

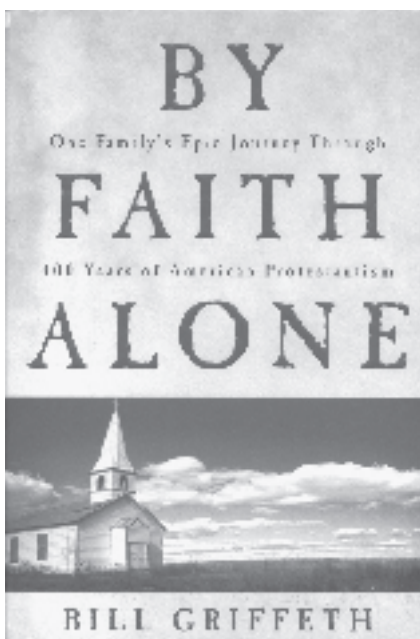
BY·FAITH·ALONE

by Bill Griffeth

The following article is excerpted from the Introduction to *By Faith Alone, One Family's Epic Journey through 400 Years of American Protestantism* (Harmony Books, 2007)

THIS JOURNEY OF MINE BEGAN WHERE ALL JOURNEYS END, IN A GRAVEYARD.

One Sunday afternoon I persuaded my wife, Cindy, and our teenaged children, Chad and Carlee, to take a drive from our home in New Jersey to the far reaches of northern Westchester County, New York, because I had evidence that suggested we might have ancestors buried there. We were looking for members of the Woolsey family (Woolsey had been my grandmother Griffeth's maiden name).



Eventually we ended up in Bedford Hills, a town forty miles north of New York City, where residents are as likely to ride horses as to drive cars. After several twists and turns on dirt roads that took us past a number of horse ranches, we came upon an old cemetery in a clearing of trees. The sign at the front gate said Bedford Union Cemetery, and roughly twenty yards behind it we could see a large stone monument with WOOLSEY carved into it.

There were eleven headstones in this family plot, representing six generations of Woolseys. The oldest one read:

Thomas
Son of George Woolsey
Born at Flushing L.I.
1655 Died 1730

The headstone next to it read:

Richard
Son of Thomas Woolsey
Born 1697 Died 1777

I looked at the notes I had brought with me, and found that they matched these names. The George referred to on the first headstone was my nine-times great-grandfather, which made him Chad and Carlee's ten-times great-grandfather. It meant that we were also direct descen-

dants of Thomas and Richard. (The rest of the headstones represented a line of Woolseys separate from ours.)

Just like that, we had discovered our family had indeed lived in this area well before the American Revolution.

Cindy got out a pad of paper and began scribbling the names and dates carved on the other Woolsey headstones, and Chad and Carlee fanned out over the rest of the cemetery to see if there were any other family members buried here (there weren't). I took pictures of everything. Mission accomplished, I thought.

But the mission had only begun.

One afternoon in June of 2003 I received an email out of the blue from my first cousin Donna. She was the oldest of Grandpa and Grandma Griffeth's eleven grandchildren, and I was the youngest. As it happens, we were born on the same date, August 7, twenty-two years apart, like bookends.

She wrote to tell me that her daughter, LeAnne, was working on a family tree. They had heard that I had some genealogical information about the Griffeths, and they were wondering if I would be willing to share it. What I had were four handwritten pages of notes from a cousin of my father's that took the family back two or three generations. I don't remember how I ended up with them, but I was happy to share, so I dug them out of the back of an old filing cabinet, made copies, and mailed them to LeAnne.



St. Nicholas Church in Great Yarmouth, Norfolk, England, where George and Frances (Roberts) Woolsey were married, and the Woolsey children and most of the Towne children were baptized.

A few months later a file showed up in my email box labeled FAMILY TREE. When I clicked it open, up popped a whole Broadway production: eight generations of Griffiths, ten generations of Woolseys, and dozens of other family names I had never heard before, going back more than three hundred years. It ran forty-four single-spaced pages in all.

Page one began with my own family: my father, Charles, who was born in Hastings, Nebraska, in 1914; and my mother, Frances, who was born in Washington, Kansas, in 1917. My three sisters were all born in the 1930s in Kansas. In 1939 the family moved to Los Angeles, hoping Dad could find work there. My brother was born soon after they arrived, in 1940. I was born in 1956. I am what the family delicately refers to as a “surprise.”

LeAnne’s family tree worked back from there. I casually thumbed through it, studying the different surnames — sixty-eight in all! — and tracing my ancestors’ migration backwards to the East Coast.

The earliest Griffiths first appeared in New England colony records in the 1600s. The family patriarch, himself a William Griffith, was my seven-times great-grandfather. All we know about him is that he was born around 1680 in Rochester, Massachusetts, and he died there in 1734. Over the next two hundred years my line of Griffiths migrated west, with stops in upstate New York, Illinois, Iowa, and finally in northern Kansas, where my great-great-grandparents settled in the 1870s.

On the Woolsey side, my nine-times great-grandparents George and Rebecca lived for many years in the New Amsterdam Colony in New York beginning around 1647. Succeeding generations migrated to Westchester and Ulster counties in New York, and then west to Ohio and into southern Nebraska, where my great-great grandparents settled in 1870.

The tree helped me clear up a family mystery. My father insisted for years that we were somehow related to Alexander Hamilton. I searched the tree, and to my utter astonishment I found our nation’s first secretary

of the treasury. LeAnne had inserted a brief excerpt from a book called *The History of Jones County, Iowa*, published in 1879, which said the father of my four-times great-grandmother, Nancy Hamilton Stivers (1824-1908), was “a cousin of Alexander Hamilton, who was killed by A. Burr.” That would have made Secretary Hamilton something like my great-great-great-great-cousin, if there is such a thing.

Then things started to get interesting, beginning with this startling revelation on page 29 of LeAnne’s tree:

Mary Towne Estey was executed on September 22, 1692, in Salem, MA, for witchcraft.

I went to my computer and entered the name in a search engine and up came hundreds of links to sites about the Salem witch trials of 1692. Nineteen people were executed that summer, all by hanging. Mary and her older sister, Rebecca, were among the nineteen.

But how was I related to this woman? I flipped back and forth through the pages of the tree and figured out that Mary and her husband, Isaac Estey, had had a granddaughter named Eleanor who married my six-times great-grandfather Samuell Griffith on September 23, 1724, in Rochester, Massachusetts, which would make Mary Towne Estey my eight-times great-grandmother.

My great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmother was one of the legendary Salem witches. I didn’t know whether to be horrified or jubilant.

I plunged further into the family tree, spending more and more time online studying maps of England, matching names and dates with places. Ever so slowly the names on the pages of this tree my cousin had compiled were turning into real people, and after hours spent connecting the dots, I was able to piece together the stories of their lives.

I figured out, for example, that the Woolseys, the Townes, and another pair of ancestors — John and Sarah Jenney — had all been Puritans who fled England in the early 1600s during the persecution of the English Protestants under the Stuart kings James I and his son Charles I. The three families eventually settled in different American colonies.

Amazingly, the Woolseys and Townes came from the same town, Great Yarmouth, a fishing village on the east coast of England, and — incredibly — George Woolsey was baptized in the very same Anglican church where Mary Towne’s parents were married and where many of the Towne children were also baptized.

Around 1620, the Woolseys sailed across the Eng-



lish Channel to Rotterdam, Holland, before George junior continued on to New Amsterdam in America, sometime in the 1640s. The Townes settled in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s.

The Jenneys, who were from the English village of Norwich, were members of the legendary congregation of Pilgrims that lived in Leiden, Holland, for twelve years before settling the Plymouth Colony in New England. John and Sarah didn't sail on the *Mayflower*; they migrated on another ship three years later, in 1623.

I had to know more. I bought dozens of books about the Puritan movements in England and Holland and in the American colonies, and books about the Salem witch trials (and there are plenty). I spent countless hours combing the Internet, and I joined a couple of genealogical societies and explored their extensive databases. I also wrote letters and emails to distant relatives I had never met, looking for still more information.

The tree became my obsession. For the next two years I retraced three hundred years of my family's journey from England and Holland to America's heartland, hopping on a plane or jumping in the car whenever I could find the time and visiting the places where they had lived.

In England I went to Great Yarmouth and worshipped where the Townes and Woolseys had worshipped. In the Netherlands I spent time in the town of Leiden, where the Jenneys had lived with the rest of the Pilgrims, and I walked the narrow cobblestone streets of Rotterdam's Delfshaven district near where the Woolseys lived for a number of years.

Back in the United States, I made frequent trips to Massachusetts. In Topsfield I worshipped in the Con-

Leiden, Holland, where the author's Jenney ancestors lived for twelve years prior to immigrating to Plymouth Colony in 1623.

gregational church that was begun in the 1680s by a group of Puritans that included members of the Towne and Estey families. In Salem, my family and I tried to understand the causes of the bizarre witch trials. And in Plymouth, I met a couple who run the grist mill John Jenney built in 1636.

In New York City, near where I live, I visited the neighborhoods in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens where George and Rebecca Woolsey and their children lived for more than fifty years. And I stumbled upon the bizarre story of the death of Rebecca's mother, my ten-times great-grandmother Rebecca Cornell, and I read the court records of the investigation and trial that resulted, a trial with an unbelievable twist ending.

During one memorable Sunday morning in a small town in New Jersey, I stood in the pulpit of a tiny Methodist church founded in 1802 by my five-times great-uncle, a Methodist circuit rider named Elijah Woolsey, and read excerpts from his journal to the members of the congregation.

Finally, I completed the journey by returning to the place where my parents and my sisters had been born: the farmlands of northern Kansas and southern Nebraska, where all our ancestral lines converged in the late nineteenth century.

When all was said and done, I had traveled more than ten thousand miles by plane, train, and automobile. I kept a journal along the way, which filled five large spiral-bound notebooks, and I took hundreds of photographs.

This book is more than just a history of my family. At this point during my research I realized that in order to fully appreciate the world my ancestors lived in, I needed to understand the Protestant Reformation that profoundly changed the course of Western civilization and shaped my ancestors' views of God, the Church, the English monarchy, and — most critically — themselves.

Most of the people you will read about here happen to be relatives of mine, but the journeys they undertook were not unique. If you are an American Protestant of European descent, chances are good that your ancestors lived in the same colonies, fought the same battles, and pursued the same dreams. All of them took enormous risks and overcame unbelievable obstacles.

For that we can all be grateful.

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