

AMERICA'S INTEREST IN ENGLISH PARISH REGISTERS.

BY CLARENCE WINTHROP BOWEN.

The importance of the preservation in England of the first records of emigrants to America in the Seventeenth Century was impressed on me during the past summer when I had occasion to examine certain parish registers.

Not a little service has been done of late by private editors, and especially by the extended work of the Parish Register Society, (divided by counties, and notably by the Lancashire Parish Register Society) in publishing for the use of those interested in genealogical history, the fading and almost illegible early records of the parish churches in England. This is much the same work which is now being done in transcribing and preserving the earliest records of the New England churches. To the excellent work of the Parish Register Society in certain counties of England much credit is due, while yet much remains to be done. This work is especially of interest to us, so many of whose ancestors, names and families can be recovered only from these records. It is desired that the brief mention, I herewith make of a glance at two of the English parish records, not yet reached by the English Society, may suggest whether some American Societies might not be glad to coöperate cordially with English scholars in bringing about the preservation of registers of parishes from which many families came to America in the Seventeenth Century.

One day in June I went to Widford in the County of Hertford, twenty-five miles north of London, to examine the parish register of the Church of St. John the Baptist, of which the Rev. J. Traviss Lockwood is rector. Whitford Manor was given by William the Conqueror to his sons.

The north wall of the church was in existence at the time of the Norman conquest and the cross-timbers are seven hundred years old. At the old font, which may still be seen, was baptized in the year 1604, John Eliot, the Apostle to the Indians. In the first volume of the register, which dates back to 1562, I read that Bennett Eliot and Lettyes Aggar, the father and mother of John Eliot, were married on the 30th of October, 1598, and that Sarah Eliot, a daughter, was baptized on January 13th, 1599, (O. S.). Regarding John Eliot the Apostle, I quote these words from the Register in the handwriting of the rector, Rev. Mr. Payton:

“John Elliott the sonne of Bennett Elliott was baptized the fifth day of August in the yeere of o^r Lord God 1604.”

Other names well known in New England and throughout the United States appear in the parish book at Widford Rectory, but Mr. Lockwood, the present rector, said that persons in England do not care to examine this old register; no one has ever called to look at it except some one from America.

From Widford I drove ten miles to Nazing Vicarage, in Waltham Cross, not far from Epping Forest, to examine another parish register. I found the book in a cupboard in one of the rooms of the house occupied by the Rev. Thomas Ward Goddard, the Vicar of the Church at Nazing. The register which I wished to examine was the earliest volume and is full of baptismal, marriage and death notices from the year 1558 to 1687. It was in a very dilapidated condition; the leaves were torn and the ink was so faded on many pages that it was almost impossible to decipher the writing. Mr. Goddard told me that during the many years he had been Vicar at Nazing no one in England had ever examined the book. Americans, he added, were the only ones who took the slightest interest in the condition of the register. Looking over the pages of this ancient volume I found the dates of the baptism of many who were later emigrants to America; for it is well known that a number of people from Nazing came to Roxbury in New England, including the ancestors of Oliver Wendell Holmes, General

Heath of the Revolutionary War, George Bancroft, the historian, and Dr. William Paine, the Vice-President of the American Antiquarian Society when the Society was formed in 1812.

Names I read on the register were Holmes, Ruggles, Wilkinson, Payson, Heath, Chandler, Lawrence, Alger, Gladwin, Camp, Mills, Adams, Goodrich, Hyde, Mansfield, Simons, Grant, Hawkins, Day, Sumner, Gibbs, Graves, Hale, Ramsey, Prentice and Ford.

The descendants of many of the families above referred to can obtain valuable information regarding their ancestors from this old parish register belonging to the Church at Nazing; but before many years it will be impossible to obtain such information, unless steps are taken to have copies made of these old volumes in the small parishes of England. The books are fast going to decay, and it would appear that they have especial interest for people from our own country. It is greatly to be desired that, with American aid, the Parish Register Society might make careful copies of these old parish registers, which would thus be made accessible to institutions in the United States, like the American Antiquarian Society. This would be a pious work and would be heartily appreciated by historical students and by many others in years to come. As many scholars and historians in the United States would be interested in having such copies made, which would give particulars regarding men who came to New England from 1620 to 1640, I have taken the liberty of speaking of these parish registers which I examined during a recent visit in Great Britain.

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