

ONCE UPON A TIME ON CAPE COD

GOVERNOR THOMAS PRENCE, Eastham's Great Man

By Gustavus Swift Paine

Most Cape Codders are descended from Thomas Prence of Eastham, who was governor of Plymouth colony from 1657 to his death in 1673. There is no biography of him, and he is not in the Dictionary of American Biography. The sketches of him are slight. From abundant materials about him I have chosen a few notes by Cotton Mather.

"The want and worth of acquired parts was a thing so sensible unto him, that Plymouth never had a greater Macaenas of learning in it. . . He had sojourned for a while at Eastham, where a church was by his means gathered. . . . Among the many excellent qualities which adorned him as governor of the colony, there was much notice taken of that integrity, wherewith indeed he was most exemplarily qualified; whence it was that as he would ever refuse any thing that looked like a bribe; so if any person having a case to be heard at Court had sent a present unto his family in his absence, he would presently send back the value thereof in money unto the person." Was bribery of officials then so common that Governor Prence stood out because of his integrity?

The usual quotation about him is that he was "a terror to evil-doers." How appears particularly in one brief account. "A debauched fellow had cursed that excellent man, Governor Prence. The governor laid before the transgressor the great sin he had committed; and with a grave, holy, awful admonition, besought him to consider of that Scripture in Psal. 109: 17, 18. As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him." The result was too terrible for me to set down here, in any detail. The man died "with inexpressible torments."

The will of Governor Prence shows that he had a special affection for one young grandson, Theophilus Mayo of Eastham. The complete inventory of his estate lists many things that would be museum pieces today. I am troubled, however, about his underwear. Apparently he had only one pair of "dimity drawers." His father-in-law, Elder William Brewster, had, by the way, "I pair of green drawers." Those single pairs of drawers must have been for dress-up. When we think of them, we lose some of our awe for these good men.

At his death, Governor Prence had twenty acres of land and three acres of meadow at Tonset in Eastham, eight acres of land on "Pochey Iland," and one fourth part of a mill at Satucket and lands adjoining to it. I suppose that some Orleans people can trace their land back to Governor Prence himself.

Governor Prence's most interesting inventory is in the Mayflower Descendant 3: 203-216. One item in it is a "betleringe." What was that? I have not seen the sketch of him by Anne Kingsbury.

One of Nauset's founders, Thomas Prence, had served as Governor of Plymouth Colony in 1634 and in 1638. After his removal to Nauset in 1644, his interest was in the establishment and growth of that new township. Accordingly, when, in 1657, upon the death of Gov. William Bradford, he was again elected to that office, his expressed wish to continue in residence in Eastham was granted by the General Court, although all former governors had resided at Plymouth. His home was a little "half" Cape Cod which had been built on the hillside below the Church. It stood in ruins for many years after it was last occupied, its wide floor boards and enormous corner posts mute proof of the mighty oaks and cedars hewn down by the settlers. The door-stone was removed in 1910 and placed in the threshold of the west entrance to the Pilgrim Monument at Provincetown. It is a great pity this ancient house could not have been preserved.

Governor Prence was reelected annually until his death in 1673. He continued to live at Eastham for seven years, finally removing to Plymouth in 1665 when the General Court offered him the use of a residence at "Plain Dealing" near Kingston besides his annual salary of L 50.

Governor Thomas Prence is particularly remembered for his interest in establishing a public school system of education which resulted in the early passage of a law requiring each township of fifty families to maintain a teacher of reading and writing, while each of one hundred families was called upon to establish a grammar school.

The years that he was Governor were marked by increased difficulties with the Quakers, partly caused by his own open hostility toward them. This group of people, most of whom were originally from England and later from the Barbadoes, had lately appeared in the Plymouth Colony. Although professing the principles of peace and benevolence, there were many fanatics among them who denounced the laws, government and form of worship of the Pilgrims. In this, they were different from that other group of Quakers, who, under the wise and tolerant

guidance of William Penn, founded a society in Pennsylvania. So objectionable did the ridicule of some offenders in Plymouth Colony become, legal proceedings were instituted against them in 1657, and banishment imposed on many. These men were, however, in the minority. There were many good people among the Plymouth colonists including several in Eastham who soon became interested in the Quaker teachings and forsook the faith of the Calvinists to join them.

See Door Stone--next page.

NOVEMBER 27, 1909

Mr. Reuben Nickerson of Provincetown prepared a stone to be placed near the portal of the Pilgrim Monument, bearing the following inscription: "The original door stone from the home of Governor Thomas Prence at Eastham, Mass." It is the gift to the Monument Assn. from Mrs. Samuel M. Nickerson of Brewster.

- Yarmouth Register

Fifty Years Ago

Sept. 1913

Mr. Joshua Cook, keeper of the Pilgrim Monument in Provincetown, says that over 900 people climbed to the top in one week recently.