

Postscript

The Craftons of 17th Century Limehouse

Captain Samuel Each struggled against the coils of rope binding him to the mizzenmast. Around him his crew lay dying, crimson leaking from their slit throats. The captain tried in vain to shout directions and warnings to the crew of the *Abigail* still resisting the faceless, black-clad raiders. But despite his best efforts, his loudest shouts were weak, hoarse whispers barely audible to his own ears. Each watched horrified as the invaders subdued and killed his remaining crew and threw them overboard until he alone remained. Torches were lit and soon the deck was engulfed in flame. Each tossed and strained against his bonds as the flames licked across the deck, but the coils only drew tighter. As the flames reached his feet, the searing heat stung his face and the coils of rope burst into flame.

Each started to consciousness. A split second passed as his mind adjusted to the sudden change in environment. Yes, he was lying in his own bedroom. It was the bed against his back, not the mizzenmast. Restraining him were not coils of rope, but a tangle of covers insulating him from the chilly September night. Despite the chill air of the bedroom, rivulets of sweat trickled from his forehead across his temples. The room was absolutely still except for the soft breathing of Elizabeth beside him. The room's silence mirrored that of the dark Limehouse streets outside. Another hour would pass before dawn revived the sounds of life on London's eastern outskirts.

A few blocks away Samuel Each's tenants, Thomas and Suzan Crafton, also slept fitfully. Thomas, a mariner like Each, may have had occasion to sail with the captain. But unlike the captain, it was not premonitions of disaster that kept the Craftons awake this night. It was the couple's eight-day old son. When the bellman called out that it was just after five a.m. Thomas and Suzan rose and woke their five-year old, Elizabeth. The family dressed and, under a sky that threatened rain, left their rented cottage on Ropemaker's Field. With a sleepy Elizabeth riding on her father's shoulders and Suzan carrying little Thomas, the family turned north on Church Lane and began the one-mile walk to St. Dunstan's on Stepney Green.¹ Today, 25 September 1618, was to be little Thomas's baptism and it would not do to keep the vicar waiting.

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We do not know for certain whether a premonition like the foregoing prompted Captain Each to make out his will in November 1618. But *something* prompted him. Among other bequests, the captain willed “to Elizabeth Shephard a Cottage in Ropemaker’s feild in Limehouse now in occupation of one Thomas Craften and if she die before expiration of the lease then to my daughter Mary the wife of John Wiles of Lymehouse.”² Thanks to Each’s will and the register of St. Dunstan’s church we can be fairly certain about the circumstances of his tenants. Although Captain Each spelled his renter’s name as “Craften” his renter was a mariner by the name of Thomas Crafton. Thomas and his wife Suzan had lived in Limehouse as early as January 1613 when they christened their daughter, Elizabeth, at Saint Dunstan’s. The Crafton’s second child, Thomas, was also baptized in that parish on 25 September 1618, eight days after his birth.

The Death of Samuel Each

In early 1622, the captain, a veteran of previous voyages to the Virginia colony, and a land owner at Martin’s Brandon, proposed to erect a block house on the oyster banks at Blunt Point. The aim of the proposal was to protect the mouth of the James River from Spanish incursion.ⁱ In late April, Sir Edwin Sandys, Earl of Southampton and governor of the Virginia Company, gave instructions that the blockhouse was to be well seated near the mouth of the river, that its construction was to be durable, and that the captain be required to give good security for the performance of the project.ⁱⁱ The colony was to bear the entire cost of the construction and Captain Each was to be paid 60,000 pounds of tobacco for completing the assignment.

As September gave way to October, Captain Each and his crew prepared the *Abigail* to set sail from London for Jamestown. The dangerous practice of overloading Virginia-bound ships with export cargo and passengers had developed and this voyage was no exception. The *Abigail* became so loaded that, at one point, Each had to refuse Sandys’ request to add 8 barrels of seed corn to the manifest. The earl was permitted to add only a cask of wine, some glasses, and other small items. Besides its cargo, the overburdened *Abigail* carried passengers including the secretary of the Virginia Company and his wife. While the exact number of passengers was unspecified the *Abigail* was known to have carried approximately a hundred passengers in addition to its cargo on other voyages.ⁱⁱⁱ

It was a fateful voyage indeed. On the way, an acute “distemper” broke out among the crew. Captain Each died at sea as did many of his men. After landfall, passengers and crew continued to die with burning fevers in the streets of Jamestown where they lay “untill the hogs have eaten theyr Corps.” By early April 1623 word reached London of the fate of the *Abigail*.^{iv} Captain Each’s executors probated his will on April 21, 1623. Was Thomas Crafton of Limehouse a member of the crew of the *Abigail* during her ill-fated voyage? Unfortunately, no mention is made of him in this regard. We know only of his tenant-landlord relationship with Samuel Each in Limehouse.

Thomas, Suzan and their children were not the only Crafton family in the area at the time. For instance there was one headed by Christopher Crofton who lived in Bethnal Green and who had married in Saint Dunstan’s in 1603. Another belonged to Simon and Joan Crofton whose son Richard was buried in St. Dunstan’s in 1622.³

In the 17th Century many of London’s sailors and dockhands made their homes on the eastern outskirts of the city in a cluster of hamlets. These included the villages of Limehouse, Ratcliffe, Bethnal Green, Spitalfields and Mile End. All of these places fell within the bounds of the parish of Saint Dunstan’s in Stepney. So it is this parish that forms a natural starting point for any search for immigrants bound from London to Virginia in the 17th Century. As alluded above, the register of marriages, baptisms and burials for St. Dunstan’s points to a number of Croftons and Craftons living in the parish by the time of Virginia’s founding. Unfortunately, a definitive connection remains elusive between these people and those of the Crafton men who eventually embarked for Virginia.

The Thomas Crafton who was born in 1618 to Thomas and Suzan Crafton of Limehouse became a mariner like his father. However, he never settled in Virginia. He sailed for the East India Company and, in 1673, was sued for theft of company cargo. His co-defendant was his unmarried sister Elizabeth.⁴ Having been born in 1618, Thomas Crafton of Limehouse may have fathered the Thomas Crafton who came to Virginia in 1672. But no definitive evidence of this has been found so far. Thus the Thomas Crafton born in Limehouse in 1618 remains one of many possible origins for the Thomas Crafton arriving in New Kent County, Virginia in 1672.

– Raymond G. Crafton
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Notes on the Death of Samuel Each

ⁱ Lothrop Withington and H. F. Waters, *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 20:70.

ⁱⁱ Sir Edwin Sandys to John Ferrar, 30 April 1622. Surveyed in Virginia Colonial Records Project (VCRP) Survey Report 06680, 1. The Library of Virginia, Richmond.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sir Edwin Sandys to John Ferrar, 13 October 1622, VCRP SR 06684, 1; *Eighth Report*, 1620, VCRP SR 00987, 20.

^{iv} *Eighth Report*, April - June 1623. VCRP Survey Report 00987, 30 and 38.

Notes on the Text

¹ John G. Birch, *Limehouse through Five Centuries* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1930) 52.

² Withington and Waters *VMHB* 20:70.

³ St. Dunstan's Church, Stepney, *Parish Register*. For the evolution of the surname Crafton and its period of interchangeability with the older spelling of Crofton, see Raymond G. Crafton, *Origins and Lives of the Craftons of Virginia*, volume 1, 1-20.

⁴ British Public Record Office, *Dawes vs. Crafton*, C 10/121/16. This document records the 1673 lawsuit of Abraham Dawes of Ratcliffe against mariner Thomas Crafton. Dawes was owner and master of the *Anne* and sailed for the East India Company. Crafton, on the other hand, was one of the *Anne*'s officers. In his suit, Dawes accused Crafton of skimming some of the ship's cargo of "China roots" and pocketing the profits. Crafton was found guilty of the charge and ordered to make restitution. According to the court record, Thomas Crafton shared his ill-gotten gains with his unmarried sister, Elizabeth Crafton, who was also implicated in the scheme. The conjunction in this case of Thomas Crafton, a mariner, with a sister named Elizabeth suggests that these may be the grown children of Thomas and Suzan Crofton of Limehouse.

According to a late 18th Century British source, the China root that the Crafton siblings stole was most likely the root of Chinese smilax thought to be useful at the time in curing venereal disease. It had been introduced to Europe in 1535 but in the 18th Century it was replaced by other herbs thought to be more effective. See William Lewis, *An Experimental History of the Materia Medica* (London: J. Johnson 1791) on-line at <http://chestofbooks.com/health/materia-medica-drugs/Experimental-History-Materia-Medica/index.html>.