

THE FAITH OF OUR COLONIAL FOREFATHERS

By Randy Seaver

On Father's Day, I think back to the many generations before this one - to the courageous and adventurous Puritans and Pilgrims that settled in New England in the 1620 to 1650 time frame. What faith it must have taken to pursue the dream of religious freedom and settle in a place where they could have a tract of land of their own to raise their families.

When I transcribe or read the wills of our colonial ancestors, I am struck by the statements of faith and their absolute confidence they have in their life after death. I offer these of my ancestral fathers as examples:

1) John Bigelow of Watertown, who died in 1703:

"I John Biglo of Watertown in the county of Midd'x within her Majesties Province of the Massachusetts Bay in New England, yeoman, being weake of body but in sound & disposing Memory praise be given to god for the same, Do make this my last will & testament in manner & forme following: that is to say first & principally I resign my soul into the mercyfull hands of almighty god my Creator, assuredly hoping through the merits of my blessed Saviour to obtaine pardon & remission of all my sins; and my body I commit to the earth whence it was taken, to be decently buried by the descretion of my executors hereinafter named, ..."

2) Robert Fletcher of Concord, who died in 1677:

"The 4th of February 1672. These may certyfie Whom it may Concern that I Robert Flecher of Concord in the County of Midelsex in the Government of the Masachusets Jurisdiction in New England being about fourscore years of age: yet through the high favor of almighty God I have my understanding in a Competent measure although I find much Weakness in my body: doe therefore declare this to bee my last Will and Testament - I doe hereby acknowledge that God to be my God who made the World by the Word of his power Who out of his unspeakabell Goodness hath Given to me my life and breath with the support of it hetherto - I also believe in and Rull myselve upon Jesus Christ his only sonn that was Given to bee a propitiation for my sinn and perfectly to fulfill the Righteous law of God for mee that soe I might obtain boldness att the throne of Grace When hee shalbee admired of all his saints - Who out of his infinite love according to his promise hath sent the spirit to sealle unto mee my adoption and fellowship both with the father and Himself in the full assurance Thereof I doe hereby Resign my soull into the hands of that God that Gave it to mee - as likewise my body to the earth from Whence it was taken; to bee decently buried by my three sonns and the expense thereof to be deducted out of my estate..."

3) Peregrine White of Marshfield, who died in 1704:

"The fourteenth day of July Anno Domini one thousand seven hundred and four. I

Peregrine White of Marshfield in ye County of Plimouth in New England Being aged and under many Weaknesses and Bodily Infirmities But of Sound disposing mind and memory praises be Rendered to Almighty God therefore yet in dayly Expectation of my Great Change Do therefore hereby make and Declare this my last Will and Testament hereby Revoking and making null any former Will or Wills by me heretofore made and declare this to be my last Will and Testament and no other---

"Imprimis I Humbly Commit my Soul to Almighty God that Gave it and my Body to decent Buriall when it Shall Please him to take me hence..."

4) Isaac Read of Sudbury, who died in 1780:

"In the Name of God, Amen. I, Isaac Read of Sudbury in the County of Middlesex in the State of the Massachusetts Bay in New England, yeoman, being of sound disposing mind, though infirm in body, sensible of my own frailty and mortality, do make and ordain this my last will and testament. Firstly committing my soul into the hands of God, hoping for salvation through Jesus Christ the only Saviour of Men, and my body to be decently buried, at the discretion of my executor, hereafter named, in hopes of a Reformation to a blessed immortality..."

Of course, not all wills expressed the writer's faith and confidence in such glowing terms. Some wrote only one line with limited sentiments, and some did not mention God at all. After about 1800, most religious sentiments disappeared from wills. Too bad.