

# Whitney Origins Revisited

From WRG (Whitney Research Group)

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## WHITNEY ORIGINS REVISITED

[John<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#) of Watertown, Massachusetts, and  
[Henry<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#) of Long Island and Norwalk, Connecticut  
*By Paul C. Reed*

It has been claimed that [John<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#), of Watertown, Massachusetts, is of illustrious and royal descent. The strongest argument for such a connection was put forth by Henry Melville in his *Ancestry of John Whitney* ... ([New York, 1896], hereafter *Whitney Anc.*). Melville cited pedigrees found in the Harleian manuscripts, now at the British Library, London (MSS1442, fols. 66, 67), that had been drawn up on behalf of John Whitney, apparently a cousin of the New England immigrant. This John claimed to be the male heir of the Whitney family of Whitney, Herefordshire, and stated that his grandfather, [Thomas Whitney](#), gentleman, of Westminster, was a son of Robert Whitney, a younger son of Sir Robert Whitney by Sibel Baskerville--and thus the royal descent. Melville also supplemented his genealogy with many transcriptions of wills, chancery records, inquisitions *post mortem*, and other primary sources, making his work appear to be highly trustworthy.

Donald Lines Jacobus challenged this line in an article published in 1933 ([TAG 10\[1933-34\]:84-88](#)). Jacobus tentatively accepted the conclusion that [John<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#) of Watertown, Massachusetts, was a son of [Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster, but he argued that the latter was not the son of Sir Robert. Jacobus concluded that the pedigree was either incorrect or fraudulent, and that chronology made such a connection implausible ([TAG 10\[1933-34\]:87](#)). The burden of proof was therefore unmet.

Some descendants still cling to the hope that the immigrant descends from royalty, however, and the connection is still appearing in new publications. It is argued that, though Sir James Whitney died on 31 May 1587, aged forty-two, his younger brother, Robert (supposed father of [Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster), could have been born about 1548-9 (given ten- to fifteen-month birth intervals). His alleged son, [Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster, married Mary Bray on 12 May 1583. Assuming that both Robert and [Thomas](#) were about seventeen when they married, the connection still seemed chronologically possible, even if unlikely.

It should be pointed out that, although John Whitney made such a claim, it was unsubstantiated and not accepted by the College of Arms. We can now show that the claim is not only unlikely, it is certainly false. The allegation for the marriage license of [Thomas Whitney](#) and Mary Bray is

recorded in the first act book of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster (fol. 94, Family History Library [FHL], Salt Lake City, film #94,507: Joseph Lemuel Chester and Geo. J. Armytage, eds., *Allegations for Marriage Licenses Issued by the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, 1558 to 1699* ..., Harleian Soc. Pubs., 23[London, 1886]:8). Though it did not specifically state the ages of the groom and bride, it must be concluded that [Thomas Whitney](#) was at least twenty-one on 10 May 1583, the date of the record, because no mention of consent is made. This would push his birth date back to at least 1562, probably earlier (a point not made by Jacobus). James Whitney, [Thomas](#)'s alleged uncle, was found to be aged twenty-three at the inquisition *post mortem* of his father, taken 18 September 1567, and aged forty-three at the time of his own death on 31 May 1587. He was therefore born about 1544. The Robert Whitney who was younger brother of Sir James and Eustace would therefore be born no earlier than the beginning of 1546, and more probably 1548 or later. Robert Whitney would not have fathered a son at age thirteen!

That Robert was definitely third, not second son is proved by the entail of land made in Sir James Whitney's will (Prerogative Court of Canterbury [PCC] 38 Spencer), which agrees with *Llyfr Baglan*, a collection of pedigrees compiled by the Welsh scholar, John Williams, between 1600 and 1607 [Note 1]. The administration of Sir Robert Whitney, their father, was granted to his relict, Dame Mary, and son James Whitney on 5 February 1567/8 (PCC Admons. Act Book, 1559-1571, fol. 128). At James's death, and administration *de bonis non* was granted to Robert's son, Eustace Whitney, on 1 February 1588/9. Sir Eustace Whitney died in 1608, heir of his elder brother James. Eustace's four granddaughters eventually became coheirs of the estate.

[Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster had a son Robert, whose son John claimed to be male heir in 1676, about the time that the Hereford estate was settled among the female coheirs. It is most likely that the claimant was trying to obtain some sort of inheritance to make his life less burdensome. The wills of both the claimant's parents were proved in the Archdeaconry of London. Their residence was the parish of St. Peter Cornhill, London, where Robert Whitney, merchant tailor, was buried on 3 Apr 1662. Robert Whitney's original will was dated 19 January 1661/2 and proved 16 April 1662 (FHL Film #94,280). He was of a very low estate, though a citizen and merchant tailor. He gave his loving children John and Mary Whitney 5s. each. He also gave John the great ring he had had from his father. His daughter, Mary, was to receive the lesser ring he usually wore. Robert gave his wife Mary the lease of the house they lived in for the remainder of the term during her widowhood. Mary was made sole executrix. Though the will was sealed with a small seal which appeared to be in good condition it could not be made out on the microfilm copy.

The original will of Mary Whitney was dated 23 October 1667 and proved 11 February 1667/8 (FHL Film #588,057). She left her son, John Whitney, and his wife, Elizabeth, 5s. each, to be paid within a year and a day after her decease. She gave her loving grandchild, Jane Whitney, one silver gilt spoon. She also mentioned her cousin Mary West, daughter to Edward West, to whom she left 12s. The residue was left to her daughter Maryfrances [sic] Whitney, whom she made sole executrix. Lastly, she gave 12d. to her friend Anne Stockinhall, who was to be overseer. In the following records, Mary was stated to be relict of Robert Whitney, of St. Peter Cornhill, London, deceased. William Parker, parson of St. Peter Cornhill, was assigned to administer the estate on 13 February 1667/8 during the minority of the executrix, Mary Frances Whitney. Neither will made any reference to a connection with the Whitneys of Whitney, county Hereford.

If John Whitney, the claimant, were male heir of the Whitneys of Whitney, it would seem inconceivable that the female heirs would have allowed him to fall into such relative poverty. Some legacy or settlement would have been given to him if he had any proof for his claim.

As it is clear that the parentage of [Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster is unknown (though examined by Horatio Gates Somerby in 1871), we present a clue to the actual origin of the family in the marriage entry of Robert Whitney, son of [Thomas](#) of Westminster. He married Mary Towers at Stepney, county Middlesex, on 18 January 1635/6 (original register on FHL film #579,245; Thomas Colyer- Fergusson, *The Marriage Registers of St. Dunstan's, Stepney, in the County of Middlesex*, 3 vols. [Canterbury, 1898-1901], 1:239: "Robert Whitney of Westminster merchanttailor & Mary Towers of Tarvin [the printed transcript says "Tarring," but is in error] in the Coun[ty] of Chester maid married by licence from the Office of Facult[ie]." [There is a gap in the marriage allegations of the Faculty Office during this period.]

The pedigree made by John Whitney, the 1676 claimant, states that his mother was a daughter of John Towers, of Chester or Shropshire (*Whitney Anc.*, 272-73). It seems likely that Robert Whitney, [Thomas](#)'s father, had close connections in Cheshire. Only one prominent Whitney family was situated in Cheshire, seated at Coole Pilate in the parish of Acton. Howell Whitney held land there in 12 and 17 Richard II [1388-1394] (George Ormerod, *The History of ... Chester ...*, 2d ed., 3 vols. [London, 1882], hereafter Ormerod, 3:389) and in 1404. The male representative of the family when [Thomas](#) was at Westminster was a Robert Whitney, gentleman, of Coole (married 1574/5), who is found in 1593, 1600, 1614, and died 24 January 1615/6 at Coole, leaving his grandson Hugh (son of Hugh), his heir (born January 1601) (R. Stewart-Browne, ed., *Cheshire Inquisitions ...*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 91[n.p., 1938]:169-71).

The fullest purported account of the Cheshire Whitney family is found in S. Whitney Phoenix's *The Whitney Family of Connecticut ...* (3 vols. [New York, 1878]). It traces the ancestry of [Henry<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#) of Long Island and Norwalk, Connecticut, from the ancient family by way of counties Hertford, Essex, and Chester. Such a connection would have provided a better royal descent than the main branch of the Whitneys had. Unfortunately, the work is based on many false and dubious sources. A careful examination found that nine key documents used to prove connections do not exist. Had they been real, their discoveries would have presented one of the most brilliant compilations in the field.

The purported English ancestry was the work of Harriet A. Bainbridge DeSalis; and after he had published the book, S. Whitney Phoenix became suspicious. He commissioned the distinguished Anglo-American genealogist, Joseph Lemuel Chester, to examine the accuracy of Mrs. DeSalis's work. Chester quickly noted the fraud. In an 1880 letter, he wrote, "I taxed her with what I had discovered, and now have her confession that the two wills of Thomas Whitney and Ann Roberts, the alleged father and aunt of the emigrant [Henry Whitney](#) ... were pure fabrications .... I have also her written pledge that she will never again seek or accept a commission from the United States." (*NYGBR* 26[1895]:201-2.) But as the earlier Cheshire ancestry is now of interest to descendants of both [Thomas](#) and [Henry Whitney](#), other faked documents also need to be exposed. The key documents are as follows:

- (1) The will of Anne Roberts, which was supposed to mention "[Henry Whitnee](#), one other of the sonnes of my brother Thomas Whitney, now living in New England," was not proved at Hitchin on 25 December 1655 (a period when all wills were supposed to have

been proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury). All possible probate courts were searched to no avail.

(2) There was no will for Thomas Whitney proved at Hitchin on 4 May 1659. It was supposed to include a bequest to "my sonne, [Henry Whitnee](#), one shilling, if he returne home to his countrie," a poorly worded fakery.

(3) There was no will for Jane Whitney proved at Hitchin in 1627. It supposedly named her son, Thomas Whitney, and made her daughter, Anne Roberts, sole executrix.

(4) There was not Pardoe family of Essex or Suffolk, a family whose documents are supposed to prove earlier connections in a remarkable way. There was no will for a Henry Pardoe proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 15 June 1619. Hew was supposed to have named nephews, Thomas Whitney Sr. and George Whitney, among others.

(5) There was no inquisition *post mortem* for Thomas Pardoe at Chelmsford, county Essex, dated 9 January 1605, which inquisition was supposed to cite a will dated 28 July 1604, mentioning his sister, Penelope Whitney, widow, and nephews, Thomas Whitney the elder, Thomas the younger, and George Whitney.

(6) There was no inquisition *post mortem* for William Pardoe, of Waldon, Essex, dated 29 Elizabeth [1586-87], which was also supposed to recite a will dated 28 July 1586, mentioning "my daughter Penelope, wife of George Whitneye, and friend Nicholas Whitney, of Walden." Indexes to Essex, Suffolk, and Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills are all now in print for this period. The many probate courts in Essex must have rendered it a seemingly safe county to bury the evidence in when "Mrs. H. A. De Salis (nee Bainbridge), of London," "a skillful genealogist," did research for S. Whitney Phoenix in 1875. "After several years of research," she may have felt obliged to create something.

(7) The key will connecting the Whitney family of Saffron Walden, county Essex, back to the ancient Cheshire family, was that of Margery Aesden, "of ye parryshe Church [*sic*] of Dariton, in the County of Stafford [*sic*; should be Shropshire], widdowe." It was not proved at Lichfield or any other pertinent court on 4 March 1578. It was supposed to mention the daughter of her "brother, John Whitney, of Audelm, Chester," her cousin, Walter Whitney, of Nantwich, who received all the tenements in Chester "left unto me by my grandfather Hugh Whitney, of Chester" and lands in Leeke "which I did purchase of my cousin, Nicholas Whitney." (Quite a resourceful woman for her time.) She then styled this Nicholas "of Walden, in the County of Essex." There was actually a will for Thomas Whitney, cleric, sometime abbot of the monastery of Deulacres, Stafford (PCC 36 Noodes [FHL film #91,931]). Then a resident of Westminster, he desired to be buried in the monastery there. He gave his brother John Whytney 20s.; cousins Peter and Francis Whitney, a lease and £10; his niece Anne Whitney 20s.; mentioned his niece Margery Aesden; and gave his nephew Nicholas Whitney his house in Mylne Street, Leeke, Stafford. The will was dated 3 and proved 13 August 1558. Mrs. De Salis used information from this will to fabricate the connection to Nicholas Whitney of Saffron Walden, Essex, whose son, Robert (born about 1536) was a Member of Parliament for Thetford in 1584.

(8) The early Cheshire Whitney citations also proved to be false. There is no inquisition *post mortem* for Owen Parry in 1549 which is supposed to quote his will at length, mentioning his daughter, "Mary Whitnee, recently bereaved of her goode husband," Robert Whitney, and their children, Thomas, Robert and John Whitney, and Margery Aesden.

(9) Nor was there any inquisition *post mortem* for Richard Vaughan of Leckryd in 1527, citing a will mentioning his daughter and sole heir, Constance Whitney, his son-in-law

Hugh Whitney, and their children, Eustace, Hugh, Robert, Constance and Elizabeth Whitney. In both cases the original was stated to be at the Public Record Office. Vaughan and Parry sources were carefully searched, but no such men existed in those families.

The purported ancestry of [Henry<sup>1</sup> Whitney](#) of Connecticut is one long string of fraudulent citations, interwoven here and there with extracts from real records. It is one of the greatest examples of "creative genealogy." If they had been genuine, Mrs. De Salis's discoveries would have been truly remarkable and amazingly complete.

Actual sources for the early Cheshire family are meager and scant, and provide no hint or illustrious royal descent such as the Parry and Vaughan matches would have provided. It is most likely that [Thomas Whitney](#) of Westminster descends from the Cheshire Whitneys at Coole Pilate, in Acton, near Nantwich. A Thomas Whitney, found in 1505, 1510, and 1517, and earlier in the reign of Henry VII (1485-1509), married Anne Brooke, daughter of John Brooke, of Leighton, Cheshire, and Jane Meverell, of Throwlegh, county Stafford (Ormerod, 3:454). It would be through this connection that the only possible royal descent for this family might present itself. That the family spread beyond Cheshire is clear from the will of Geoffrey Whitney, son of an earlier Geoffrey. Born at Coole Pilate about 1548, he attended both Oxford and Cambridge, was under-bailiff of Great Yarmouth, county Norfolk, 1580-86, and admitted to the university at Leyden 1 March 1586 (Joseph Foster, *Alumni Oxoniensis ... 1500-1714*, 4 vols. [London, 1887-92], 4:1623; John and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Pt. 1, 4 vols. [Cambridge, 1922-27], 4:396; and *Dictionary of National Biography*). His will, dated 11 September 1600 and proved 28 May 1601 (PCC 33 Woodhall), mentioned many relatives, including his brother, Brooke Whitney, of Oxford and Berkshire (PCC 100 Byrde) [probably a great-grandson of the Whitney-Brooke alliance], Geoffrey Whitney, of Draiton, Shropshire (citizen and merchant tailor of London, PCC 15 Bolein), and Walter Whitney, citizen and plasterer of London (Commissary Court of London, Orig. Will, 1608), but no possible reference to [Thomas](#) of Westminster was noted.

The only place the name *Henry* has been found in the earlier Whitney family is in this branch. Brooke Whitney married Magdalen/Mawdlen Stacey at St. Botolph Bishopgate, London, on 11 July 1585. He had a son Henry born about 1588. A Henry Whitney Jr. married there by license in 1590. And the St. Mary Magdalen Old Fish Street Whitneys where the name *Henry* also appears are also connected to this Brooke Whitney. The most likely origin for the Connecticut immigrant seems to be in this family. Cheshire, Hereford, Lichfield, Gloucester, Norfolk, Essex, and Suffolk wills have been exhausted. Other records are still being searched, but the parentage of [Thomas Whitney](#), gentleman, of Westminster, still remains to be found.

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