

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

THE COFFIN FAMILY

RECALLING THE BACKGROUND AND
SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF A FAMILY
WITH HISTORIC LINKS IN FRANCE,
ENGLAND, THE UNITED STATES OF
AMERICA AND CANADA.

KEN ANNETT.

THE COFFIN FAMILY

Few families of Gaspesia have access to such a wealth of well-documented family history as the Coffins. As the year 1982 marked the 340th anniversary of the arrival of the Coffins in America it seems appropriate to recall the background of the family and some highlights of its history in America and links with Gaspesia. Such recall will draw heavily, but not exclusively, on the remarkable book, THE COFFIN FAMILY, edited by Louis Coffin and published by the Nantucket Historical Association of Nantucket, Mass., U.S.A. This general overview may provide introduction to the more detailed study of the Farewell Cove Coffins now in progress by Leigh Coffin of Fortledge House, Armstown, Québec.

EAR BACK IN TIME

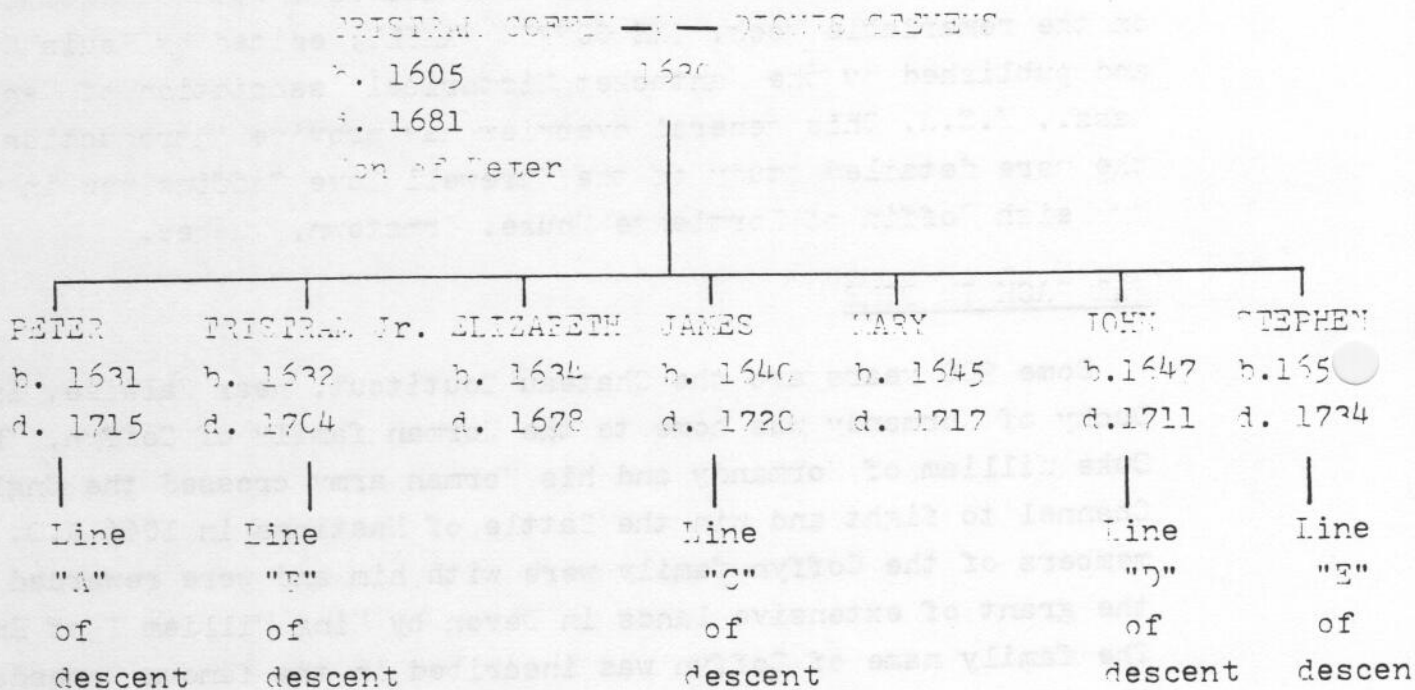
Some 900 years ago the Chateau Coutitout, near Falaise, in the Duchy of Normandy was home to the Norman family of Coffyn. When Duke William of Normandy and his Norman army crossed the English Channel to fight and win the Battle of Hastings in 1066 A.D., members of the Coffyn family were with him and were rewarded by the grant of extensive lands in Devon by King William I of England. The family name of Coffyn was inscribed in the famous Domesday Book. Sir Richard Coffyn located in Devon at Portledge, near Bideford, and other family members took up lands in other parts of the County. The family links that ensued with other Devon families have been recorded in some detail by Louis Coffin in the family story referred to above.

IN THE COURSE OF TIME

One's imagination is hard-pressed to realize that it was almost 600 years after the settlement of the Coffyns in Devon before the first member of the family emigrated to America. That significant move was made by Tristram Coffyn (Coffin) who was born at Brixton, near Plymouth, in 1605, the son of Peter and Joan Thimber Coffyn. Tristram grew up to marry a local Brixton lass, Dionis Stevens, and in 1642 the couple with five children, the widowed mother of Tristram and his two spinster sisters sailed from Devon for America.

Following temporary residence in the Massachusetts communities of Salisbury, Haverhill and Newbury, from 1642 until 1659, Eristram and his family settled in Nantucket. It was there that Eristram Coffin died in 1681. The descent from Eristram and Joan Coffin which provides the key to descendants of succeeding generations in America is illustrated by CHART I of this account.

CHART I



NOTE : 1. Two children, John and Deborah, died in infancy. The John shown on the above chart bore the name of his deceased infant brother.

2. Abraham Coffin, of whom more later, was of the 5th. generation in Line "C" of descent from James Coffin.

NANTUCKET - HOME OF THE COFFIN FAMILY

The island of Nantucket lies off the Massachusetts coast some 25 miles south-east of Cape Cod. Some 15 miles long and 3 miles wide, the island is ringed by more than 80 miles of sandy beaches and has a commodious harbour. Granted to the Plymouth Company in 1621 and sold to Thomas Mayhew twenty years later the island was found to be ill-suited for agriculture. The early settlers quickly turned to fishing, ship-building and maritime trade. In the early 18th. century whaling began in earnest and reached its peak at the time of the American Revolution when some 150 whaling ships sailed from their Nantucket home port.

The introduction of whaling, with which the Coffin families of Nantucket were deeply involved, had an interesting parallel years later in Gaspé Bay. In 1690 the Nantucket men, finding that the people of mainland Cape Cod were proficient in whaling, brought to the island a noted whaler, Ichabod Paddock, to teach them about the best methods of killing whales and obtaining the valuable oil. Ichabod proved to be a good teacher and the men of Nantucket apt students. Initially, and up until 1712, it was the "right" whales whose migration path lay just offshore, that were hunted. But in a wild autumn storm in 1712 a Nantucket whaler, "Kit" Hussey and his crew were driven far offshore into the Atlantic and came upon a great herd of the "sperm" whale. Historians of whaling note that this discovery changed Yankee whaling forever. Subsequently the Nantucket whalers pushed farther and farther into the Atlantic and eventually into the Pacific Ocean in search of whaling grounds. By 1774 the annual income to Nantucket of the whaling enterprise had reached some \$500,000 - a vast sum in those distant times.

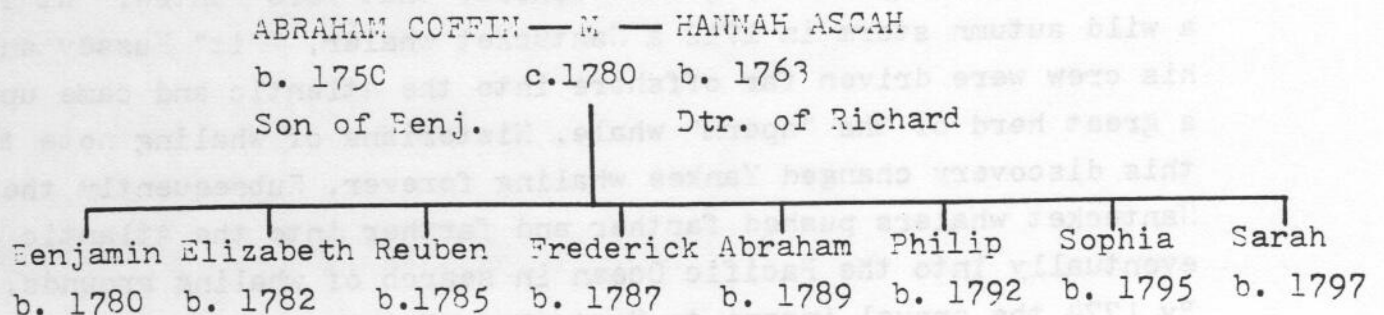
As Captains of whaling ships and crewmen members of the Coffin families were in the forefront of Nantucket whaling. Such famed Captains as Uriah, Elihu, Frederick and Prince Coffin are among the descendants of Tristram Coffin who have an established place in whaling history. The portraits of some of these indomitable Coffin mariners, painted in oil, can be found in whaling museums.

ABRAHAM AND HANNAH ASCAH COFFIN

Born in 1750, son of Benjamin and Medida Coffin, Abraham Coffin was of the 5th generation in the line of descent "C" from James Coffin. In the course of time destiny took him to Gaspé Bay where he met and married Hannah, daughter of the pioneer Peninsula family of Richard and Christiana Ascah circa 1780. By marriage Abraham became linked to the early Gaspé families of Annett, McKinnon, Patterson and Thompson and it was on the shores of Gaspé Bay that he and his wife, Hannah, made their home.

Tradition holds that Abraham, like his Biblical namesake and his Nantucket forebears, was a man of high principle. To him is given credit for having introduced the men of Gaspé Bay to whaling. Like Ichabod Paddock in earlier times, he found his Gaspé Bay neighbours to be apt students. Thus was laid the foundation of Gaspé whaling.

The Gaspé family of Abraham and Hannah Ascah Coffin is shown in CHART II.

CHART II.

- Note: 1. Reuben died in childhood at age 7 years
 2. Benjamin married Christiana Patterson
 3. Abraham Jr. married Annabella Poyle
 4. Philip married Margaret McCrae
 5. Sophia married Richard Annett.

FOUR COFFIN COUSINS OF ABRAHAM OF GASPE

Contemporary with Abraham Coffin of Gaspé and in the line of descent "C" from James were the following cousins who are worthy of mention in this recall of the Coffin family. While the selection of these four cousins, among many, is frankly subjective, the criterion of choice has been the role they played in the lands about the Gulf and River St. Lawrence.

ANNE COFFIN CALBECK.

Anne, daughter of Nathaniel and Elizabeth Barnes Coffin, grew up to marry Phillips Calbeck and make her home in Charlottetown, St. John's Island (now Prince Edward Island) Her husband was prominent in the early British administration of St. John's Island as the first Attorney General, Treasurer and President of the Council.

In 1775 with the American Revolutionary War in progress, two ships of American privateers out of Marblehead, Mass., sailed into Charlottetown harbour, seized Phillips Calbeck, the Acting Governor, sacked and looted the settlement and hunted for Anne Coffin Calbeck to, in their own words, "cut her throat". But Anne had taken her husband's advice to seek refuge at their farm in the country on the St. Peter's Road and from there she could only watch helplessly the looting of her home and the carrying away of her husband into captivity. Months passed before Phillips Calbeck was released on the personal order of General George Washington and made his way back to Charlottetown. On his return he found that his loyal and competent wife had "kept the home fires burning". In this crisis, as in the many problems of pioneer life, Anne Coffin Calbeck reflected the qualities of self-reliance and courage of her family heritage. Widowed in 1790 by the premature death of her husband at the early age of 46 years she continued to manage the business of the family for more than twenty years. Travel by sea held no fears for her - on occasion she sailed from Charlottetown to Québec City to visit her Uncle John Coffin (1728-1808) the Deputy Commissary General and other family members, including her Aunt, Susanna Coffin, the wife of the Hon. John Craigie.

At the time of the War of 1812-14 Anne Coffin Callbeck went to live in England. There she died and on a marble tablet in the Abbey Church, Bath, Somerset, the following inscription may be read:

"Near this spot lie the remains of"

Anne Callbeck

Widow of the late Phillips Callbeck, Esq.
Attorney General of Prince Edward Island
who departed this life in this city

October 15th, 1826

aged 74

This monument is erected as a small
tribute of affection by her youngest
and only sister. "

ADMIRAL SIR ISAAC COFFIN

A brother of Anne Coffin Callbeck, Isaac Coffin was born in 1759 and followed his family affinity for the sea by enlisting in the British Royal Navy at age fourteen. Promoted Lieutenant in 1778 and Captain in 1781 he rose to the flag rank of Rear Admiral of the White in 1804 at the time of the Napoleonic Wars and was created a Baronet. In the same year he was granted the Magdalen Islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence by Lord Dorchester.

Named Vice-Admiral in 1808, Sir Isaac Coffin reached the summit of a Royal Navy career in 1817 by his appointment as Admiral of the Fleet. His many close personal friends included the Duke of Clarence who succeeded to the British Throne as King William IV in 1830.

On retirement, Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin lived in England at Cheltenham until his death, in 1839, at age 80 years.

An interesting evidence of family ties is that Admiral Coffin had his nephew, Phillips Franklin Callbeck, son of his sister Anne under his protection in the administration of the Magdalen Islands. As a Justice of the Peace, Major of Militia for the County of Gaspé and Deputy Collector of Customs for the Magdalen Islands, Phillips

GENERAL JOHN COFFIN

Nathaniel Coffin, the father of Anne Coffin Wallbeck, Admiral Sir Isaac Coffin and General John Coffin was an ardent Loyalist who was active in the British cause during the American Revolution. His children shared his convictions and it was not surprising that his son, John, chose a British Army career. He distinguished himself during the Revolutionary War, rising to the rank of General. In common with thousands of his fellow countrymen who were persecuted as Loyalists to the British Crown he had to leave the United States as the war came to an end. He was among those Loyalists who settled in New Brunswick and who laid the foundations of the Loyalist city of the city of Saint-John.

On the outbreak of the War of 1812-14, General John Coffin came forward to fight once again on the British side.

His retirement years at his New Brunswick home continued until 1838 when he died at the age of 82 years.

ELISHA COFFIN

The fourth, and last, of the Coffin cousins of Abraham of Gaspé to be recalled here is Elisha who settled in Prince Edward Island.

Elisha married Eunice Myrick and their family and descendents, noted ship-builders and mariners, were linked to the Island community of Savage Harbour. One son, Elisha Jr., married Jane Robins while his brother, Benjamin, named after his paternal grandfather, married Catherine Sanderson

The family of Coffin remains well-represented in Prince Edward Island to this day. Information on family history is preserved in the genealogical library of the Prince Edward Island Heritage Foundation.

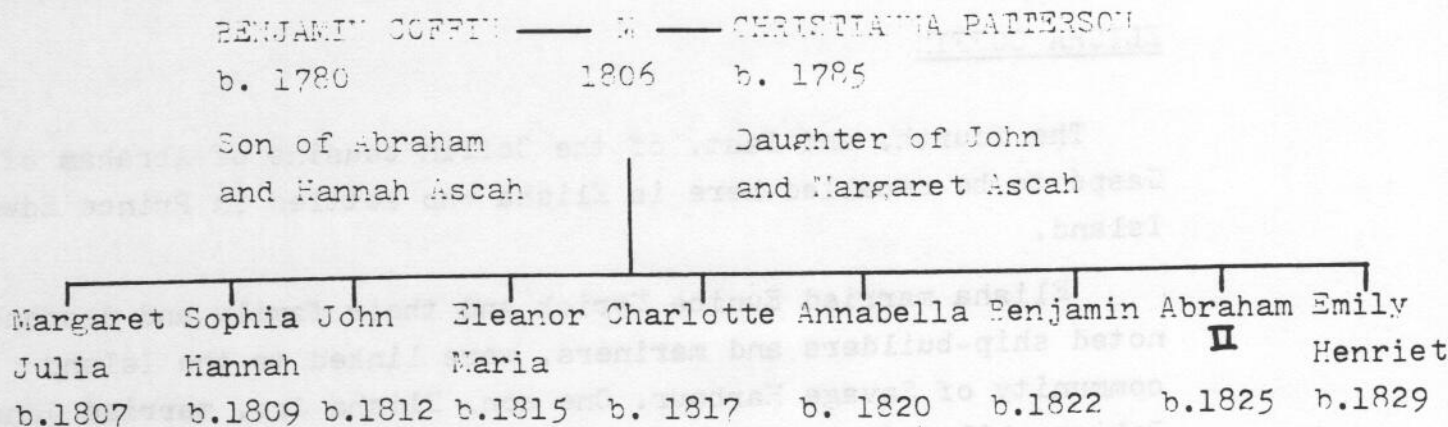
SONS OF ABRAHAM AND HANNAH ASCAH COFFIN OF CASPÉ

This general account does not propose to recall, in detail, all of the Caspé descendants of Abraham and Hannah Ascah Coffin. It is to be hoped that some member of the Coffin family will undertake and publish that interesting family history. To illustrate the progressive and increasingly close integration of the Coffin family of Caspé with other pioneer English families of the Caspé Bay communities this article will concentrate on three sons of Abraham and Hannah.

BENJAMIN COFFIN

The eldest son of Abraham and Hannah Coffin, Benjamin was born in 1786. He grew up to marry Christianna, daughter of John and Margaret Ascah Patterson. Their family is shown in CHART III, below.

CHART III



Note - Abraham Coffin II, born 1825, grew up to marry Annabella Annett, the daughter of Richard and Sophia Coffin Annett. Sophia Coffin (CHART II) was the daughter of Abraham and Hannah Ascah Coffin. She was Richard Annett's second wife, his first wife, Mary Boyle, having died within three years of marriage.

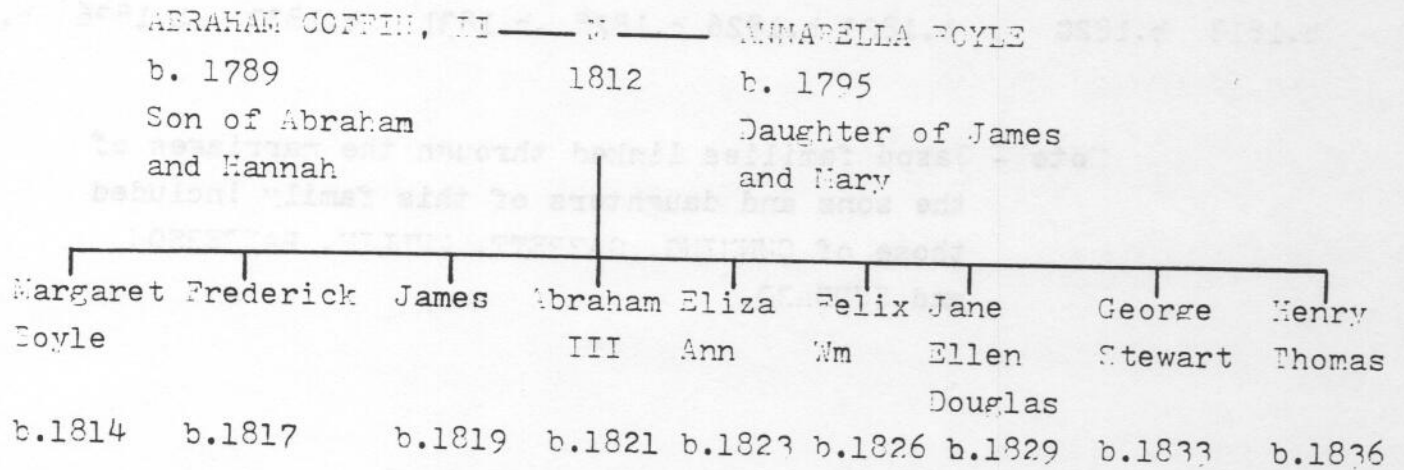
ABRAHAM COFFIN, II

The fourth son of Abraham and Hannah Ascan Coffin, Abraham was born in 1789. In 1812 he married Annabella, daughter of James and Mary Boyle.

Annabella was a sister of Mary Boyle, the first wife of Richard Annett.

Early Gaspé records reveal that men of the Annett, Boyle and Coffin families shared a close, common interest in seafaring and whaling.

CHART IV

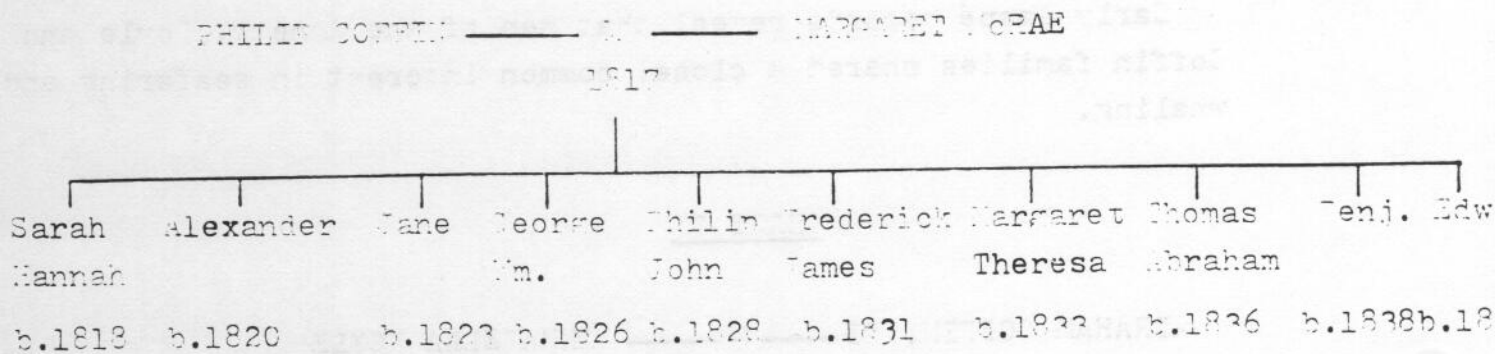


Note - The Aunts of Annabella, sisters of her father, James, included Mrs.Eden (Ellen), Mrs.Languedoc (Eliza) and Mrs.(Captain) Hall (Helen)

Her brother, James, married Charlotte McKinnon. (Ref. GASPE OF YESTERDAY, "SPRING GROVE".

PHILIP COPPEN

The youngest of the sons of Abraham and Hannah Asch Coffin, Philip was born in 1792. In 1817 he married Margaret McRAE. Their family is shown below in CHART V.

CHART V.

Note - Gaspé families linked through the marriages of the sons and daughters of this family included those of CUNNING, GARRETT, MULLIN, PATTERSON and SUDDARD.

IN CONCLUSION

Though the Coffin family is still well represented in Gasné after more than two hundred years, descendants of Abraham and Hannah Ascah Coffin are also widely dispersed over the North American continent.

The careers and life experiences of members of the family have been diverse and are worthy of detailed record. All share a remarkably long and interesting family history - a history that extends back in time to the Coffin family of Normandy. As the record of the Coffin families of Gasné would be an invaluable contribution to our Gaspesian heritage, it is hoped that it will be written and published.