

John Winthrop the Younger, The unlikely founder of Saybrook (Part II)

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS March, 2022)

John Winthrop the Younger (Born 1606 in England, died 1676 in Boston) was an “unlikely founder” of Saybrook because he had no intention of ever founding the settlement. The accepted legend is that he named what became the Saye-Brooke settlement in honor of his two employers, Viscount Saye and Sele and Baron Brooke, sometime around 1635-36. Many have questioned this legend.

The Viscount and Baron and their other investors had given him a one-year employment contract to administrate the establishment of the settlement. They also gave him an official document, authorizing the settlement, and they gave him a title to go along with the authorization, “Governor of the River Connecticut.”

The investors also recruited and financed a workforce of men who they supplied with provisions, money, ammunition, armaments and building supplies. This workforce was led by Lion Gardiner who was hired to build a defensive fort as well as suitable homes for the wealthy English investors who were to follow.



Winthrop never had a permanent home in Saybrook, but it is known that he, along with lawyer George Fenwick, visited Gardiner for about five months or more in 1636. Winthrop’s pregnant bride, Elizabeth, stayed in their Massachusetts home, near John Winthrop the Elder, his father and governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She gave birth while he was away visiting Lion Gardiner.

(Left): Portrait of John Winthrop the Younger hangs in the Historical Society’s Hart House. Painted by local artist, Marek Sarba, eminent portrait painter.

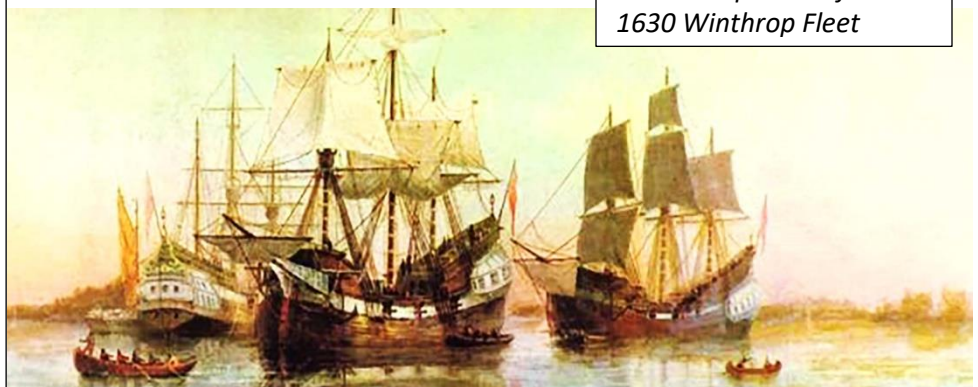
His remarkable resume

Winthrop the Younger was the definition of a renaissance man. He studied law in London and was a long-serving member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court for 18 years. He practiced medicine as a colonial doctor treating half the population of Connecticut from his home in New London. He was an alchemist, a spiritualist, a scientist, a philosopher, an amateur astrologer, and an industrialist, founding several New England iron foundries and a salt manufacturing factory for curing fish. He was a geologist who prospected and mined ore for lead and silver. He was the only Colonist to be a founding member of England's Royal (scientific) Society. (The actual title was *The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge*.) He became a consummate diplomat and politician, and ultimately governor of the Connecticut Colony for almost 20 years and the colony's most influential statesman. He lived in Massachusetts, New Haven, New London, Hartford and Fishers Island, which was granted to him. His crowning accomplishment was securing a Royal charter from the Restoration Court of Charles II in 1662, granting Connecticut virtual independence. He founded three colonial towns, Ipswich Massachusetts, and in Connecticut, New London and Saybrook.

His second wife, Elizabeth, bore him nine children. His eldest son, Fitz-John Winthrop, became governor of Connecticut for 14 years, and another, Wait (Waitstill) Winthrop, became the chief judge of the Massachusetts Superior Court (the highest court), and was a long-time councilor and contender for the governorship of Massachusetts.

This article deals with the very brief span of his life that dealt with his founding of the settlement of Saybrook, from 1635 to 1636.

Winthrop's father sailed to Boston in 1630 in what was called "The Winthrop Fleet," 11 ships carrying 1,000+ people, livestock and provisions to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It was the largest English colonial invasion ever known. Five more ships followed the main fleet that same year.



Artist's depiction of the 1630 Winthrop Fleet

His life just before Saybrook

His father, Winthrop the Elder, had sailed to Boston in 1630 as Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Younger Winthrop stayed in England to settle his father's estate, and then joined his father in 1631 with his new bride Martha Fones, who was also his cousin. In 1633 he was put in charge of the establishment and fortification of Ipswich, Massachusetts, a task to which he was not only physically unsuited but also unenthusiastic and reluctant to perform. Yet he prevailed, probably as a token of respect for and obedience to his father, the Governor, and the common desire to secure and fortify locales around Boston from the encroaching Indians. His wife and infant daughter died there in the summer of 1634 and his life then changed dramatically.

A new marriage and a business proposition

Widowed John Winthrop the Younger returned to England in 1634 and the last thing on his mind was being asked to establish another settlement in New England. He had already done that with the establishment of Ipswich. His two primary goals in returning to England were to find a new wife and to renew his relationships with fellow scientists and alchemists. He accomplished both of those goals. But marrying his second wife also connected him to an extraordinary circumstance, namely the settlement of Saybrook.

In July 1635, at the age of 29, he married 21 year old Elizabeth Reade, daughter of Edmund Reade of Wickford, Co. Essex. Reade had died 12 years before his daughter's wedding. His wife, Elizabeth's mother, was then remarried to the Rev. Hugh Peter, Elizabeth's stepfather. It is fair to assume that Hugh was present at her July marriage to Winthrop. A likely father-in-law to son-in-law conversation would have revealed the fact that Rev. Hugh Peter and his close associate, the Rev. John Davenport, (who would later co-found the New Haven Colony) had just recruited the soldier of fortune, Lion Gardiner, and a band of his military comrades. This was at the request of William Fiennes, the 1st Viscount Saye and Sele and Robert Greville, the 2nd Baron Brooke.



Rev. Hugh Peter, John Winthrop's new father-in-law. He would later support the trial and execution of King Charles I and then suffer a gruesome execution ordered by the son, King Charles II, in 1660.

Very possibly his new father-in-law also suggested that Winthrop drop by Broughton Castle to discuss a business proposition that awaited him. The discussion would be with a fellow lawyer, George Fenwick, and Fenwick's employers, the Viscount and the Baron. They would discuss the plans they had for Gardiner and his men to establish a new settlement they were financing, at the end of a river in Connecticut. This settlement was to be a refuge for their fellow wealthy Parliamentarians. The collective fear for their safety was growing due to their vocal and public opposition to the king, Charles I, and his fellow Royalists.

Why was John Winthrop the Younger hired by the investors?

They needed a lawyer. English lawyer George Fenwick was a signatory to the Warwick charter, which authorized the settlement of Saybrook, but his authority in and knowledge about New England was limited. They needed a well-connected Massachusetts Bay Colony lawyer to assist Fenwick, and Winthrop the Younger was just that lawyer --- he was both the son of the governor and a respected member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court. They also knew that Winthrop was far more liberal in his religious and political views; views more aligned with the investors seeking alternatives to an exile in Massachusetts.

The business proposition to young Winthrop

When Winthrop the Younger visited Broughton Castle in 1635 he may have been surprised that the investors were offering him a one-year employment contract and an official commission which constituted him, "Governor of the River Connecticut, and the places adjoining thereto." They would pay him well for his assistance but how much he was paid is not recorded. They would also confirm that Lion Gardiner, both a soldier and engineer, along with his men and supplies, were ready to set sail and would immediately follow him back to Boston, to begin work on the settlement. Further, they promised that following right behind Gardiner would be an additional 300 able men, *whereof two hundred should attend fortification, fifty to till the ground, and fifty to build houses.* This turned out to be an offer Winthrop the Younger could not, and obviously did not refuse.



Broughton Castle was home to William Fiennes, the 1st Viscount Saye and Sele, and the venue for the meetings of wealthy colonial land investors.

Back in Boston

Young Winthrop agreed to the offer and sailed home to Ipswich, Massachusetts with the new Warwick Charter, his new bride, his father-in-law, Rev. Hugh Peter and Hugh's brother, Rev. Thomas Peter, (who became the second chaplain of Fort Saybrook and later led the Congregational church there). A month after he arrived back home, as promised, a ship arrived carrying Lion Gardiner, men, money, supplies and ammunition, all for building a defensive fort at the end of the Connecticut River.

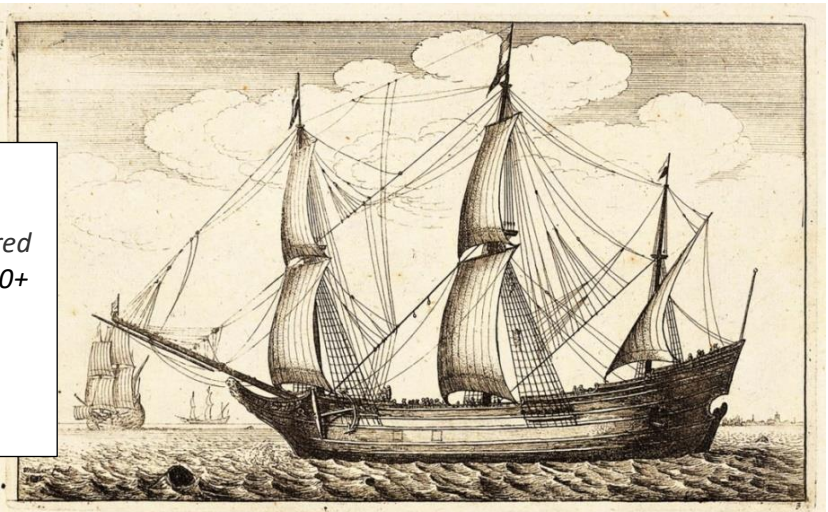
Englishman Lion Gardiner was 36 years old and had been living in the Netherlands. He and his Dutch wife Mary left the Netherlands, and embarked on the ship *Bachelor* on July 10, 1635. The ship stopped in England and was provisioned with supplies and more passengers, including young lawyer George Fenwick and a teenager named Robert Chapman, who would later fight alongside Gardiner defending Fort Saybrook and become one of the founding families of Saybrook.



Lion Gardiner had a 4-year employment contract to build the fort and the settlement

The *Bachelor* arrived in Boston at end of November in 1635. Governor John Winthrop the Elder noted Gardiner's arrival in his journal under the date November 28: *Here arrived a small Norsey bark of twenty-five tons sent by Lords Say, etc, with one Gardiner, an expert engineer or work base, and provisions of all sorts, to begin a fort at the mouth of the Connecticut. She came through many great tempests; yet, through the Lord's great providence, her passengers, twelve men, two women, and all goods, all safe.*

The Bachelor was a typical three-masted bark or barque of the 1600s. This type of ship was also later referred to as a pinnace. Some could carry 100+ people, plus a cargo of livestock and building supplies. A small "Norsey bark," (North Sea) of 25 tons could carry 50+ people plus cargo.



Winthrop, Fenwick and Gardiner arrive at the Saybrook settlement site

Historical reports confirm that an advance party was sent in the winter of 1635, from Boston to the river, to begin preparations for the fort. Perhaps they sailed on the *Bachelor*. But it was not until the early spring of 1636 that young Winthrop, along with lawyer George Fenwick and Lieut. Lion Gardiner, actually visited what is now Saybrook Point for the first time. Quite possibly then and there were sown the seeds of doubt about the viability of the investment.

George Fenwick was obviously sent to Boston and then to the settlement to oversee and report back to William Fiennes and Robert Greville about their investment. Unfortunately for the investors he had nothing positive to report. Over the next few months he not only learned about the smallpox plague that was decimating the local tribes throughout New England, but also about the growing threat from the hostile Pequots in the area, and the uncomfortable presence of the Dutch trading post in Hartford that was monopolizing the river's fur trade. Additionally, the building of the fort was slow and well behind schedule, and already in need of further supplies. Lastly, the Warwick charter authorizing the settlement was facing legal challenges.



Depiction of Fort Saybrook, built on the high ground above the river. It would burn in 1647 and a new fort would be built closer to the river and named Fort Fenwick.

The Warwick Charter's legal problems

The entire Connecticut River and surrounding land was part of the charter and Winthrop the Younger was the designated governor. So when the newly designated governor came to realize there were already English settlements upriver in Wethersfield and Windsor, much less the Dutch trading post in Hartford, he faced a dilemma. Technically they were all squatting without legal charters on lands within the Warwick Patent.

Winthrop and Fenwick decided to return to Boston and meet with the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and negotiate legal jurisdiction. Apparently the two English settlements agreed to accept Winthrop the Younger as governor of the River Connecticut and were granted the right to reside on their

lands under the new Warwick Patent. Author and historian Francis Jennings wrote in his book, *The Invasion of America: It was a situation where the governor of the River Connecticut, sitting at Saybrook, pretended to have a colony and the colonies upriver pretended to have a governor. Winthrop had in fact no real authority over the river settlements.*

It turned out that vanquishing the Pequots would settle all questions of jurisdiction on the river as well as eliminate the Dutch trading post at Hartford. Windsor, Wethersfield, and after the Pequot war, Hartford, would form a new colony of English settlers called the Connecticut Colony. They would later purchase the Saybrook settlement from George Fenwick and twenty one years later they would elect John Winthrop the Younger as their sixth governor.

The investors abandoned their Saybrook settlement

George Fenwick sailed back to England sometime later in 1636 to report to the investors. His news to the investors could not have been positive. And while he was away in England, things got even worse back in Connecticut. The Pequot siege of Fort Saybrook began, with Gardiner becoming a soldier once again. John Winthrop was at that time safely home in Boston, where his bride had just given birth to their first child. Occasionally he was asked during the Pequot War to represent the Massachusetts Bay Colony in negotiations with the Pequot leadership, but there are no records of Winthrop ever again visiting Saybrook.

(Right)
Depiction of Lieut.
Lion Gardiner
fighting the Pequots
during the siege of
Fort Saybrook in
1636-1637



After George Fenwick's return to England, word from the English investors came back quickly. Winthrop was told the funding was stopped and there would be no more supplies of 300 additional men and provisions. Lieut. Lion Gardiner then had to rely on support from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, not the English investors.

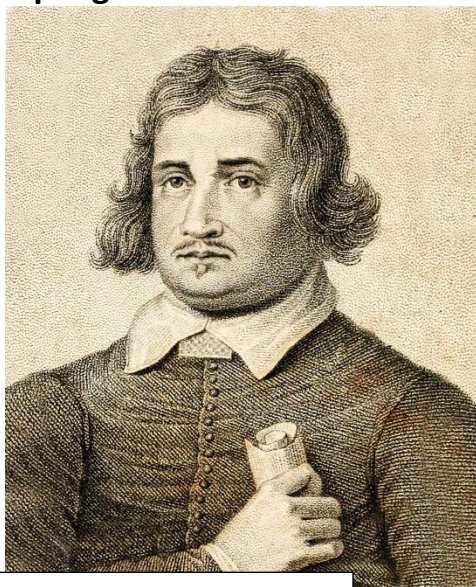
The investors had decided, for better or worse, to stay in England and fight their civil war, rather than flee. Later, only George Fenwick returned in 1639 with his wife, Lady Alice Fenwick, to take over the settlement. He and his wife and cattle sailed over on the ship with both Rev. John Davenport, who founded the New Haven Colony, and Rev. Henry Whitfield, who founded Guilford.

Unfortunately, history would show that George Fenwick was unable to make the Saybrook investment profitable. Just five years later in 1644 he sold the fort and the settlement lands to the upriver towns of Wethersfield, Windsor and Hartford, now combined as the Connecticut Colony.



Rev. John Davenport who, along with Rev. Hugh Peter, recruited Lion Gardiner and his men to build the Saybrook settlement. He co-founded the New Haven Colony.

Epilog



Rev. Hugh Peter, John Winthrop's father-in-law, was executed in 1660

George Fenwick, who in 1639 had been given the rights to the Saybrook settlement, would return to England six years later to join the civil war, earning the rank of Colonel. His second wife, Catherine, was Lord Brooke's teenaged niece.

Rev. Hugh Peter, Winthrop's father-in-law, would join the post-civil war trial of Charles I and the king's subsequent beheading. Later, the son Charles II would arrest Hugh Peter and brutally execute him for his actions against his father.

Rev. Thomas Peter, brother of Hugh, became the second chaplain of Fort Saybrook and later led the Saybrook Congregational church. He then followed John Winthrop to New London.

Rev. John Davenport, who along with Rev. Hugh Peter recruited Lion Gardiner, would co-found the New Haven Colony and stay safely in New Haven, away from royal civil war retributions.

John Winthrop the Younger would later found New London, Connecticut in 1646 and live an amazing life as an alchemist, scientist, amateur physician, astrologer, and politician/statesman. He would become the governor of the Connecticut Colony in 1657 and then again in 1659 until his death in 1676. When he died he was also a commissioner of the United Colonies of New England.

New London erected a statue of their founder, John Winthrop the Younger. Old Saybrook has a statue of Lieut. Lion Gardiner, erected by Gardiner ancestors.



(Above) 1930 Statue of Lieut. Lion Gardiner in Old Saybrook, created by sculptor William Ordway Partridge and funded by Gardiner family ancestors living on Long Island, NY. A dedication on the front (south) face of the monument's pedestal reads, "In memory of Lion Gardiner, builder and commander of Saybrook Fort, 1635-1639"

(Right) Statue of John Winthrop the Younger in New London, Connecticut