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Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England 1620-1633, Volumes I-III

Introduction

For the user of this set of volumes to understand what is being presented, we must define carefully the scope of the Great Migration Study Project. Who were the participants in the Great Migration? What information is being collected on these people?

Criteria for Inclusion in The Great Migration Begins

The first phase of the Great Migration Study Project attempts to identify and describe all those Europeans who settled in New England prior to the end of 1633. The date was chosen because of the steep increase in migration beginning in 1634 and continuing for the rest of that decade (see Robert Charles Anderson, "A Note on the Pace of the Great Migration," The New England Quarterly 59 [1986]:406-07). As a rough estimate, about 15 percent of the immigrants to New England arrived in the fourteen years from 1620 to 1633, with the remaining 85 percent coming over in half as many years, from 1634 to 1640.

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ROBERT KEYES

ORIGIN: Unknown

MIGRATION: 1633

FIRST RESIDENCE: Watertown

REMOVES: Newbury 1644

EDUCATION: The inventory of the estate of the widow Sarah Gage (formerly wife of Robert Keyes) included a Bible, valued at 3s.

ESTATE: In Watertown composite land inventory of 1644 held a three acre homestall, which he had acquired from William Woolcocks [[WaBOP](#) 50, 135]. Had also held two acres of Remote Meadows, which he had sold to Nicholas Guy [[WaBOP](#) 21].

On 23 November 1647 William Aspinwall testified to a copy of a bill of exchange for £10 drawn by "Rich: Denny" upon "Mr. Robert Keyes of Newbery," dated 7 May 1647 [two months before the death of Keyes], to be paid to Mr. Richard Scott. Scott assigned the bill to Edward Hutchinson of Boston, and the widow Sarah Keyes answered for the bill [[Aspinwall](#) 112].

Administration on the estate of Sarah Gage, widow of John Gage, intestate, was granted on 29 March 1681 [sic] to John French and William Smith, two of her sons-in-law. The inventory was taken 14 July 1681, and totalled £28 2s., consisting entirely of household goods. On 27 September 1681 the court ordered "that the estate be equally divided to the three daughters, namely, the wives of Wm. Smith, John French and Samuel Buswell" [[EPR](#) 3:412-13]. (The death date of Sarah Gage is given in her inventory and in the town records as 7 July 1681, so the date of the grant of administration must be in error.)

BIRTH: By about 1606 based on estimated date of birth of eldest child.

DEATH: Newbury 16 July 1647.

MARRIAGE: By 1633 (and probably by 1631) Sarah _____ (she is named in the records of all children born at Watertown). She married (2) at Ipswich 7 November 1658 JOHN GAGE and died at Newbury 7 July 1681.

CHILDREN:

- i SOLOMON, b. say 1631; m. Newbury 2 October 1653 Frances Grant.
- ii SARAH, b. Watertown 26 May 1633 [[WaVR](#) 3]; m. Salisbury 8 July 1656 Samuel Buswell.
- iii (prob.) PETER, b. ca. 1635; m. by 1667 Elizabeth _____ (child b. Sudbury 12 February 1667).
- iv REBECCA, b. Watertown 17 March 1637/8 [[WaVR](#) 6]; m. Topsfield 6 July 1657 William Smith.
- v MARY [PHEBE], b. Watertown 17 June 1639 [[WaVR](#)]; m. about 1664 John French of Topsfield (eldest child b. Topsfield 1 March 1664/5).
- vi MARY, b. Watertown February 1641/2; bur. there 20 July 1642 [[WaVR](#) 10].
- vii ELIAS, b. Watertown 20 May 1643 [[WaVR](#) 11]; m. Sudbury 11 September 1665 Sarah Blanford.
- viii MARY, b. Newbury 16 June 1645; m. Andover 16 February 1663/4 Benjamin Gage [miscalled Cady by Savage], her stepbrother; she had died by 11 October 1671, when Benjamin remarried.

COMMENTS: An English origin for **Robert Keyes** was proposed in 1970, but has more recently been shown to be incorrect [[TAG](#) 46:150-54, 65:12].

The arrangement of the children given here follows that in J. Gardner Bartlett, *The Ancestry of Daniel Bushnell* (Boston 1918), p. 31. Bartlett does not present his reasoning for this arrangement, and the following paragraphs are an attempt to recreate what that reasoning might have been.

1) There are no birth records for the proposed sons Solomon and Peter, but there are reasons for including them in this family. Solomon married in Newbury six years after the death of Robert, at a time when his widow Sarah, as yet not remarried to John Gage, was evidently still living in that town. Given his marriage in 1653, Solomon must have been born before 1633, when the birth of Sarah, daughter of **Robert Keyes**, took place in Watertown. In his will of 9 April of an uncertain year in the reign of William III (1694-1702), Samuel Buswell of Bradford, who had married Sarah Keyes, daughter of Robert, named as one of his overseers "my brother-in-law Solomon Keys of Chelmsford" [[EPR](#) 308:250-51].

2) Peter first appears in Sudbury, and he was married by about 1664. Elias Keyes, known to be a son of Robert, also married and lived in Sudbury, and thus provides the link to Peter. Given the approximate date of his marriage, Peter cannot fit into the family any later than 1635, when there is a gap in the births of children to this family in the Watertown records.

3) The daughter born at Watertown on 17 June 1639 is given in both the town and county copies of the vital records as Mary, but this may have been the record for the birth of Phebe. Note first that another Mary was the next child born to this family, and a date of death is given for her, but not for the earlier Mary. Robert and Sarah Keyes had a daughter Phebe who had married John French no later than 1664; unless she is an unrecorded daughter born in Newbury about 1647, about the time of her father's death, there is no other spot to place her in the family. There may be some other resolution to this problem, but we suggest here that the Mary born 17 June 1639 was actually Phebe.

There are a number of features of this family that are unusual and await explanation. Part of the story is told by the early Watertown vital records. As with the other Massachusetts Bay towns, these records were gathered in 1643 or 1644, and include vital events only for those families resident in Watertown at the time of gathering, and only those events which occurred when the family was resident in Watertown.

Since the first event recorded was the birth of daughter Sarah in May of 1633, we can be certain that **Robert Keyes** was in New England by that year, and, given that the birth was so early in the year, the family may have come in 1632. On the other hand, if Solomon Keyes is correctly placed in this family we can say that he was not born in Watertown, and that the marriage of Robert to Sarah, and the birth of this eldest child, probably took place in England.

If Peter was also a son of Robert, and if he does fit chronologically as being born in 1635, then the family could not have been resident in Watertown in 1635, and perhaps not in 1634 and 1636. Where the family might have been in this brief period is unknown, for he does not appear in any New England records for these years. The Keyes family may have resided briefly in some other town, or may have returned to England for a year or two.

This absence from Watertown, if it really happened, may explain another curiosity about this family. Since **Robert Keyes** was married and had begun his family when he first appeared in Watertown in 1633, he certainly would have been eligible to receive a grant of a houselot, and become a proprietor of the town, with all the grants that would ensue from that. Since Keyes is not in any of the lists of town grants, and since his holdings in the various inventories of 1644 are so small, and clearly acquired by purchase, he must not have attained the status of proprietor in Watertown.

In some ways, then, **Robert Keyes** looks like a typical member of the Great Migration: a solid married man with a family in progress, who is in a record made just before his death called "Mr." But in other ways

he does not fit the mold; he did not become a town proprietor, he did not become a freeman, and he does not appear to have left any estate at his death. Perhaps the discovery of his English origin, when it is made, will throw some light on these irregularities in the brief New England career of **Robert Keyes**.
5 June 1638: "John Leg bound in £40, & Willi: Edmonds bound in £40, to carry their wives to Salem Court, & Rob[e]rt Keyes bound in £20 to appear" [[MBCR](#) 1:234].
26 June 1638: "Robt. Key for unseemly behavior toward Goody Newell to sit in stocks at Lynn one hour with her, and one hour at Cambridge before Lecture on 4th day of next month" [[EQC](#) 1:8].

[Beginning The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England 1620-1633, Volumes I-III](#)

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