

EDGECOMBES IN EARLY COLONIAL AMERICA by Alan Taylor [Oct. 1991]

Many of the new members who have joined *Edgecombe Family History and Genealogy* magazine this summer are descended from Lieutenant John Edcombe, first recorded at West Hartford, Connecticut, in 1729. He moved to New Hartford shortly after that settlement was established in 1734 and remained there until he died c1772. Unsurprisingly they would like to know whence he came and who his ancestors were.

An attractive candidate is John born at New London, Connecticut, on 14 Nov 1675, the son of John and Hannah (Hempstead) Edgcombe. He is known from his father's will to have been alive but away from New London in 1727. Thereafter the picture grows confused: there is inconclusive evidence to suggest he might have died c1735 in New London, but this is not sufficiently definite to preclude the possibility that he became the sought-for lieutenant. If he were not from New London, John could have come either from England or from elsewhere in America. In order to help assess the possibilities of the latter option, this note sets out the results of a search in my files for any Edgcombes known to be active in early America other than the lines of Nicholas of Maine and John of Connecticut, which are well written up in more recent American literature and feature prominently in the American I.G.I., most of the references have been discovered browsing along the shelves at the Society of Genealogists' library in London.

First on the scene was Nicholas Edgcombe who landed from the *Hercules* at Richmond Island, Maine, on 13 Feb 1636/7, and later settled at Scarborough. The search for his English ancestry has been extensive and unsuccessful, and has already been the subject of three articles in *E.F.G.H.*, most recently by Ken Rolston elsewhere in this issue. Judith Voran, has summarily reviewed his descendants who multiplied mightily in Maine and northern Massachusetts, and concluded that there is no suitable John. My files which include additional material support her conclusion.

Very shortly after Nicholas arrived, and before 1640, a John Edgcombe was one of a number of planters at Piscataqua. (In 1654 this place was incorporated into the town of Kittary which is at the southern extremity of Maine.) This John is not heard of again and I am almost sure that he is the John buried at St. Andrew's, Plymouth, on 6 Feb 1643/42. He was unmarried and childless and in his nuncupative will delivered the previous day he left his 'debts and adventures abroad' to his brother Peter. They were the sons of Thomas Edgcombe,

merchant of Tavistock and Plymouth, a man well placed to size up the chance of profits for colonial enterprise, and to guide his sons towards them. Although I have come across no record of Peter in America, I suspect that he was a partner in his brother's adventures. He married in 1652 in Plymstock near Plymouth, by which time he was over 40, not excessively old for a first marriage but older than average. Perhaps he had spent time seeking, and perhaps making, his fortune in Piscataqua. He and his wife settled in Buckland Monachorum where four children were born. It is unlikely that had American descendants.

The next migrant was also of this family. Peter and John had a cousin Nicholas who was also a merchant in Plymouth. He was the father of three sons, John the youngest being christened at Plymouth St. Andrew on 12 Mch 1647/8. In 1673 he went to New London, Connecticut, and established himself as a farmer and tanner there. He was the grandfather of John, born 1700, whom met above. He left many other descendants in America, but none who could plausibly be presented as Lieutenant John.

Looking further south, in an area from which on-migration to New Hartford would be unlikely, there is a Richard Eachcome recorded with a certain Robert Week in the Montserrat census for 1677-8. I know nothing else about him. Another West Indian island, Antigua, was home after c1687 to Thomas Edgcombe who married Martha, a member of the Horsford family of Antigua. Thomas came from Plymouth and was the son of Abraham Edgcombe, the youngest brother of John of Kittery and Peter (above). Thomas and his family crossed the Atlantic more than once, and was buried at Plymouth St. Andrew on 2 May 1706. His descendants remained in Antigua for almost a century, although they seem to have died out and at no time to have run to any Johns.

Returning further north, on 25 Mch 1690 a Nathaniel Edgcombe who is otherwise unknown witnessed the marriage of Abimelech Hudson and Priscilla Beswick at Burlington, West Jersey County, New Jersey. If we have any other record of him it is his baptism 2 Apr 1656 at Buckland Monachorum, tenth child of Joseph Edgcombe and only a very distant relation of Peter mentioned above. He may, however, have been the father of a later Nathaniel who married Susanna Skinner on 2 Feb 1729 at Falls, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. This Nathaniel would have been much of an age with Lieutenant John.

Around this time we hear of two sea captains whose trading activities took them to America, although neither seems to have settled there. One was Leonard Edgcombe who was mentioned as a captain in the Royal Hudson Bay

Company between 1688 and 1692, at which time he was master of the Deering of London; by 1695 he had transferred to the East India Company. He was murdered by a mutinous crew in 1698. The other was Robert Edgcombe of Falmouth and Plymouth who was trading in Chesapeake Bay in 1692 and in Antigua in 1698. He was buried in Falmouth in 1707.

Another settler of whom little is known is Sugitt Edgcombe whose children, William and Jemima, were mentioned in a will drawn Up In Richmond, Virginia, on 2 Jun 1753. Sugitt sounds so unlikely that it may be a mistranscription but I cannot imagine for what.

By this time, although the population of America was growing very rapidly because of a high birth rate, the rate of emigration had slowed significantly. This is reflected in a diminution in the number of Edgcombes crossing the Atlantic. Since, however, land was plentiful and cheap the sons of settlers preferred to acquire their own farms rather than work for others. Particularly in the less comfortable southern colonies, the shortage of wage labour became a problem. Transportation of criminals was introduced in the years after 1660 as a means of simultaneously punishing criminals and providing labour in the southern states.

The first Edgcombe transportee seems to have been John Edgcombe, alias Elford, sentenced in Devon in April 1728. I know no more of him but, in any case he would not have served his term in time to be a free man of Hartford by the following year. Later criminals transported to the states were Mary Edgcombe from Devon in 1756, Thomas Edgcombe from Worcestershire in 1765, and George Edgcombe from Hertfordshire in 1774, just before Independence diverted criminal transportation elsewhere.

By that time, or so I imagine, Nicholas, the son of Richard and Christian (Maddaford) Edgcombe of Milton Abbot who was chr 2 May 1750 Milton Abbot, of whom it was written that he went to America and not since heard of had crossed the Atlantic. He might have been the Nicholas Edgcombe who married Isabel Redman at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 26 Jan 1779.

I have come across no other Edgcombes in America before the declaration of independence.

* * * * *

1In The Edgcombes of Allen County OH and New Hartford CT in The American Genealogist, Jan/Apr 1986, pp146-158.

2 I had reached this conclusion independently before discovering that it is shared by Eben Putnam, quoted in C.A. Converse, *Converse Family and Allied Lines*, (Boston, 1905), p.757.

3 Proved 13 Feb 1645 P.C.C.

4 Which I mention because of the theme of Ken Rolston's article later in this issue. I doubt if it is significant.

4 On the armorial pedigree which used to hang in Edgcumbe House, and is now in the Devon Record Office.