

Talk on Early Medfield and the Frairy (Frary) Family

By Richard DeSorgher

This actually is an intimidating assignment, to speak about the Frairy family at a reunion of Frairy family historians and DNA certified Frairy members.

So, to be safe, I will go on the assumption that you have through knowledge of John Frairy and his first in America family and instead I will focus on their time in Medfield, as that is my expertise, and will try to give you a vision of what life would have been like for John, Prudence and family as they leave their home in Contentment, ie, Dedham, and settle in the new town of Medfield on the banks of the Charles River near what was called Boggestow.

John Frairy, as you know, came to Massachusetts Bay Colony from England in 1636 with his wife Prudence and three sons, John, Jr., Theophilus and Samson. Eleazar would be born in 1639 and Samuel in 1641. It is Samuel who probably died in infancy. Now, they first settled in Watertown but moved to Dedham in 1638 where John was one of the founders of the town and where, when the First Church of Christ was formed on November 8, 1638, he was one of the eight men signing the covenant.

The Frairys came with the wave of English to the new world, starting in 1630, known as the Great Migration. During a twelve-year period, some 13,000 to 21,000 emigrants made their way to the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Frairys were Puritans and they left England primarily due to religious persecution but also for economic reasons as well. England was in religious turmoil in the early 17th century, the religious climate was hostile and threatening, especially towards religious nonconformists like the Frairys.

The Puritans were a sect of religious dissidents who felt the Church of England was too closely associated with the Catholic religion and needed to be reformed. They were not as radical as the Pilgrims, also called Separatists, who broke from the church. The Puritans wanted to stay with

the church but they wanted to reform it. Here they could get away and make their reforms in the new world, far from the oversight of the Church of England, now an ocean away.

The founding of Dedham came as a result of people moving there from earlier settled towns and villages, including Watertown. Here was a grant of land for some 200 square miles of American wilderness, at first known, appropriately, as Contentment. That original Dedham grant included not only the current town of Dedham but also the future towns of Medfield, Wrentham, Needham, Natick, Franklin, Bellingham, Wellesley, Walpole, Westwood, Norfolk, Norwood and Dover. There are few examples in human history in which mankind had been given a clear slate, than the founding of Dedham. How exciting and historic this must have been for the Frairy family. Though they were under the broad guidance of the General Court, most of how they chose to organize and what they chose to do, in the most immediate sense, was up to them; it was their town.

In their covenant, which, following the lead of the Mayflower Compact, all the early New England towns wrote as soon as they organized their town; this they all signed at the founding of the town. Among other things, John Frairy and the other at Dedham agreed that they shall take all means to keep out all that are contrary minded and receive in only such that may be probably of one heart with us. Those new settlers at Dedham and then at Medfield expected that all townsmen would be of the same faith and there could be no place for the contrary minded; those of different opinion would be warned off or if needed, like Roger Williams, Ann Hutchinson, Thomas Morton and other, be expelled or banished. These founders saw no contradiction in the idea that the ideal society was to be built upon a policy of rigid exclusiveness. Frairy and the others basically created a “Christian Utopian Closed Community”; all were steep in Puritan ideology.

The lots given the first settlers of Dedham totaled 12 acres for married men and this included an additional 4 acres of swamp land, and that is what the Frairy's received. Bachelors were given less, usually eight acres. The swamp lands were also ordered to be cleared. First, because they were home to wildcats and wolves. Wildcats and wolves presented a major threat to the well-being of the new Dedham settlers. The town employed full-time hunters and maintained a town-owned pack of dogs trained for the hunt. It was reported that 7-year old John Dwight, son of one

of the founding settlers of the town, wandered off into the woods and was eaten by wolves in 1638. Swamp clearing also gave John an additional supply of wood. He needed the wood for cooking and heating fires as well as use for building materials. All this tended to deplete the wood supply rather quickly. By one estimate, an average family would, in the course of one year, for burning purposes alone, require all the wood from 4 acres of forest totally leveled or from 20-acres selectively cut. Multiply that estimate by the 30 families in Dedham in 1640 and the amount of lumber required staggers the imagination. Restrictions were put on wood-cutting on public or unallotted lands. Most could remember the total deforesting of trees in Boston within 3 years of the founding of that town. Not wanting the same to happen to them, John and the Dedham settlers established one of the first conservation projects in New England. For John, the swamp, once cleared, would become a bog and a bog, once drained, would become a meadow. Here in the meadow, the cattle could graze. Another avenue for food supply for the cattle and other barn animals was the rich grass that grew along the rivers. This could also be cut and stored for use in the snowy winter months. This supply of grass had been one of the major attractions to the Dedham site in the first place. The grass to be sure was not English grass but it was as good as might be had until a better seed was imported from England and it was at least nutritious enough for the cattle.

The first mention in Dedham town records of what is now Medfield came in 1640, when Edward Allen was assigned 300 acres of upland and 50 acres of meadow, all to lie in or about that place called Boggestow. Allen died in 1642 but the land was laid out to his heirs in 1649. That land was afterwards bought by the new Town of Medfield. While its exact location is not known, it is thought to be within the present bounds of Medfield. Since Dedham law stipulated that “no house be built over half a mile from the meetinghouse,” it seems clear that there were no dwellings built here before the land grants given to the new town of Medfield in 1650.

For quite some time, John and other Dedham men traveled out to the Charles River in what is now Medfield to cut the grass growing in the meadows along the river. They then journeyed back to Dedham with the grass to store in their barns for winter feed for the cattle and farm animals.

This was a lot of work and a distance to travel, and as a result, a movement was undertaken in Dedham to establish a new community out along the banks of the Charles River. Their plan was

to get as much of the meadows on both sides of the river. The east side already belonged to Dedham, the west side belonged to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. To carry out this plan, two grants would be needed. John must have been very involved in these happenings. A petition was sent to the General Court for a grant of land west of the river. This grant was given to Dedham on October 23, 1649. The town of Dedham then held a town meeting on November 14, 1649 and voted to set aside a portion of its original territory east of the river for the new town. With the two grants, the new town now had land on both sides of the Charles River, Those in Dedham saw some advantages in giving up a portion of their territory, as it would establish a buffer zone to protect Dedham proper in the event of attack by Native-Americans (this would come true during the King Philip War, when Medfield took the blow of an attack that otherwise could had gone to Dedham) However, there was much debate in Dedham over the possible loss of land along the Charles River. Some in Dedham felt the land should be freely given to those who would emigrate; while others felt there should be consideration to the fact that Dedham was losing so much meadow land and therefore the new settlers should pay 100 pounds to be evenly divided among the remaining residents of Dedham. Town meeting eventually voted the sum of 50 pounds be paid in consideration of the many and great charges lying upon the town.”

In January 1650, Ensign Phillips, John Dwight and Daniel Fisher were chosen by the Town of Dedham and authorized to lay out the grant from that town lying east of the river. The men appointed by the General Court to lay out the land on the west of the river, now Medway and Millis, completed that duty on May 22, 1650. In the grant laid out by the General Court the name of the new town is left blank. But the name was decided upon very shortly afterwards, when it was probably inserted. The name has a number of different spellings in the early records most frequently Meadfield and Medfeild.

To carry out the actual transaction and to manage the smooth division of the land from Dedham to Medfield, a committee was selected by the town meeting in Dedham.

Among the first business undertaken by this committee was the writing of the Covenant to be signed by all who wished to be accepted as official inhabitants of Medfield. While its author is not certainly known; there is little doubt that it was chiefly, if not entirely the work of Ralph Wheelock, who has been proclaimed the “Founder of Medfield.” The Medfield Covenant very much echoes that of Dedham. Those settling Medfield would do so to “further spread the gospel,

that differences would be solved in peaceable ways, that those entering the town would be honest, peaceful, free from scandal and free from erroneous opinions.”

The main road from Dedham to Medfield ran through the vicinity of what is today Clapboard Tree Street in Westwood through the northeast corner of what is now Walpole, cutting through roughly where Bubbling Brook Ice Cream is located and entering Medfield along Foundry Street

On June 19, 1650 the committee met again, this time to layout thirteen house-lots. John Frairy was given 12 acres abutting the highway towards the south-east. The highway here referred to was the common around the meeting house, which embraced the land now covered by Meetinghouse Pond. Frairy's houselot lay along present Frairy Street up to Dale Street and the house itself was on the site just to the west of the current Dwight-Derby House. The Frairy house and lot was given to son Theophilus after John's death. Theophilus, living in Boston at the time, would donate house and lot to the town and the church in 1695. The house was torn down a few years later by vote of town meeting and the proceeds were used to fence the lot. This was afterward divided between the town and the church and a plan of it is inserted in the town records. The church had a long, narrow piece, next to the Dwight line; the town had the remainder.

John's meadow land was located on the west side of Stop River by Noon Hill. (not far where David and Marjorie Temple live today)

John built a bridge over the river to get to his meadow land. Replacement bridges over what became Noon Hill Road still bears the name Frairy's Bridge today (Article 18 of the 1976 Annual Medfield Town Meeting made it official that the name of the bridge is Frairy's Bridge)

Local government in these New England towns was under the leadership of a Board of Selectmen. At first as many as seven would serve on the board, on one-year terms, later dropped to five members and then later, as in most New England towns, to three-member boards. These leaders would be the executive branch of local government. John Frairy was a selectman in Medfield in 1651, 1653, 1654, and 1661. Frairy and the others elected selectman, were the most power men in the town. The selectmen were also members and leaders of the church. As a selectman, John Frairy had immense prestige, he worked hard, giving time without salary. Most important Frairy and the others who were selectmen had been chosen by their neighbors. By-in-

large those elected selectmen were the wealthier men in the town. Frairy in the Medfield 1652 valuation, had his valuation listed at 316 pounds. Only Thomas Wight had a higher valuation, at 322 pounds. The town wanted these men to be the town leaders and called them back repeatedly.

What were some of the issues John would have been dealing with during his terms as a selectman:

1651 must have been the most exciting, important and time-consuming year for John, as the town was being laid out, new settlers were entering, the convenient written and enforced. The first mill was built, the first roads were laid out. Safety and wild animal concerns were abundant.

In 1653 he would have had to deal with who would be allowed to cut the massive Old Forest trees along Vine Brook, who would contribute to the new college in Cambridge, new settlers would have to be accepted as townsmen. The meeting house constructed was begun. It was modeled after that in Dedham, probably 36 feet long, 20 wide and 12 high with a thatched roof. John and the other selectmen would have formed a committee to “burn the woods” The old Native-American practice was kept for many years. Led by John and the selectmen, Town Meeting passed a bi-law stating that all who failed to be at the annual town meeting by 9:00 be fined 12 pennies. The South Plain was laid out in long narrow strips, measuring from three to 20 acres each, more roads were laid out.

IN 1654 John and the selectmen pushed through a bi-law at town meeting stating that those absent for part of the town meeting were to pay a fine of 12 pennies but those who missed the entire day of town meeting be fined 3 shillings and 9 pennies. (sounds like John was a stickler on making sure you attended town meeting). They also pushed a town meeting vote to require the “whole force of the town to give six days of work on the highways, four of those days to be performed by June 24.” In 1654, they also erected a town pound for stray animals.

IN John’s 4th and final year as a selectman in 1661, Rev. Wilson’s pay was debated and finalized, the plans for building a school house were being debated, a new town law mandated every household “have a ladder, whereby the top of his chimney may be conveniently reached, under penalty of 5 shillings.” With thatched roofs, house fires were a major problem. Selectmen also banned the use of canoes in any pond, brook or river except by permission of the selectmen

under penalty of 10 shilling fine. Many people in the early colony, not having swimming abilities, had been drowned by means of canoe. Town meeting agreed to buy a bell for the meeting house from Robert Hinsdale. The selectmen also laid out and accepted Dwight's Causeway as a town way

Let's take a look at what life would be like for the Frairys in the first years of this new Medfield community.

On any given Sunday, the Frairys would be getting ready to go to Meeting. As the meetinghouse was within sight of the Frairy home, it would not take them long, just crossing Meetinghouse Brook. Early Sunday morning, one hour after sunrise, they would hear, loud and clear, George Barber beat his first Sunday drum-call, a signal for all to be getting ready to "go to meet'n". After another hour the second drum-call would sounds out, this time from the top of the meetinghouse roof, the better to be heard down in Bridge Street and across the Charles River at Sherborn Farms.

The tithing-man appeared with his staff and set the front door of the meetinghouse ajar, so the earlier comers might get in out of the biting cold winter wind. There was no artificial heat in the building. When the Frairys approached the meeting house they would see wolf heads, brought in and nailed to the walls so as to get the bounty. The wolf was a marked animal in early Medfield and very destructive to lambs, pigs, calves and young stock, generally the most hated of all the wild beasts then infesting the town. Everyone was interested in having the wolf killed and a large bounty was paid for every head of a wolf brought in. It was nailed up to the Meetinghouse wall as the selectmen did not want to pay bounty on the same head twice.

On the Meetinghouse front door were posted notices; Like: Robert Mason intends to marry Abigail Eaton of Dedham; and "strayed away from me, one red steer, 2 years old, has the Medfield brand on the rump, signed John Bowers," or "Town Meeting will assemble on the 28th day of February 1659 to see what bounty the town will allow upon grown wolves, squirrels and blackbirds killed with in the limits of this town, or do or act anything relating thereto, signed John Frairy, constable."

People begin arriving at the Meetinghouse, the furthest off arriving first, as usual that was George Fairbanks, from the Farms, in what is now Millis close to the Sherborn town line. Fairbanks and his daughter arrived so early that they went instead over to Joshua Fishers Inn to warm up before the meeting. Soon the Bridge Street people were seen coming then the dwellers in the village- Mr. Wheelock, the Fishers, Barbers, Frairys, Dwights, Bullards, Metcalfs, Thurstons, Wights- and others.

The seats were just rough board benches without backs, less comfortable drowsing -places than modern pews. Fur bags were nailed to the front of many seats. These were made of wolf-skin, into which the people, especially the women, thrust their feet during the long service, to keep them from freezing. The men let their dogs come in and lie at their feet as a sort of animated foot-warmer. The men sat on one side by themselves, the women and young girls on the other. The boys, the boys had to sit under the pulpit, where the tithing man could watch their behavior. The pulpit was elevated and made of oak. (the Medfield Historical Society has parts of that first oak pulpit). When Medfield's minister, Rev. Mr. Wilson and his wife appeared at the door, the tithing man rapped his pole on the floor and all rose and stood while Rev. Mr. Wilson entered and sat down in the pulpit.

Several people "put up notes" as it was called, which were read by Mr. Wilson; "Iassac Chenery, for the birth of a son, or Alexander Lovell, on account of his wife's sickness" or Gershom Wheelock, for the death of an infant child" or "Eleazer Frairy, being about to take a journey to the Connecticut River."

The morning service began with singing from the Bay Psalm-book. Since not many people had books, the first line was read by someone and then it was sung. There were no instruments of any kind. Then came the Long Prayer by the pastor; and long it was, at least forty minutes in length. All must stand except women who had infants in their arms. Then another two psalms were sung. The hour glass was then set and the sermon begun. On this occasion, the hour glass had to be turned before the sermon was through. The sacrament followed but the bread was found to be frozen solid and rattled in the plate like pebbles.

Now came the noon hour. Those like the Frairy's, who lived nearby, went home to get by their fireplace and have lunch. Those who live too far away went into the noon-house, built next to the church, where they could sit inside around a fire, with the smoke floating out the hold in the roof and there they would eat their lunch and be warm. At the end of the hour, George Barber would beat his drum and all began to again gather.

When the people were once more in their seats, Rev. Mr. Wilson arose and said that he had important news. News had just come from England, and it gave him great pain to learn that our steadfast friend and ruler, Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, was no more. It was feared by many, Wilson said, that the son, Richard Cromwell, would never be able to live up to his father's abilities and that Prince Charles might come to the throne after all, in which case no man could tell what was to become of our liberties.

The afternoon services began in the same way as had the morning. The psalms were sung and another sermon began. In the middle of the sermon two dogs who were not on good terms to begin with, went at each other causing the Tithing man, with his pole, to drive the two yelping dogs out of the Meeting house. At the close of the sermon, came confession time. John Ellis rose and said he was conscious of wrong-doing in that he had spoken disrespectfully of Deacon Bullen in alluding to his keeping Sarah Daniels, a young woman from Cambridge, in his family as a helper for his wife; his remarks he made to others were unjust and uncalled for. He also regretted having given way to his temper in firing at and wounding one of John Frairy's pigs which came across the brook into his garden. Mr. Wilson said that Goodman Ellis had made a proper acknowledgement of his wrongs but counselled him to have better care of his uncharitable judgement and hasty temper.

The minister and his wife then passed out of the meetinghouse with all standing in their places until he was gone. Then all left-- with the Frairy's trudging on foot to their home where a blazing hearth-fire and a substantial meal soon made them welcome- rude, yet home sweet home- Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home

John was a cordwainer, maker of boots but like everyone else was a farmer by survival. What about the Frairy's house? John would have had to build a house on his new lot, located not far

from Meetinghouse Brook, now called Vine Brook, which meandered between his house lot and, as mentioned, where the meeting house would be built. His house was a log house- good, stout logs, straightened a little with his axe where they lie one above the other, to form the walls and locked together at the corners. The wind would not shake his house much, though it may find some crevices. But the cracks between the logs, John would have filled by wooden wedges and clay from the town clay pits down by Bridge Street. He never made an attempt to finish either inside or outside, all was very rustic. Inside the Frairy's original house were two rooms, one large living room, that was kitchen, sitting-room and work room all in one. The other room on that first floor was a sleeping room. The house was of one story but with a loft under the thatched roof where the Frairy children would sleep. It was reached by a ladder. There were two windows of English diamond glass but in the loft and sleeping room the windows were simply openings fitted with oiled paper panes, which let in a little subdued daylight. In the middle of the house was a wide heavy door through which John could bring in one of his horses dragging a big back-log for the fire.

At one end of the big room was a large fireplace, some ten feet wide built of stone laid in clay with a broad chimney of the same material rising above the loft and the thatched roof; as I mentioned, the thatched roof was at the mercy of sparks and embers from the fire; leading to that town law requiring every house hold to have a ladder long enough to reach the roof.

In winter, against the rear wall of the fireplace would be the great back-log which the horse drew in and which took the united muscles of John, John Jr, Samson, and Eleazar to put in place. Piled in front would be a generous quantity of other wood, which sent up a roaring blaze, giving a pleasant thrill of warmth to all in the Frairy family. The floor was strong enough to hold the weight of a horse and massive logs because the floor was made up of trees split in half with the split side up, hewn into a somewhat smoothness, the round side bedded in the solid earth. John build just a small cellar under the sleeping room, reached by a trap-door. A few of his apples would be stored there along with turnips, cabbage and other vegetables, kept safe from the frost. (his apple tree did not bear many apples in the first years of planting.)

John had an old matchlock gun, some seven feet long, which had been taken out against bear or wolf or perhaps a deer, it was hung up across two stout pegs provided for it near the door.

For their meals, the Frairys would have a board in the main room, literally a wide board that they leaned against the wall until they were ready to eat. It would then be placed upon wooden saw-horses and made into a table. On the table they would have wooden platters, knives, pewter bowls and spoons. Forks? The Frairys would not know what forks were, as there were none in use at this early day in the colony. They would often have meat for supper, where they would make use of their fingers with a lot of home-made napkins. As there was no baker in Medfield, there would be no bread. Wheat did not thrive well in Medfield, and what little was raised would go to Boston where it would bring in a good price. Over the fireplace would come something stewing, steaming and sputtering in the kettles over the fire, the odor of which would fill the entire room. When they were ready to eat, there was always one chair in the house and that is for a visitor. John and Prudence sat side by side on a bench on one side of the table and John, Eleazar and Samson would stand around the board. A kettle of mush would be brought from the fire and each would help himself, cooling it in his pewter bowl with the milk that had been brought in from the cows in the barn. Next a seething iron pot would be set on the board holding stewed meat and vegetables. Prudence might have remarked to John that “This is some of the deer you shot down by Henry Adams mill the other day.” . With the stew being finished Prudence would go back to the fireplace again. But this time the lug-pole on which the various kettles were hung had burned off and suddenly gave way, forcing the remaining kettle with its contents into the coals and ashes. There was great sizzling and steaming accompanied this catastrophe, but the ruin was complete. Nothing could be saved from the wreck. Oh no said Prudence, “there goes my hulled corn that I have been cooking all day long. She would then proceed to rake the ashes bringing to view a nice baked pumpkin. A big hole would be made in the shell as it stood in the center of the board. The pewter spoons taking out the savory sauce from within. They end their meal with a piece of cheese from which each cut up with their knife.

When getting ready for bed, John would bring out his old black-letter Bible and read slowly...’
The Lord is my shepherd—then stands and commits the keeping of his rude home in the wilderness with its beloved inmates to the heavenly Protector of us all. John, Samson and Eleazar climb up the latter to the loft. John replenishes and banks up the fire and with Prudence settle into their bed. Than all is quiet within and while the wind howls without, the occasional cry of a wolf startles the dogs in their kennel out by the sheep-pen and the snow comes sifting

down in the darkness, the Frairys lie snugly in the realm of forgetfulness till another day dawns upon this primitive household and they arouse themselves to their round of homely duties again, varied, it may be, by some news of what happened in old England of four months ago, just brought out by some swift-sailing vessel, and by recounting the little happenings among their rural neighbors in the infant settlement, on the banks of the Charles River, next to Boggestow, called Medfield.

Research included: *History of the Town of Medfield 1650-1886*, Medfield Historical Society Frairy Family Files, *A visit to an Early Homestead* by William Tilden and *A Sunday in the Old Meeting-house* by William Tilden.

