watertown, MA; Tomas Dudley, later Governor of Massachusetts; Anne Bradstreet, poet and the first Puritan figure in American Literature; John Winthrop Jr. later governor of Connecticut; and Reverend George Phillips one of the founders of Watertown, MA.¹

Isaac was baptized at Fordham, Essex, England on October 3, 1595 and married at Stoke Nayland, Suffolk, England on May 20, 1622, **Mary Barker, daughter of John and Margaret Walter Barker**.² Three of their children were born in Stoke Nayland and accompanied their parents on board the *Arbella*. Isaac settled in Watertown, MA where he served as selectman for several years. He became one of the largest land owners in Watertown, and his homesteads was in that part of Watertown that is now Belmont. When he died in 1671 he left an estate of 535 acres divided into fourteen lots. He purchased another homestead for his son, Samuel that was located at the northwest corner of Lexington and Belmont Streets in Watertown, now in Waltham.³

Isaac and Mary had eight children: 1. **Mary**, baptized January 6, 1626 in Nayland, Suffolk, England; 2. **Hannah**, baptized October 5, 1628 in Nayland; 3. **John**, born about 1631, perhaps in Watertown, not recorded but mentioned in will; 4. **Isaac**, born January 6, 1633 in Watertown; 5. **Sarah**, born September 22, 1635 in Watertown. 6. **Samuel, great, Great Grandfather of Phineas**, born April 24, 1638 in Watertown; 7. **Elizabeth**, born about 1640, not recorded but mentioned in will; and 8. **Abigail**, born about 1644, not recorded but mentioned in will.⁴

Isaac wrote his will on June 14, 1671 and died in Watertown five days later on June 19th. It was probated January 8, 1672. He left bequests for his wife, Mary, and each of his surviving children—Isaac, Sarah, Samuel, Elizabeth and Abigail as well as to his son John's children. Mary died April 2, 1677. Of his three sons, John died before his father and Isaac before his mother, leaving Samuel the bulk of the estate.⁵

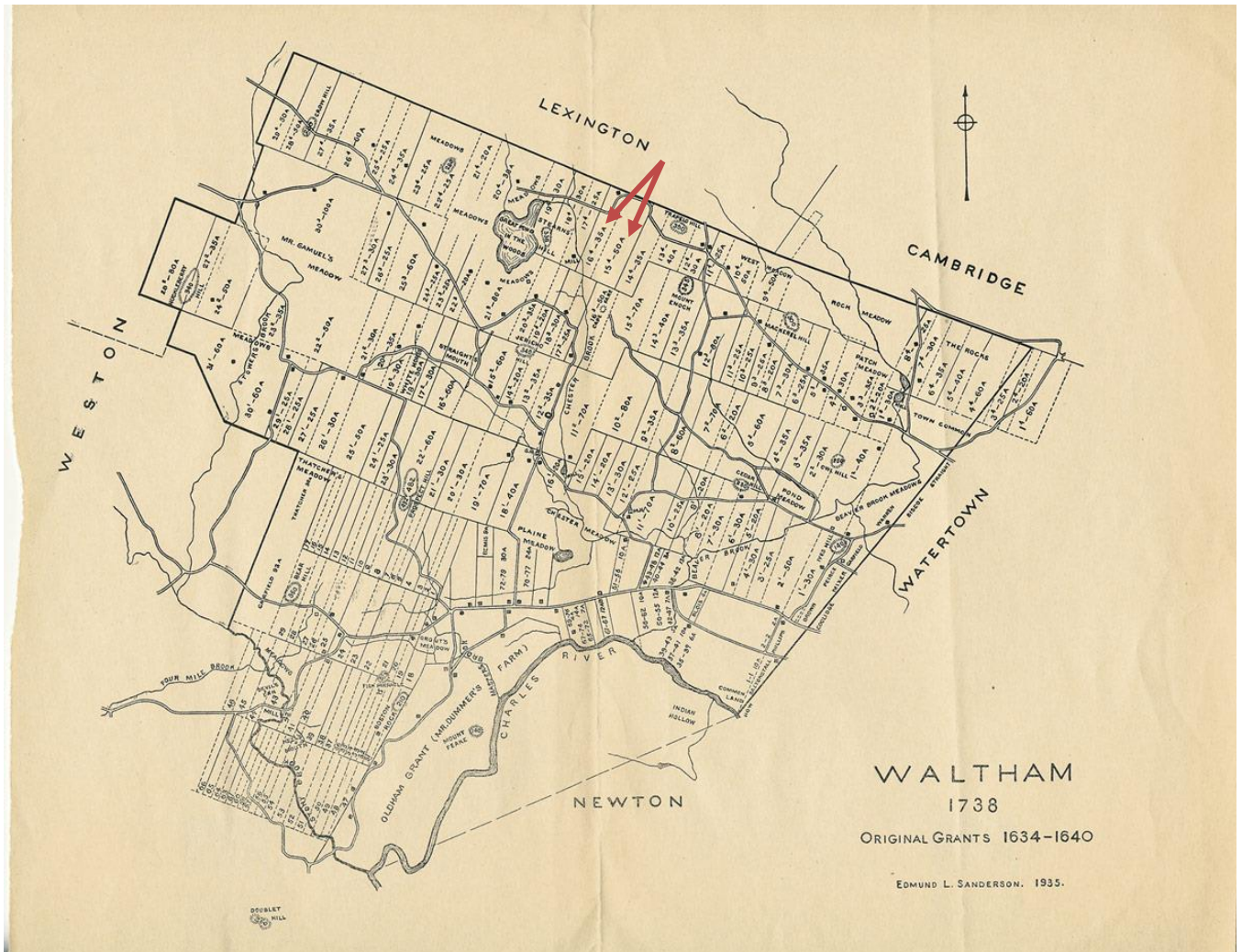
Samuel Stearns, Great, Great, Grandfather

Samuel, lived at the crossroads made by the road from Cambridge to Waltham and that going north to Lexington, or as stated before, the northwest corner of Lexington and Belmont Streets in Waltham. This was directly cattycorner to the new meeting house erected on the southeast corner of Lexington and Belmont streets for the convenience of the inhabitants in what would become Waltham.⁶

Samuel married on February 1, 1662/63, in Watertown, **Hannah Manning**, born June 2, 1642 in Cambridge, MA, daughter of William and Dorothy (maiden name unknown) Manning. They had ten children all, except their first, born in Watertown, MA: 1. **Samuel**, born May 4, 1664 in Lexington, died June 7, 1671 in Watertown ; 2. **Hannah**, born October 10, 1666; 3. **Nathaniel**, born December 13, 1668; 4. **Sarah**, born April 21, 1671; 5. **Samuel Jr.**, born March 29, 1673; 6. **Isaac Sr., Great Grandfather of Phineas**, born December 31, 1674; 7. **John**, born June 25, 1677; 8. **Mary**, born April 5, 1679; 9. **Abigail**, born April 16, 1681; and 10. **Joseph**, born December 11, 1682.⁷

Samuel was constable of Watertown for one year and Selectman for five. He died in 1683 aged 45, but Hannah was living in March, 1723 in her seventies "very aged and infirm in body and mind." when a committee was appointed by the Court to divide the estate at that time.

“In the division the homestead where the grandfather (Isaac) had lived and died was awarded to the heirs of Samuel's oldest son Nathaniel. That of the father (Samuel) where he also had lived and died went to the youngest son John. One half of the dividend land and other lots were awarded each to the sons Samuel and Isaac. This dividend land consisted of Lots Nos. 15 and 16 in the fourth squadron. The former was granted to Isaac Stearns in 1636 and the latter purchased by him in 1645.”⁸



Dividend Lot 15 in the fourth squadron granted to Isaac Stearns and lot 16 purchased by him

Isaac Sr. married Mary Bemis on October 26 1708 in Watertown, Mary Bemis born September 24, 1688 in Watertown, daughter of John and Mary Harrington Bemis. They made their home on the northern half of the dividend land and are supposed to have built there about that time. “He died early in 1737, and the inventory of April 4 of that year shows that his homestead included 40 acres of orchard, mowing, plow and pasture land and five acres of meadow, just the amount that he received from his father’s estate. His oldest son, Isaac, Jr. purchased the shares of the other heirs and secured the whole estate.”⁹

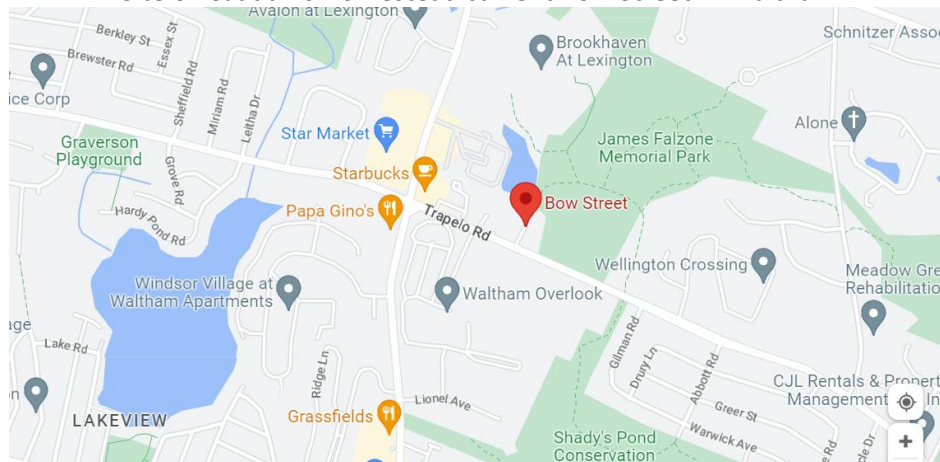
Isaac Sr. and Mary Bemis Stearns had five children, all born in Watertown 1. **Isaac Jr., Father of Phineas**, born May 14, 1710; 2. **Mary**, born December 4, 1712; 3. **Nathaniel**, born April 23, 1718; 4. **Peleg**, born January 2, 1720/21; and 5. **Susannah**, born January 11, 1715/16.¹⁰

Isaac Stearns Jr. Father of Phineas

“Isaac Stearns inherited in 1737 his father’s homestead on Bow Street which was the old location of Trapelo Road.”¹¹



Site of Isaac Jr.'s Homestead current Bow Street in Waltham



Isaac Jr. was a selectman of Waltham for thirteen years and assessor for two years. On Feb. 10, 1756, he was chosen deacon and was known as Deacon Isaac thereafter. He married in Watertown on July 31, 1739, Elizabeth Child, born in Watertown February 18, 1706, daughter of Daniel and Beriah Bemis Child. Elizabeth and Isaac were first cousins, their mothers, Beriah and Mary Bemis were sisters, both daughters of John and Mary Harrington Bemis. When they were married, Isaac Jr. was 29, and Elizabeth 33¹².

Elizabeth and Isaac Jr. had eleven children: 1. **Elizabeth**, born in Watertown, December 2, 1729, died May 9, 1733 at 5 months 7 days; 2. **John**, born in Watertown, January 8, 1731/32, died January 21, 1734 aged 3 years 13 days; and 13 days; 3. **Silas**, born in Watertown, March 6, 1733/34; 4. **Isaac**, born January 18, 1735/36 in Watertown; 5. **Phineas, the subject of this essay**, born February 28, 1738 in Waltham; 6. **Susannah**, born April 9, 1740; 7. **Joshua**, born May 26, 1742 in Waltham, died July 10, 1748 aged 6 ears 1 month and 16 days; 8. **Sarah**, born May 22, 1744 in Waltham; 9. **Joshua**, born July 10, 1748 in Waltham; 10. **Jonathan**, born May 22, 1750 in Waltham; and 11. **Elizabeth**, born March 17, 1752 in Waltham.¹³

In 1738, Waltham was incorporated as a town separate from Watertown, so although all the children were born in the same place, their births were recorded in the two different towns.

Isaac Jr. signed his will on October 6, 1772, died on November 25, 1799 in his 70th year, and his will was probated on April 5, 1780. Bequests were made to his widow, Elizabeth, and his five surviving sons and one daughter. Phineas received the smallest bequest of 30 pounds 6 six shillings and eight pence.¹⁴ Elizabeth died on February 18, 1791 aged 85. Her will was signed February 25, 1789 and probated on September 6, 1791. Her estate was to be divided equally among her five surviving children: Silas, Phineas, Jonathan, Joshua and Elizabeth. She made special bequests of her silver shoe buckles and twenty dollars to son, Silas, and to Elizabeth her gold necklace and wearing apparel.¹⁵

Elizabeth and Isaac Jr. are buried in Waltham's Grove Hill Cemetery¹⁶



In
memory of
Mrs. Elizabeth Stearns,
Wife of Deacon Isaac Stearns,
who died July 10th, 1791
in the 85th year
of her age.

*In thy fair book of life divine,
My God inscribe my name;
There let it fill some humble place,
Beneath the slaughtered Lamb.*

In memory of
Deacon Isaac Stearns
who died November 25th
1799 in the 70th year
of his age

*My flesh shall slumber in the ground
Till the last trumpet's joyful sound
Then burst the chains in sweet surprise
And in my Savior's image rise.*

Phineas Stearns

Charles Hudson wrote that Phineas came to Lexington in 1768. Tax records indicate that he was in town at least by 1771 and on the rolls until 1784. Thereafter, he disappears from the tax rolls. He was fairly well off and in the second decile with regard to wealth. His residency in Lexington was not lengthy, for when he died in 1792, he was in Waltham, his property was there, and he had a pew in the Waltham church.¹⁷

However, at age 37 with a wife and two children, as a member of Captain Parker's militia company he stood on Lexington Common on April 18, 1775. He was one of a group of Captain Parker's company who signed a combined deposition describing the events of April 19th.

"We Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, Mos. Harrington, Sr., Thomas Harrington, Daniel Harrington, William Grimes, William Tidd, Isaac Hastings, Jonas Stone Jr., James Wyman, Thad. Harrington, John Chandler, Joshua Reed, Jr., Joseph Simonds, Phineas Smith, John Chandler, Jr., Reuben Locke, Joel Viles, Nathan Reed, Samuel Tidd, Benjamin Locke, Thomas Winship, Simeon Snow, John Smith, Mos. Harrington, 3d., Joshua Reed, Ebenezer Parker, John Harrington, Enoch Wellington, John Hosmer, Isaac Green, Phineas Stearns, Isaac Durant, Thos. Hadley, Jr. all inhabitants of Lexington in the County of Middlesex, and Colony of Massachusetts Bay, in New England, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April instant, about one or two o'clock in the morning, being informed that several officers of the Regulars had, the evening before, been riding up and down the road, and had detained and insulted the inhabitants passing the same; and also understanding that a body of Regulars were marching from Boston towards Concord, with intent (so it was supposed) to take the stores belonging to the Colony in that Town, we were alarmed; and having met at the place of our company's parade, were dismissed by our Captain, John Parker, for the present, with orders to be ready to attend at the beat of the drum. We further testify and declare, that about five o'clock in the morning, hearing the drum beat, we proceeded towards the parade, and soon found that a large body of troops were marching towards us. Some of our troops were coming up to the parade, and others had reached it; at which time the Company began to disperse. Whilst our backs were turned on the troops we were fired on by them, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded. Not a gun was fired by any person in our Company on the Regulars, to our knowledge, before they fired on us, and they continued firing until we had all made our escape." ¹⁸

Following the engagement on the Common, Phineas was a member of a detachment of the Lexington Militia under Captain Parkers command that went to Cambridge on July 17-18, 1775 to support the siege of Boston. In 1776 he was one of the larger subscribers in support of the three month campaign to the Jerseys, and in 1777 he and others psid for a man to be sent to the Bennington Campaign.¹⁹

Phineas was chosen a selectman in 1781 and 1782. Phineas had married **Mary Wellington** born November 29 1742 in Watertown, daughter of **Joseph and Dorcas Stone Wellington**. Mary and Phineas had nine children: 1. **Sarah**, born December 29, 1761 in Waltham; 2. **Mary**, born March 6, 1764 in Waltham; 3. **Peleg**, born April 25, 1766; 4. **John**, baptized April 24, 1768 in Lexington; 5. **Phineas**, baptized June 10, 1770 in Lexington, died July 24, 1770, aged 1 month and 14 days; 6. **Susanna**, baptized August 14, 1774 in Lexington; 7. **Isaac**, baptized November 3, 1776 in Lexington but died young; 8. **Rebecca**, born August 24, 1778; and 9. **Dorcas**, born August 8, 1780.²⁰

Phineas moved back to Waltham sometime after 1784 when he disappeared from the Lexington tax rolls. He died there on October 7, 1792 at the young age of 44. He had no will, so his estate began probate on November 15, 1792. His sons, Peleg and John protested at the mill they had built being included as part of the estate since they had financed the entire project. An amount of \$142.79 was then subtracted from the total value of the estate. It took until April 5, 1796 to complete the probate process, at which time each of seven surviving children were awarded \$429. 13 5/7 for a total value of Phineas' estate of \$3,003.96.²¹

Mary Wellington Stearns had died on February 13, 1790, and with Phineas' death the children were orphaned. Sarah, Mary, Peleg and John were adults and married, but Susanna, aged 18, Rebecca, aged 14 and Dorcas aged 12, were minors, and it was necessary to have guardians appointed. Peleg assumed guardianship for his sisters Rebecca and Susanna, and John for Dorcas.²²

The grave of Mary Wellington Stearns is located in Waltham's Grove Hill Cemetery, but "Find A Grave" does not locate one for Phineas although he was most likely buried there.²³



In memory of
Mrs. Mary Stearns
Wife of Mr. Phineas Stearns
who died Febr. 13th 1790
in the 48th year of her age.

My Soul in Christ's sweet hands I trust,
Now can I [stone has sunk]

Footnotes

- ¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arbella#:~:text=Notable%20passengers,-Captain%20John%20Underhill&text=George%20Phillips%2C%20religious%20leader%20and,Bay%20Colony%20to%20Anne%20Hutchinson.>
- ²Guilford, Joan S., *The Ancestry of Dr. J. P. Guilford: Volume II: Seventeenth Century–New England Colonials and a Few Eighteenth–Century Immigrants* (Orange, California: Sheridan Psychological Services, 2003), 677-679; Anderson, Robert Charles, *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England 1620-1633, Volumes I–III*, 3 vols. (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1995), 3:1747-50; Threlfall, John Brooks, *Fifty Great Migration Colonists to New England & Their Origins* (Madison, Wisconsin: p.p., 1990), 433-450.
- ³Van Wagenen, Mrs. Ava Stearns, *Genealogy and memoirs of Isaac Stearns and his descendants* by Mrs. Avis Stearns Van Wagenen, Syracuse, NY, Published by Courier Printing Co., 1901, pp. 27-8, at https://archive.org/stream/genealogymemoirs00vanw_
- ⁴Bond, Henry, *Genealogies of the Families and Descendants of the Early Settlers of Watertown, Massachusetts, Including Waltham and Weston to Which is Appended the Early History of the Town, With Illustrations, Maps And Notes* (Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1860, p. 453; Hudson, 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, pp. 662-3.
- ⁵Middlesex County, MA: Probate File Papers, 1648-1871 Middlesex Cases 20000-21999, pages 21239:1-21239:5.

- ⁶Sanderson, Edmund L., *Waltham as a Precinct of Watertown and as a Town 1630-1684*, Published by the Waltham Historical Society, Inc., Waltham, Mass, Publication Number 5, 1936, p 135.
- ⁷Vital Records of Watertown, MA to the End of the Year 1849
- ⁸Sanderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 135.
- ⁹*Ibid.* pp. 135-6
- ¹⁰Vital Records of Watertown, *op. cit.*
- ¹¹Sanderson, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
- ¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 136-7.
- ¹³Vital Records of Watertown, *op. cit.*; New England Historic Genealogical Society, *Vital records of Waltham, Massachusetts to 1850*, Boston, 1904, pp. 86-89.
- ¹⁴Middlesex County Probate File Papers, *op. cit.*, pages 21250:1-21250:5
- ¹⁵*Ibid.*, pages 21229:1-21229:5
- ¹⁶<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/34646773/isaac-stearns>;
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/34646822/elizabeth-stearns>
- ¹⁷Middlesex County, Probate File Papers, *op. cit.* pages 21312:12-21312:13
- ¹⁸Kehoe Vincent J.R., *We Were There April 19, 1775 The American Rebels*, Self-Published, January 1, 1975, p. 87.
- ¹⁹Hudson, Charles, *Bi-centenary Edition History of the Town of Lexington Massachusetts in Two Volumes*, Volume I, *History*, Lexington Historical Society, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, 1913, pp. 425, 428-9.
- ²⁰Vital Records of Waltham, Massachusetts, *op. cit.*; Vital Records of Lexington, MA to the End of the Year 1897.
- ²¹Middlesex County, MA: Probate File Papers, 1648-1871 Middlesex Cases 20000-21999, pages 21312:1-21312:18
- ²²*Ibid.*, pages 21313:1-21313:3; 21314:1-21314:3; and 21315:1-21315:3
- ²³<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/34646734/mary-stearns>