

MATHERS OF DARIEN: A HISTORY



*A lecture delivered by
Marian Castell, Town Historian, on March 15, 2001
for the Annual Meeting of the Darien Land Trust*

We are here tonight because we care about Darien. We were either born here and did not want to leave, or we chose to live here. Something holds us, and it is more than the commute to New York or Stamford. Over time, towns develop personalities and definite physical aspects because of people and decisions in the past. These elements continue down generation after generation until these threads weave themselves into a fabric of a particular town. One of the most important threads that binds, and connects us in Darien relates directly to this particular family, the Mathers. Who they were and are currently, have an important impact on all of us living here today. Hopefully, future Mathers will continue to shape the town.



In order to see how the strengths of this family passed down from generation to generation, let's begin in 1596 with the birth of Richard, in Lowton, Lancaster, England. The name Mather is derived from the Anglo Saxon, "Math" which means honor and reverence. You will notice that from this Richard to the present these are qualities that keep reappearing. This family includes many people with passionate convictions, with no fears of expressing their views, and with the enormous energy and vision to lead large groups. The Mathers have reflected this for at least 500 years. As taking the role of a clerical leader is one of the most effective means to express these qualities, it is interesting to note that in *The Mather Genealogy of 1890* there are five solid pages of Richard's clerical Mather descendants.

In his youth, he studied at Oxford, became a schoolmaster and then a preacher in Lancaster. After being silenced several times for sermons that were "non-conforming" he decided to go to New England and settled in Dorchester, Massachusetts. He has written a record of part of his life in a *Journal of 1596 to 1669*, which in 1890 was at the Dorchester Antiquarian Society. It gives one a fresh sense of the times. One of the paragraphs describes his six weeks voyage across the Atlantic in 1635 with 100 passengers, 23 seamen, 23 cows, 3 sucking calves and 8 mares. None of which, he claims, died along the way (I suspect some of the animals may have been eaten.). One woman had scurvy, which Richard attributed to lack of exercise, or as he put it "want of walking and stirring of her body upon ye deck." He also describes a storm on the Atlantic in which they lost anchors, sails as well as many other things.

He made Dorchester, MA his home with his wife and family preaching there for fifty years and never missing a Sabbath (he was blessed with strength and health). Four of his five sons, except Timothy, became clergymen. Samuel and Nathaniel went back to Europe. Eleazer was the first minister in Northampton, MA, dying the same year as his father; Dr. Increase Mather stayed in

Boston after entering Harvard at 14, he went to Trinity College in Dublin, preached in England and returned to be the first American born President of Harvard. He filled this position, as well as preacher at the North Church, for the rest of his life, dying at 84 years after freeing his slave in his will. Interestingly enough, he also had a prenuptial agreement in his will with his wife dividing their property. Dr. Increase's other legacy to Boston was his son, Cotton. As the leading preaching light in Boston, Cotton had a tremendous memory with the ability to read and write in seven languages. He sponsored a school for African Americans to teach reading, and devised a plan of voluntary groups to help with problems. Of course he believed in witchcraft, as everyone did. In 1713, he was elected to the Royal Society of London. He is buried at Copp's Hill in Boston's North End.

Returning now to the first Richard, in reading his will, one sees the stage for the future as well as insights into the 17th century. He gave his son, Timothy, "his house, barn and lands in Dorchester, all moveable goods including servants," in addition to all this he made him one of the executors. Timothy was known as "Farmer Mather." To his "beloved" wife Sarah, Richard gave "free liberty" to live for 3 or 4 months in his house after his death, plus 100 pounds (she brought him a dower of 50 pounds). Basically, after giving him a family, traveling the Atlantic, and all the rest, she ends up 50 pounds ahead and a place to stay for 3-4 months. Timothy ended up with all the property. However, fifteen years after he inherited it, he died after a fall from his barn at the age of 56. All descendants of the Darien Mathers come from "Timothy, the farmer". Descendants of Richard's sons, Increase, and Cotton, all died out about 100 years ago.

Now we go to another Richard Mather, who is one of Timothy's six children (Rev. Samuel, Richard, Catherine, Joseph and Atherton) who moved to Lyme, Ct. Richard had two sons, a Samuel and another Timothy. This Timothy, a Captain, was the father of Moses Mather who was born in 1719. Moses Mather went to Yale and left there in 1739 coming to Middlesex (Darien) a year later. In later years, he was a Fellow at Yale from 1777-1790 and one year later a DD was conferred on him by College of New Jersey (Princeton) in 1791.

As you may know, in the early 18th century Darien was a part of Stamford. However, in the late 1730's there were some very severe winters that led to the death of some Darien area members attempting to go to church in Stamford. This created a definite feeling that there was the need for a church closer to residents. However, at that time creating a new meetinghouse often meant creating a new town. No towns were allowed that did not have a meeting house (Church) and, of course, that meant Congregational. A church school was established there in 1732. For seven years following that there was a debate over which one of the six Yale men should be called to the new Middlesex Society. After many negotiations about an annual salary of 46 pounds and a variety of produce, the choice finally settled on Rev. Moses Mather, with a two-year probationary period. He arrived in Middlesex Parish at the age of 25 as a bachelor. This was soon remedied two years later when he married his first wife, Hannah Bell, of Darien on September 10, 1746. Elizabeth Whiting and then Rebecca Raymond followed her. These wives gave him a total of 10 children, which was a common number in the 18th century. Large families were life insurance, and household help when survival was hard. He remained and preached in Darien for 64 years until his death in 1806.

Moses came from an impeccable, academic family, and was a determined as well as forceful conservative "Old Light" preacher. Interestingly, he took up the Enlightenment principles several years before Thomas Jefferson. There is a pre-Revolutionary broadside attributed to Rev. Mather. In 1764, he delivered an election sermon in Hartford, *America's Appeal to the Impartial World*, in which he deals with "Patriotism, Described and Recommended, and how America should fight for the rights of all freemen." (at Darien HS) One of the things that does not reach our history books is that the Church of England, (and there were a lot of members in New England,) basically felt that it was best for their new colony that the Congregational Church be eliminated. Mather was fighting

for his Church, Freedom and his job.

As a man, he was described as "of medium height, slender, distinguished for learning, piety, free and easy in conversation, with a good business sense." He had great humor and tremendous patriotism, and stood out in a crowd because a long Quaker like coat he always wore. Now we come to the Revolution. I want to remind you what it was like here. The fact that Middlesex was located on the Sound gave it easy access for the Tories of Long Island (and that is where many were gathered). In consequence, there was constant raiding, stealing, kidnapping and burning. The Episcopalians or Anglicans had difficult loyalty questions, and these divided loyalties made for great bitterness, with families and neighbors against each other. Even Dr. Mather's two sisters-in-law were Tories. Darien had 67 Anglican families and 86 who were members of the Middlesex Society. Moses Mather was the only clergyman in the four surrounding towns to whom people could turn to for vigorous leadership in the rebel cause. He felt this responsibility strongly and preached vigorously.

On August 8, 1779, eight Tories, five of whom were Dr. Mather's former parishioners, broke into his home at 68 (64) Brookside Road, now demolished, and captured him as well as his three sons. They were imprisoned in New York City for five weeks until Moses and two of his sons were released. The third son, 19-year-old Moses, died in prison on September 22. His body was brought back for burial. That winter of 1779 - 80 was the severest ever known up to that time in America. A man could walk across Long Island Sound. This brought a lull in the raids, but spring brought them anew. It continued until we get to 1781 when there was the Tory raid on the night of March 19 on the new house of Rev. Moses Mather's son, Deacon Joseph, at Brookside and Stephen Mather Road. There are several accounts. One is Joseph was not there, but his wife of three years, Sarah with a nursing baby was forced to reveal the whereabouts of valuable possessions that many friends had stored in the well, hanging from the grandfather clock and other places in the belief that its distance from the Sound made it safe. Most of these possessions were stolen, including 93 pounds worth of silver and clothing of Rev. Moses that was hidden in the house.

Two months after this raid, Dr. Mather was invited to preach at the opening of the spring session of the Connecticut General Assembly. He spoke bluntly of "the anarchy and licentiousness" and blamed the Tories "secret enemies". He urged men to bear testimony against secret Tories, and prosecute them more forcefully. It may well have been a reaction to this that aroused the Darien refugees in Long Island to mount the famous raid that took place a few weeks later at the Meeting House in Darien.

It was July 22, 1781, when a former neighbor, Captain William Frost (who was married to Sarah Scofield, daughter of Josiah Scofield whose farm is now the Goodwives Shopping Plaza), led a party of 40 across the Sound landing at the Fish Islands, hiding over night in a swamp 50 rods (16 1/2 feet are in a rod so this was 825 ft.) from the Church. They decided not to attack at the morning service, because not enough of the Tories' particular enemies were there at that time. They attacked at the beginning of the afternoon service. Deacon Joseph Mather and three others escaped by leaping from the window. One account records that another son hid under the benches.

The 40 men then were tied together two by two and marched along with about 40 horses back to the Fish Islands. Armed vessels were waiting at the outer island and a Middlesex rescue party under Major Davenport could not save them. Some of the men were freed, and the rest were jailed- first in prison ships and later in the notorious Provost Prison (now City Hall Park). All during this confinement, Moses continued to preach, dealing with constant daily threats of execution. There was little food and dreadful conditions. Nineteen survived, and Dr. Mather, at 62 years, was helped greatly by food rumored to have been brought to him by Washington Irving's mother. At the end of December, the 27th, 1781, in exchange for some Tories, they walked home in the winter cold with

James Bell dying along the way. Rev. Mather carried on his ministry until 1806 when he died at 87 years. He is buried in the Rowayton Cemetery with the words "Death is a debt to nature due which I have payed and so must you."

Deacon Joseph Mather, the son who built the current homestead on Brookside and Stephen Mather, married a girl from Ridgefield, Sarah Scott, and had eleven children. He fought in the Revolution and went to the battle in Montreal which was one of the cruelest marches in the war. He was an Ensign in the Ct. Militia and sergeant in the Coast Guard.

This meant guarding the Darien coastline. This was extremely dangerous, as every few days a guard was killed. It was no easy task to get recruits.

However, one of the most important things he did during the Revolution was his building of the current homestead, which has been owned by a Mather since it was erected in 1778.

Joseph Mather, built it on land from his mother, Hannah Bell, and it was hoped that the home's distance from Kings Highway and the Sound would make it safe. That did not work, however, a few months before Yorktown when raids became so bitter, it was robbed in the

raid I just described. However, three years before the raid, and on July 4, 1778, the first hearth fire in his new home was lit by his father, Moses Mather, by igniting the tobacco in his box from a solar glass in his pocket. Joseph and his family lived there with nightly worships around the hearth in the west room under the same clock that stands there today until his death in 1840. His will gave this house and \$500 to his widow for the remainder of her life and then to his maiden daughters. 1867 marked a family reunion where they all gathered and dined in an orchard. Moses Mather at 85 was present as having been married by Rev. Moses and his only living grandson. In 1878, Joseph's daughters still lived there. Rana, at 90 years, still collected her father's Revolutionary pension. She died at 96 in 1880.



Mather House in Darien circa 1980

The homestead was then passed down to Joseph Wakeman Mather, who built a barn, but lived most of the time at the St. George's Hotel in Brooklyn because he liked central heating. He moved to San Francisco to develop some business interests. The house then came into the hands of his only son, Stephen Tyng Mather. At that time the house had 22 acres that were valued at \$1,300. Stephen first occupied the house in the summer of 1907 and used it as a vacation home. He also decided to make improvements building a barn to replace the one that burned, a cottage, sunken garden and front porch. He used it as a summer home until 1930. His daughter, Bertha Mather McPherson inherited it at that time. There were some more alterations, but the basic house was kept in its original form. It is listed in the WPA Census of Old Buildings, and now, as you all know it is a Registered National Historic Landmark. (1964).

Across a still untamed continent in San Francisco when his grandmother, Rana was still collecting her Revolutionary pension in the Homestead in Darien, Stephen Tyng Mather was born in 1867. (Tyng was the name of the pastor of St. George's Church in New York.) Like the 17th century Richard, and Dr. Increase, he graduated from college early, in this particular case it was at 19 years from the University of California. From there he went to New York City to be a reporter for the New York Sun, which proved to be very helpful later because its editor, Charles Dana, helped Stephen in his National Park Service role. He married Jane Thacker Floy, and then went out to Death Valley for work for a company that mined borax to do public relations. At that time most of the borax was imported, and the American market needed developing. Because mule teams were the means of extractions he created the promotion and advertising slogan "20 Mule Team Borax". He became very successful, ended up with his own borax

company and became very comfortable as a millionaire.

Stephen was a mountaineer at heart and in 1912 he met 80 year old John Muir and was inspired by him. At that time, the thirteen National Parks were in disarray with major hunting as well as the big timber interests wanting to log the Sequoias. Stephen wrote a strong letter to the federal authorities registering his protest. Suddenly, at 47, he found he was Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Franklin Lane (also from the University of Calif.). Parks at that time were orphans of the government, no one looked after them, and there were large financial interests seeking to profit from this neglect. Stephen came to Washington, and he was a striking figure of a man, handsome, over 6 feet tall with keen blue eyes and energy to wear out almost anyone, as well as the security of wealth. (His government annual salary was \$2,700.) He engendered tremendous loyalty, and was able to pick the right man for the right job. As is true with anyone who seeks change, he had many enemies who were against government control of the parks. He was not fearful of making changes and he was not afraid to meet aggression with force. There was one incident when he dynamited an illegal sawmill in Glacier National Park and when asked why, he replied, "it was for my daughter's birthday."

It was imperative to raise public support so that the government would support park initiatives. The most important initial thing to do was to raise public awareness. He needed an avalanche of publicity, and as a consequence persuaded the editor of the New York Sun to head public relations for the Department of Interior. Mather paid his salary out of his personal funds. On July 14, 1915, he gathered Frederick Gillett, future Speaker of the House, Burton Holmes, travel lecturer, Gilbert Grosvenor, National Geographic, Henry Osborn, American Museum of Natural History as well as Southern Pacific Railroad men, writers and newspaper men to go on a wilderness two week trip with him. He gave each guest a new sleeping bag; an air mattress, a horse, and he supplied an excellent Chinese trail cook. He took them through the Sequoias, up Mount Whitney and on to Yosemite. This was Gilbert Grosvenor's first trip west, and he was so taken by what he saw that he gave \$20,000 to the Park Service. The parks had no hotels, or roads. Stephen and a friend bought a private road that ran across Yosemite. He brought in photographers, he persuaded his college fraternity to hold its convention in California and he took them to Tahoe, and Yosemite. Following this, of course, financial requests were made. He worked with the railroad tycoons to have spurs run to the parks, and further developed awareness by creating with them a photographic portfolio of the endangered areas. (\$48,000).

One year after these trips, 1916, Congress created the Bureau of National Parks. His goal, in addition, to conservation was to give people access to and enjoyment of the parks. In order to aid and educate visitors as well as to protect the parks, he developed the Park Rangers. Park protection, formerly done by the army, was a haphazard affair. Stephen Mather set up a system of training, and schools so that the Rangers could educate visitors and think of themselves in a career job. He even designed their uniforms, which he wore himself and paid 1/2 of their salaries. Trails, hotels, roads and lectures were all part of his schemes for the parks.

By 1923 the National Park Service was fully established. Visitors increased ten fold. There was a 6-8 page monthly newsletter for all park service employees. The total park area in the US doubled as a result of his effort. Grand Canyon, Bryce, Zion, Arcadia, Hawaii and Mt McKinley were added to our National Parks. His vision of the American system of National Parks was the first in the world, and now over 100 countries emulate it.



In the midst of all these activities Stephen Mather still had some time for attention directed to Darien. He sponsored and participated in the *Pageant of Darien* in 1913. This was an extensive, elaborate pageant, performed over three days with almost the whole town doing costumed reenactments. Stephen played the part of Rev. Moses, carrying the same Bible that he had in the 1781 church raid. Another event was the bicentennial of Dr. Moses Mather's birth in 1919, where about 400 people made a pilgrimage to his cemetery. Stephen also organized his father's birth centennial in 1920 as well as the sesquicentennial (150th year) of the Mather Homestead. Stephen received many honorary degrees, but to accomplish the National Park goals he sacrificed his health, his time and his money.

Stephen Mather as Rev. Moses Mather, Pageant of Darien 1913

His nerves went, he had a heart attack, and became paralyzed. He learned to walk again, but in 1930 he finally succumbed, and is now in the Darien Mather cemetery. There are bronze plaques to him in each National Park, a photograph of one of these in the Darien Town Hall, a bronze historical marker on the Homestead, and the road Grandview was renamed Stephen Mather Road.

One of the most important gifts Stephen gave to Darien was his daughter, Bertha Mather McPherson. Born in Chicago in 1906, graduating from Vassar in 1929, with the masters from Smith in 1931 and graduating from the Cambridge School of Architecture and Landscaping, she became one of the first women architects in the state. She designed the house on the opposite corner from the Homestead for her aunt, Grace Floy. She did wonderful crewelwork as well and made curtains for her own house as well as the Historical Society. She was instrumental in acquiring and moving the Bates Scofield House and was a charter member of the Darien Historical Society, as well as its second President. In 1974, the Historical Society awarded her its highest medal.



Bertha Mather and her father, Stephen Mather, in 1928

The Darien Parks Commission also claimed her and she was its chairman from 1941-45. As an active member of the Darien Garden Club she received the Preservation Award by The Garden Club of America. If you go through the doors at St. Mark's Church in New Canaan you should know that she and her husband donated them. She died in 1993.

This is a story in which Darien can take great pride. One of the things that makes it special is that the physical reminder of a house and general land that has been held in the same family over two hundred years may well be the only instance of this kind in New England. The qualities of the people in the Mather family have helped establish this town, are currently woven into its very fabric, and have extended from Darien to the preservation of America's wilderness with that ripple effect going around the world.

This has been expressed with over one hundred countries that now have a similar national park system. The qualities I have hoped to bring into these brief past biographies are: the capacity to have a vision; to have the courage to face opposition; the ability to speak out vigorously even when not accepted by the conventional; the strength to suffer setbacks; and to have the organizational skills to accomplish what is necessary.

Two particular leaders in the Darien Mather family dealt with two of the most vital human issues, and courageously fought the resulting battles that come from them. These issues or ideas have been fought over ever since man came out of the cave. My view is that these battles will continue until we crawl back in the caves. One of these issues is Freedom and the other one is Conservation. Freedom is a struggle that will always be with us, and Conservation, from the 19th century George Perkins Marsh in Woodstock, Vermont, and John Muir to the 20th century Stephen Mather, is another battle that will always require an endless struggle. Darien is fortunate to have retained physical visual reminders of these battles for freedom and conservation. It is up to us now to recognize those who have fought them, so that it may serve to inspire more action in the future. The fight is worth it.

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