

Was Stanclift really the first?

by Doris Sherrow, February 2000

Portland history teaches that James Stanclift, a stonecutter from England, was the first European to settle on Portland's shores. This past August, I took my summer vacation in the basement vault of Middletown's land records, where Portland's records from the 1650s to 1767 reside. I was looking for information on **John Gill**, whom Portland history tells us was the second resident of Portland, and **Richard Goodale**, who sold Stanclift the lot on which he built his house in 1689.

John Gill first turns up, surprisingly, in the 1676 probate papers of an older Richard Goodale, the father of the one above. The elder Goodale refers to Gill as his "son." This probably meant that Gill's wife **Martha** was Goodale's daughter. Colonial people usually referred to sons- and daughters-in-law as "son" or "daughter," and, in fact, used the word "mother-in-law" to mean "step mother."

The elder Goodale, a mariner from Salisbury, Massachusetts, had acquired land in Portland. In 1673, he received permission from the selectmen of Middletown to build a warehouse "by the river side at or near the point of rocks provided it hinder not the digging [sic] of stones." The "point of rocks" refers to the Portland quarries—brownstone extended high over the Connecticut River on the east side in the 17th century.

In 1675, **King Philip's War** made living on the east side of the Connecticut River dangerous: the General Assembly commanded towns up and down the east side of the river to fortify one house in their community against Indian attack. None of those houses were in Portland, so apparently no one was living here at that time.

Goodale died in 1676, willing 20-acre lots each to his son Richard Jr. and to John Gill. In 1680 they signed a deed clarifying who owned which lot, and describing themselves as "Dwelling in midletown [sic]." Since neither owned land on the west side of the Connecticut River, this could be interpreted to mean that they were living in Portland at that early date.

However, it is unclear. Goodale and his wife Mary had several children between the 1670s and 1700. The ones born before 1691 were all born in Salisbury. On September 20, 1691, all those children were baptized in Middletown, indicating that the family had moved to the area. Perhaps Richard had maintained a residence in Portland, or stayed with his brother-in-law John Gill, while Mary and the children stayed in Salisbury. His daughter Martha was born in January, 1694, in "Middletown"—Portland.

John Gill was a "husbandman," or farmer. Five children were born to him and Martha: **Richard**, before 1675, **Joshua**, 1676, **Ebenezer**, 1680, **Judith**, 1681, and **John**, 1685. If he moved to Portland in 1680, he would have come with two or three tiny children, and raised his young family in complete isolation on the east side of the river, a decade or more before people began to move there.

The marriage patterns of his children are distinctly odd by colonial standards. Young people in the colonial period usually married in their early 20s, when they were in a position to set up housekeeping on their own (not in their teens, as has been rumored). Of Gill's five children, the two oldest were in their fifties when they married for the first time! The middle son, Ebenezer, was a mere 38 at his 1718 marriage. The two youngest died before they could marry, but Judith was 34, an age by which she should have been married. John Jr. died at age 27, engaged. He touchingly left one quarter of his estate "to my espoused friend **Elizabeth Fox** of Glastonbury." (It was she that his eldest brother, Richard, finally married, eleven years later, when he was 50!)