

The New England Frosts

Robert Frost, that quintessential New England poet, was not always a New Englander. His father had an abiding dislike for the region and had no intention of raising his children there. Growing up about 30 miles north of Boston in the industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, William (or Will, as he was nicknamed) complained that the region was still in the grip of the Puritans who had founded it. His most dramatic rebellion occurred around 1862 when he ran away from home to fight for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Having recently defeated General McClellan in the Peninsular Campaign and General Pope at the Second Battle of Bull Run, General Lee was one of the most glamorous enemies of New England to whom Will could declare allegiance. While pro-Lincoln Bostonians such as Senator Charles Sumner fulminated against the institution of slavery and Colonel Robert Shaw led an African American regiment into battle against Confederates in South Carolina, Will sided with the "Copperheads," who were considered poisonous snakes by Boston abolitionists and other anti-Confederate New Englanders.

Although Will's attempt to join Lee's army proved futile (police apprehended him in Philadelphia and sent him home to Lawrence), a decade later he put New England behind him for good, this time by traveling to San Francisco, where he worked as a newspaper reporter. For the rest of his life, Will had little contact with his family in Massachusetts, remained stubbornly committed to the principles of the antebellum South, and continued to revere Robert E. Lee. Rather than name his son after a New England military hero or Frost ancestor, which was the family custom, Will named him Robert Lee Frost in homage to his Confederate idol. As a journalist with political ambitions, he criticized New Englanders for being idealistic killjoys, and he worked tirelessly for politicians opposed to Lincoln's Republican policies of racial integration. He kept an iconic picture of General Lee on his office desk and talked to his son about the possibility

of a second civil war in which future generals like Lee might win a belated victory. With the boy looking over his shoulder, he pointed to several regions on a map of the United States that he thought could break away from the Union to form separate confederacies.

Listening to his father's stories about the early Frosts who had made their homes in New England, Rob, as he was often called by his parents, must have thought it strange that his father was the only member of the family to sever ties with New England. For seven generations, the Frosts had lived within a 25-mile radius of the spot north of Boston where the family patriarch, Nicholas Frost, had first settled in the seventeenth century. As a boy, Rob heard his father wax lyrical about Nicholas's family battling Native Americans in King Philip's War and King William's War. (Will admired his ancestors' military prowess while despising their Puritanism.) Rob later told a friend: "I was forever being told what a great ancestry I had come by – Indian fighters, some who had married into shavetail nobility [i.e., into the families of newly commissioned military officers] ... till I found myself in distaste of them."¹ Like his father siding with New England's Confederate enemies, Rob sided with New England's other early enemies: the Native Americans. In one of the first stories he wrote as a boy in San Francisco, he recounted a dream that was uncannily similar to his father's account of running away from home to fight for General Lee, only Rob dreamed of running away to join a band of Native American warriors in California's Sierra Nevada. He idealized these renegades the way his father had idealized the Confederacy. He imagined them welcoming him as a hero, inflicting punishment on their enemies (white settlers like the Frosts) with impunity, and always returning unharmed to their utopian community in the mountains. Rob wrote in a notebook that "Civilization is the opposite of Utopia,"² and for much of his life he sought relief from civilization in sparsely populated communities in or near mountains like the ones that protected the Native Americans in his boyhood dream.

Rob's military-minded father showed a keen interest in family history as a young man, and as a father he passed that interest on to Rob. Several years after failing to get admitted to West Point (General Lee's alma mater), Will wrote a 10-page genealogical essay for his Harvard Class Book that focused on Frost ancestors who had established a tradition of soldiering. For two centuries, he noted, Frost men had fought with distinction in most of the country's major wars. Will's father, William Prescott Frost Sr, had encouraged his son's passion for all things military by giving him the name of their distant relative William Prescott, the legendary commander at the Battle of Bunker Hill who reputedly shouted to his troops as the British advanced: "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"³ Acutely aware of the Frosts' warrior ethos, Will tried to show he was made of the same bellicose stuff as his ancestors by regularly engaging in street fights with immigrants who worked in Lawrence's textile mills. His father admired his feisty spirit, but eventually imposed a curfew and locked him in his room so he would refrain from fighting at night. Showing a characteristic mix of cunning and recklessness, Will climbed down a rope ladder to continue his combative ways in the city's dimly lit streets.

After inheriting a copy of his father's genealogical essay as an adult and receiving other accounts of ancestors from friends, Robert Frost reiterated his admiration for Native Americans and his distaste for New England precursors who fought them in "Genealogical," a poem written in 1908. Although he told a journal editor he aimed to present an "authentic bit of family history" about Charles Frost, his "bad ancestor the Indian Killer,"⁴ his poem exaggerates Charles's life, lampoons his well-known military accomplishments, and admits to a "lifelong liking for [the] Indians" who had murdered him. Another poem written at about the same time, "The Generations of Men," gives another caustic assessment of Frost's New England heritage. While "Studying genealogy," one character in the poem (a member of the Stark family who resembles Frost) declares: "What will we come to/With all this pride of ancestry, we Yankees?/I think we're all mad." To Frost as a young poet, his Yankee past seemed more of a burden than a blessing. Some of his forebears even seemed "stark" mad. Convinced that Frost had inherited many "eccentric" family traits, his close high school friend Carl Burell told one biographer: "To understand ROB FROST you must know his ancestors."⁵ His ancestors did, indeed, provide Rob with models he tried – with various degrees of success – to emulate and resist.

The earliest records reveal that the Frosts (or "Forsts," as the name was first spelled) were known for their military and civic activities. Some participated in the invasion of Britain by Anglo-Saxon warriors during the fifth century, while others fought for a foothold in Britain with the Danish Vikings during the ninth century. One ancestor, Henry, named his son Robert Frost and established the Hospital of the Brothers of St John the Evangelist in 1135, which in 1509 became St John's College, Cambridge. Once the Frosts immigrated to New England, they earned reputations as stolid Yankee farmers, merchants, soldiers, and public officials for the next two and a half centuries. The first English Frost to cross the Atlantic Ocean and settle in New England, however, was different. Court documents show that, shortly after Nicholas Frost arrived on the southern Maine coast, he was convicted of "theft committed att Damerills Cove upon the Indeans, [and] for drunkenes and fornicacon." His crimes on Damariscove Island (a fishing and trading site about 30 miles northeast of present-day Portland) exacerbated the already tense relations between native and non-native communities. For the Puritan magistrates who heard his case, drunkenness and fornication were especially heinous crimes. As punishment, he was ordered to pay a fine of £5 to the magistrates and £11 to his employers. According to historian Wilbur Spencer, the magistrates also stipulated that Nicholas be "severely whipt, & branded in the hand with a hott iron, & after banished out of this pattent."⁶ His banishment from the "patent" – the land in New England granted to the colonists by King James I – was supposed to be permanent. If Nicholas returned and was caught, he would be executed.

Whether or not Nicholas obeyed the court's order is uncertain. Spencer contends that Nicholas "went back to England in some fishing vessel" and "in June 1634 returned to New England with his family, sailing from Plymouth in the *Wulfrana*, which with a few passengers may have come on a fishing voyage to the Isles of Shoals [10 miles off the coast of New

Hampshire].”⁷ By contrast, the historian Charles Libby suggests that Nicholas remained in New England, but fled the site of his crimes to avoid capture. After his 1632 appearance “in the Boston court for compromising the English by misusing the natives at Damariscove,” Libby writes, Nicholas procured land in the Kittery area, started a successful farm, and on July 27, 1639, petitioned the Massachusetts governor to rescind his “decree of banishment,” but had to send a second petition before he was granted amnesty. According to Libby, Nicholas was “an efficient and aggress[ive] man”⁸ who, after sorting out his legal troubles, served his community as a constable, land commissioner, and first selectman. His volatile temperament, however, kept getting him into trouble. On October 14, 1651, having been charged with blasphemy and conspiracy to steal from a fellow Kittery selectman, he was hauled before the magistrates again. Rather than admit guilt, he acted like one of the mad Starks, shouting in court that “he hoped to live so long as to wet his bullets with the blood of the [Puritan] saints.”⁹ His violent outbursts and court battles notwithstanding, he continued to prosper, eventually amassing one of the largest estates in southern Maine.

To explain the Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde aspects of Nicholas Frost’s personality, some of his descendants argued that there were two Nicholas Frosts who landed in New England in the 1630s. Thomas and Edward Frost, for example, proposed in their book *The Frost Family in England and America* (1909) that the first Nicholas was the mad, bad, and dangerous lout who drank, fornicated, stole, and blasphemed; the second Nicholas, who “should not be confused with the [first],”¹⁰ was the upright, civic-minded farmer who served his community nobly before dying a rich, respected man. Unlike the Starks in “The Generations of Men,” these Frost genealogists refused to entertain the possibility that Nicholas, like many ambitious public officials before and after him, acted in contradictory ways. Robert Frost, who would have his own scrapes with the law, knew better. As he noted in his meditation on “beginnings” in “West-Running Brook,” most lives “go by contraries.” He agreed with William James, who observed in *Psychology: Briefer Course*, a book Frost read carefully as a student and teacher: “A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him,” and these different selves sometimes lead to a “discordant splitting”¹¹ of the personality. Nicholas was the first American Frost to demonstrate a split personality, sometimes acting like an ignominious Mr Hyde and at other times like a proper Dr Jekyll. Or so Robert Frost came to believe. He once told a friend: “[My] first ancestor in America was banished from town for three years because of intimacy with an Indian girl. After the time was up he came back with an English wife and all was proper. *He should have stayed with the Indian girl.*”¹² Rather than renounce the “discordant splitting” in Nicholas’s personality, Frost sympathized with it. He even suggested that the family patriarch should have been more contrarian than he was.

Despite the mystery surrounding Nicholas’s beginnings in New England, facts about his life are plentiful. He was born on April 25, 1585; lived for several decades in Tiverton, a town in southwest England made prosperous by the wool trade; and married Bertha Cadwalla on January 1, 1630, when he was 45 and she was only 20. Like other Puritans chafing under the yoke

of the Anglican Church, Nicholas hoped to find freedom and a simpler form of Christianity in New England. Nicholas may have found freedom, but he quickly upset the Puritans north of Boston with his licentious behavior. If he followed their disciplinary measures by returning to England in 1632, which is likely, he disobeyed them by sailing back to New England in April 1634 on the *Wulfrana* with his wife and two infant sons, Charles and John. Their ship anchored near Little Harbor, a small fishing and trading settlement not far from present-day Rye, New Hampshire. Thomas Wannerton, a local farmer whom Nicholas befriended, let the Frost family stay in his home while Nicholas built a house on a parcel of land at Leighton's Point near the source of Sturgeon Creek. Despite the harsh climate, marshy terrain, and persistent threat of attacks by Native Americans, Nicholas established a successful farm there. After his daughter Anna was born in 1635, he acquired an additional 400 acres on the northeast side of the Pascataqua River, an estuary rich in fish where the Cochecho and Salmon Falls rivers converged. Some historians believe that Nicholas's house was the first permanent one in the Pascataqua Plantation, an area which later grew into the town of Eliot, Maine. To pay tribute to the provenance of his enterprising ancestor, Robert Frost named his first son Elliott.

Like the other 1,400 colonists in the Maine wilderness, which in the mid-1630s was part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Nicholas depended on courage, self-reliance, hard work, and faith to survive – virtues that Robert Frost would esteem, as well. Nicholas also had a sense of civic responsibility. He blazed a road through the woods to Sturgeon Creek in 1637 to enhance fishing and trading opportunities for his neighbors. The governor in charge of the province rewarded him for his public service by appointing him constable in 1640. To demonstrate his new status as protector of the people and to accommodate his growing family (he would eventually have six children), he constructed a fortified, two-story log house in Eliot known as “Frost's Garrison.” During a period when Native American attacks on settlers were frequent, the garrison became a convenient sanctuary. Out of respect for his good deeds, the citizens of Kittery – a nearby town affiliated with Eliot – elected him first selectman in 1648. As his income grew, he acquired more land and more farm animals. By the time he died on July 20, 1663, he owned a 1,042-acre estate that included 27 cattle, 19 pigs, four horses, and a servant boy. Despite the allegations of misconduct that dogged his career, he established the prototype of the rugged, down-to-earth, politically engaged farmer that guided future generations of Frosts.

Although Robert Frost's “Genealogical” ignores Nicholas and portrays his son Charles as a murderous brute, most seventeenth-century New Englanders regarded Nicholas as an eminent pioneer and Charles as a brave soldier who helped save the colonists from extermination. Frost was right, though, to emphasize Charles's murderousness. In 1646, at the age of 15, he shot and killed a friend, Warwick Heard, while hunting. Although he was exonerated, four years later he killed a Pennacook tribal chief and brave while searching for his 40-year-old mother Bertha and his 15-year-old sister Anna, whom the normally friendly Pennacooks had kidnapped. The murders ruined the possibility of a rescue and sealed the fate of Bertha

and Anna. To get revenge, the Pennacooks executed both women on July 4, 1650, leaving their mangled bodies in a camp by Sturgeon Creek. Incensed by these assaults on his family, Charles dedicated his life to being what his poetic descendant called a “bad ... Indian Killer.”

By the time King Philip’s War broke out in 1675, Charles was a Maine militia captain in charge of all the garrisoned houses around Kittery. As Usher Parsons recounts in his *Memoir of Charles Frost*, the war was especially deadly around Frost’s Garrison: “The Indians [allied with the Pokanoket chief King Philip] proceeded down the shore of the Pascataqua, and thence eastward through York, burning houses and killing people wherever they found them unguarded, so that in the short period of three months, eighty lives were taken, a great many houses plundered and burnt, and animals killed.”¹³ In the sparsely populated area, 80 dead was a significant number. Haunted by the deaths of his mother and sister, Captain Frost got a chance to settle scores in September 1676, a month after King Philip had been shot and decapitated in a Rhode Island swamp. Frost led his militia to Cochecho, a settlement governed by Major Walderne near present-day Dover, New Hampshire, where 400 Native Americans had gathered for a feast. Some were friendly Pennacooks who regularly mingled with the settlers at Walderne’s trading post. Others, however, were renegades from battles in Massachusetts. Because Walderne wanted to remain on good terms with his Native American trading partners, he devised a scheme to protect the Pennacooks while rooting out the renegades. After two companies of Massachusetts soldiers arrived, Walderne convinced his allies to begin a mock battle. He then ordered the militiamen to round up all the Native Americans, free the Pennacooks, and send the others to Boston to be punished.

Some historians claim that Captain Frost was a reluctant participant in what became known as the “base Yankee Trick” at Walderne’s Garrison. Nevertheless, he meted out rough justice to those he apprehended. According to Elizabeth Bartlett’s account of the incident, after Walderne instructed the Pennacooks to start a “sham fight,” Captain Frost’s soldiers “surrounded and disarmed them, and took them all prisoners. Those who were known to be allies were dismissed. About three hundred strange Indians from the south and west were sent to Boston: seven or eight of these were known to be murderers, and they were hanged. The rest were sold into foreign slavery.”¹⁴ According to Robert Frost in “Genealogical”:

[Captain Frost] knew that the Indians were usually in a state of not
having
Eaten for several days and hungry accordingly.
So he invited them to a barbecue ...
And then as they feasted he fell upon them with slaughter
And all that he didn’t slay he bound and sold
Into slavery ...

Charles Frost was a fierce soldier, but not the cartoonish character with no “Regard to the laws of civilized warfare,” which is how “Genealogical” portrays him.

By the late 1600s, Charles had proved himself to be a political leader as well as an effective militia commander. When Maine's governor promoted him to commander-in-chief of all the province's militias, he served as a representative at Boston's General Court, the legislative and judicial institution that governed the Massachusetts Bay Colony. As Parsons observed in his *Memoir*, Charles was a stern judge. After an insubordinate soldier struck him during an altercation in 1674, he punished the offender with "twenty-five stripes on the bare skin."¹⁵ Robert Frost's debates about Old Testament justice versus New Testament mercy, which informed his *Masque of Reason* and *Masque of Mercy* and many of his poems and lectures, can be traced back to the harsh practices of Puritan ancestors like Charles. Early on in his career, Robert Frost favored harsh justice, but exacted by Native Americans against the New England colonists rather than the other way around. That is why "Genealogical" expresses sympathy for the braves who killed Charles "with great barbarity" on Sunday, July 4, 1697, while Charles was walking home with friends from a Puritan meeting house. Frost the poet "vowed [to go on] a pilgrimage" to the "notable boulder in Eliot, Maine" that marked the spot where Charles was buried. But in "Genealogical" he repeatedly suggests that his illustrious ancestor got what he deserved. As the poem points out, Charles's grave was desecrated by the Native Americans; after his corpse was exhumed and crucified on a large stake, Charles's "indefatigable sons cut him down and buried him again." Rather than lament such barbarity, Frost says in "Genealogical" that he will not visit his ancestor's grave "for grief," but only to bear witness to an act of punitive justice that he endorses.

Frost no doubt heard about the plan to celebrate the two-hundredth anniversary of Charles Frost's death in Eliot, Maine, on July 5, 1897. The Eliot Historical Society had invited many of Charles Frost's descendants to the day of commemorative prayers, patriotic songs, genealogical lectures, and poetry recitations. One of the invited guests was probably Robert Frost's grandfather, William Frost Sr, a well-known citizen of Lawrence, Massachusetts. Recently married and living close to his grandfather in Lawrence, Robert Frost was on vacation at the time with his wife and their 10-month-old son Elliott in Amesbury, Massachusetts, about 25 miles south of Eliot. If he missed the ceremony, he soon learned that a group of poets, historians, and ministers had gathered in Eliot to pay homage to Charles Frost as a Christ-like martyr, saint, and – in Eliot Historical Society president J. Willis's words – "the most venturesome and fearless spirit of his generation ... to claim the wilderness for civilization."¹⁶ Opposed to the sort of sanctimonious ancestor worship and New England patriotism on display at the anniversary (the Native Americans were denigrated as satanic "tawnies" in the poems eulogizing Charles), Frost presented his contrarian view in "Genealogical." By the time he wrote "The Gift Outright" for a Phi Beta Kappa ceremony in 1941 at the College of William and Mary (he also recited the poem at President Kennedy's inauguration in 1961), he had changed his tune. Still going "by contraries," he now implied that it was the destiny of white settlers like his ancestors to conquer Native Americans and take possession of their land.