

Portland's 1st European Resident

by Doris Sherrow, July 1999

Portland histories typically include little information about James Stancliff, the first Englishman to settle in town. The reason becomes clear from a remarkable 1995 genealogy by **Sherry Smith Stancliff, *The Descendants of James Stancliff of Middletown, Connecticut and allied Families*** (James preferred the latter spelling; more recent descendants use the "-cliff" ending).

Of his 73 years, Stancliff spent the first four decades in England, the next decade in other parts of the world, and did not come to Portland until he was 50. And then he came as somewhat of an outsider, not making as large a mark as others in the workings of church and government from which we generally draw our portraits of historical figures. He was a simple stonemason. James Stancliff was born about 1639 in Halifax Parish, York, England. As a younger son, under British law, he would not be able to inherit the family estate, so he learned a trade to make a living: stone masonry. He was a generation younger than the Puritans and Pilgrims who first settled New England, but he and his family also encountered trouble with the Church of England. So, on August 2, 1680, James put himself under indenture to leave England and work four years in Nevis, in the Windward Isles.

In 1684, Stancliff turned up in Lyme, Connecticut, in debt to three wealthy New Londoners who traded in the West Indies. Perhaps they paid for his passage to New London, or bought out his indenture. In Lyme, Stancliff met and married **Mary (Tinker) Waller**, a wealthy widow, in 1685. For the next four years, he ran a farm on the northeast shore of what we know as **Rogers Lake**. He also engaged in brick-making, and carved gravestones for those who could afford them, often for relatives who had died long before Stancliff entered the country. **Lt. Reynold Marvin's** stone, dated 1676, is such an example.

On February 24, 1687, James Stancliff and the town of Middletown entered into an agreement whereby he would build "chimneys, and other stonework" for Middletown and receive in payment "a parcell of land upon the rocks." Offering land and land division right to men with various necessary trades was a common colonial practice, not unlike offering tax breaks to desirable businesses today. "The rocks" referred to the outcropping of brownstone on the east side of the Connecticut River in what would someday become Portland.

Stancliff was listed as a resident of Lyme on the August 1688 tax list; the births of his son **William** in September 1686, and his daughter **Martha** in December 1688 are recorded in the style of the Lyme town clerk, but in October of 1689, he divested himself of his property in Lyme. By May 5, 1690, the Middletown selectmen deeded him "A parcell of Land on the East side the Great River near his hous [sic]." Thus he had probably moved to East Middletown (Portland) in the summer of 1689, to build his own house and construct the stonework and chimneys for Middletown, as per his contract.

Stancliff's willingness to live on the east side of the river is not surprising, given that he was a newcomer to the area, drawn by economic interests, rather than a member of the community which settled Middletown in the 1650s. His wife, too, had no Middletown roots.

James and Mary had two more children, **James** in 1692, and **Sarah** in 1695 (recorded in the style of the Middletown town clerk). Mary also had three daughters from her marriage to the late **William Waller**. The family probably lived in the vicinity of Commerce Street. A painting by **John Wells Stancliff** (owned by the Portland Historical Society) supposedly depicts the Stancliff house, showing a small Cape Cod with a center door and windows on either side. However, Stancliff's rendition of the roof is problematic: it is very low-pitched. A 1690s house would have had a very steep roof pitch, like the House of the Seven Gables in Salem. Either Stancliff erred in painting the roof, or it was remodeled in the century or more between him and his several-greats grandfather.

The Stancliffs and the nearby **Richard Gill** family seem to have been the only white residents in Portland in the 1690s (although **William Cornwall** might have been north of Wangunk meadows that early). Apparently Stancliff employed the "locals." A 1702 diary entry from Stonington speaks of an Indian named "**Sacient**" delivering head- and foot-stones for the grave of **Rebecca Minor carved** by "Stancleef" – possibly the diarist's rendering of the Indian's pronunciation of the name.

James Stanclift was middle-aged when he left England. He was 46 when he married, and 56 when his last child was born. He quarried more than twenty years in the rich brownstone of Portland, and carved gravestones for families all over Connecticut and Massachusetts.

In 1712 there was a serious influenza in Connecticut. James died in October, and Mary in December of that year, possibly from that epidemic. James' sons were left at ages 25 and 20, to carve the tombstones for their parents' graves. There was no graveyard in Portland until the following February, so James and Mary Stanclift, the first family to settle in Portland, lie in the Riverside Cemetery in Middletown.