

time, presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury, other bishops, and some of their bureaucratic aides. This volume included the two lengthy entries transcribed below regarding the conventicles led by Alice Blower of Sudbury, Suffolk, and Ralph Shepard of Limehouse, Stepney, just before they departed for Massachusetts Bay. We may be sure that many other Great Migration immigrants had participated in conventicles in old England.¹

The Case of Alice (Frost) (Blower) Tilly
of Sudbury, Suffolk, and Later
of Boston, Massachusetts

24 January 1632/3: Office of the lords against Alice Blower wife of Thomas Blower of the parish of St. Peter in Sudbury in the Diocese of Norwich:

The cause is to be informed in & for [?] sentenced and the said Alice Blower is [?] appear personally this day and place according [to] her bond to hear and receive the full order and judgement of [the] Court. At which day and place the said Alice Blower being called appeared not and thereupon she was pronounced contumacious and her bond pronounced to be forfeited and was ordered to be certified into his Majesty's Exchequer. At which day and place the counsel for the office desired their proofs made against the said Alice Blower might be here publicly read by which it appeared that the said Alice Blower about three years ago was convented or questioned in this court for holding of private conventicles (by the Laws [and] Canons Ecclesiastical of this Realm confirmed by legal authority, [viz:] for her disobedience to the government of the Church of England for manifold contempts against the lawful commands of [the] Ordinary) and for diverse other crimes and offenses mentioned [in] the Articles objected against her and after some proceedings [held] against her this court in favor of her referred the further [hearing] of this cause to the Lord Bishop of Norwich who upon [hearing] thereof and upon the humble

¹ In 2004 historian David Como, in his examination of Antinomian underground congregations in early Stuart London, made extensive use of "MS. Dd. ii. 21. High Commission Act Book (missing volume from State Papers series)," a record volume covering sessions of the Court of High Commission from late 1631 to early 1634. Other Court of High Commission Act Books are preserved at the National Archives at Kew, but somehow the volume mined by Como escaped official hands and lay fallow in the Cambridge University Archives for centuries (David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* [Stanford, California, 2004], 492). On a research trip to England in 2016 I had the opportunity to explore this volume and found entries pertaining to many individuals who later migrated to New England in addition to Alice Blower and Ralph Shepard.

submission of the said Alice to his Lordship, and upon her faithful promise of obedience and conformity to the Church of England hereafter (which was by his Lordship certified to this Court) the Court well approved thereof and decreed that [the] said certificate should be accepted and stand for the final sentence and judgment of this Court which nevertheless the said Alice Blower since the setting down the said decree and within these two years last past hath been several time excommunicated and so stood [?] contemptuously for six months together or more without [?] her absolution and in manifest contempt of the laws of the Church and all jurisdiction ecclesiastical hath presumed & standing yet excommunicate to come to her parish church to hear divine service and would [not?] be absolved although she was offered her absolution gratis by [the?] Ordinary and being forbidden by the minister and churchwardens or sidesmen to come into the church and wished to depart till [she?] had procured her absolution she obstinately refused to depart [?] the third of April 1631 being the Sunday before Easter Mr. Harrison the minister of St Peters in Sudbury published an excommunication against the said Alice Blower in the parish church in [time?] of divine service she being then present but would not [?] and in the afternoon of the same day she came to the church again and remained there in time of divine service and stood as a midwife at the baptizing of a child and [would?] not depart and on the Sunday following being Easter day ([she?] standing yet excommunicate) pressed into the congregation [?] and received the holy communion in the said church and at the hands of the said minister and was for the same presented by the churchwardens to the Ordinary, that the said Alice within the time aforesaid hath oftentimes neglected to come to her own parish church to hear divine service & gone to other parish churches to hear silenced and inconformable ministers preach, that she hath vilified and contemned the authority of the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury and his Vicar General, that since the exhibiting of the Articles original in this court against her she hath carried and demeaned herself more insolently against ecclesiastical authority than before and namely on the 21th[?] day of August 1631 being Sunday she the said Alice came into the parish church of All Saints in Sudbury with five or six men with her where she behaved herself so insolently in time of divine service that the whole congregation was thereby disturbed and disquieted all which was there fully proved to the court and this court taking into their consideration the quality of the woman and the nature of the proofs made against her and finding her to be a pragmatical, audacious and busy woman, and one that taking upon her the practice of

surgery and the office of a midwife had opportunity to dissuade many silly persons men and women from their obedience to the laws and orders of the Church of England and to draw them by her example to be as refractory in that kind as she herself is thereby nourishing a faction and schism there, first she was *unanimi consensu* pronounced guilty of sundry disturbances and affronts by her done and committed in the parish church of St Peters in Sudbury, and of high and notorious contempts against the laws and jurisdiction ecclesiastical established within this realm, and thought well worthy to be severely punished, and the rather for that she had been before convented for such like irregular carriage and found so much favor to be dismissed with a gentle admonition whereby she was nothing at all reformed or amended but rather become more disobedient and refractory than she was before. The court in this regard first ordered her to make a public submission *conceptis verbis* in her parish church and in the Consistory Court where it is usually kept for that Archdeaconry and further fined her in one hundred pounds to his Majesty's use and it was referred to any one of the commissioners to set down the form of her submission or punishment and she was further condemned [*sic*] in expenses or costs of suit which are to be taxed the next court day, and lastly she was ordered to be attached and to stand committed to the Gatehouse till she give bond to perform the order of the court and that she shall not hereafter practice surgery and lastly the cause against Harrison was ordered to be informed in and finally sentenced the next court day.²

By 1615, just five years before the arrival of John Wilson at Sudbury, Thomas Blower and his wife Alice had moved the five miles from Stanstead, Suffolk, to Sudbury. Thomas Blower was born at Stanstead in 1587, son of an earlier Thomas Blower who was a tanner. In 1612 the twenty-five-year-old Thomas married Alice Frost, who was also born at Stanstead in 1594. Their second child was baptized at St. Gregory, Sudbury, in 1615 (an earlier child having been born elsewhere, perhaps at Stanstead).³ The Blower family would already have been known in Sudbury, as Susan Blower, elder sister of Thomas, had by 1608 married Jeffrey Ruggles of All Saints, Sudbury.⁴

² Act Book of the Court of High Commission, 14 October 1631–13 February 1633/4, ff. 124v–125r (Cambridge University Library Archives Dd.2.21, by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library). [Items in square brackets represent words lost in the tight binding of the Act Book, or best guesses at such words.]

³ John Brooks Threlfall, "The English Ancestry of Richard and Alice (Blower) Brackett of Braintree," TAG 52 (1976):65–75. Anderson, Sanborn, and Sanborn, GM, 1:338–40.

⁴ Anderson, *Winthrop Fleet*, 572–74.

By 1621 Thomas and Alice had moved the short distance from St. Gregory parish to All Saints, where their next five children were baptized between 1621 and 1630. During this decade of residence in All Saints they would have heard the sermons of John Wilson and come to know him well. Probably during this same decade Alice began her long career as a midwife, a profession which would on more than one occasion bring her to the attention of the authorities, in both old and New England.

In the Court of High Commission entry transcribed above, we learn of Alice's religious and professional activities in the opening years of the 1630s. In 1629 or 1630 the Court of High Commission had charged her "for holding of private conventicles . . . and for diverse other crimes and offenses mentioned [in] the Articles objected against her." Her case was referred to William Redman, Bishop of Norwich, who had ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Sudbury. He extracted from her a "faithful promise of obedience and conformity."

Within a year, however, Alice had reneged on this promise and was back to her old practices. During 1631 and 1632 she was excommunicated several times and at one point remained in that condition for six months, even though offered free absolution. While excommunicated she continued to attend divine services and receive communion, which led to further charges.

On Sunday 3 April 1631, the minister at St. Peter's, Sudbury, issued an excommunication against Alice during the morning services, but in the afternoon she returned and "stood as a midwife at the baptizing of a child." On Sunday 21 August 1631, she "came into the parish church of All Saints in Sudbury with five or six men with her where she behaved herself so insolently in time of divine service that the whole congregation was thereby disturbed."

At this point, the Court found Alice "to be a pragmatistical, audacious and busy woman, and one that taking upon her the practice of surgery and the office of a midwife had opportunity to dissuade many silly persons men and women from their obedience to the laws and orders of the Church of England." Taking into account her earlier admonition in 1630, they directed her to make a public admission of her infractions against church law, fined her one hundred pounds, and ordered her "to be attached and to stand committed to the Gatehouse till she give bond."⁵

Alice's case dragged on for another year, until 18 February 1634, when the Court of High Commission observed that "neither the said Alice nor anybody else for her gave in any petition to desire any mitigation of her fine," and so the fine was formally assessed. The records contain one last entry on 26 June 1634 for the proceedings against Alice, the Court "finding

⁵ The meaning of "pragmatistical" intended here was "officious, meddling, interfering, intrusive" [OED]. The Gatehouse was a prison in Westminster.

that the said Alice Blower had removed herself long since from Sudbury, where the offense was given, & thereby the scandal grown by her taken away, and for that she in all obedience submitted herself & would continue herself conformable to the order's doctrine, & discipline of the Church of England, she was dismissed from further attendance touching this cause."⁶

This final order of the Court may have been entered in ignorance of the facts, or as a face-saving gesture, or both, for by August 1634 Alice Blower had almost certainly sailed for New England. Richard Brackett, also from Sudbury, had migrated to New England in 1632, where he settled at Boston. In 1633 he returned to England, and on 16 January 1634 he married at St. Katherine by the Tower, London, Alice Blower, daughter of Thomas and Alice (Frost) Blower.⁷ Richard Brackett and his new bride were back in Boston within a few months, and the bride's mother almost certainly travelled with them. No further records for Alice (Frost) Blower have been found in England, and her husband Thomas Blower came to New England alone in 1635, suggesting that she had preceded him across the Atlantic.⁸

Once in Boston, Alice Blower does not make much of a mark on the records during the late 1630s (although we will shortly present some thoughts on what she might have been doing). Likewise, Thomas Blower makes almost no impression in official documents, but he was certainly dead by the summer of 1639. Soon after 6 July 1640 Alice married at Barnstable in Plymouth Colony William Tilly and she appeared in the records thereafter as Alice Tilly.⁹

Over the next decade, Alice resided at both Boston and Dorchester, even though during much of that time her new husband was living either at Barnstable or at Cape Porpoise in Maine. She continued her activities as midwife, as the consequence of which in 1648 she was accused of malpractice by one or more of her patients. She was imprisoned and in the spring of 1649 tried and convicted of whatever specific crimes had been laid against her.

Historian Mary Beth Norton has published all the documents created during this episode and recreated the story to the extent possible given the

⁶ TNA SPD 261:1v, 64v.

⁷ Anderson, GMB, 1:203–6. (The date of the marriage given in this compilation, 6 January, has been corrected to 16 January by genealogist Caleb Johnson [private communication].) Note that this marriage of a young man and woman from Sudbury took place in London, just a month before the Court of High Commission session which ordered that the fine against the bride's mother, Alice Blower, be enforced. One wonders whether Alice might have been held in the Tower at this time.

⁸ Anderson, Sanborn, and Sanborn, GM, 1:338–40.

⁹ Anderson, GM, 7:51–56.

incomplete survival of court records for these years.¹⁰ The surviving records do not specify what misconduct Alice was being accused of, but undoubtedly, given the infant mortality levels of the time, some children that she delivered would have been stillborn or died soon after birth. Nevertheless, in six petitions in 1649 and 1650, 217 women of Boston and Dorchester, more than a third of all adult women in those two towns, signed their names to requests to the Court of Assistants to allow Alice Tilly to continue her practice of midwifery. More than once she was described as “the ablest midwife in the land.” The petitions did not lead to the exoneration of Alice Tilly, but she was eventually released from prison and resumed her professional career.

Interestingly, the petitions tell us that Alice’s medical and religious pursuits after her arrival in New England were unchanged from when she resided at Sudbury. One of the petitions from the Dorchester women described her as “Alice Tilly the wife of William Tilly a professed servant of Jesus Christ both in old England and new: as we have heard and by experience do find that she hath been a woman of singular use in the place from whence she came (and here also).”¹¹ Norton sums up Alice’s character in New England as follows: “However pious she may have been, she was certainly not humble: even her Boston supporters admitted the self-conceitedness they agreed she should moderate; the statute referred to her presumptuous arrogance; and the General Court in 1650 spoke of ‘her excessive pride.’” All of this comports with the assessment of her personality made by the Court of High Commission in 1633.¹²

Given this consistent picture of Alice’s character, we return to the question of what she might have been doing in the late 1630s, from her arrival in 1634 until her remarriage in 1640, a period for which we have no records of her. If we are correct that Alice came to New England with her son-in-law Richard Brackett, and since her residence was reported as Boston in 1640, we conclude that she resided in that town at least from 1634 until 1640.

As a midwife who was present at the births of most Boston children during these years, she could not have avoided meeting and interacting with Anne Hutchinson who was also present at many childbirths. Knowing that Alice was a woman of strong religious opinions, who had gathered her own conventicles in Sudbury, Suffolk, we can easily picture Alice attending

¹⁰ Mary Beth Norton, “‘The Ablest Midwife That Wee Knowe in the Land’: Mistress Alice Tilly and the Women of Boston and Dorchester,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 55 (1998):105–34. Norton also summarizes the limited evidence for the rest of Alice’s life in New England.

¹¹ Norton, “Ablest Midwife,” WMQ 55:123–24.

¹² Norton, “Ablest Midwife,” WMQ 55:119.

the religious meetings held by Anne Hutchinson in Boston from 1634 until 1637, which would not have been that different from those she had led in old England, except that in Boston, at least initially, they were for women only. Nothing in the records of the proceedings against Hutchinson supports this surmise, but the image of these two strong-willed women in the same room is an attractive one.

As may be seen from the accompanying pedigree chart (see foldout Chart 11), Alice (Frost) (Blower) Tilly was at the center of an extensive kinship network connecting at least a dozen other families who came to New England during the 1630s. Two of her sisters married Edmund Rice and Philemon Whale, both of Great Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, and Sudbury, Massachusetts.¹³ Her husband Thomas Blower's sister Susan Blower had married Jeffrey Ruggles, who was brother of John Ruggles, both of Sudbury; these two Ruggles families had accompanied John Wilson to Boston in 1630.

When Alice's daughter Alice married Richard Brackett in 1634, Thomas and Alice were connected to several other Sudbury families who came to New England (Peter Brackett, Martin Saunders, Francis Newcomb) and to more distant families, such as Simon Ray and Hugh Mason, the latter of whom was born at Dorking, Surrey, and married at Maldon, Essex.

This extended family company led by Alice Blower clearly overlapped substantially with the clerical company derived from Sudbury and headed by John Wilson. But this family company also linked up with other as yet ill-defined companies. Several Great Migration families, including some who came on the *Mayflower* in 1620, also derived from Dorking, but the driving force behind the Dorking migration has not yet been identified.

Finally, although no direct evidence for the hypothesis has been found, the attendees at Alice's conventicles in Sudbury must have been drawn both from her own family circle and also from John Wilson's supporters. When Alice Blower entered All Saints church on 21 August 1631 "with five or six men" and disrupted the service, we would expect that this group would have included such Sudbury citizens as Peter Brackett, Martin Saunders, and Francis Newcomb.

**The Case of Ralph Shepard of Limehouse, Stepney,
Middlesex, and Later of Weymouth and
Woburn, Massachusetts**

26 December 1633: Office of the lords against Jane Taylor widow,
Ralph Shepherd & Thancklord his wife, Anne Isaak widow, Joanna
Whiting widow, Magdalena Clearke widow, Magdalena Norris
wife of William Norris, Margaret Isaak wife of Nicholas Isaak,

¹³ For more on Rice and Whale, see Interlude: Weald of Kent.

Mary Clearke wife of William Clearke shoemaker, Katherine Walker wife of Edward Walker, Jane Lucas wife of Richard Lucas, Anne Skynner wife of Alexander Skynner, Joanna Hewett wife of Thomas Hewett, Margery Grice wife of Nicholas Grice, Mabel Gibson servant of Joanna Whiting, Abigail Isaak servant of Anne Isaak, Judith Miller wife of Thomas Miller and Jane Goddard wife of Humfrey Goddard.

At which day and place appeared personally Richard Tomlyns one of the sworn Messengers of his Majesty's Chamber together with Richard Cole Constable of Lymehouse in the parish of Stepney in the County of Middlesex and Edward Awdley headborough there, and also John Dumbelowe, Thomas [Harnton?] and Edmund Silvester their Assistants and brought before the said commissioners at London House all the said parties and there affirmed that yesterday in the evening they found and apprehended the nineteen several persons formerly named at a conventicle or exercise of religion held in the house of said Jane Taylor by Raphe Shepheard her son who being examined confessed that he used to take notes of Mr. Sedgwick and other preachers sermons in short writing and report them again on Sundays in the evening and that he had used this course for these two years last past unto which his exercises diverse of the town besides those of his and his mothers owne family used to resort And that yesterday at night all the said several persons were there present, And that his manner was and is at these meetings at such his repetitions to make extemporary prayers for a blessing both before and after his repetition and to sing psalms and so much the said Anne Isaak, Joanne Whiting, Katharine Walker and diverse others of the said persons present did likewise confess and acknowledge whereupon the said Raphe Shepherd being the chief party that occasioned these unlawful meetings, and being a tailor by his trade took upon him to expound and interpret the scriptures according to his own fancy he was committed to the custody of Tomlyns the Messenger and ordered to remain with him *sub salva custodia* until he shall give bond with a sufficient surety in the sume of fifty pounds at least to his Majesty's use for his personal appearance before his Majesty's Commissioners Ecclesiasticall judicially sitting at Lambhith [Lambeth] the first court day of the next term being the 23th of January next and for his attendance from time to time according to the order of the Court and for Anne Isaak, Joane Whiting, Katharine Clark and the rest of the parties they were by order of the Commissioners remanded back to the custody of the said Richard Cole the Constable and Edward Audley headborough who tooke upon