

“History of our Commonwealth, written by men who lived at the time on the spot, and were personally engaged in the transactions which they record such documents can never become obsolete, can never be superseded by subsequent narratives, however eloquent or beautiful, but must always be appealed to as the solid groundwork of our history”¹

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***John Endecott, First Governor
in the
Massachusetts Bay, 1629 ©
by
Gordon S. Harmon- 10th Generation Grandson***



Over the years, there have been various historical accounts and even in some cases of historical misunderstanding – written by numerous chroniclers of New England history - as to the first Governor in the Massachusetts Bay. It appears to be a mute point when the historical and primary evidence is so striking to settle the question. This primary evidence clearly shows the election of Captain John Endecott as Governor. This account shows those reliable and credible understandings both historical and contemporary of the first Governor of Massachusetts.

An interesting earlier account of the history of Salem, Massachusetts is found in *Old Naumkeag: A Historical Sketch of the City of Salem, and the Towns of Marblehead, Peabody, Beverly, Danvers, Wenham, Manchester, Topsfield, and Middleton*. In this account, it is stated that “there has been much controversy in the past as to whether Endicott is entitled to the

honour of being the first Governor of Massachusetts. The question has never been settled; the difference seems to consist mainly in the meaning of the title. During Endicott’s term, the

¹ Young, Alexander. *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay From 1623 to 1636*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2004, Reprinted). iii-iv.

meetings of the company were held in England while under Winthrop they were held in Massachusetts.”²

Savage does not historically portray in his work, *A Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England*,³ the correct analysis on the question of the first Governor in the Massachusetts Bay. Whether he had access to important primary source documents is unknown as he quotes other sources for his conclusions, all of which are secondary sources in nature.

The most compelling argument discovered during the course of this research was Joseph B. Felt’s *Who Was the First Governor of Massachusetts?* Felt provides a detailed analysis arguments and evidence into the question of the first Governor. This work is highly recommended for reading and study on this subject. Felt states that “...there is full as much propriety, to say the least, that Endecott chosen by freemen or members of the Massachusetts Company, among whom he held a prominent stand, assembled in General Court, in London, and under royal sanction, to be their Governor of this Commonwealth, ...should be alike entitled precedently to Winthrop”.⁴

Felt also says “Hutchinson and Prince meant to be understood that they had no doubts but that Endecott was in 1629 a true, constitutional and proper Governor of Massachusetts, as much as Winthrop or any of his successors ever were under the colonial charter, and consequently and righteously accounted the first on the list of such magistrates in our Commonwealth.”⁵

Felt continues by presenting a thoughtful rebuttal to a note published by James Savage in his second edition of *Winthrop’s Journal*.⁶ In the second volume, he states that the latter person (Endecott) held office under those of the Company of Massachusetts, who resided in England, therefore, no Governor, in 1629, in the right acceptance of the word.⁷ In this presentation, Felt gives us the idea of subordinacy – as advocated by Savage – as “tending to absurdity; proves far too much, and consequently should be rejected as unsound, unsafe, and introducing confusion

² Webber, Charles H. and Nevins, W. S. *Old Naumkeag. A Historical Sketch of the City of Salem and the Towns of Marblehead, Peabody, Beverly, Danvers, Wenham, Manchester, Topsfield and Middleton*. <<http://www.ancestry.com/ma/fiche-ma/0906.htm>> downloaded July 5, 2010.

³ Savage, James. *Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England and Showing Three Generations of Those Who Came Before 1672 on the Basis of Farmer’s Register, Volume III*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, Reprinted, 1990).

⁴ Felt, Joseph. *Who Was the First Governor of Massachusetts?* (Boston: Press of T. R. Marvin, 42 Congress Street, 1853). 11.

⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

⁶ Savage, James, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649 by John Winthrop, Esq. First Governor of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay for His Original Manuscripts With Notes. Vol. I*. (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1825).

⁷ Felt. *Who Was the First Governor of Massachusetts?* 5.

into the records of our history. ⁸ Felt further states, “of course a doctrine of such a cast and character should never be applied to Endecott, and thus strip him of the honour of being the first Governor of the territory and population of our Commonwealth.” ⁹ Felt clarifies the misleading and implied comments by Savage that Endecott did not have the charter which gave him the authority to exercise his duties as the duly elected Governor of the General Court in London. The historical fact demonstrates that Governor John Endecott was sent the charter via the George Bonaventure in the care of Samuel Sharp. ¹⁰ This “Endecott Charter” is owned by the Salem Athenaeum and is maintained by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts.

Later in 1858, Felt further discusses this question of the first Governor that was published in the *Register*. Here, he describes in implicit detail a further analysis of the Royal patent or Charter sanctions by the King’s seal. ¹¹

Thomas Prince in *A Chronological History of New England in the Form of Annals* clearly refers to the General Court of the Massachusetts Company in England and the Company order that thirteen in their plantation shall have the sole ordering of the affairs and government there, by the name of the Governor and Council of London’s Plantation in the Massachusetts Bay in New England and elect Mr. Endicott Governor. ¹²

Thomas Hutchinson stated in *The History of Massachusetts from the First Settlement thereof in 1628 until the Year 1750*, “the names of all of the adventurers and the sums subscribed were sent over to Mr. Endecott, who was appointed their Governor in the Plantation.” ¹³

In May, 1629 the General Court having convened in London provided and made the necessary arrangements for transmitting the Charter and royal seal. They also voted to bestow that the authorities of the Colony shall be styled the ‘**Governor and Council of London’s Plantation in the Massachusetts Bay**’¹⁴. Then, the General Court in London elected John Endecott as Governor.

⁸ Ibid. 8.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Prince, Thomas. *A Chronological History of New England in the Form of Annals*. (Boston: Antiquarian Bookstore, 56 Cornhill, 1852). 258.

¹¹ Felt, Joseph. *John Endecott*. The New England Historical and Genealogical *Register* for the Year 1858. Volume XII. (Boston: Samuel G. Drake Publisher 13 Bromfield Street, 1888).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hutchinson, Thomas. *The History of Massachusetts from the First Settlement thereof in 1628 until the Year 1750*. (Salem: Thomas C. Cushing, 1795).

¹⁴ Young, *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay from 1623 to 1636*. 173.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work on the first Governor in the Massachusetts Bay is Mayo's *John Endecott, A Biography*. Much of this work is credited to William Crowninshield Endicott, a ninth generation grandson of Governor Endecott. Mayo's work is dedicated to William. "... the Company appointed him (Endecott) to the place of present Governor in our said plantation"... This does not mean that he was chosen head of the **Massachusetts Bay Colony**, for he was not. That office had already gone to his wife's cousin, Matthew Craddock ...but, Endecott was to be Governor of the plantation in New England "... *he and his advisers were to be entitled by the name of the Governor and Councill of Londons Plantation in the Massachusetts Bay in New England*".¹⁵

In the *Memoir of Rev. Francis Higginson* there is a reference from Higginson's diary when he arrived at Salem, as minister. He mentions that "*the Governor came aboard and bade us kindly welcome*".¹⁶ Why, do you suppose that Rev. Higginson referred to John Endecott as "Governor"? Another first person account of making a reference to Endecott as Governor can be found in the Massachusetts Historical Society Collections. It records the account of July 20, 1629 written by Charles Gott ... "*The 20th of July, it pleased God to move the heart of our governor, (Endecott) to set it apart for a solemn day of humiliation for the choice of a pastor and teacher ...*"¹⁷

The instructions to Endecott as amplified in Troup's *The Massachusetts Bay Company and Its Predecessors*¹⁸ outlines the letter from Matthew Craddock, Governor "in England" to John Endecott, informing him (Endecott) of the enlargement of the Company and that he (Endecott) had been appointed Governor. These instructions refer to the patent that the Company had obtained. It gave and authorized them to have sole management of the government of the Company's affairs *there* (in New England).

He (Endecott) had a commission, in 1629, from the company to act as governor, which was, of course, superseded by the arrival of Winthrop with the charter.

That official and formal election that was held in the newly formed **Councill of Londons Plantation in the Massachusetts Bay in New England** was held on 30 April 1629 when the Councill decided to establish an absolute government in New England. It was then that they elected John Endecott to the place of present Governor.

¹⁵ Mayo, Lawrence Shaw. *John Endecott, A Biography*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936). 22.

¹⁶ Felt, Joseph B. *Memoir of the Rev. Frances Higginson*. (Boston: Thomas Prince, Printer, 1852). 12.

¹⁷ Massachusetts Historical Society Collections. *Account of Charles Gott*. (Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society).

¹⁸ Troup, Frances Rose. *The Massachusetts Bay Company and Its Predecessors*. (New York: The Grafton Press, 1930). 65.

The Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England being the official records of the proceedings of the General Court in London and later the government entity in New England, shows “having taken into due consideration the merit, worth, & good desert of Capt John Endecott, & others lately gone over from hence with purpose to reside & continue there, we haue, wth full consent and authoitie of this Court, & by ereccon of hands, chosen and elected the sd Capt Endecott to the place of psent Gounor in of said plantation.”¹⁹

Surprisingly, the *Official Chronicle and Tribute Book* as part of the Massachusetts Bay Tercentenary states that “both Conant and Endicott were called governors. Before 1629, the word implied nothing more than that they were employees of their English associates, exercising superintendence in America.”²⁰ Babson in his *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann Including the Town of Rockport* suggest that Roger Conant was selected by the Dorchester Company “for the management and government of the affairs at Cape Ann.....that they (Dorchester Company) had chosen him to be their Governor in that place”²¹ No primary source evidence has been discovered that support this claim of Babson that Roger Conant ever held the title of “Governor” during his tenure at Cape Ann of the Dorchester Company. He, later, had removed to Naumkeag with a small band at the time of the arrival of John Endecott and company on September 6, 1628.

We will continue to present that the title “Governor” has much more significance than shown in the Chronicle and Tribute Book. The term Governor had the same meaning of significance and authority for John Endecott as it did for Matthew Craddock, later in 1630 for John Winthrop and subsequent Governors as chief executive of the Massachusetts Bay. The election of John Endecott as the one who would govern the affairs in the Massachusetts Bay as the head had full rights to establish a new government in New England. Not only was Endecott elected the first Governor of Massachusetts in 1629, he was re-elected in 1644, 1649, 1651-1653, and 1655-1664²² longer than any other Governor in Massachusetts history.

¹⁹ Shurtleff, Nathaniel B., MD. *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* Vol. IV 1661-1674. (Boston: From the Press of William White, Printer to the Commonwealth, 1874).

²⁰ *Official Chronicle and Tribute Book, Massachusetts Bay Tercentenary*. (Boston: George D. Hall Company, 1930).

²¹ Babson, John J. *History of the Town of Gloucester, Cape Ann, Including the Town of Rockport*. (Gloucester: Published by the Proctor Brothers, 1860). 42.

²² List of Colonial Governors of Massachusetts. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_colonial_governors_of_Massachusetts downloaded 27 May 2011.

Sir Roper Lethbridge, Ex-President of the Devonshire Association in his *Hands Across the Sea* in 1912 recognized John Endecott as the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay.²³ His work is one of the few examples of attempting to establish the true ancestry of John Endecott.

Finally, it is helpful in this review and historical portrayal of the first Governor in the Massachusetts Bay to understand the chronological development of the Massachusetts Bay and some of the major events leading in its development including the evolution of these entities establishing the management of the adventurers. They include:

- **Dorchester Company** – 1623 - Dissolved 1627
Roger Cognant removes to Naumkeg after the failure of the Plantation at Cape Ann
- **New England Company Governor and Council of London's Plantation in the Massachusetts Bay in New England** – 4 March 1628
- Purchase of the Patent – 19 March 1628 (John Endecott being one of 6 grantees)
- Endecott arrives on the *Abigail* in Naumkeg (Salem, MA) – 6 September 1628
- Massachusetts Bay Charter – 4 March 1629
- Captain John Endecott chosen and elected as Governor – 30 April 1629
- Governor John Endecott receives a copy of the charter via the ship *George Bonaventure* in the care of Samuel Sharp. (referred to as the Endecott charter by the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA)
- Cambridge Agreement – 26 August 1629
- **Massachusetts Bay Colony** – John Winthrop chosen Governor – 20 October 1629
- Winthrop arrives on the *Arbella* in Naumkeg (Salem, MA) – 12 June 1630 and assumes role of Governor from John Endecott

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²³ Lethbridge, Sir Roper. K. C. I. E. “*Hands Across the Sea*” *The Devonshire Ancestry and the Early Homes of the Family of John Endecott, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay, 1629*. (Exeter: W. J. Southwood & Co., Catherine Street, 1912.)