

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR ANCESTORS ...

EARLY PURITAN SIBLINGS SETTLING NEW ENGLAND

**William Spencer
(1601 – 1640) &
Agnes Harris
(1604 – 1680)**

— Bradley Rymph

VISITS TO HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT:

*July 10, 1999 (with José Baquiran, Albert
and Edna Mae Rymph)*

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Rymph.*

In the early 1600s, probably all during the early 1630s, four brothers and one sister — five of the adult children of Gerard and Alice (Whitbread) Spencer — sailed from England to the young Massachusetts Bay Colonies in America. Together, these siblings were part of the early great migration of ardent Puritan faithful to America.

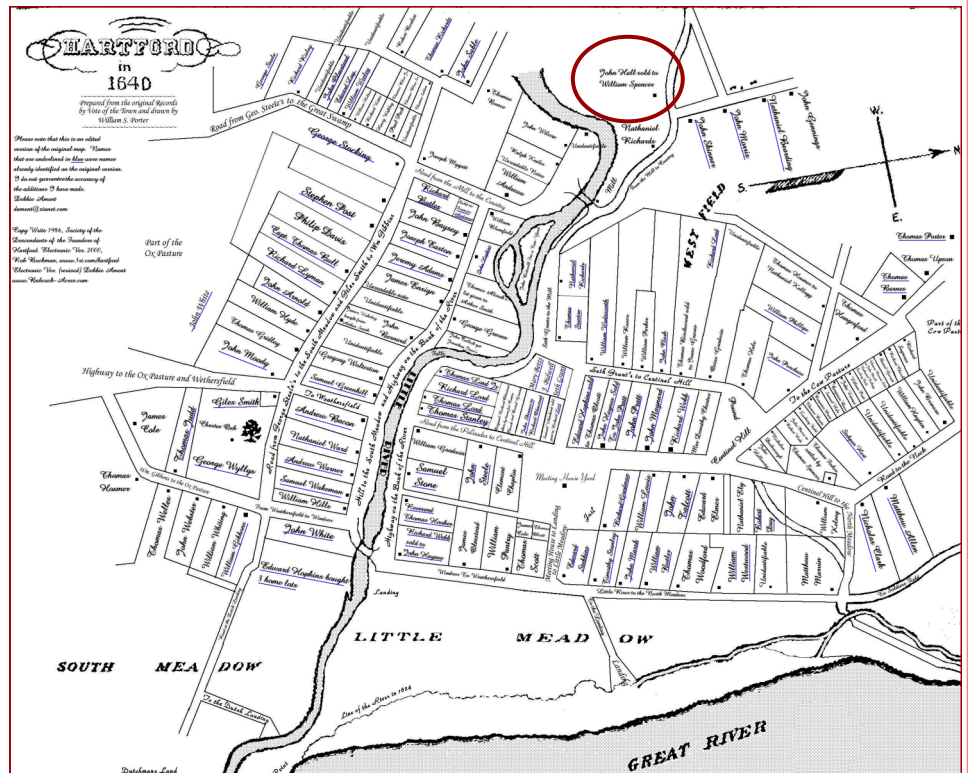
The eldest of these migrating siblings was **William Spencer**. He was baptized on October 11, 1601, in Stotfold, Bedfordshire, England. Some references indicate that he was a graduate of Trinity College in Cambridge, England.

COMMUNITY LIFE IN CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

William probably arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631, possibly sailing with friends of Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop. The earliest documentation for him in the Americas is as a deputy from Cambridge (originally known as Newtown), Massachusetts to the General Court on May 9, 1632. He also held this office when the General Court met on March 4, 1634/5; March 3, 1635/6; September 8, 1636; April 18, 1637; May 17, 1637; September 26, 1637; and March 12, 1637/8.

Spencer is believed to have sailed back to England around 1633 to bring back

Plan of Early Hartford, 1640.
William Spencer's plot is indicated
with a burgundy oval.



his wife, **Agnes Harris**. Sources disagree on whether they were married in England or in Cambridge after their arrival back in America.

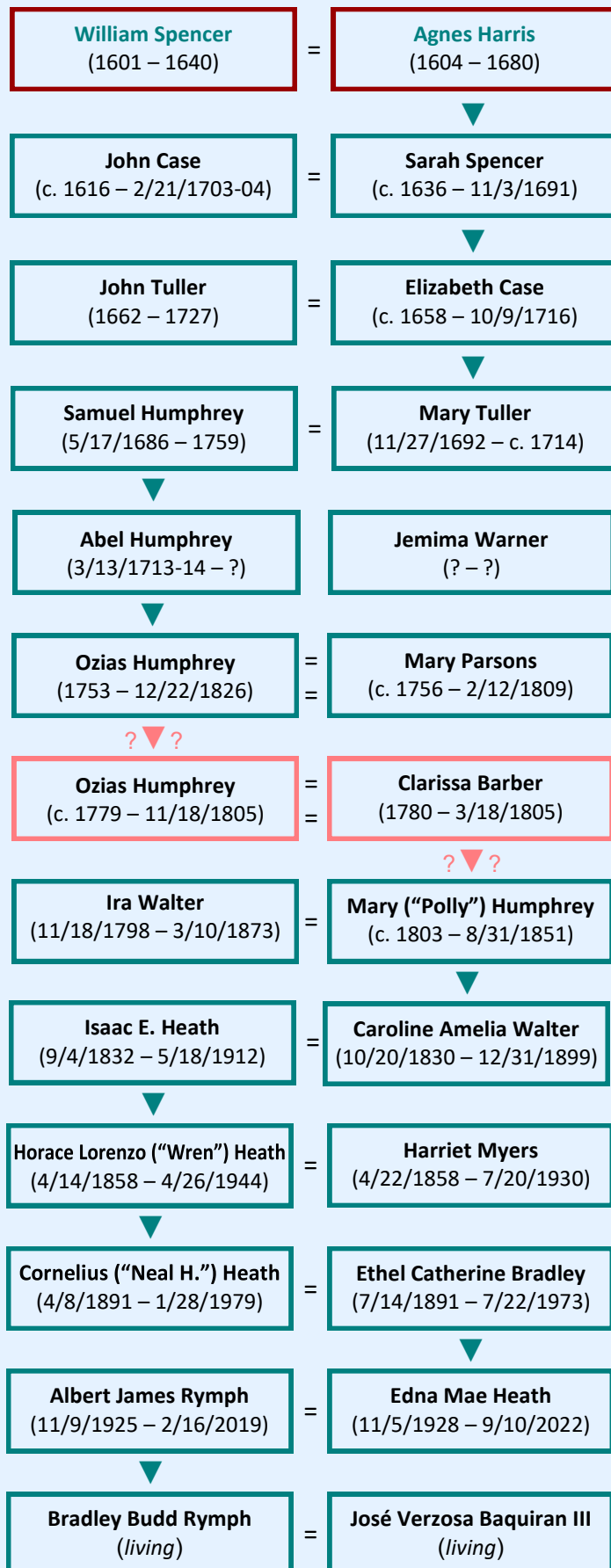
According to data in *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1633*, he also was an observer to or a member of several committees that helped establish early Cambridge, including a “committee on bounds between Cambridge and Watertown” (March 4, 1634/5), “committee on bounds between Boston and Charlestown” (March 28 1636), “committee to set out bounds of the new plantation above Charles Ryver” (March 3, 1635/6), “committee on colony debts” (September 8, 1636), “committee on codification of laws” (March 12, 1637/8), and several others.

Spencer served as Cambridge’s town clerk from 1632 to 1635, during which time he was on a committee to survey lands in the town and deliver a report on their findings. Cambridge historical records include documentation that on October 27, 1636, “Newe towne presented a book of their records under the hands of Will[iam] Andrews, constable, John Beniamin, & Will[iam] Spencer.” On August 20, 1635, a general meeting in Cambridge ordered that “William Spencer and Georg[e] Steele should measure all the meadow ground undivided belong to the Newtowne” and allot “to every man his proportion.”

Spencer was also a charter member of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts, which describes itself on its website as “the

HOW WE'RE RELATED

Family genealogical charts passed on to my mother, Edna Mae (Heath) Rymph, by her sister, the late Wilma Heath, indicate that William and Agnes (Harris) Spencer would be great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents. Unfortunately, one of the links in the genealogical chain — registering Mary (“Polly”) Humphrey as the daughter of Ozias and Mary (Parsons) Humphrey — is not consistent with published Humphrey family genealogical records, which caused me to question whether this commonly offered ancestral chain was correct. My own theory (which I cannot prove) is that Mary (“Polly”) Humphrey was instead the daughter of Ozias and Mary (Parsons) Humphrey’s son, Ozias, Jr., and his wife, Clarissa (Barber) Humphrey. This alternate theory would make William and Agnes (Harris) Spencer my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandparents. (For more about the reasoning behind my theory, see the box “A Genealogy Family Mystery Resolved?” in the separate profile “First Settler of Burke, Vermont: Lemuel Walter.”)





Monument to Hartford's founders in the city's Ancient Burying Grounds. William Spencer's name is inscribed on the monument, as is the name of his brother Thomas.



third oldest chartered military organization in the World, and the oldest in the Western Hemisphere." In 1634, he was on the committee that conferred with the Massachusetts governor and his assistants on caring for the colony's common artillery stock. Governor Winthrop granted the charter to establish the Company in 1638.

MOVE TO THE NEW COMMUNITY OF HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

In 1639, William and his family left Massachusetts to be part of the new settlement at Hartford (also originally called Newtown), Connecticut, that had been established in 1635 by a party

from Cambridge led by the Rev. Thomas Hooker. According to *The Great Migration Begins*, he was a Deputy for Hartford to the Connecticut General Court on April 11, 1639; August 8, 1639; September 10, 1639; January 16/1639/40; and April 9, 1640. In addition, he was a surveyor of "armor and other military provisions" for Hartford on August 8, 1639, and he was also one of three men appointed that year to revise the laws of the Connecticut colony.

William Spencer died in the spring of 1640. It is not unreasonable to believe that, when he died at the untimely age of 38 or 39, he was on the verge of what could have been a brilliant political career in early New England.

Distant “Cousins”

Notable figures in history who share descent with William and Agnes (Harris) Spencer include:

- ♦ Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887) — Congregational preacher; advocate for abolition, evolution, temperance, and women’s suffrage
- ♦ Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885) — 18th President of the United States (1869–1877).
- ♦ Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) — American novelist; author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; sister of Henry Ward Beecher

In addition, through her second marriage (after William Spencer’s death) to William Edwards, Agnes (Harris) Spencer’s descendants include:

- ♦ Aaron Burr (1756–1835) — 3rd Vice President of the United States (1801–1805); grandson of Jonathan Edwards
- ♦ Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) — Puritan preacher and theologian; considered “America’s most important and original philosophical theologian” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

Agnes (Harris) Spencer is also the one ancestor in our family tree for whom there is an undisputed, royal genealogical heritage. (It has been claimed by some genealogists that Katherine [Browne] Budd also had royal roots, but several genealogists have questioned the validity of those claims.) Unfortunately, as noted under “How We’re Related,” the evidence is not confirmed that Agnes (Harris) Spencer is a family ancestor due to the questionable link between Ozias Humphrey / Mary (Parsons) Humphrey and Mary (“Polly”) Humphrey.

He is listed on the obelisk monument in the Ancient Burying Ground in Hartford as one of the founders of the Connecticut colony.

WILLIAM’S FELLOW-IMMIGRANT SIBLINGS

William Spencer’s brothers Thomas, Michael, and Gerrard and his sister Elizabeth also each came to New England within a few years of William’s arrival. Like William, Thomas Spencer settled first in Cambridge, at least by

the end of 1633, apparently arriving there as a single man. By 1636 (i.e., three years before William), he had moved to Hartford, Connecticut, which would make him one of that city’s very earliest European settlers. (Thomas’ name is also on the Ancient Burying Ground’s monument to the founders of the Connecticut colony.)

At some point, Michael also settled in Cambridge, but he apparently moved soon thereafter to Lynn, Massachusetts (where he lived until his death in 1653 at age 42).

Gerrard first settled in Cambridge in 1637, but moved, by the end of that year, to Lynn. In 1660, he moved to Hartford, then in 1662 he moved again, to Haddam, Connecticut.

Elizabeth married a Timothy Tomlins, probably in the 1630s in Massachusetts. He had first migrated to Massachusetts in 1632, living in Cambridge, and then moved to Lynn by 1634.

TO LEARN MORE

Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts. Web pages (www.ahac.us.com).

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