

A few People in Southwest Harbor Congregational Church History

Presented by George Gilpin at a dinner on October 20, 2018, in celebration of the 225th anniversary of the church founding.

Tonight I'm going to talk about some of the people behind the names in the Clerk's Record of the Southwest Harbor Congregational Church, especially the founding members, and some of the events of their time.

My story begins in the 1750s, and to borrow a few words from Thomas Payne these were also "times that try men's souls". France and Britain were fighting over control of Acadia and Eastern Maine. Then in a decisive battle General James Wolfe defeated the French army on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec (Sept 13, 1759) that led to the end of the Seven Years' War¹. This victory opened new territory for the immigration of Englishmen from older settlements in southern New England. Places like Boston, New London, and Gloucester. In the summers of 1760 and 1761 hundreds of men, many with their families, ventured Down East in every kind of craft that would float, to claim land that would improve their lot in life.

Four of those immigrants were among the founders of our church. The Richardson brothers, James and Thomas, and their wives came here from Gloucester, Massachusetts, shortly after Abraham Somes built his home at the head of the sound. Stephen a third brother came at the same time.

While living in Gloucester the brothers each started their own families when they married three sisters by the name of Gott. They were Thomas and his wife Margaret, James and Rachel, and Stephen and Elizabeth.

JAMES RICHARDSON, the oldest (33), James was born in Londonderry, Ireland about 1730, and moved to Gloucester with his parents (about 1738). He was 62 when our church was organized. James died Dec. 12, 1807. Rachel d. March 22, 1814.

James and Rachel along with their five children moved to MDI, and became neighbors of Abraham Somes when they settled on the east side of Somes Sound². James' son George was their sixth child, and is believed to be the first white child born on MDI (Aug 16, 1763)³. James was a man of some education and was quite industrious. He built a mill at the head of the sound and engaged in lumbering in winter and farming in summer. The exact location of the dam is not known, but over near the junction of Rte. 198 and Eagle Lake Road there is a stream that flows out of Aunt Betty Pond called Richardson Creek. He was voted Plantation clerk at age 46⁴, and then town clerk after the Town of Mount Desert was organized in 1789. Two months later he was voted Town Treasurer too. And, in 1794 he was chosen moderator of our church.

THOMAS RICHARDSON Thomas, Margaret and two children built their cabin on the east side of Bass Harbor near where the Swan's Island Ferry dock is now. Thomas was also a leader in the early community. He was voted a member of the Committee of Correspondence, Safety and Inspection, and a member of a committee in the village of Southwest Harbor to send to the westward (New Hampshire) for a minister.

The third brother STEPHEN RICHARDSON was not a member of this church, but Elizabeth joined in 1799. They settled on a piece of land that is now called Crocket Point in Bernard.

While researching the church history I read the following story in Nellie Thornton's 1938 book "TRADITIONS and RECORDS of SOUTHWEST HARBOR and SOMESVILLE (page 315) about a major event in the life of Thomas Richardson's family.

One day in late November Thomas came into the two-room log cabin with a load of wood for the fireplace, and told Mary that he thought a long storm was brewing. A coastal trading vessel had left the winter's supply of food for the three Richardson families. Thomas was concerned that the storm would last several days and brother James, in Somes Sound might have very little food besides his vegetables.

After talking it over with Mary, she suggested that they finish their chores quickly, and go tell James about the supplies arriving before the storm began. The trip would be nine miles over a rough, seldom used, ox-trail that would take them along what is now the Bass Harbor Rd., then onto a woods road passing to the west of Southwest Harbor, emerging near Norwood Cove. Then they would take the path up over Beech Hill.

Thomas loaded a few supplies to take with them, and left the rest for James to pick up after the storm passed. With "Bright" the ox pulling a cart, off they went leaving the children, Thomas Jr. and his sister, Puah, with instructions to go to bed early. (Puah, one of two Egyptian midwives told by the Pharaoh to destroy all male children as soon as they were born (Exodus 1:15). The two named midwives, Puah and Shiprah,)

James and Rachel were very glad to see Thomas and Mary because social life of the two families was very limited. They spent most of the short visit talking about family and friends they left in Gloucester, and the men probably talked about the problem with mainlanders coming over to cut marsh hay and timber off what they considered was their land. (Grasses that grow in tidal marshes was harvested to feed cattle.) Sometimes the mainlanders would take hay that was already cut and bailed. The men may have also complained about ships coming to the island to cut timber for shingles, and other lumber.

After about an hour or hour and a half, Thomas and Mary left for the long cold journey home.

Well on their way and nearly over Beech Hill Mary pointed out a light in the distance that looked like a fire. Since there were no other homes on that side of Bass Harbor the only source of light would be from their cabin. Being six or seven miles from home they were very worried for the safety of their children. Thomas urged Bright on to his best speed, and prayed that his children would be safe. Then suddenly in the darkness Mary heard voices, and there in the middle of the road were Thom Jr. and Puah. The children had gone to bed early as they were told and some hours later Tommie heard crackling of wood and the room was very light. He woke his sister, got dressed, and helped her dress but could find only one of her shoes and one stocking, so she wore one on each foot. They escaped from the cabin, and started off in the snow and in the dark for their uncle's home at the head of the sound.

When the family was in sight of the burning logs they could see that nothing was left. Everything was burned. Their homestead and what few belongings they had, the winter food supplies, were all gone. That night the Thomas Richardson family spent a cold winter night in the ox-shed.

The storm Thomas predicted didn't appear the next morning instead it was clear and cold. Daniel Gott who was out on Gott's Island had seen the fire the night before and came in a small boat to investigate what had happen.

DANIEL GOTT of Gott's Island – was a brother of the three Gott sisters.

After seeing the destruction, Mr. Gott invited the Richardson family to stay with him and his family on the Island until spring, when they could build a new cabin. He told Thomas the birding was good, and fish and clams were plentiful, and he had a cow. Brother Steven across the harbor took in Bright.

Mr. Gott's generosity consisted of sharing his small cabin in which just he, his wife and two children had planned to spend the winter. Now the population of Gott's Island had doubled. As the harsh days of winter passed, food supplies for the eight grew fewer and fewer. The men knew they had to do something or all of them would not make it to spring, so the men set off in a small boat for their nearest neighbor on Naskeag Point across Blue Hill Bay.

Days passed after the two women watched their men fade from view, storms passed and ice built up around the islands making boat travel dangerous or impossible. There's no record of how long the men were gone but days passed and still the ice held. Then an easterly storm finally broke up the ice giving the women hope that their men could now return.

By evening of the day they left their wives, the two men reached a safe harbor with a few inhabitants. Where they were is not known, but while watching and waiting for favorable weather Thomas and Daniel fished, hunted and gathered food to take to their families back on Gott's Island.

The men waited many days for the weather to clear, before they could make the crossing. But when Thomas and Daniel set foot back on Gott's Island they brought several birds, lots of fish, rabbits, and ammunition. By the middle of May the next spring a new cabin to replace the burned one was suitable for habitation. Mr. & Mrs. Richardson felt they that had many blessings.

Thomas lived in that cabin until his death in 1813. Margaret had died in 1803. Their son Thomas Jr. built a large frame house near by that remained in the Richardson family until at least 1938.

The other founding members were:

DANIEL RICHARDSON, son of James and Rachel Richardson. He got into government service by being elected "Fence Viewer" in 1796. (Fence Viewer is a town official who administers fence laws by inspecting new fences and settles disputes arising from trespass by livestock that have escaped enclosure. The office of Fence Viewer is one of the oldest appointments in New England.) ^{en.wikipedia.org}

EZRA H. DODGE AND WIFE MARY (RICHARDSON) DODGE. Mary was also a child of James and Rachel Richardson. They established their homestead on the southern side of Seal cove, a place still known as Dodge's Point⁵. I didn't find much information on about Ezra, except that in September 1816 Ezra Dodge was baptized by immersion, and made a Deacon in the Baptist Church of Tremont at Pretty Marsh.

DAVIS & RACHEL (RICHARDSON) WASGATT. Rachel was another daughter of James and Rachel Richardson. They lived on Beech Hill. According to what I read, Davis was a man of strong personality⁶. Davis was on a committee to value and oversee a bridge over Northeast Creek and make a plan of the bridge and "get it built as cheap as they can⁷." He was also on the town committee with Thomas to send to the westward for a minister.

If you remember in the monthly history excerpts, Davis Wasgatt was not satisfied with his infant baptism and wanted to be re-baptized but the congregation would not allow any of the visiting ministers to perform the service⁸. So in 1801 he went to the Baptist Church in Eden and was baptized by plunging. Davis was accepted back into our church, and after James Richardson's death in 1807 he was appointed Clerk of the Congregational Church. He didn't fill the job very long because. When the Baptist Church of Mount Desert at Pretty Marsh was organized, Davis is listed as one of the charter members. He was baptized again, and chosen clerk of that church⁹. Davis

died in 1843 at the age 92 years; his headstone is inscribed "A Soldier of the Revolution". Rachel died June 1841 at age 89.

I didn't find much information on the other founding members: Nancy Atherton, Ruth Norwood, or Nathaniel and Hanna (Norwood) Gott, except that Nancy was Davis Wasgatt's sister. (She died Aug 1794).

The last of the fifteen who founded the church was Paul D. Sargent. When you read the Clerk's Record you'll see that his name is crossed out of the list of those who signed the covenant. (I read somewhere that he was removed from the list in the Clerk's Record when he left the church in 1800, but I haven't confirmed it.) Colonel Paul Dudley Sargent lived in Sullivan. During the Revolutionary War he was at one time part of George Washington's troops in Pennsylvania, and was a close friend of Marquis de Lafayette.

Now we'll move ahead to the time between 1776 and 1818, and there is still a lot going on in this area. Only nine years before the church was formed, the Treaty of Paris of 1783 was signed ending the Revolutionary War. But that didn't make living here any easier. The Penobscot and Passamaquoddy people were making claims in the US court for the return of their land. The British, still unhappy about losing the colonies, had military forces not too far to the north.

Communications between settlements was still by water or over rough paths cut through the woods. It was not easy for settlers to get together for town meetings or religious meetings.

In 1789 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts enacted the Corporation of the entire island including the Cranberrys, Bartlett's, Robertson's, and Beech Islands into the Town of Mount Desert. (Settlements were at Southwest Harbor, Bass Harbor, Seal Cove, Pretty Marsh, Beech Hill, Somesville, The Narrows, Hadley's Point, Salisbury's and Hull's Coves, Bar Harbor and Sandy Beach)

According to the entry in the Clerk's Record Book, the founding members received instructions on how to start a church from Reverend Doctor Samuel McClintock.¹⁰ Doctor McClintock was actually a man of some historical note. He graduated from Princeton in 1751 at age 19 years old, and in 1756 was ordained pastor of a Congregational church at Greenland, New Hampshire. He was a chaplain for the British army in the French war (1754-1763), but changed sides to become chaplain for the New Hampshire troops in 1775. He was present at the Battle of Bunker Hill in Boston (June 17, 1775), and figures prominently in John Trumbull's painting of that event as the clergyman in bands. Like many clergyman of his time Dr. McClintock traveled the countryside preaching wherever people would gather. From one of our earliest records he was on Mount Desert Island in July of 1792 when he baptized Lydia and Reda Dodge, children of Ezra and Mary Dodge.

REVIVAL in the late 1790s

During this period religion was not part of everyday life in this area.

Found in our records was a copy of a letter from Rev. Peter Powers of Deer Isle dated March 2, 1799, to his friend in Newburyport, MA. Rev. Powers wrote that

Eight months earlier it appeared to him that religion was near expiring in the area, except in a handful of people. He wrote "Deism had taken an unaccountable stride and spread itself over a great number of the inhabitants". And how "Christian religion and Christians were the song of the drunkard; and every drunkard and every vice was deemed inoffensive to God." He believed that, "by the next annual meeting of the town they would vote the gospel out from them."

But there was also a revival going on too. He wrote that in June 1798 he came to Mt. Desert to administer the sacraments, and stayed about nine days. Two days after his second sermon four people converted and were added to our church. Then three months later (Sept 1798) he came back to administer the Lord's Supper at which time he admitted twenty-eight (28) more.

He added in his letter that the preaching of Rev. Daniel Merrill, together with experienced Christians they were able to set the people on the way to Christianity. He didn't know how many had been brought to the Lord, some say about one hundred, and others say about double that number.

Through the work of brother Merrill and the assistance of Mr. E. Eaton, in eight years our church had grown five fold, from the beginning 15 members to 75 members by 1800. That was about ten percent of the population in the Town of Mount Desert. The 1800 US government census showed 721 residence, in 121 households in Mount Desert, including the town of Cranberry Isles. (There were another 399 people in 67 households over in Eden). The census only counted free persons, and did not include Indians.

Under the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts towns were required to provide for religious education. So in 1793 the town voted to send to the westward (New Hampshire) for a minister who could be hired on probation. A committee wrote to Rev. McClintock to provide a candidate to preach, but none could be

found. Again in 1795 and 1796 the town authorized the selectmen to take money out of the treasury to pay a minister if one could be found. All these efforts were in vain. It's no wonder that ministers were not attracted to this remote and poor settlement, with a parish covering a very large territory and compensation only for his time and expenses¹¹.

Enter Ebenezer Eaton. Ebenezer Eaton (b. Aug 22, 1756) was a layman who began preaching the gospel in his hometown of Sedgwick when he was 32 years old. He was licensed to be a supply minister at the Mount Desert Church in 1793, and from time to time went to settlements on the northeastern shore of MDI. An entry in their town records reads, Selectmen in the town of Eden were authorized to "agree with Mr. Ebenezer Eaton to preach to us". (September 1798).

Finally in 1801 at the age of 41, Mr. Eaton was invited to settle as minister of the Mt. Desert Church in Southwest Harbor. He declined the invitation on the ground that he did not want to be ordained. He continued to serve as supply minister, which solved the town's problem, so the town gave up efforts to hire a full time minister. Ebenezer's reason for refusing ordination is not known, but in the Autobiography of Rev. Lemuel Norton, a Baptist preacher who came to Mount Desert in 1817, Norton says that Ebenezer "being rather illiterate, he had never been ordained, because it was against their rules to ordain an illiterate man to the work of the ministry." When he was 65 years of age, Mr. Eaton finally consented to be ordained, and as we know from the Clerk's Record he served the Mt Desert Congregational Church continuously until 1832, and occasionally for two years after that.

According to a survey by Salem Towne, Ebenezer owned all of Clark's Point between the harbor and Norwood's Cove and extending westward to the top of Freeman Ridge. He probably supplemented his income with lumbering and farming.

Through his generosity Mr. Eaton allowed his parishioners to bury their dead on the sunny hillside in what was his field. Eventually this plot of land became the first public cemetery on MDI. This is the cemetery across the road from the church, and there is a headstone marking the grave of his wife Abigail who died in 1830, at age 72. Not far away is another marker for their son Joshua Herrick Eaton who died in 1835.

After Abigail's death and poor health began taking its toll on him, Rev. E. Eaton moved back to Sedgwick, and it was there five years later he died and was

buried (1841). The citizens of Tremont, especially church members wanted to have his body returned here to rest next to his wife, but the process was much too difficult in those days and it was not done. Eventually as the congregation aged the plan faded away.

The Grandfather Clock in the adult classroom has a note inside stating that it was purchased by Rev. Eaton in 1810.

The military history of the island in the two wars with England reveals the patriotism, and the genuine sacrifices of the people. The island was remote and defenseless, but the inhabitants were ready to bear their full share of the public burden.

Groups of volunteers went to Machias to fight the English in 1777 and 1778, and another expedition went south to keep the British from taking control of Castine in 1779. Unfortunately, this battle was the worst naval defeat for the Americans until Pearl Harbor 162 years later. Daniel Richardson, one of the founding members, was in the militia that fought in the unsuccessful land battle at Castine.

After the United States declared war on Britain in 1812 for imposing trade restrictions and forcing American merchant seamen into service for the King, there was much suffering and many deprivations among the inhabitants of the island. Coastal trade was severely damaged; the British fleet and privateers destroyed US vessels, entered remote villages and took what they wanted. With no US naval forces to protect them, the settlers were obliged to pay tribute to the British Captains or have their property destroyed. It's recorded that Captain Amariah Leland was building a small vessel in his yard, near Emery's Cove, when a barge from an English privateer landed, and he was forced to pay \$500 or his vessel would be burned¹².

The Battle of Norwood's Cove is written about in George Street's book, Mt Desert a History, and also in Nell Thornton's Traditions & Records. The Southwest Harbor Library also published the story in 2014. Several of our church members who fought to protect their homes and their county are mentioned in the account: Timothy Smallidge, Capt. Samuel Haddock, Jacob Lurvey, John Richardson, and, Isaac Lurvey who was 18 years old at the time of the battle.

The story goes like this.

Her Majesty's Ship TENEDOS made her way into the channel between Sutton and Bear Islands, and dropped anchor. The captain of the TENEDOS found out that Captain Benjamin Spurling of Cranberry Island had two vessels hauled up in the Mill Pond at Norwood's Cove. The commander sent a message to Capt. Spurling demanding \$350, or the vessels would be burned. Capt. Spurling asked for and was granted time to raise the money, but

instead he sent his five sons to raise the militia. That night Captain Spurling informed the British officers the bond could not be met. The next morning, two barges from the TENEDOS with 100 men, a six-pound and a twelve-pound gun began to enter the cove. Captain Spurling was forced to go in the larger boat to “stand and watch his ships burn”. Spurling warned the soldiers not to go near shore, because his five sons would shoot them. When they got close enough they were met with gunfire from the bluff on the back shore of Clark’s Point killing seven and wounding several other soldiers. The marines on the barges fired back with muskets and the twelve-pound swivel gun, but failed to cause any casualties to the men of Southwest Harbor. After the barges got back to the ship Capt. Spurling was released, and the Tenedos sailed out of the harbor. Eden town records may confirm this event because it shows that the Eden militia was called out in 1814 to go to Southwest Harbor to protect vessels from the British¹³.

Now moving ahead to when the church building was constructed, to the year 1884. Here, I introduce the man who helped decide where this church would be located: DEACON HENRY H. CLARK¹⁴ of the Baptist Church in Manset.
(The building just bought by the SWH Historical Society.)

Henry was born on Clark’s Point, in 1811. So when the battle of Norwood’s Cove occurred, he was three and a half years old. His mother was sure the British would come on shore, to kill and burn everything and everybody who opposed them. To escape, she placed her children in a boat, rowed across the harbor and found refuge in a house that was well hidden by the woods. Though of short duration, it made an indelible impression on the little boy, and Deacon Clark was always delighted to tell of his first and only battle.

Deacon Clark attended the village school in Southwest Harbor and the Blue Hill Academy, and at seventeen years old he was teaching school in Bar Harbor. He did his own fire lighting and sweeping, and even provided the brooms to sweep with. It was at about this time that he joined the Baptist Church. When he was twenty-four years of age, Deacon Clark, with Captain Jacob Mayo for his mate, sailed to Boston in the coastal trading business. On the return trip, on December 15, 1835, they ran into a wintry gale with blinding snow, and at eleven at night saw breakers ahead and were cast ashore. Clark and Mayo got onto a narrow sandbar, which the receding tide made wider, and there they spent the night. The next day they were found by duck hunters and taken to a nearby village, there they got dry clothing and supplies. Then they got their little schooner off, patched her up, and finally reached home safely.

Not discouraged, Deacon Clark continued to put his savings into vessels, and whether as a skipper or owner he steadily prospered.

He had always insisted that Clark's Point was the place for a steamboat landing, and he built the wharf, which offered the earliest steamboat connection on the island.

In 1869 Deacon Clark with foresight and energy organized a telegraph company to construct and operate a telegraph line from Southwest Harbor through Somesville to Ellsworth. He secured a charter under the name of Tremont and Ellsworth Telegraph Company. When the work was completed in 1870 the company began operations with Mr. Clark as president. One year later, a branch line was built to Bar Harbor. Unfortunately the company was not a financial success.

Deacon Clark was always active at town meetings, and everyone was interested in hearing him speak. He had argumentative qualities, and a distinct gift of oratory, --- that was masterful and convincing. When a movement began for building a union meetinghouse on the north side of the Southwest Harbor in 1884, Deacon Clark became a leader in the movement. He made the land available, and agreed to take on himself the cost of building one third of the structure. Deacon Clark would retain in his own name one-third of the land and one-third of the pews, which is how the Baptists became owners of one-third of the church. (In 1899 Rev. C. P. Kittredge of the Baptist Church at Manset declined his privilege of every third Sunday usage, the house then became exclusively Congregational.)

Once, the Baptist churches of Hancock County held their conference at Southwest Harbor, and many clergymen from throughout the state were in attendance. The hotels of the village were closed, but Deacon Clark kept an open house and took the convention almost bodily to his house as his guest. He provided food and drink for one hundred and fifty people.

Deacon Clark was a shrewd man in business, unwilling to be outwitted, eager for the best end of a bargain, but he was also magnanimous and always ready to extend a helping hand to the needy and destitute. No man went away from his door hungry.

Even in his old age he was an engaging conversationalist. He easily mastered any subject in which he was interested, whether the simple details of local concerns, or the more complex problems of national policy. Long after the time had come for him to retire, he was unwilling to relinquish his hold on business concerns. Activity continued to be his nature and habit.

There was one minister, although we rarely heard about until this year, who may have left an indelible mark on this community.

In July of 2015, fourteen-year-old Theo Gardiner was working as a volunteer for the MDI Historical Society. He began research work on an inscription in the rock ledge that faces the sea at Seawall; it reads “1895 – 1900 CHH or GHH”. At the time, Theo thought the inscription referred to a child who died, but his search of the birth and death records in Augusta and Boston revealed nothing that fit the dates. After reading an article in the newspaper about Theo’s puzzle, I began looking through the Clerk’s record for anything that matched. It wasn’t until this last spring, while I was preparing an insert for the bulletin, that I came across the initials G.H.H. and remembered the newspaper article. I suggested to the historical society that it might have been Rev. George H. Hefflon who carved his initials in the ledge.

Reverend George H. Hefflon was the Congregational minister here from November 1895 until November 1900. Rev. Hefflon went on to be a servant to the deaf with the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. In a follow up on my finding and a personal interest, Mr. Tim Garrity, Executive Director of the MDI Historical Society is writing an article for the 2019 edition of their magazine “Chebacco” about Rev. Hefflon’s life.

When you begin looking into people’s lives, and not just historical events, the stories go on and on. Our founding members were men and women who worked hard to carve a community out of the woods. The men went about the work of clearing, plowing, and building with deliberation and courage. The women worked endlessly providing for the care and needs of the entire family. Marriage at the time was not a sentimental arrangement but an industrial partnership for life. “All the people worked very hard and for long periods.”¹⁵ Because of the hard labor and poor sanitary conditions women often suffered the most, but the men, unless lost at sea, were long-lived and vigorous. There were very few bachelors and no single women in the early development of MDI

But the six families who founded this church knew that God was part of their daily lives, and gathered together to praise him.

SUGGESTED READINGS

TRADITIONS AND RECORDS; Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine, by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, 1938. Nellie C. Thornton.

MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905

The Battle of Norwood’s Cove: Southwest Harbor’s Victory over the British In the War of 1812, Compiled by Meredith R. Hutchins and Charlotte R. Morrill, 2014

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- ¹ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 103
 - ² MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 115
 - ³ TRADITIONS AND RECORDS; Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine, by Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, 1938, 242
 - ⁴ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 145
 - ⁵ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 150
 - ⁶ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 243
 - ⁷ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 203
 - ⁸ Mount Desert Church Clerk's Record 1792 – 1892, 27
 - ⁹ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 244
 - ¹⁰ Mount Desert Church Clerk's Record 1792 – 1892, 3
 - ¹¹ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 232
 - ¹² MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 213
 - ¹³ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 219
 - ¹⁴ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 195 - 200
 - ¹⁵ MOUNT DESERT A History, by George E. Street, 1905, 199