

The Journey of the Blaisdells by Louise Butler

On the morning of August 15, 1635, off the coast of Pemaquid, Maine a ship thrashed at anchor. The 250 ton *Angel Gabriel* was a big ship with heavily gunned decks and a reputation for successful transport of immigrants and cargo.

It had arrived at one of the most beautiful harbors on the east coast of the New World the day before and on this morning the crew and passengers were busy off-loading people, possessions and livestock.

The Great Colonial Hurricane

While those with a weather eye may have known that trouble was brewing, none could have guessed that the *Angel Gabriel* was about to be set upon by a storm that history would call the “Great Colonial Hurricane.”

The hurricane is the first great storm recorded by the Europeans who were steadily populating New England and the Mid-Atlantic Seaboard. Though no such scale existed at the time, the hurricane was probably a Category 3. The eye passed between Boston and Plymouth with winds approximately 115 miles per hour. A tidal surge of twenty feet was reported in Boston.

Thousands of trees were toppled and houses flattened as the hurricane bore down on the *Angel Gabriel* at anchor at Pemaquid. As the men, women and children frantically sought shelter with whatever possessions they had been able to take from the ship that morning, a storm of what must truly have seemed like “biblical” proportions closed in on them.

Ralph and Elizabeth Blaisdell

The *Angel Gabriel* was torn from its moorings and dashed onto the solidly pre-Cambrian rocks of Maine. It was completely destroyed. Among the immigrants huddled on shore, watching as their only link to the old world sank beneath the gray waves, were **Ralph** and **Elizabeth Blaisdell**, and their three year old son, Henry.

Ralph and Elizabeth were my great-great-great... grandparents. They had risked all, left the family and home they knew in England, and traveled to a primitive land, burning every bridge behind them.

Bleas Dale — A Hotbed of Puritanism

Ralph Blaisdell had been a “dealer in wood” in the Lancashire area of northern England and probably lived in or near the town of Bleas Dale¹. This locale was a hot bed of the Puritan movement and Ralph Blaisdell must have been in the thick of it. There are two facts which speak to this.

First, **Ralph, Elizabeth** and **Henry** boarded the *Angel Gabriel* in Wales, not Bristol, England where the travel of Puritans was closely monitored. Their names do not appear on the original registry. Second, the Blaisdells kept some very interesting company on their trek to the New World.

Angel Gabriel Set Sail With Others

The *Angel Gabriel* did not sail alone. There was a small armada of immigrant ships sailing together for protection from both pirates and foul luck. More ships represented the redundancy so desired by those who sail the oceans of space today. Along side the *Angel Gabriel* were the *Diligence*, *Mary*, *Bess* and *St. James*.

Only the *Angel Gabriel* was bound for Maine, but the rest would travel with her as far as Newfoundland and Boston.² On board one of these ships was an Anglican priest from the same

Lancashire County as the Blaisdells. The Reverend **Richard Mather** had been removed from the church because of “non-conformist” ideas and was immigrating, along with his suspect beliefs to a land where they might be appreciated.

Reverend Mather was the father of **Increase Mather**, who became the President of Harvard and grandfather of **Cotton Mather**, a minister and scholar.

Life on Board Ship

Contrary to the bleak portrayals of the poor pilgrims on the *Mayflower*, the immigrants on the *Angel Gabriel* fared much better. There was plenty of livestock on board to eat and they also had beer, bread, oatmeal, buttered peas and sack pudding. They were a moral group, attending regular church services and putting ashore a drunken sailor.

The *Angel Gabriel* and her sister ship, the *St. James*, even took time to briefly chase a Turkish pirate ship. While taking exercise on the deck, Ralph and Elizabeth saw both whales and porpoises playing about the boat. On the eighth week a blue bird landed on board, which was taken as a sign that they must be approaching land.

After a relatively uneventful ten week voyage, falling prey to the Great Colonial Hurricane must have seemed like a cruel reminder of how perilous their leap of faith truly was.

Yet this tenacious family not only survived, they thrived. Ralph was 43 when he sailed for America. He must have married late in life as his only child, Henry, was 3 years old. One can presume that his wife, Elizabeth, was a much younger woman.

Ralph Blaisdell, An Able Leader

There is indication that Ralph was both intelligent and industrious, or perhaps the New World brought out the best in him. During his short stay in York, Maine he was named an attorney for the town.

Ralph’s family did not stay in York, but instead, moved to Salisbury, Massachusetts where he was an honored member of the founding fathers. In Salisbury he was one of only eight men who earned the honorific of “Mister.”

He was referred to as “**Goodman Blaisdell**” and his wife as “**Goody Blaisdell**.” Ralph packed a great deal of enterprise into the 15 years he had in America before his death in 1650³. And while he only left one child⁴, his son, Henry went forth and multiplied.

Questions for Ralph and Elizabeth

Ralph and Elizabeth could not have imagined me or my life in modern America; yet I owe so much to their choice and resolve. I wish I could watch them from afar, learn what type of people they were, and, perhaps, ask them a few simple questions.

I would especially like to talk to Elizabeth, because the immigrant women were so often the last to have a say in the ebb and flow of their lives, but the first to bear the burden of those sea changes. Even more than that, I would like them to meet me and make a judgment on whether or not they thought their sacrifice was worth it. I hope they would say, “Yes.”

¹ Or Bleasdale.

² The five ships left Bristol June 4. On June 23 the *Diligence*, *Bess* and *Mary* went ahead. On June 24 the *Mary* was captured by a Turkish pirate ship. On July 4 the *St. James* sped ahead of the slower *St. James*.

³ BFNA records indicate Ralph Bleasdale died between 1648—1650.

⁴ Ralph and Elizabeth had three more children after arriving in America: Mary, Ralph and Martha.

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February 2009. Louise Butler is a BFNA member from Emery, SD. See her brief bio on p. 564.

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