**Thomas Gunn: From the West Country to New England**

[Thomas Gunn](https://www.werelate.org/wiki/Person:Thomas_Gunn_%281%29) was the first settler of that surname to arrive in the New World, although there may have been a much earlier explorer named Sir James Gunn.[1]

Thomas’s precise origins are unknown, but circumstantial evidence points at his arriving in New England with the Winthrop Fleet of 1630 and suggests he’s from the West Country of England, from Devon, the area just southeast of Barnstaple. If so, he probably was a passenger on the Mary and John, which preceded the Winthrop Fleet by a number of days, departing early from the port of Plymouth.[2] Interestingly, in Devon there exists a hamlet called Gunn, and in the 16th century as now there were and still are Gunns living in that part of England. In fact, an IGI Record (Film number 458951) names a Thomas Gunn, born about 1576 in or close to South Molton, Devonshire, who marries Christian Badcock in that town on 15 February 1601.[3] Thomas was born about 1605.[4] Could Thomas and Christian be his parents?

It was a chilly Sunday morning in 1629, and the sermon was every bit as stirring and passionate as Thomas had been led to expect. Rumors had been spreading of a great pilgrimage to cross the ocean to a new England, a place of far greater opportunity than this old England had to offer, with its overpopulation, entrenched hierarchies, religious animosities, and limited horizons. There was little here in the West Country for young Thomas, indeed little in all this island for a poor country boy, especially one from a nonconformist family.[5]

Once, in his father’s time, Devonshire was an important center for weaving and the production of wool. But the last ten years had been hard, with a slump in the woolen industry and a series of bad harvests creating poverty, starvation and unemployment. Then, too, there were plagues and other mortal sicknesses. For Thomas there seemed to be little hope of a good life. His older brother would inherit the family farm in South Molton, and there was no money to set Thomas up in anything like a comfortable position. He was already 24 years old and felt he had to do something to increase his chances for a better future.

Still, Devon in the early 1600s was an exciting place for a young man: ships were sailing from its main port, Plymouth, to far away lands--carrying adventurers and merchants to the Spice Islands of the South Pacific in search of wealth, and “planters” to New England and Virginia in search of land and the freedom to worship as they chose. Ten years earlier a group of religious separatists, “pilgrims” they called themselves, had set out to New England and established a thriving community. There were opportunities that had never existed before, for those brave enough to risk the hardships and the dangers.

Thomas was a young adult, eager to go out into the world and find his place and make a family. His parents were God-fearing people, like many in this part of England, but they were also “dissenters” or non-conformists. Some even accused this group of being “separatists” like the pilgrims, but that wasn’t true at all; they simply had no patience for what they called the “papist practices” of the High Church, the established Church of England. Today we might refer to them as an evangelical sect, advocating a simpler, fundamentalist Church, rooted in apostolic Christian times in opposition to the more formal, ritualistic, authoritarian, “unscriptural” Church. They were influenced by Calvinist models, generally seeking to “purify” the Church of England and consequently they were called “puritans.” They were seen as dangerous to the established order and were occasionally persecuted.

What follows is a biography of Thomas, much of it documented with the rest imagined, but based on what we know of customs and life as they were in those times.

Thomas’s father was strict with his children, and he expected Thomas to work and learn a useful trade. To that end, he may have apprenticed his son to an acquaintance in nearby Barnstaple, perhaps to Mr. Richard Collicott, a dissenter like himself and an experienced tailor and trader. In the company of Mr. Collicot Thomas may have gone to Exeter in order to learn more about the rumored pilgrimage to a “New England,” and to meet with a preacher with whom both his father and his mentor were much impressed, a Rev. John Warham.

This is why on this chilly winter morning Thomas sat enthralled in church, listening to Rev. Warham preach of the promised land of plenty waiting across the sea for God’s chosen people. Richard Collicot was much attracted by the scheme and determined to join Rev. Warham’s group. During their return to Barnstaple he proposed to Thomas to go off with the Collicot family to this fabulous New England. In compensation for Thomas’s services while the family settled, Collicot would pay his passage and help him establish himself.

It was not easy to convince his mother and father that this was the best thing for him to do, but Thomas was determined to go. The ship was to sail in mid-spring. The voyage itself wasn’t considered especially dangerous; the seamen of the West Country had for years been fishing in the North Atlantic and along the American coast and knew the ocean and that distant shore well. In the end Thomas’s parents accepted that this was God’s will, just as Thomas insisted it was.

**The Dorchester Migration** A few weeks later, on March 20, 1630, Thomas was in Plymouth and aboard the ship Mary and John waiting its departure anxiously and with great excitement. This ship would be the first of the Winthrop Fleet to depart and the first to arrive in New England; the fleet would bring some 1500 Puritans to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was, indeed, a great adventure. Though it was painful to leave his family and his country behind, Thomas was young and he looked forward with happiness and optimism to the months and years ahead. He knew there would be hardships to endure and dangers to face, but he was young, strong and vigorous, and very eager to get on with his life and to explore this new world and its many opportunities.

This group of Puritans was organized by Rev. John White of Dorchester, Dorsetshire, who had solicited the Rev. John Maverick and Rev. John Warham to lead the group. Warham was a nonconformist minister who had been relieved of his duties at Crewkerne, Somersetshire by the powerful Bishop William Laud. He had removed to Exeter, Devonshire, where he had more protection from the established Church. Maverick was a nonconformist who had been rector at Beaworthy in Devonshire.

There were people of all ages among the 140 or so passengers, mostly families, but that included some teenage daughters. There were also some bachelors who, like Thomas, were travelling alone. Several of them he had already met: Aaron Cook, George Phelps, Robert Dibble, and Robert’s brother Thom. They were about the same age, and Thomas knew right away they were going to be the best of friends. All the passengers were members of Rev. John Warham’s congregation.

They were about to spend two months at sea, and there would be danger at the very beginning from attack by the French enemy ships patrolling the English Channel and looking for easy targets. As a precaution, Captain Thomas Squibb had picked out the best marksmen among the landsmen, given them muskets and enrolling them to serve in the ship’s defense if the need should arise.

Captain Squibb had a crew of fifty or so seamen. The ship he commanded, the Mary and John, was larger than many--400 tons--and had cannon to provide some protection from enemy ships. Though the Mary and John is counted as part of the Winthrop fleet of eleven ships sailing for New England under the auspices of the Massachusetts Bay Company, the Rev. John White was not altogether comfortable with the Winthrop group from the London area. He therefore determined to sail from Plymouth two weeks earlier and beat the main body of ships to New England.

The sailors told the passengers to expect cold, rough, and wet weather, with headwinds on most days. During the occasional northerly gales they might make good time, but otherwise it would be slow going. On calm days, which would not be frequent, they could light fires and cook their food. But more commonly they would fast, or eat their food cold.

Initially Capt. Squibb refused to attempt the passage through the Channel without pilot or charts, but at mid-morning they weighed anchor and set sail. It would not be particularly easy to sail out of the Channel and into the open Ocean. If the weather was not good or the wind was not blowing west or southwest, they would have to put ashore and wait. The rain, and cold, and rough seas must have been difficult for these landsmen to bear. And the fasting must have made things worse.

[There is no record of the voyage of the Mary and John; however, there is a detailed one, kept by Winthrop himself, of the voyage of his fleet of ships. The description below relies on that record for the conditions of crossing the Atlantic in those days under such circumstances.]

Discipline was necessarily rather severe and any infraction, such as stealing “strong” water (rum), would be harshly punished, with imprisonment, whipping, and being kept on bread and water for a time. It would soon become clear that the rules must be obeyed. Besides, rigid rules of conduct and severe penalties for flouting the rules were part and parcel of Puritan life.

All went well at first, then on the second morning several sails were seen astern. Since they might well be Dunkirkers (the Dunkirk privateers were commerce raiders in the service of the Spanish Monarchy), the captain had the gunroom and gundeck cleared, all the hammocks taken down, and the ordnance loaded. The powder-chests and fireworks were made ready and twenty-five landsmen appointed with muskets were stationed among the seamen. The wind continued north with fair weather, though after noon it calmed, and still those ships came on, having more wind than the Mary and John. The captain became more convinced they were Dunkirkers, for he had been told at Plymouth that there were a number of them waiting just out of sight of land for an easy English target. He prepared the ship and all the men to put up a fight. Some cabins which were in the way of the ordnance were dismantled, such bedding as were subject to take fire were thrown overboard and the long boats were heaved out. All the men were then armed with muskets and other weapons. The women and children were moved into the lower deck, that they might be out of danger.

When all was prepared, the passengers knelt in prayer. It was gratifying to see how cheerful and comfortable all the company appeared; there was not even a woman or child that showed fear, though all understood the danger to be great, for there were several enemy ships against one, and the least powerful of those ships were reported to carry thirty brass pieces. But their trust was in the Lord, and the courage of the captain and his crew encouraged the passengers. It was now approaching dusk, and the fleet behind seemed to be within a league of them. But the captain, rather than tacking about and standing defiantly to meet the enemy, sailed on in the hope of losing them in the darkness. Fortunately, cloud cover hid the moon and stars, so there was no light on that night. In the morning, the sails behind were nowhere to be seen. They never knew for certain if these were enemy ships.

Once out of the Channel the voyage became a series of routine, monotonous days, with occasional storms and rough seas. The passengers entertained themselves and the children as best they could. On good days they were allowed on the top deck, where they could take some sun and get some exercise and fresh air. They listened to sermons, prayed often, and played games.

There were occasional discipline problems, to be expected on a long voyage in cramped quarters. Two of the young men fell at odds and began fighting, contrary to the rules of behavior which had been established. They were judged and ordered to walk upon the deck till night with their hands bound behind them. Another man was restrained and punished for using bad language until he confessed his offense and promised to change his ways.

The passengers were of course unused to voyaging on the sea, and in the beginning were frequently sick during rough weather. On numerous occasions, especially in the early days, the sickness of the passengers put everything out of order for a day or more, so that they would have no sermons, fresh air, or food. But with fair weather, and with time to accustom themselves, the people would to grow well again. On these good days the children and others that were sick and lay groaning in the cabins would be brought out and made to stand holding a rope stretched from the steerage to the mainmast, some on one side and some on the other, swaying up and down until they were warm. Exercise and fresh air, it was thought, were the best remedies for seasickness. Seeing their difficulties, the captain set the children and young men some exercises in which the seamen were also very active. This helped the passengers feel better, and by this means they soon grew well and content.

The ship made relatively good time, and at noon on the fourth day the captain made observation with the cross-staff, and found them to be at forty-seven degrees thirty-seven minutes north latitude. About ten that night the wind grew so high and the rain so hard that the captain was forced to take in the topsail and lower the main and foresails. The storm was so great that it split the foresail and tore it to pieces, and a huge wave washed the fish tub overboard. The storm still grew, and the night was dark with clouds.

About four in the morning the wind slacked a little, but the storm raged on, and though in the afternoon there was much less wind, the sea remained so high that it tossed the ship even more than before. At four in the afternoon, a new foresail was hoisted up. All this time few of the male passengers were sick and they appeared calm; that was not the case with the women, however, probably because they were kept under hatches in the rank interior of the ship.

This fifth day the captain complained that that the bachelor landsmen were dirty and slovenly, and that the gundeck, where they lodged, was so filthy and stinking with old food and mess that it would endanger the health of the ship. Consequently, after prayer, the passengers appointed four of the single men to keep that room clean for three days, and then four others to succeed them, and so forth.

About two in the morning the wind shifted to the North West, so the captain tacked about and steered the course South West. There was still a lot of wind, and the sea was very high, which tossed the ship continually. After the evening sermon on day six, about five o’clock, a strong wind came about to South East, but it was rainy; so the captain steered a course West South West and the ship made about nine leagues a watch (a watch is four hours; nine leagues is about 31 miles).

After eight days they found themselves to be at forty-eight degrees north latitude, and two hundred and twenty leagues west from the meridian of London. Since their departure from Plymouth they had cold weather and the passengers needed their warmest clothes. Fortunately, they had the foresight to provide themselves with warm clothing, knowing that nothing breeds more danger of sickness than cold. So far everyone was in good health, though one of the cows had died.

By the first of May they found themselves at forty-seven degrees and forty-eight minutes, and with a stiff gale they steered South West at about four leagues a watch all that day and the night following. On the second of May they had little wind, so the sea was smooth and the ship made little headway. The weather was fair and calm all that day and the next. When they made observation again they found themselves at forty-five degrees twenty minutes, north latitude.

At about five o’clock they saw two ships ahead, and within a few hours they had caught up to them and discovered by signals and salutes that they were friends. The two ships were bound for Canada. The captains conferred together until one of the ships was becalmed by the Mary and John’s sails and the two became much too close together for safety; but there being little wind and the sea calm, the seamen managed to keep the ships apart with oars and poles until the Canada bound ship heaved out its boat, and was towed away.

On the 9th of May the sea was very high and the ship rolled a good deal. After the captain had the foresail hoisted, the ship went more steady, but it was another uncomfortable day for the passengers--cold, wet and rough. They had now been at sea for three weeks and had traveled some three hundred leagues or about one third of the way to New England. They were about forty-six north latitude, and near the meridian of the Terceiras (an island in the Azores). For several days the wind stayed strong and the seas high. In fact, the wind was so strong that the sails were trimmed to only that needed to keep the ship on course. Then it got worse, and on the third night there was a very great tempest, with fierce rain showers, and it was very cold. During the entire day the sea raged and tossed the ship about, yet trusting in God as always, the people were calm and comfortable, and few were sick. They even managed to keep the Sabbath and listen to a sermon preached by Rev. Warham.

On the fourth day of the storm the wind abated and by morning the sea had calmed so that they could raise the foresail again and sail West South West. During the tempest they had made no headway, being driven to leeward (downwind). It was now the 13th of May and they were at forty-three and a half north latitude. Two men again were punished for fighting, being set in the bolts (held by ropes threaded through ring-bolts) until night with their hands bound behind them. A maid-servant, being sick to her stomach, drank so much rum that she was senseless and nearly killed herself. Rev. Maverick observed that too many of the young people were given to drinking “hot waters” very immoderately.

As they sailed west the passengers noted that the pole star was ever lower to the view than it was in England. They were also surprised to see fowl flying and swimming, even when there was no land for 200 leagues. Then, too, they noted that no matter which way the wind blew, it was cold and the sun did not seem as strong and hot as in England. (They had left behind the warmth of the Gulf Stream.) Some of them began to wonder what they had gotten themselves into.

On the 18th of May a whale was spotted just ahead. The hump of its back was about a yard above the water and it appeared to have no fear of the ship, which passed within a stone’s throw as it lay spouting water into the air. The wind was still strong, and there was some rain. That night the weather cleared and a great fog came up. They were now at forty-four and a half north latitude, and a little west of Corvos (off the Peniche peninsula on the southern coast of Portugal).

On the 20th the wind increased and there was a great storm all that day and night, and some of the shrouds were broken. The storm continued all the next morning, till three in the afternoon, and the sea was very rough, so that the ship could make no headway, being able to bear no more than the mainsail about mid-mast high. At three there was a great rainstorm, and the wind shifted to the West. The captain tacked and stood into the head sea (the waves run directly against the course) to avoid the rolling of the ship, and by that means they made no way, the sea beating the ship back as much as the wind pushed it forward. There was still cold weather, but by now the people were so accustomed to storms that they were not sick, nor greatly troubled by the experience, though they were tossed about a lot for about forty-eight hours. When the storm was over, the ship lay becalmed but continued rolling in a high sea.

A complaint was made to the captain of some injury that one of his officers had done to one of the landsmen. Thereupon the captain called the officer and examined the cause, and then as punishment commanded him to be tied up by the hands and a weight to be hung about his neck. The Reverends Warham and Maverick thought this too harsh a punishment, and interceded on the officer’s behalf.

On the 24th of May they were making about five leagues a watch, and were at forty-four and a half degrees north latitude. On this day they saw a great object floating in the sea, so the sailors heaved out the skiff and discovered it was a fir log, which seemed to have been many years in the water for it was all overgrown with barnacles and seaweed. They sounded for the first time and found no ground at one hundred fathom and more. Two whales were sighted. About nine that night the wind grew very strong and it rained until the middle of the night, but then the wind became violent. They were forced to take in all the sails, except the mainsail, and to lower that as much as they could.

The storm continued all that next day. In the afternoon, with the wind increasing and the sea grown very high, the foresail was taken in and the ship made no headway. A young man, one of the passengers, was washed overboard and lost. The weather continued to be cold and too rough to light fires, so again no food was cooked and the people fasted.

About seven the next morning they saw a sail ahead, towards the North East and coming toward them. The captain, supposing it might be a friend in need of assistance, hoisted up his mainsail and came about to meet her. When they drew near the captain raised the flag, and the ship hoisted up her foresail and stood away before the wind. Though they made all the signs they could that they meant no harm, those aboard would not trust them. As she passed within the range of a shot, it was seen she was a small Frenchman, which they supposed had been driven off the bank. When she was clear, she stood her course again and sailed away. On this day another cow died.

On the 28th of May the wind veered to the West and there was so great a fog that they could see little. There were many fierce showers of snowy rain throughout the day, and a child was born to one of the passengers. The captain, supposing now to be near the coast, and knowing that there were dangerous shoals, fitted on a new, much stronger mainsail and would not risk using his old sails as before, when he had plenty of sea-room. They sounded again and had ground at about eighty fathoms. Fog continued all that night and all the next morning, so that they could not see a stone’s throw in distance. When the fog cleared they saw the shore about five leagues off. They sounded again and had ground at thirty fathoms. With a few hooks they took five dozen cod fish in two hours. This was their first fresh food in many weeks.

On the 29th they followed the land on their starboard bow (right side), at a place called the Three Turks' Heads, being a ridge of three hills upon the mainland. It lies near Aquamenticus (on the coast of southern Maine). They could see also another hill, more northward, which lies by Cape Porpus (Kinnebunkport), and ahead of them, some four leagues from shore, a small rock (Boone Isle) which was known to have a dangerous shoal east and south of it, some two leagues in length. They carefully kept several miles offshore and towards night they could see the trees very plainly, and a small hill to the southward of the Turks' Heads. All the rest of the land to the south was plain, low land. They had a fine fresh smell from shore.

On the 30th of May, after a 70-day voyage, they were within sight of Nantasket. But Captain Squibb was not familiar with the Charles River and was fearful of running his ship aground, so he refused to take the passengers up the River to the destination agreed. He insisted on putting them and their goods ashore there at Nantasket Point, miles from anywhere, leaving them to shift for themselves in the wilderness. Fortunately, they managed to get a boat from some old planters and several of the young men, well armed, went in it to Charlestown, where they found some wigwams and a house. In the house was a man who had a boiled bass which he invited them to eat. They then continued up the river until it grew narrow and shallow, and there they landed with their goods. One of the Englishmen they had picked up along the way, an old planter who could speak the Indian language, told them there were some 300 Indians living close by. Since there were only about 10 Englishmen in this group, the old planter was sent to tell the Indians to keep their distance until morning. They placed sentinels during the night, and at morning some of the Indians came and stood a distance off, but would not come near. After a time, some of them came closer and held out a great fish to show their friendship and willingness to provide food. A man was sent out with a basket for the fish and he exchanged a biscuit for it. After that, the Indians readily exchanged fish for biscuits.

The group managed to build a shelter and to plant gardens, but they were not there many days when a message came to return to the mouth of the river, to a place called Mattapan at the mouth of the Neponset River (now Dorchester) because there was a neck of land there fit to safely keep the cattle on. In the fall, some members of this group returned to this place up the Charles River to harvest the crops from their gardens.

Continue to [The Settlement at Dorchester](http://thomasgunnfamily.com/1st-generation/the-settlement-at-dorchester/).

NOTES:

1. There is mounting evidence that a number of Europeans reached North America prior to the year 1492. Vikings probably reached what is now New England and eastern Canada nearly 500 years before Columbus' voyage. Other rumors have circulated about British, Irish, Dutch, Spanish, and even Phoenician explorers before the year 1492. Such visits were possible; many groups had the technology to cross the Atlantic Ocean

Many believe that a Scotsman was the first European to discover North America in the year 1398. Sir Henry Sinclair was a 14th century Scottish nobleman, Baron of Roslin near Edinburgh, Lord Chief Justice of Scotland, and Admiral of the Seas. The King of Norway also confirmed him as Earl of Orkney, endowing him with 200 strategically positioned islands over which he was to all intents and purposes an independent king.

Sir Henry Sinclair was known to be a traveler and adventurer. He also was known as "Henry the Holy'" because he had made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Some say he even fought in a Crusade, like his ancestors before him. In 1398 Sir Henry, sometimes described as Prince Henry because of his royal connection, reportedly sailed to Nova Scotia in a fleet of 12 ships.

After spending the winter in the new lands, Sir Henry set sail for home; however, a storm drove him south to Massachusetts. The evidence for Sir Henry's presence can be seen in the figure of a medieval knight carved into the rock near the summit of Prospect Hill in current day Westford, Massachusetts. It appears to be a grave marker in the style of the Templars, which was hand-chiseled onto a rock slab.

A rubbing of the image was made in 1954 and sent to T. C. Lethbridge, a British writer, archeologist, and curator of the University of Archeology and Ethnology at Cambridge, England. The research done by Mr. Lethbridge established that the knight’s armor dated from the 1360’s to no later than the mid-to-late 1400’s. The coat of arms was determined to be that of the Gunn clan, which was allied to the Sinclairs. Ancient records in Scotland claim that Sir Henry's lieutenant and supposed cousin, Sir James Gunn, died while in the second summer of their voyage. The assumption is that the figure of a knight in armor bearing the Gunn coat of arms is that of Sir James Gunn.

Sir Henry Sinclair may even have reached as far south as Rhode Island, where some evidence suggests that he built Newport Tower. This circular stone tower is of the same design as the round churches of the Knights Templar, of which Sir Henry was a member. The tower in Newport has eight arches, the same as the round churches of the Knights Templar. These churches are rare; the only one remaining in Scotland was built in Orkney, the home of Henry Sinclair.

Sir Henry sailed back to Scotland. He was killed by the English in a battle in Orkney either in 1400 or 1401. His grandson William, first Sinclair Earl of Caithness, immortalized the voyage in stone at Rosslyn Chapel, near Edinburgh. The symbols can still be seen today.

You can read more about Sir Henry Sinclair and his adventures at <http://sinclair.quarterman.org/who/henry.html>.

Remember that Sir Henry Sinclair was a member of the Knights Templar. Adding to the intrigue, this order reportedly had possession of the Holy Grail, supposedly captured in or near Jerusalem in 1127 A.D. A German book in the 1990s speculates that Sir Henry gained possession of the Holy Grail and took it to Nova Scotia and buried it there for safekeeping. This may be pure fiction, but it makes for interesting reading. The book is Die Ewigkeits-Maschine, or (in English) The Holy Grail: Chalice or Manna Machine? by Dr. Johannes Fiebag and Peter Fiebag. Source: <http://eogn.com/archives/news0414.htm#ScotsmanDiscoveredAmerica>.

2. Passenger List of the Mary & John: <http://www.maryandjohn1630.com/passengerlist.html>.

3. International Genealogical Index: batch number: A457613 sheet number: 00.

4. On 6 March 1666 John Winthrop Jr. treated Thomas Gunn, 61 years of age, in Windsor. Thomas must, therefore, have been born in 1605. Source: International Genealogical Index: batch number: A457613 sheet number: 00.

5. The nonconformists or Puritans “were English Protestants who wished to reform and purify the Church of England of what they considered to be unacceptable residues of Roman Catholicism. In the 1620s leaders of the English state and church grew increasingly unsympathetic to Puritan demands. They insisted that the Puritans conform to religious practices that they abhorred, removing their ministers from office and threatening them with "extirpation from the earth" if they did not fall in line. Zealous Puritan laymen received savage punishments. For example, in 1630 a man was sentenced to life imprisonment, had his property confiscated, his nose slit, an ear cut off, and his forehead branded "S.S." (sower of sedition).

Beginning in 1630 as many as 20,000 Puritans emigrated to America from England to gain the liberty to worship God as they chose. Most settled in New England, but some went as far as the West Indies. Theologically, the Puritans were "non-separating Congregationalists." Unlike the Pilgrims, who came to Massachusetts in 1620, the Puritans believed that the Church of England was a true church, though in need of major reforms. Every New England Congregational church was considered an independent entity, beholden to no hierarchy. The membership was composed, at least initially, of men and women who had undergone a conversion experience and could prove it to other members. Puritan leaders hoped (futilely, as it turned out) that, once their experiment was successful, England would imitate it by instituting a church order modeled after the New England Way.” Source: Religion and the Founding of the American Republic (Library of Congress 23 July 2010) at <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html>.