

Windham's founding father

Mystery and contradiction shroud the life of Windham's first settler John Cates. Elijah Waterman (1769-1825), the Windham Congregational Church's pastor between 1794 and 1804, penned the earliest account of Cates' life. Waterman, an accomplished essayist, included a short biography of Cates in his book "A Century Sermon at Windham" (1800).

When Waterman first came to Windham there were people living whose fathers had been Cates' contemporaries. He interviewed them, and combined these oral accounts with information on Cates gleaned from town records.

Waterman wrote that Cates was a "pious puritan" who in the 1640s served as an officer in Oliver Cromwell's Model Army during the English Civil Wars. He also maintained that Cates had played a part in the arrest and subsequent execution of King Charles I.

When Parliament restored the monarchy in 1660, King Charles II arrested all those considered implicated in his father's 1649 execution. Known as regicides, or "king killers," those not apprehended fled to America and Europe to avoid imprisonment and execution. However, the king sent agents to track them down. According to Waterman, Cates was one of these regicides.

On arriving in Virginia in 1660, Cates procured an African-American slave named Joe Ginne. The crown's officers arrived shortly afterwards, so Cates and his slave prudently departed for New York, and from there they arrived in Norwich. Still feeling unsafe in that busy inland port town, Cates headed to a region north of Norwich known as the New Plantation. Here during the spring of 1689, he and Ginne dug Windham's first cellar and built the town's first house.

However, writing in 1862, Windham historian William Weaver cast doubts upon Waterman's 1800 account, doubting the chronology of events. The pro-Catholic Charles II had died in 1685, four years before Cates settled on the Windham plantation and the protestant King William III, Prince of Orange had been on England's throne for a year when Cates built Windham's first house. Accordingly, Weaver maintained that it was unlikely that officers of the king were still pursuing Cates more than a quarter of a century after the Restoration.

Instead, Weaver believed that Cates had been involved in plans to depose Charles II's Roman Catholic son King James II and came to America after the abortive Battle of Sedgemoor in 1685, where King James forces had defeated the Protestant forces of the Duke of Monmouth. Cates had probably served under Cromwell 30 years previously and Weaver wrote, "nothing would have been more natural than for one of (Cromwell's) veterans to rush to arms under such a chief as Monmouth, when he raised the Protestant standard against so infa-



Tom
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mous a king as James II."

The mystery surrounding Cates continues, because there is disagreement in varying records on the actual spelling of Cates' name. It is written Cates, Cats, Ceats, Kats, Kates and Keats in the Windham records. In recording Cates' death, Joshua Ripley, Windham's first town clerk, spelled it Keats.

However, as Weaver pointed out, this reflects how arbitrarily and inconsistently individuals wrote and spelled the English language during the 17th century. Nevertheless, town records document that Cates was a man of considerable property. The documents illustrate that he bought and sold lands in his own name, was a freeman of the town, took part in local affairs and that his house was near the center of the settlement.

Cates' will dated May 5, 1696, shows that he gave 200 acres of land to "the poor of the Towne of Windham," and 200 acres to the town for a schoolhouse. He bequeathed his "negro Jo," and 10 pounds sterling to the Congregational Church pastor Samuel Whiting, and 10 pounds sterling to the church.

However, suggesting that he had left England hastily, Cates added that if his children came over from England they "should enjoy my estate notwithstanding what is above expressed."

Cates left the majority of his estate to his housekeeper Mary Howard. This consisted of 1,000 acres of land in Windham and Mansfield and one-fourth of a share of "wilderness land" at Coventry. He left this in recognition of her "love and regard to him" and because he had been at "great trouble and charge about her in time of long sickness."

In 1769, the town erected a monument in the Windham Center cemetery. It reads:

"In Memory of Mr. John Cates. He was a gentleman born in England & the first settler in the Town of Windham by his last Will and Testament he gave a generous Legacy to the first Church of Christ in Windham in plate & a generous Legacy in Land for ye support of ye poor, another Legacy for ye Support of ye School in Said Town; he died in Windham July ye 16th A.D. 1697."

The evidence suggest that Weaver's account of Cates life is perhaps more accurate than Waterman's. John Cates was most likely a staunch Protestant and Cromwellian who had fought for Monmouth and after the latter's defeat fled for the American colonies.

Moreover, his will and probate records and the reference to his children in England, suggest he was a man of means who had fled the country in haste, but not as early as 1660.



The inscription on John Cates' tombstone in the Windham Center Cemetery.