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Rev. William Blackstone,

THE PIONEER OF BOSTON.

VIEW OF BOSTON IN 1740.



Rev. William Blackstone,

THE PIONEER OF BOSTON.

BY JOHN C. CRANE,

Member N. E. Historic Genealogical Society.

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Rev. William Blackstone.

Mr. Blackstone was a man of marked peculiarities, and his coming to this country seems to be somewhat shrouded in mystery. Some authorities put the year of his arrival as 1623, and others as 1625 or 26. From what can be gathered in relation to him we learn that he was one of the Non-Conformist clergymen of England, who, tiring of the persecutions there received, fled to the quiet asylum the new world offered. For awhile he enjoyed the peace and quietness he sought on the peninsula of Boston, but the El Dorado of the Western Continent was attracting the attention of the people of the mother country, and soon he found neighbors nearer than he wished. When Governor Winthrop arrived at Charlestown, Blackstone was found in full possession of Shawmut. The first time his name is found in our history is under date of 1628. That year he paid an assessment of twelve shillings for the campaign against Morton at Merry Mount. The Governor finding Blackstone

in full possession of the peninsula, was inclined to dispossess him, but the old Non-Conformist asserted his rights in vigorous language, claiming the right of actual prior possession and settlement. Winthrop, though holding a grant from the King, was somewhat taken back by the claim put forth by Blackstone. They proposed to buy him out. His right of pre-occupancy was afterward recognized by the Massachusetts colony, for they set off a portion of land for him as shown by their records, Vol. I, page 97.

On April 1, 1633, at a court held, fifty acres were assigned him near his home. His house was, as Mr. Bowditch proved, on a six acre lot at the bottom of the Common, near an ever-living spring of water. This place was at one time called Blackstone's Point.

May 18, 1631, he took the Freeman's oath. Had William Blackstone lived in our day, he would have been called a Squatter-Sovereign, for without patent or right conceded from any one, he held the peninsula, and no doubt felt he was sovereign of all he surveyed. For some time his tri-mountain farm had been viewed with jealous eyes by the early comers at Charlestown. Blackstone, it seems, early found that Massachusetts possessed a climate adapted to the growth of the apple, and forthwith selected what is now a part of Boston Common for the purpose. He is credited with being the first man in New England engaged in the culture of this fruit.

The year 1630 found him quietly engaged on his

plantation in the pursuit of his new calling. His pen had been laid aside for the rude plow of those early days. On the 17th day of September of the year above mentioned, the fears that Blackstone had entertained of being disturbed in his bucolic pleasures were realized, as on from Charlestown came the pioneer fathers of Boston, and laid the foundation of what is now the modern Athens.

Mr. Blackstone was a lover of solitude, so much so that he viewed with alarm the coming of other emigrants to the region. Adventurous in spirit, he had squatted on the peninsula, but had not foreseen that that place above all others would be the least likely to furnish the refuge he sought. But the Puritans had come to Boston to stay, and that which troubled Blackstone the most, controversy about religious matters, began to sound in his ears. He resolved to push farther into the wilderness where he hoped to find the seclusion he desired.

That he was a scholar is evident from the profession he had chosen while in England. A lover of books; among those ever-speaking friends he was most at home. The world might rush hither and thither in search of fleeting joys, but the boundaries of his kingdom he cared not to have many cross.

What is now Rhode Island offered to him the field he sought, and his property in the region of Boston was disposed of in 1634, and a year later it is supposed he bid farewell to those who had encroached

upon him, and took his departure for the plantation now included within the limits of the state above mentioned. The spot chosen by him for his future home was then in the original limits of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, the part now Cumberland, Rhode Island. Blackstone seems to have been first in many things. The honor falls to him of being the first settler of Rhode Island as well as the original one of Boston. He built his residence upon the banks of the river that afterwards took his name. Along its course were then no industries to utilize the power running to waste. Just why the river runs so long a journey from its source before receiving its name, we are unable to say. In the early annals of Grafton, Mass., the stream is called Blackstone's, but the earliest name known for it was Nipmuc river. The distance from the Heart of the Commonwealth to tide-water at Providence, is forty-five miles, and in its course the river takes in many tributaries. Of its source, Peter Whitney, the early historian of Worcester county says, in his article on rivers: "Blackstone River rises in the town of Sutton, and first runs northwest through Ward (now Auburn) into Worcester, and takes in various streams and rivulets in its course, then it turns and runs southeast, and receiving the river (Quinsigamond) which comes from Shrewsbury Long Pond, it passes through Grafton, Northbridge and Uxbridge, into Rhode Island state." In his article on Sutton, in the same work, he writes:

“There is some good both high and low interval land, on Blackstone river, so-called. As this river has its source in Sutton, and is singular in its formation and course, we shall attempt a particular description of it. The reputed head of this river is a pond of about seventy acres called Ramshorn pond, because of the crookedness of the stream which issues from it.” He then proceeds to describe its course to Worcester, speaks of its taking in Kettle brook at Ward (Auburn) and of receiving Bimlick or Mill brook at Worcester, after which he goes on to mark out its course to Providence, mentioning some other tributaries that flow into it. As late as 1810 the old historian had revised a copy of his history, intending to issue another edition, but failed to do so. In that revision he made no correction of his original statement relating to the source of the Blackstone. A majority of the later historians of the county agree with him in locating the source in Sutton. I have for years maintained that there lies its main source, and have met with some opposition. Notwithstanding, I yet hold to the same opinion. The famous saying of Blackstone, that he “came from England to get rid of the Lord Bishops,” and was going from Boston “to get rid of the Lord Bretheren,” was characteristic of the man. We are led to believe that wrangling and controversy was distasteful, and to escape it a place, though in the wilderness, was preferable. On the banks of the then Nipmuc river he reared what was to be his final home.

He heard of the coming of Roger Williams, who had fled from Blackstone's old neighbors in the old Bay country, but being unmolested in his chosen retreat by the old Baptist, he pursued the even tenor of his way, enjoying his books, the placid onflow of his river, nature and nature's God. Boston has perpetuated his name given to one of her busy streets. Worcester has also a street that received its name from its contiguity to the river and canal named in honor of the pioneer of Boston. A town of Massachusetts has also remembered him, when seeking a name for her territory. The old tradition about Blackstone may not be out of place in this paper. It is, that in his travels in the region about him in Rhode Island he rode upon a bull which he had trained for the purpose.

It will be remembered that in 1662, two thousand clergymen seceded from the Church of England, rather than submit to the act of uniformity. These were called Non-Conformists, as in fact were all who at any time after the advent of protestantism refused to submit fully to the customs and practices of the Episcopal church in England. The Puritans sought for a change in church government by not wholly leaving it, yet the time came when they did so. The Pilgrims on the contrary severed their allegiance to it. Thirty-nine years or more before this great secession of clergymen, William Blackstone had set them an example in the matter. He had not only withdrawn from the church, and if the date, 1623, is right, he had

bid adieu forever to the land of his nativity. During the reign of Edward VI, the people of England saw many changes take place in religious affairs. Somerset, Protector of Edward, had him in charge, and being a Protestant the young king was imbued with a like faith. At this time the "Book of Offices," or Prayer Book, was prepared. Many prayers of the Romish church had been retained. It was also under the administration of this king that the code of articles were prepared, from which the thirty-nine articles so-called came forth, said articles being the substance of the doctrines and belief of the English church. The reign of Bloody Mary followed, during which took place many terrible martyrdoms of Protestants. Her rule was short, but it dealt a severe blow to Protestantism and reformation. Then came to the throne Protestant Elizabeth, under whose reign Protestantism became established in England. But the Protestants were divided among themselves. The Puritans objected to so many of the customs of the Church of Rome, and refused the surplice and also benefices. Elizabeth sought to suppress this unruly faction in her dominions. The next reigning monarch was James I. He it was who caused a translation of the Bible to be made. It was under the rule of James that Blackstone decided on leaving the home of his birth. He was not a Puritan, as is shown by his turning his back upon them in the region of Boston. The practices of the English church were

distasteful to him. The Lord Bishops he could not fellowship with, and he left their church behind forever as he set out for the new world. It will be noticed that cotemporary with him in England, were three poets whose names are immortalized in history, namely: Shakespeare, Spenser and rare Ben. Johnson.

A few years ago could be seen, near his Rhode Island home, the well dug and used by him. Roger Williams, upon his advent in Rhode Island, was a very near neighbor of our subject, but nothing is left on record showing that any intimacy sprang up between them. Williams probably knowing something of the characteristics of Blackstone, resolved on leaving him to that seclusion he desired. What is now Lonsdale, Rhode Island, seems to have been the immediate ground covered by the later home of our subject, and the spot is still pointed out where his house stood. In the summer of 1886, excavations were made for a new mill for the Lonsdale company. His bones were dug up, and what few remained were removed to a more quiet resting place. In the floor of the new mill there erected, a tablet was placed over the spot where his grave was. He died May 26, 1675.

It has been disputed that Blackstone settled in Rhode Island prior to Roger Williams. Samuel G. Drake was among those who gave the priority to the latter, but it is now thought they were mistaken.

The reason for this is that another name was taken for Blackstone's at the time of deeding some land at Muddy brook in 1638. There is good evidence that Blackstone left Boston forever in 1635. He would not join the church in that place and decided on leaving the region. November 10, 1634, at a general meeting, a rate of taxation was levied and paid him for his lands, all but six acres and his house, and after this it is said the land became the training field. With the proceeds of his land he bought a stock of cows and took up his march for the new plantations of Rhode Island. What became of his house and the few acres remaining near it we do not learn. It is said Mr. Savage visited him in his new home in 1641, and said Blackstone had before this been a resident of Boston nine or ten years. The Indian name of Blackstone's last home was *Wau e poon seag*, or a place of snares or nets. Here too he planted an orchard and was successful in its culture. Occasionally it is said he went to Providence and preached the gospel. Study Hill, as he called his new home, was once said to have been located on the extreme brow of the hill, but it is now thought from further investigation to have been on lower land nearer the river.

The Boston records show that he married the widow of John Stevenson. By her he had one child, John Blackstone. The latter was a spendthrift, and negligent of his inheritance, according to the accounts coming down to us. He lived on the estate inherited

from his father until 1692. He then sold to David Whipple. John removed to Providence and there remained till 1713, when he went to Attleboro, from which place he and his wife emigrated soon after. It is said they went to Connecticut, in the vicinity of New Haven, and descendants of them were later known to be residing there. Blackstone's estate in and out of Providence amounted, it is said, to three hundred acres. Part of William Blackstone's estate was, by order of court, given to John Stevenson, the son of his wife. The library of Mr. Blackstone contained about two hundred volumes, which was considered large for a private individual in those days.

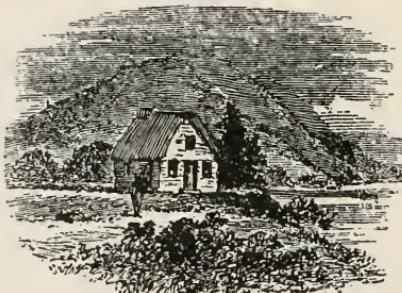
Blackstone was a pioneer in the breaking away from the unjust, assumed power of the bishops of that early day. His was a spirit that would be free and untrammelled. His right to worship God in his own manner, he recognized, and he proved his manhood in daring to stand for that which he felt to be his prerogative. In such action he was not alone. The same spirit had prompted the fathers of 1620, as they sailed for the cold inhospitable shores of Massachusetts bay. The spirit that actuated the latter, led on to great and glorious results, as history testifies. Not that the Pilgrim and the Puritan were free from the faults of mankind, for they had many of them. But their accountability to God was uppermost in their minds. Errors of judgment in dealing with their fellows who differed from them in religious matters, plainly appear

from the record. Yet in the face of all this, in view of all their rigid action, and knowing of their troubles which came through their superstition, we honor them for sterling worth, and the principles they advocated, the outcome of which has been a perfect civil and religious liberty that has permeated an empire. William Blackstone was instrumental in the movement that brought to these shores that Pilgrim band of God-fearing men and women early in 1600. Yet his life was soured by contact with the world, and he sought isolation and quiet more than controversy, defending whatever belief he may have held. Still his place in early history is and has been an honorable one, and though, perhaps, his later life may not have been as progressive as some of the early fathers, yet a meed of praise should to him be given. Notwithstanding his evident desire to avoid his fellowmen, late in life he seems to have come forth, occasionally, from his retirement, to do something for their benefit, both physical and spiritual.

On the river which perpetuates his name are a hundred or more mills whose ever-sounding hum of industry wins bread for toiling thousands of human kind. The Blackstone valley is rich in its varied scenery of hill, vale and plain. The canal which the early century saw and which bore the name of our subject, is among the things that were. But the iron horse still speeds the valley through, bearing in its train the commerce between man and man.

The mission of Blackstone is ended, but his life and those of his cotemporaries furnish themes for the historian for all time. They were the advance guard of a stern old race, behind whom was the Ruler of all things. The purpose that led them to these shores was His. His thought the motive gave.

“Who fathoms the Eternal thought ?
Who talks of scheme and plan ?
The Lord is God ! He needeth not
The poor device of man.”



MR. BLACKSTONE'S HOUSE.

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