

Why did George Fenwick come back to Saybrook?

Why did he not stay?

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS June, 2022)

George Fenwick first visited the Saybrook settlement while it was being built in 1636. He returned to England that same year. Three years later in 1639 at the age of 36 he came back as the sole magistrate of the settlement. Why he came back is not clear. He stayed for only five or six years before again returning to England, never to return. His departure is easier to understand than his arrival.



Robert Greville, the 2nd Baron Brooke

George Fenwick (1603-1657, 54 yrs.) was an English lawyer and an “adventurer” in the early 1600s. “Adventurer” was a moniker for wealthy Englishmen who invested in colonial land schemes from the late 1500s through the 1630s. In the 1630s he was part of an investment group led by William Fiennes, the 1st Viscount Saye and Sele, and young Robert Greville, the 2nd Baron Brooke, who

were involved in several overseas investments along with Robert Rich, the 2nd Earl of Warwick.



William Fiennes, the 1st Viscount Saye and Sele

By far the largest of these land investments was the Massachusetts Bay Company. The 1630 “Winthrop Fleet” brought over 1000 Puritans in 16 ships to establish the colony that year. It is not clear if William Fiennes, the 1st Viscount Saye and Sele was an investor but his daughter and son-in-law were. And many of his Puritan associates were. Fenwick was part of that wealthy and powerful group of Puritan investors and “adventurers.”



Robert Rich, (Above) the 2nd Earl of Warwick, obtained the Massachusetts Bay Company Charter from King Charles I in 1629.



The 16 ships of the Winthrop Fleet began the “Great Puritan Migration” to New England in 1630

The same year the Winthrop fleet was landing on the shores of Massachusetts, Viscount Saye and Sele and Baron Brooke, along with several other wealthy investors, including Robert Rich, the 2nd Earl of Warwick, were financing the Providence Island Company. This was a Caribbean Island investment off the coast of Nicaragua. Unlike the successful Massachusetts Bay Company, their Caribbean investment failed. So these same investors turned their focus back to New England for investment opportunities. They had one last scheme in mind; a settlement that could be their place of refuge and exile during their English civil war, which was imminent.



Their vision for Saybrook

Their vision for the settlement was a safe exile for themselves and their peers, noble Puritan lords and masters, the wealthy elite investors in England, the Parliamentarians who were at odds with the rule of their king, Charles I. The plan was for them to sell their estates and rebuild their lives in a virgin settlement. These “men of distinction and quality” were to live amongst their peers in a cultured enclave at the end of the river, presumably in grand estate homes with English gardens, liveried servants, and possibly even indentured farmers tending to their lands. They would live as they did in England with their venerated peerage system and hereditary aristocracy intact, either for as long as necessary or possibly as their permanent place of exile in New England.

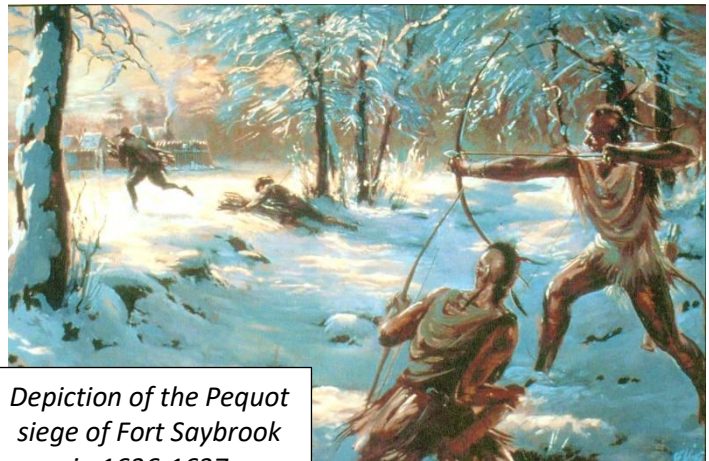


Typical Old-English country village or hamlet

George Fenwick and John Winthrop the Younger visit the settlement

The two young lawyers were sent to visit the settlement in the spring of 1636 to inspect the work and finalize land ownership agreements with the local tribal inhabitants. What George Fenwick observed was not encouraging. His fellow 1635 shipmate, Lieut. Lion Gardiner, was short-handed, underfunded and behind schedule in establishing the requested defensive fort. The additional 300 men and supplies previously promised to help build the fort and the settlement homes for the wealthy investors had not yet arrived. Deadly local skirmishes with the Pequots were increasing. There was a legal dispute with the Warwick patent and its claim to lands upriver where settlements in Windsor and Wethersfield were already established. Winthrop's designation of and prerogative as the "Governor of The River Connecticut" was being disputed as well by the Dutch in their trading post in Hartford. The deadly smallpox epidemic was still in evidence.

Later that same year Fenwick returned to England to report all this to the investors. What exactly transpired between George Fenwick and the investors is not recorded but between 1636 and his 1639 return to Connecticut there had to have been some interesting negotiations. Almost immediately upon his return to England, further investment in men and supplies for the river settlement was cancelled. John Winthrop's one-year employment contract as Governor of the River Connecticut was ending and it was not renewed. Lieut. Lion Gardiner's four-year employment contract was still in effect, but he was now fighting for his life with the Pequots and not building settlement homes.



*Depiction of the Pequot
siege of Fort Saybrook
in 1636-1637*

At the end of his contract he would purchase and move to his own island off Long Island's

North Fork. By 1639 all the wealthy investors were ending their colonial land investment schemes in New England. The settlers in Connecticut were aware that the Saybrook settlement was becoming irrelevant to the investors.

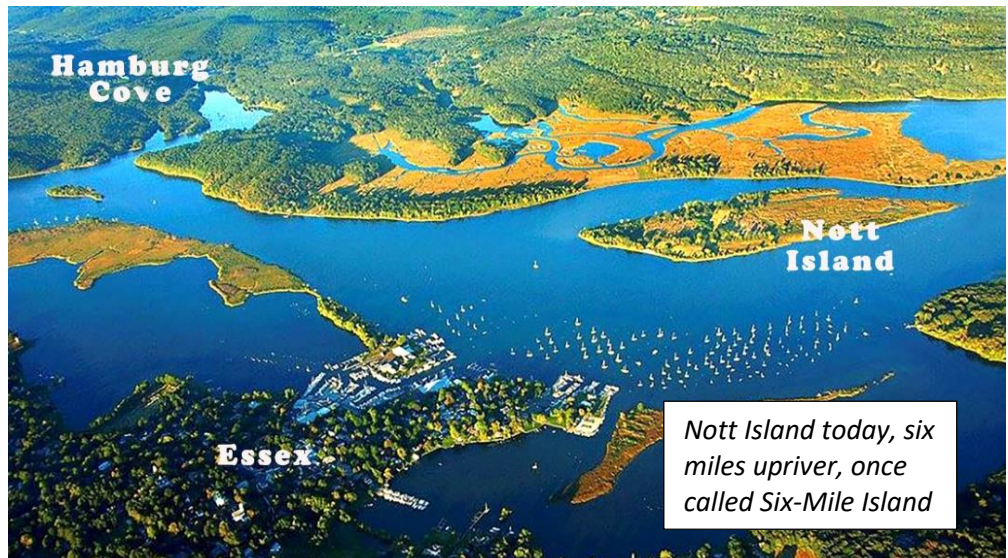
What was George Fenwick's motivation for returning to the Saybrook settlement in 1639?

Avoiding the English Civil War?

George Fenwick sailed back to the river settlement in 1639 with his new bride, Lady Alice Fenwick. At this time Fenwick was well aware that the English civil war had unofficially begun with deadly skirmishes in the north of England with the Scots, known as the Bishop's War. Three years later the civil war or "Wars of The Three Kingdoms" would be officially declared, and his fellow Puritan Parliamentarians would be fighting the king's Royalists forces at home. Perhaps avoiding the imminent civil war motivated him to return to Saybrook.

Title to land?

Title to extensive land rights may have been a greater motivation for his return to the settlement. What is not clear is whether he was to liquidate the land holdings for the benefit of the investors or himself. Whatever the negotiations were between him and the other investors, the end result was his being made sole magistrate of the settlement and with that came the rights to a great deal of adjacent land. Being the magistrate did not afford him the title, "Governor of the River Connecticut," like it did Winthrop the Younger. But history does label him the successor to Winthrop as the official governor of the Saybrook Colony and along with that came the authority vested in the dubious Warwick Patent. Therefore it was Fenwick with whom the adjacent colonies would have to deal regarding all land ownership matters. This power, prestige and land wealth was perhaps the strongest motivation for his return. Land ownership was the strongest currency of the time. More so than any other commodity, it could be sold, mortgaged, and used as collateral anywhere. George Fenwick's designation as magistrate of the Saybrook settlement gave him the rights to sizable tracts of land for his own use. One was Nott Island in the Connecticut River, across from what is now Essex. He made Nott Island his farm.

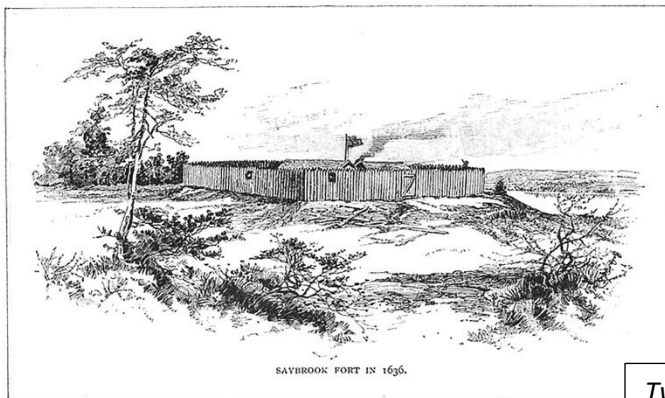


Nott Island today, six miles upriver, once called Six-Mile Island

He also had rights to land across the river in what is now Lyme and Old Lyme, plus extensive shoreline acreage from what is now the borough of Fenwick and Cornfield Point down to what is now Guilford. Fenwick sailed back to Connecticut in 1639 via New Haven, with Rev. John Davenport, the founder of New Haven, and Rev. Henry Whitfield, founder of Guilford. Fenwick was instrumental in negotiating land titles on behalf of both Rev. Davenport's New Haven settlement and Rev. Whitfield's Guilford settlement. Years later part of George Fenwick's Saybrook land holdings would be inherited by the Lynde family.

Title to a revenue source?

By 1639 Fenwick was keenly aware that other Connecticut settlements had already been well established, and like the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they were prospering. Fellow Puritans from the Massachusetts and Plymouth colonies, plus others from England had established Windsor in 1633, Wethersfield in 1634, Hartford by 1636, New Haven by 1638, and shortly thereafter, Guilford, Branford, Milford and Stamford. The 1635 Saybrook settlement was the smallest and frailest of them all, but with its fort at the end of the river, Fenwick believed it held unique leverage over the other river settlements. Fenwick reasoned that the fort benefited all traders on the river by protecting them from invasion from Long Island Sound. Therefore the cost of maintaining and securing the fort should be



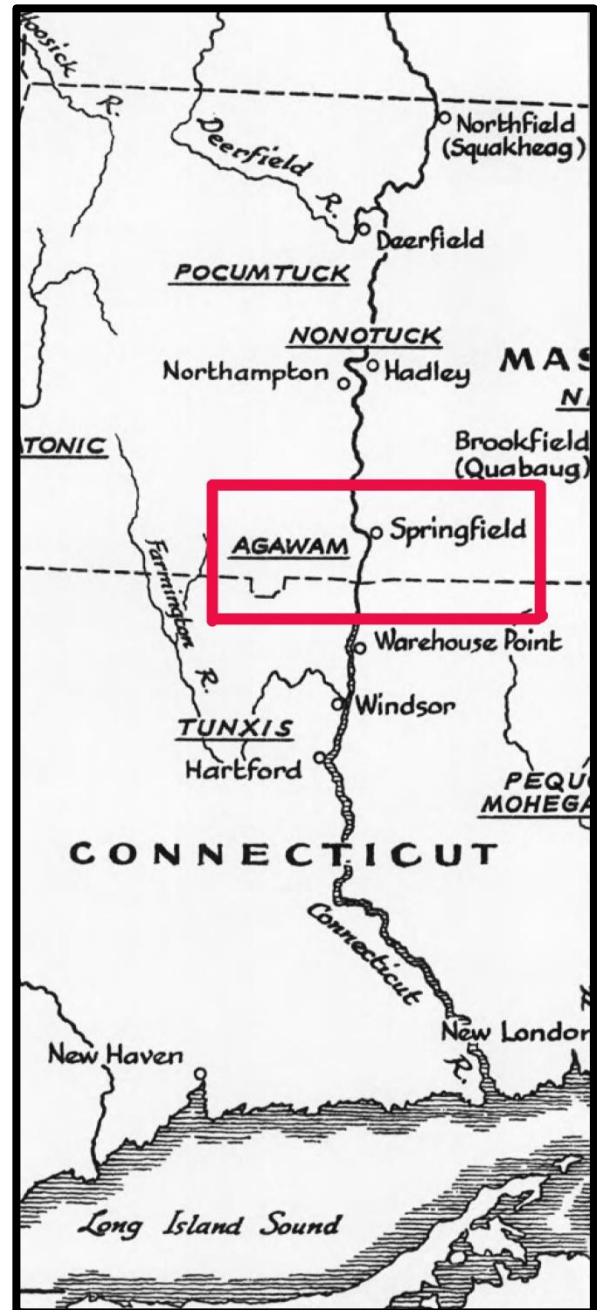
Two depictions of the 1635-1636 Fort Saybrook built by Lion Gardiner's men

the burden of all the upriver settlements. Fenwick could make his small trading settlement at the river's mouth a source of revenue by utilizing the fort that Gardiner and his men had built. So in the early 1640s he levied a tax on all shipping cargo sailing past Fort Saybrook. Historians debate whether this revenue was another motivation for his return to Saybrook or simply a clever ploy to enrich his departure package when he returned to England just a few years later.

George Fenwick's river tax

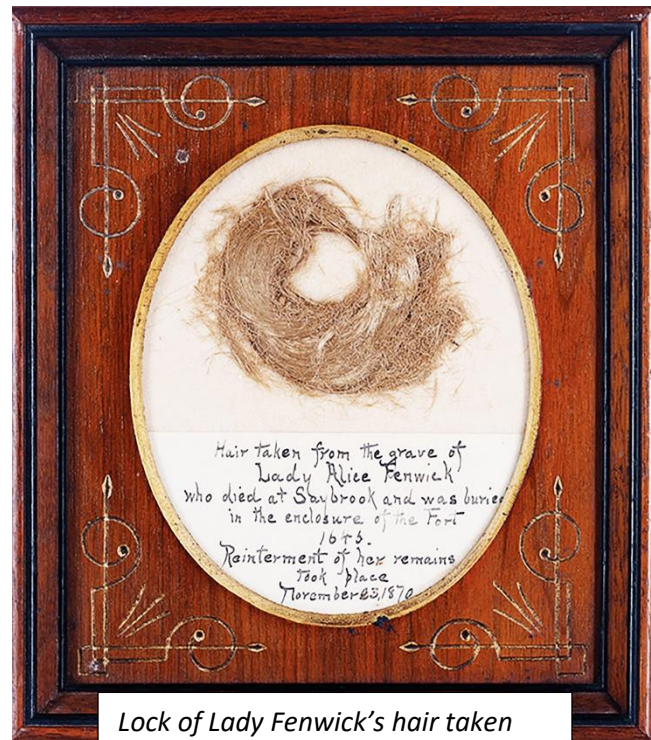
The tax, or Fort Rate as it was called, was a toll on "all exports of grains, skins, etc. passing by Saybrook to the sea." This decree extended to the farthest upriver settlement, which was Springfield, 25 miles beyond Hartford. That may have been a mistake. Springfield disagreed with the tax and the entire matter went to court. Some historians believe that the nearby Connecticut Colony agreed to this river tax because it was part of Fenwick's early negotiations to sell the Saybrook settlement to them, which he did a few years later. Springfield was aware of Fenwick's negotiations to sell his settlement, and used that fact as part of their argument in refusing to pay the tax. They argued why they should pay a toll which was basically part of a payment for a town not under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Springfield, founded in 1636 as the Agawam Plantation, was originally under the administration of the Connecticut Colony. But in 1641 it was renamed Springfield and became part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. So the legal dispute with Fenwick's river tax was first taken to the General Court of Massachusetts. The court demanded to see the Warwick Patent and Fenwick's jurisdiction to the river. This was not the first time the Warwick Patent's jurisdiction had been challenged and its existence questioned. The patent was curiously not available and the case ultimately went to the Commissioners of the United Colonies where the Fenwick river tax was upheld. Massachusetts was furious and as retribution they then demanded tolls from all the other settlements for the maintenance of their fort at Boston.

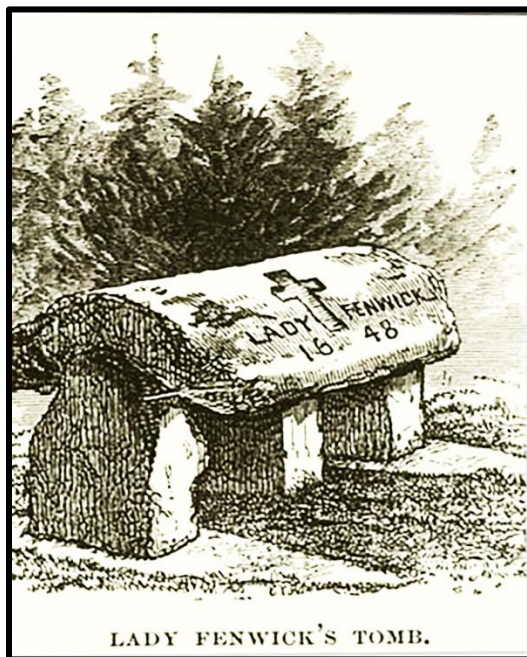


George Fenwick sells Saybrook and returns to England

No one knows when George Fenwick decided to sell his Saybrook settlement to the larger Connecticut Colony, but it was a multi-year negotiation and by 1644 the deal was done. It was complicated and part of it was disputed after his death by his heirs and the Connecticut Colony. When exactly Fenwick sailed back to England is not clear, nor is the exact date of Lady Alice Fenwick's death. Some claim she died in 1645, others claim 1648. Some claim Fenwick was already back in England in 1645 when Lady Fenwick died. Whatever the date, his two surviving children remained in Saybrook and only later rejoined their father in England



Lock of Lady Fenwick's hair taken when she was reinterred in 1870



In 1647 Fort Saybrook burned. The original fort was not rebuilt. A new stronghold was built closer to the river and named Fort Fenwick. But by this time George was already back in England. He never returned to the settlement to see his namesake fort. Some claim the fire was set on purpose because it conveniently ended George Fenwick's excuse for his unpopular tax on ships trading on the river. It also ended the Saybrook Colony's obligation to pay these taxes to him *for ten years in return for his land on the river, Fort Saybrook and its appurtenances and his pledge to convey all the land in the Warwick Patent if it came into his power.* This was land east of

the river toward Rhode Island which never officially came into his power and which became central to a dispute with his heirs upon his death.

There was also another reason the fire was convenient. One historian wrote: *It seems to have been so providential an event that the fire might have been set by an adherent of either party. The Massachusetts men could then say there was no reason for tolls as there was no fort to maintain, and the Connecticut men were spared the embarrassment of confessing that they had no patent or of producing an agreement which did not convey even the right of jurisdiction that was conceded to them. Thus the first issue of intercolonial commerce on the Connecticut River was to die unattended and in 1650 Massachusetts repealed her obnoxious order taxing ships to support their fort.*

George Fenwick's life back in England

In 1645, a year after selling the Saybrook settlement to the Connecticut Colony, he returned to England alone to rejoin his wealthy and powerful Puritan Parliamentarians. They elected him to Parliament that same year and many assert that was also the year his wife Lady Alice Fenwick died back in Saybrook. He was 42 years old, widowed and in need of a new home for his two children, Elizabeth and Dorothy. They were both still in Saybrook living with his sister Elizabeth. When exactly they rejoined him in England is unclear. The English civil war had begun three years earlier and he very quickly joined the forces aligned against King Charles I.

His civil war

In 1647 he was fighting in Ireland. The next year he was in his native Northumberland County, joining Oliver Cromwell's forces as they invaded Scotland.



Berwick-Upon-Tweed

By 1650 Fenwick had earned the rank of colonel and commanded a regiment that captured Edinburgh Castle. He was one of the eight commissioners appointed for the government of Scotland. A year later his regiment captured Fenham Castle, Hume Castle and then the town of Berwick-on-Tweed. Today Berwick is the northernmost town in England, just 2 miles from the Anglo-Scottish border. George Fenwick was appointed governor of Berwick-on-Tweed in 1651.

At that time he was reacquainted with an old associate, Sir Arthur Hesilrige, who was a fellow member of Parliament and the governor of Newcastle-on-Tyne, a town 50 miles south of Berwick. Sir Arthur Hesilrige was also one of the many wealthy investors who had contemplated emigrating to Saybrook and had invested along with Viscount Saye and Sele and Baron Brooke. Hesilrige had married Dorothy Greville, the sister of Robert Greville, the 2nd Baron Brooke, and one of their daughters was named Catherine.



Sir Arthur Hesilrige, (above right) George Fenwick's new father-in-law in 1652. At the Restoration his life was saved because he had refused to sign Charles I's death warrant, but he was committed to the Tower of London, where he died shortly afterwards in 1661.

His new wife, his death, and his Saybrook land

In 1652, at the age of 49, George Fenwick married Baron Brooke's niece, 17-year old Catherine Greville Hesilrige, in Berwick. Just 5-years later he died there at the age of 54. According to a monument to him in the parish church of Berwick, Fenwick died on 15 March 1657. He died a wealthy man and left the greatest portion of his estate to his young 22-year old widow and his two daughters by Lady Alice, Dorothy and Elizabeth. They had both eventually rejoined him in England and at the time of his death were probably both teenagers. The rest of his estate was left to his sister Elizabeth and her family.

His sister Elizabeth had remained in Connecticut and at the time of his death was living in Lyme with her second husband, Richard Ely. Unfortunately for her, his will resurrected some of the controversies of the Warwick Patent and his Fort Rate river tax. His will stated that in addition to his Saybrook land, his sister was also to receive the Fort Rate tax revenue that he negotiated be paid to him by ships passing Fort Saybrook but which he never received. The Connecticut Colony refused to pay these funds to the sister and also refused to surrender Fenwick's

land holdings at the mouth of the river. The excuse was that the sale of Fort Saybrook in 1644 also included the remainder of the original Warwick Patent land that extended east from the Connecticut River to the Narragansett River, which he said he would transfer in the event it “came into his power” to do so. Since it never came into his power to do so, the Connecticut Colony not only wanted a repayment of 500 pounds but also elimination of “all claims against the colony growing out of the agreement for the purchase of the River.”

An agreement was reached. The remaining Fenwick land was subsequently handed down from his sister Elizabeth to her daughter, also named Elizabeth (Fenwick’s niece) and her husband Benjamine Batten who in turn sold all of the Fenwick land to Simon Lynde in 1675. That land included the 16 acre lot on Saybrook Point later to become the Saybrook Collegiate School, and all of the Fenwick lands from present day Lynde Point (the Borough of Fenwick) west to Cornfield Point and beyond. Ten years later in 1685, Simon Lynde handed down the Saybrook land to his third son Nathaniel Lynde prior to the elder Lynde’s death in 1687. It was Nathaniel who loaned his house on Saybrook Point (originally lived in by George Fenwick and his family) for use by the fledgling Saybrook Collegiate School in 1701 that eventually, upon relocation sixteen years later to New Haven, became Yale University.

A footnote

It is said that as magistrate of the Saybrook settlement, George Fenwick would seal his documents with a ring. The legend is that the ring’s grapevine seal was also used as the flag of the Saybrook Colony, standing for good luck, peace, and fertility. The Connecticut Colony dispersed in 1687 and almost 100 years later in 1775 the official state seal that we know today was created. The state seal of Connecticut features a trio of grape vines. Underneath the grape vines is a banner with the official state motto reading: “Sustinet Qui Transtulit” (Latin for *he who is transplanted still sustains*) and “Sigillum Reipublicae Connecticutensis” (Latin for *Seal of the State of Connecticut*).





The Connecticut state seal



The Connecticut state flag