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Richard Mills of Stratford, Connecticut; or is it New Haven, Long Island or Westchester?

by John Drobnicki

The following paper is intended to clarify information about Richard Mills. Several standard genealogical reference works conflict information about this man, or, to be more accurate, these men.

According to Henry Stiles’ History of Ancient Wethersfield [1:296], Richard Mills was an early settler of Wethersfield who subsequently removed to Fairfield (1642), Stratford (1653), and finally, to Westchester (1662). Savage’s Genealogical Dictionary [1:214] places Mills settling first in Stratford, before moving on to Stamford and Westchester. In his History and Genealogy of the Families of Old Fairfield [1:411], Donald Lines Jacobus placed Mills in Stratford and Stamford, but with no mention of Westchester. Samuel Orcutt’s History of Stratford [1:184, 241], on the other hand, placed Richard in Stratford and Westchester, with no mention of Stamford. William Wilcoxson’s History of Stratford [124] followed the same pattern as Stiles. In an unpublished manuscript, the Long Island historian Herbert Swanzsmith wrote that Mills went from Stratford to Southampton, long Island and then on to Westchester; but Swanzsmith, influenced by Spencer Mead’s History of Ye Town of Greenwich [617], also added New Haven to the long list of towns that Richard Mills was supposed to have lived in.

What is one to make of all this? Was Richard Mills really as mobile as these writers made him out to be? After all, it seems that he slept in almost as many places as George Washington. Mobility, however, doesn’t provide all the answers, because Mills couldn’t have been in more than one place at the same time. To have confused such eminent historians and genealogists, there would have had to be more than one Richard Mills. So, as we shall see, there were three.

At a time when spelling was still done phonetically, the same surname was often spelled differently by different people. Hence it is not surprising that in various colonial records and sources the name “Mills” is written as Mils, Miltis, Miles, Miles, Miles, Miles, and even Mylls. Thus, therefore, provides one explanation of how there could have been more than one Richard Mills and how easily they could have been confused with one another by later researchers.

First of all, both Stiles and Mead confused Richard Mills of Stratford with Richard Miles of New Haven. Although we would pronounce their surnames differently because of the way that they’re spelled, people in the 17th century would have pronounced them the same: “Mills.” Thus, Mills and Miles were often written interchangeably.

Richard Miles emigrated from Horsley, county Hertford, England in 1636 [Mile, 1:322], along with his first wife and (at that time) three children. Stiles [2:30] didn’t think that the family came from Watertown, Massachusetts, so they may have come from another Massachusetts town or may have emigrated directly to Wethersfield. In 1636, Miles moved from Wethersfield to Quinipiack (New Haven) [Stiles, 1:140], and from there went to New Haven (Milton) in 1639 with Rev. Peter Prudden’s company [Stiles, 1:138], where he served as a judge [Calder, 108].

Miles returned to New Haven in 1643, at which time he was admitted to the First Church of Christ [Dexter, 5] and to the General Court [New Haven Recs., 1:59]. Miles became a deacon in 1656 [Dexter, 5], and he also appears in New Haven records as surveyor of roads and bridges, appraiser of estates, officer of artillery, ship-builder, baker, and miller [New Haven Recs., 1:48, 392; II:158, 202, 258; Calder, 155, 156, 160]. The genealogy of the Richard Mills family can be followed in both Jacobus’ Families of Ancient New Haven [Vol.182-193] and Susan W. Abbott’s Families of Early Milford [446-456]; the two works differ on some details.

With Wethersfield, Milford, and New Haven now accounted for, we are still left with the claims that Richard Mills was in Stratford, Southampton, Stamford, and Westchester.

Richard Mills was an early settler of Stratford, Connecticut. While the very early Stratford town records no longer exist, Richard Mills’ name appears in the Connecticut colonial records in 1644, involved in various court cases [Ct. Col. Recs., 1:109, 110, 114, 115]. Those records don’t mention which town Mills was living in, but the fact that he sold his land in Stratford in 1650 to Joseph Hauley [Orcutt, 1:241]; Wilcoxson, 76]; indicates that he must have been there prior to that date. Mills was married
to the daughter of Sergeant Francis Nichols [Orcutt, I:241], who was present in Pequannock (Stratford) in 1639, when Connecticut's General Court assigned him "to trayne the men and exercise them in military discipline" there [CT. Col. Recs., I:36]. The fact that Nichols was in Stratford in 1639 led historians and genealogists to suggest that his son-in-law, Richard Mills, might also have been there as early as that date [Orcutt, I:241; Wilcoxson, 124]; but it is impossible to say with certainty.

After selling his land in Stratford in 1650, Mills removed to Stamford, where his name appears in the records for the first time in April 1654, testifying in a court case concerning Capt. John Manning [New Haven Recs., II:75]. The Long Island historian Herbert Seversmith claimed that Mills moved to Southampton, Long Island after he left Stratford in 1650 [The American Genealogist, XV:197; Seversmith HS., notebook 4], but the reader will see below why this is incorrect.

In Stamford, Mills married Ann, the widow of Vincent Sinkins (Jacobus, Old Fairfield, I:411) and is mentioned as being a schoolmaster there [Stamford Town Recs., I:32; New Haven Recs., II:329]. Ann's father, Henry Ackerly, was in New Haven as early as Apr. 1640 [New Haven Recs., I:32] and died in 1658 [Stamford Town Recs., I:65, 71]. Vincent Sinkins, one of the original purchasers of Stamford in 1640-41 [Stiles, I:143-144], had died in 1653 [New Haven Recs., II:159]. On Mar. 6, 1662/3, Richard Mills sold his home and belongings to Joseph Axeop, who was acting as agent for Mrs. Margaret Sheofe of Boston, and the document was also signed by A. M. Mills (presumably, his wife Ann) [Stamford Town Recs., I:32].

The following was a child of Richard Mills by his first wife, — — — Nichols:

Samuel, who was in Stamford in June 1659, when he witnessed a will [Stamford Town Recs., I:77]. He was married to Mary — — — (Jacobus, Old Fairfield, I:411). Samuel left Stamford and moved back to Stratford, where he purchased land from Hope Washburn on Dec. 24, 1666, and from his uncle Caleb Nichols on Oct. 29, 1668 [Orcutt, I:241]. Samuel resided in a section of Stratford known as Chronoke [Orcutt, I:241], which was located at the narrows of the Housatonic River between Stratford and Milford. He was still in Stratford in January 1673/4, at which time he concluded a whaling agreement with John Tomson of Brookhaven, Long Island [Brookhaven Recs., 106], and Orcutt wrote that Samuel lived in Stratford for twenty years before moving to Southampton, Long Island [Orcutt, I:241-242]. Samuel must not have lived long in Southampton, for his will was presented there in March 1684/5 [Jacobus, Old Fairfield, I:411]. In 1706, Samuel's Stratford property was delivered to his son and only heir, Richard [Jacobus, Old Fairfield, I:411].

It is not known whether the following children of Richard Mills of Stratford and Stamford were by his first or second wife, and they are listed below in no particular order:

Richard, who was married to Lydia Knapp, daughter of Roger, and who lived in Greenwich, Connecticut [Jacobus, Old Fairfield, I:411].

John, a shipwright, who was granted four acres by the town of Stamford in June 1697 [Huntington, 57]. He sold his ship, the Blossom, in 1691 [Huntington, 57]. John was dead by 1706 [Stamford Land Recs., A:444; B:292], and his "antient widow," Mary, died in Stamford on Nov. 19, 1732 [Huntington, 57]. Their children were John, Mary, William, and Robert [Stamford Land Recs., A:444; Huntington, 58; the descendants of John Mills, Jr., can be found in Jacobus, Old Fairfield, II:653-656].

Richard Mills also had a step-son, Daniel Sinkins [Stamford Town Recs., I:71], who died in 1699 in Bedford [Atwater, 609].


The name "Richard Mills" does not appear in the Southampton, Long Island records until 1660, which makes it tempting to think that this was the same man that had been in Stratford; after all, Mills sold his land in Stratford in 1650. The evidence, however, indicates that Richard Mills was in Southampton for several years prior to 1660, during which time the other Richard Mills was in Stratford.
William S. Pelletreau, the editor of the early published Southampton records, wrote that Mills seemed to have acted as schoolmaster since the time of the settlement there (i.e., 1640), and that the early records were in his handwriting (Southampton Recs., ll:283, 284). First-hand examination of the original manuscript Southampton records has confirmed some of Pelletreau's assertions: many, but not all, of the early records are in Mills' hand. The earliest document in his hand, although his name does not appear, which this writer found was dated Apr. 8, 1643 (Southampton MS., A:13). Numerous records written in his hand appear throughout the 1640s, and the records of 1650-51 are clearly in his distinctive handwriting.

This record Richard Mills (or third, if one counts Richard Millet), a schoolmaster, was made freeman in Southampton on Oct. 7, 1650, and was served as a town clerk and town clerk between 1650 and 1652 (Southampton MS., A:73, 81, 92). He was served as the secretary of the town in April, 1651 in order to keep the "ordinary," (i.e., to lodge strangers) which he agreed to do for four years (Southampton MS., A:109). It was also decreed that only he would be allowed to sell liquor in the town (Southampton MS., A:95). Although Mills sold his homestead to John Cooper, Jr., on Mar. 7, 1651/2 (Southampton MS., A:162), he still owned land on the "little plain" (Southampton MS., A:162, 178), on which he continued to live.

Even though Richard Mills' name does not appear in the Southampton records after early 1652, this does not mean that he left the town. As mentioned above, the land he sold to Cooper did not include his property on the little plain. First-hand examination of the manuscript records shows that the records from 1652 on are written in others' hands; but a document dated Oct. 8, 1656 clearly is written in Mills' hand (Southampton MS., A:113). Possibly the gravity of the document (the banishment of Richard Smith from Southampton) explains why Mills, rather than the secretary or clerk at the time, entered it in the record book. As noted above, the Richard Mills from Stratford was already in Stamford at this time.

Sometime around the year 1657, Richard Mills removed from Southampton to Middletown (Newtown), Long Island, which was an English settlement within the boundaries of the Dutch colony of New Netherland. In Middlebury, Mills became involved in a dispute over a "town-house." A house had been built, at public expense, for the use of the minister/teacher, Rev. John Moore. After Moore died in Sept. 1657, his family retained possession of the house and, when asked to do so, refused to turn it over to the new schoolmaster - Richard Mills (Riker, 49-50; Moore, 31-32). Finally, on Feb. 14, 1661, Peter Stuyvesant, the New Netherland's Director-General, ordered that the house be turned over to Mills (Riker, 50; Moore, 32). His name is mentioned in the Newtown records as late as Feb. 24, 1662/3 (Newtown Town Recs., I:38; NYSBR, LXIII:362). It should be pointed out, also, that while Richard Mills of Long Island was in Middletown, the other Richard Mills was clearly still in Stamford.

Mills' problem in Middletown, however, would pale in comparison to what was next in store for him. He left Middletown and moved to Westchester (Irvington, 59; Powell, 432-433), which was the border territory between the Dutch in New Netherland and the English in Connecticut. Both colonies claimed the area and, as town clerk in Westchester, Richard Mills found himself in the middle of the dispute. Connecticut had previously recognized New Netherland's jurisdiction over the territory; but in Oct, 1662 Connecticut formally notified the inhabitants of Westchester that they were included within the boundaries of Connecticut, and that they were required to send deputies to the Connecticut Assembly (Bolton, XI:280-281).

It was the way in which Mills handled this delicate problem which infuriated Peter Stuyvesant. According to custom, Mills, as town clerk, should have forwarded Connecticut's letters and instructions to Stuyvesant; but he didn't, making, in Stuyvesant's eyes, a conspirator. Under a recently enacted law, Westchester should have nominated magistrates for the coming year and presented them to Stuyvesant; but it seems that both Mills and the "people of Westchester refused to do this (Bolton, XI:282-283). On Apr. 30, 1663 Mills wrote to Stuyvesant, informing him that "we the inhabitants of this place, have not plotted nor conspired against your Honour," that they didn't ask Connecticut to try to annex them, and that the reason that the people of Westchester were so hesitant was because Connecticut acted in the name of their king (Bolton, XI:281).

This must not have satisfied Stuyvesant, however, for the Director-General imprisoned Richard Mills in New Amsterdam in May 1663 (Bolton, XI:283-284). Mills, being "antient and weakly ... and lame with pains in my back, hips and joints," was released on June 18, 1663 after having confessed his guilt to the satisfaction of the Dutch (Bolton, XI:284-285). Although he was only in prison for about a month, Mills died shortly after his release, leading the English in Westchester to claim that he had been mistreated by his Dutch jailers (N.Y. Col. Docs., XII:3).
Backissues of Mills Ancestry

The following issues of this newsletter are available as back issues. Actually, they're just piled up here. If you want I'll send you what I can from the list below.

Mills Ancestry #10, 11, 15, 16, 19, 23, 24, 31, 32, 33

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391. Stuyvesant, however, denied the English charges, writing that "it is notorious that he [mills] lived eight months after his discharge, and during that time had made divers inland journeys hither and thither, and last October [1663] to Hartford" [P.R. Col. Docs., I:397], at which time, incidentally, in an obvious slap at Dutch rule in Westchester, "Mr." Richard Hills was made a freeman by Connecticut's General Court [Ct. Col. Recs., I:412].

The children of Richard Hills of Long Island and Westchester were:

Mary, who married Nathaniel Norton sometime between 1661 and 1667, probably in Southampton, and they subsequently removed to Brookhaven, Long Island. They had seven children: Isaac, Nathaniel, George, Mary, Sarah, Hannah, and Jonathan. She was still living in 1685, when her husband's will was probated. [The American Genealogist, X:196-198; Seversmith HS., notebook 4.]

Samuel, who, "aged about 25 years," testified in a court case in Middleburg on Dec. 29, 1660 (Newtown Court Recs., I:311). Along with his father, he was made a freeman by the Connecticut General Court in Oct. 1663 [Ct. Col. Recs., I:412]. He appears in the Southampton records for the first time in Apr. 1661, when he witnessed his brother Isaac's land purchase [Southampton Recs., II:59]. Samuel purchased land in Southampton on Aug. 27, 1677 from Joseph Foster [Southampton Recs., II:60], and he died on Apr. 1, 1685 [Southampton Recs., II:282]. It should be pointed out that for much of the period that this Samuel Hills was in Southampton, the other Samuel Hills was clearly in Stratford, Connecticut [Wilcoxson, 47n; Brookhaven Recs., 106].

Isaac, who appears in the Southampton records for the first time in Apr. 1671, when he purchased a house and four acres from John Beswick [Southampton Recs., II:591]. He was married to Elizabeth *-- -- [East-Hampton Recs., I:133-134]. Howell placed him in Bridgehampton in 1694 [Howell, 433], and he appears in Southampton's tax list of Sept. 11, 1696 [Southampton Recs., II:362]. It is assumed that he is the "Doctor Mills" referred to in the record [Southampton Recs., II:363]. Isaac's children were Isaac, Jonathan, and David [Howell, 433].

Phebe, who married Lot Burnet in Southampton on Oct. 20, 1675 [Southampton Recs., II:242]. It is not known when either died, but Lot Burnet is included in Southampton's Sept. 11, 1696 tax list [Southampton Recs., II:362].

It is clear from the foregoing information that many of the standard genealogical reference works have confused Richard Hills, Richard Mills, and Richard Mills. As the reader has seen, this was something that was easy to do, since their names were for all intents and purposes the same; and the fact that the latter two both had sons named Samuel only added to the mistakes. Also adding to the confusion were the unusual and changing boundaries of the towns and colonies that these men lived in - at one time or another, Southampton, Westchester, and Middleburg (called Hastings) were all part of Connecticut; at Stamford, although physically separated from it, was part of the New Haven colony. Thus, when the name "Richard Mills" appears in Connecticut records in 1663, who would have guessed that this was actually the man from Long Island and Westchester?

It is hoped that this paper will make a contribution, however small, to a clearer understanding of these three men and their respective families, and that it will provide a framework for future researchers interested in the three Richard Hillses.

*While the present writer is admittedly not a handwriting expert, Richard Mills of Southampton wrote with a style which clearly distinguishes his from the entries made by others. One example of this is the way he pulled the "h" far below the written line (see the appendix at the end of this article).

**This document, which looks to have been written hastily, while not bearing the pulled-down "h," contains Mills' unusual rendering of "general Court" - his written "C" looks like a "c" (compare South Hampton HS., A:87 and 135), and while he always wrote "Court" (again with a distinctive "C"), other secretaries wrote "Cort" [for example, South Hampton HS., A:134].