

The Guilford Keeping Society



The Thomas Griswold III House of Guilford, Connecticut Its History and Occupants

Leila Ruser

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of Guilford, Connecticut
Its History and Occupants**

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The Guilford Keeping Society

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By way of introduction, the author wishes to acknowledge the fact that before the Griswold house was built, and before the British colonists founded the town of Guilford, the land was home to Native Americans belonging to the Menunkatuck and Hammonasset branches of the Quinnipiac tribe.

Guilford, Connecticut is defined by its rich and vivid history. For many, New England appears an idyllic beacon of charming history, home to colonial buildings and warm hospitality. However, the towns and cities that dot the region are not examples of perfection. Rather, they are defined by their persistence, grit, and tenacity.

Settled in 1639¹, the coastal town of Guilford has weathered a revolution, a civil war, and centuries of change and strife— all with grace and rugged beauty. Its concentration of remaining historic homes is no exception to this fact. Surrounding the 16-acre Green, a former pasture and cemetery² turned public space and town center, lie several instances of these persistent structures.

The House

One of the best-preserved dwellings in the town—the 1764 Thomas Griswold house—is a beautiful example of one such home. Located at 171 Boston Street, the traditional “Saltbox” house marks the entrance to central Guilford. Named after the common salt storage containers of the 17th and 18th centuries, Saltbox homes were known for their flat fronts, centered chimneys, and asymmetrical sloping roofs. The design was popularized during the reign of Queen Anne—mostly due to the tax placed on two story homes. Through the strategic design of the Griswold house and many others at the time, occupants could enjoy more space while avoiding the tax.



The Griswold home as viewed from Boston Street

The Keeping Room

Each room in the Griswold house served a unique purpose. The keeping room, or the room through which visitors enter, displays a hearth and table similar to what the original occupants would have used. The room would have served as a place for food preparation, as well as a room for small tasks such as weaving or mending. In many dwellings, it was the only room with a stove, and thus played an important role in *keeping* the family warm in the cold New England winters—hence its name. It also served as a communal space where the family could gather without being underfoot in the nearby kitchen³.



The Keeping Room with Fireplace

The Borning Room

The next historic room is known as the borning room. As the name suggests, the room was where babies were born and often kept in after the birth. It was usually a small room adjacent to the kitchen or keeping room, which allowed the baby to stay warm. In times of illness, sick people could stay separate from the family in the borning room⁴. When not in use for newborns or the sick, borning rooms could serve as a spare bedroom.

The Parlour

The parlour, a room that became more important in the Victorian era, was still a crucial part of the Griswold house. It served as a place for the family to receive guests, and for this reason, was often the nicest room in a house. In the Griswold house, it is located near the front and has many windows to let in natural light. As a socially active hub, this room served as an opportunity even for rural families to entertain⁵.



The Parlour

The Sitting Room

The sitting room played a similar role in the home but was more informal. For a more modern comparison, the sitting room is similar to what we currently think of as living rooms. These are communal spaces designated for the everyday life of a family, rather than parlours, which served as spaces for special occasions.



The Sitting Room

The Lean-To

Finally, the lean-to room was a unique feature of the Saltbox house. Because the house was deliberately constructed with an asymmetrical structure, it left a “lean-to” room available on the second floor, in the back of the home. This is currently used to store a loom which families would have used to weave their own clothes, a process that many of us cannot envision today.



The “Lean-To” and a Loom

History and Dating of the Construction

Previously, local historians assumed that Thomas Griswold III constructed the house in the year 1774 for his two sons, John and Ezra Griswold. However, through a process known as dendrochronology, the date of construction was determined with greater certainty. Dendrochronology is also known as 'tree ring dating' and can be extremely useful when it comes to wooden historical structures. Samples of wood drawn from beams in the Griswold house were analyzed by the Oxford Dendrochronology Laboratory to assess the year of origin. From there, it was deduced the house must have been constructed in 1764⁶.

John's 1765 marriage supports this theory, since it is reasonable to assume that Thomas would have constructed it for his soon-to-be married son. Later, Thomas's other son, Ezra, and Ezra's wife moved in and shared the house with John and his family⁷.

As it stands now, the house was refurbished in a style that is consistent to the early 19th century time period, although much of the furniture is not originally from the house. When the Guilford Keeping Society purchased the house, most of the original furniture had been removed with the departure of the Griswold's descendants (except for a parlor mirror and a dressing table). This meant that historic inventory sheets were necessary to create an appearance consistent with the past⁸.

Aspects of the Property

Several aspects of the property, some botanical and some geological, were fortunate and carry historical significance. For instance, the distinctive site of the house itself, being located on the former Boston Post Road, which carried passengers and mail, “*at the edge of a wood, upon a little knoll, at a bend in the road, on the corner of whimsical Lover’s Lane, where grew a huge slippery elm*” (from Charles Hubbard’s *Old Guilford*).

That tree which once stood in front of the home was known as the “Gateway to Guilford”, and along with the house itself, alerted travelers that they were nearing the town center of Guilford. Unfortunately, the tree was severely damaged when trolley tracks were put in around 1909, an event which contributed to its demise.



The Griswold House, circa 1885

Another historical feature relating to the physical property is the rock ledge behind the house known as the Griswold Ledges or Griswold Rocks. Guilford, like many towns in Connecticut, is “*a rough land of earth, and stone, and tree*” to quote a line from Guilford’s most renowned poet – Fritz-Green Halleck. It was this rock outcropping which provided the stones, which were carried by indigenous people across the Fair Grounds of today to the construction site of one of the first and most important houses in town – the Henry Whitfield house, another well-preserved Guilford home. Much of the original ledge is still visible on the property, some beneath the home and other parts have been distributed throughout the land.



“Gateway to Guilford”, colorized postcard, circa 1910

The Owners and Inhabitants

Since the construction of the Griswold house, its inhabitants have defined its purpose and use. Though each person who lived there is now relatively anonymous and lost to time—some of their stories live on through the home.

– Stephen Bradley – Original Property Owner

Stephen Bradley is the first relevant figure in the story of the Griswold house. Living between the years 1642-1702, Stephen Bradley was the father-in-law of Thomas Griswold II. Bradley gave Griswold, who was a blacksmith, the property on which the house would eventually be constructed. In that era, the services of a blacksmith were crucial to the survival of a town. Partly for this reason, Bradley allowed Griswold to have the land on February 8, 1699. Thomas Griswold II presumably lived on the property in a dwelling that was torn down to make room for the 1764 house, and he never took up residence in the new home. The property was described as:

“5¾ of rocky land situate lying and being in the township of Guilford lyin over against the land of Samuel Huges...North on common highway, rearing back on / South to a slope ledg of rocks / West on hyway on the top of the leig of rocks and the claypits / E on the acres of land part of it now in the possession of the Deacon John Megs and part on the land of Abraham Foulor (Fowler)”⁹.

This description has been rendered relatively inaccessible by changes in the English language and by phonetic spelling but provides insight into where the house initially stood.

– Thomas Griswold II –

The Blacksmith from Wethersfield

The history of the Griswold house continues with Thomas Griswold II, son-in-law of Stephen Bradley. As the recipient of the initial Griswold property and the first in the lineage to possess the land, Griswold's skill as a blacksmith lent him an important job within the town. He was born in Wethersfield, Connecticut on January 11, 1673/4¹⁰. In 1697, he was married to Sarah Bradley, daughter of Stephen. Though he was buried in 1729 on the Guilford Green, the gravestones of Thomas and many others were scattered in 1818 when the land was cleared. Many of these stones were rediscovered in surprising places—against stone walls, in barns or church basements¹¹. Thomas Griswold's gravestone was found and moved to the Alderbrook Cemetery. Though well worn, the inscription reads,

"Here Lyeth ye body of Mr. Thomas Griswold who died Oct 19, 1729 aged about 56 years"



Re-creation of a typical 1700s Blacksmith workshop

– Thomas Griswold III & Anne Grave – Build the House

The lineage continues with Thomas Griswold III, son of the blacksmith Griswold. It was Thomas Griswold III who would construct the Griswold house for his son John in 1764. Born in 1708, Thomas Griswold III was the first in the line of the Griswold house to be born in Guilford, following the relocation of Thomas Griswold II from Wethersfield, Connecticut.

On October 19 of 1729, his father—Thomas Griswold II—died, followed ten days later by his mother—Sarah Bradley¹². At age 21, Thomas Griswold III married his wife, Ann Grave, who was aged 14 at the time. She was the daughter of Deacon John Grave II, a slave owner who owned a now-historical house which rests near the Madison Green¹³.

Thomas and Ann served as the guardians for Ruth Grave, the daughter of John Grave III (Ann's brother). Ruth chose to live with Thomas after becoming a minor with no legal guardian¹⁴. Besides Ruth, Thomas and Ann had 4 children: Miles, Thomas IV, John, and Ezra. John and Ezra would inhabit the Griswold House, while Miles and Thomas IV would move out. Miles lived in the Nut Plains area of the town and owned enslaved people.

During the American Revolutionary War, Thomas Griswold III served as a Grand Juror, provided for families of soldiers and supplied soldiers with clothing. His son, Thomas IV, served in the French and Indian War in Colonel Samuel Willard's regiment, at the alarm for relief of Fort William Henry in 1757¹⁵. He also participated in the Revolutionary War from March 22 to April 18, 1776, in New York in the company of Daniel Hann, Regiment of Matthew Talcott¹⁶.

Thomas Griswold III died 1784, at age 75, while Ann died in 1801 at age 86¹⁷. Both were buried on the Guilford Green. Their tombstones were later moved to Alderbrook Cemetery when the Green was being converted into a park during the 1820s and 30s.

– John Griswold & Mary Burgess –

First Occupants

John Griswold, son of Thomas III, was a member of the next generation of inhabitants of the home. He was born on June 17, 1742. He married Mary Burgess on April 13 of 1765, who was born on December 7, 1744¹⁸.

Mary (Burgess) Griswold was a descendant of Thomas Burgess, a shoemaker and tanner that was detained on a British Man-of-War. He escaped, was recaptured, escaped again, and went on to settle in Guilford.

John and Mary Griswold had four children: John II, Anna, Mary, and Rebecca¹⁹.

On May 16, 1777, John died an early death, but it was not possible to ascertain the cause of death or the burial location with certainty. Mary died in 1801. Presumably, she was buried on the Guilford Green, and later her gravestone was moved to Griswold family property off Tanner Marsh Road²⁰.

John Griswold II went on to live in a house on Clapboard Hill Road that was raised in a solar eclipse and said to have been struck by a small meteor in 1916²¹. John II married Hannah Dudley, another member of an old Guilford family²².

– Ezra Griswold & Mehitabel Cleveland – Share House with His Brother

Ezra Griswold, brother of John, was an important figure in both the construction of the Griswold house and its inhabitation. Ezra was born on December 10, 1753, and died March 14, 1814, at age 61²³.

Ezra served as a guard on the Guilford coast during the Revolutionary war, a time when the British patrolled the sea with whaleboats, leading small skirmishes on the shore at random. This job gave Ezra an important role in the protection of the town. Unfortunately, it also led to a grave accident where Ezra shot fellow guard Billie Stone in the thigh, mistaking him for a British soldier²⁴.



Ezra Griswold's tombstone, Alderbrook Cemetery

Ezra married Mehitabel Cleveland on Christmas Day 1777²⁵. Mehitabel was a descendant of the New England Clevelands, a family who came to America in 1635 and settled in Woburn, Massachusetts. Moses Cleveland, an ancestor of Mehitabel, was a prominent member of the community and political scene in Woburn. Most exceptionally, Mehitabel was a distant relative of President Grover Cleveland²⁶.

Mehitabel was a refugee—born in Southold, Long Island, in 1757, her family was forced to immigrate during the throes of the revolution as the island fell under harsh British rule. When the refugees fled, they were plagued by terrible epidemics of smallpox and cholera. In Connecticut, however, they found a home, alongside some semblance of safety²⁷.

Perhaps Mehitabel's background in hardship gave her empathy for the indigenous peoples of the land. Dorcas, one of the last of the Menunkatuck people, lived in a cave in the Griswold woods. Mehitabel provided her with food for a long time²⁸. Mehitabel and Ezra had six children.

Unfortunately, Ezra II, their firstborn, died at only 2 weeks old. A 1790 census shows Mehitabel, Ezra, and the five remaining children as inhabitants of the Griswold House²⁹.

Ezra's importance in the close-knit community is perhaps best demonstrated by his funeral, with a local woman Amanda Elliot making a note of its impact in her diary³⁰. After his death, Ezra



Griswold was buried on the Guilford Green, but, like many before him, his tombstone now stands in Alderbrook Cemetery.

Ezra Griswold's signature, from probate records

– George Griswold & Nancy Landon –

George Griswold, son of Ezra and Mehitabel, was born April 9 of 1781³¹. George was at one time the sole owner of the Griswold house, after purchasing the eastern half of the home from his cousin. He owned a store and was a successful merchant in town.

On September 27, 1807, he married Nancy Landon. Her father, Samuel Landon, was lost at sea when she was 5 and he was 27, and Nancy's widowed mother sewed to provide for her daughters³².

George dealt with the business of his mother-in-law, Hannah Landon. He also served as a probate judge and sold groceries, crockery and dried goods in his store. George and Nancy were both Congregationalists. Together, they had George Cleveland, Fitz Edward, Hetta, Fanny, Nancy, and Roger Griswold³³.

When George died on February 7 of 1843, he deeded the house to Nancy Landon and his daughter Fanny³⁴. An article about George's



George Cleveland Griswold, before 1906

personal exploits, written recently, described five signs that George painted for members of the town. He also did the lettering on several ships and was known for his fine handwriting and drawings.

Both George and Nancy were buried in Alderbrook Cemetery, marking a new generation of Griswold's buried away from the Green³⁵.



George Griswold	X	182	91
Griswold & Landen	X	9	00
Stephen Griswold	X	99	98
Joseph Griffing	X	22	50
Nathaniel Griffing	X	380	28
William H. Griffing	X	64	50
wid ^o . Mary Griffing	X	34	80
John Goldsmith	X	67	14
John Goldsmith jun ^r	X	44	30
Lois, Martha & } John Goldsmith	X	55	08
Joshua Goldsmith	X	64	26
John Grumbly	X	19	50
Nathaniel Grave	X	58	32
Ambrose Grave	X	4	50
Sherman Grave	X	70	51
		1177	58

Guilford Tax List, 1827, showing the amount of property tax (\$182.91) to be paid by George Griswold (Henry Whitfield State Museum)

– Nancy Griswold II & W. Bartholomew –

The next generation of homeowners were the children of George and Nancy: Fanny Griswold and Nancy Griswold II. However, with Fanny deeding her half of the home to Nancy I in 1847, who deeded her half to George Cleveland Griswold in 1869, the home ended up entirely with Nancy II after finally George deeded her his half³⁶.

Nancy Griswold II was born on June 18 of 1826, and married Worthington Wellington Bartholomew³⁷, who owned a store in the building that now houses Page’s Hardware, beginning in the 1870s and onwards. This building was an ice cream shop, saloon, and later a meat market. It was constructed in the Greek Revival style and still stands today as another important reminder of Guilford’s colorful history³⁸.

Nancy died on January 30 of 1892 at age 64³⁹. Worthington died suddenly of “Rheumatism of the heart” in 1897 and was remembered as a prominent community member and merchant⁴⁰.

Account books and ledgers from Bartholomew’s store are in Guilford Keeping Society possession. Both were buried side by side in Alderbrook Cemetery.



W. W. Bartholomew’s store at 11 Boston Street (third building from right),
now part of Page’s Hardware store

– Robert Elliot DeForest – Changes Name and Moves to Bridgeport

Next, the house passed to Nancy's nephew, Robert Elliot DeForest, the son of George C. Griswold. Although his name was initially Robert Elliot Griswold, he changed it to be eligible for a Yale scholarship. He was born February 20, 1845⁴¹. He attended Yale University and was a member of the alpha delta phi fraternity⁴². After graduating Yale, he taught at Royalton Academy in Vermont, where he met his wife, Rebecca Bellows Marcy⁴³.

Although Robert was born in Guilford and attended public schools, he spent most of his adult life in Bridgeport, where he began his political career as a lawyer. He did not live in the Griswold house despite his ownership, instead electing to use the house for different purposes.

In 1872, he served as the prosecuting attorney for Bridgeport, while in 1878, he was first elected Mayor of Bridgeport. In 1880, he served as a member of the Connecticut House of Representatives. In 1882, he served on the state senate, and continued his political aspirations as Corporation Counsel for Bridgeport. He was reelected as mayor of Bridgeport in 1889 and 1890.

The zenith of his political career, though, came in 1891, when he was elected to the United States House of Representatives.

He had three children with Rebecca: Robert Griswold DeForest, Frederick Marcy DeForest and John Bellows DeForest. On October 1, 1924, Robert Griswold DeForest died and was buried in Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport⁴⁴.

– Robert Griswold DeForest & Lillian Wheeler – Sell House to GKS

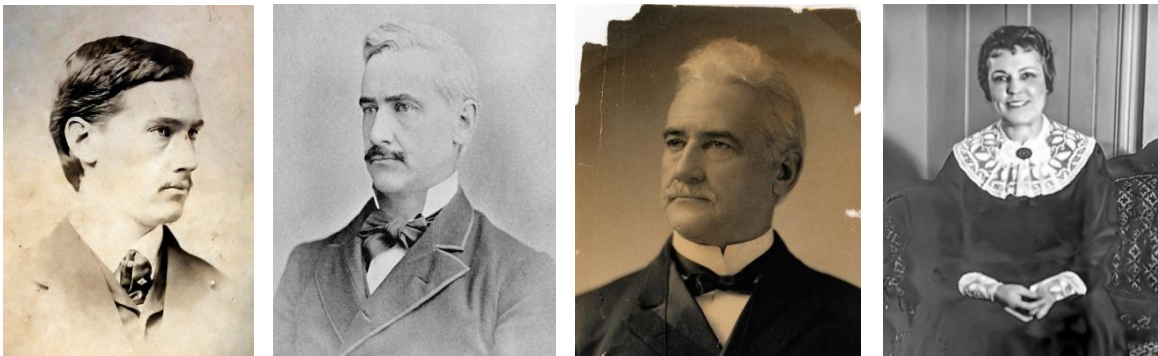
The story of the house continues with Robert Griswold DeForest, son of Robert E. DeForest. Born August 7, 1878, in Bridgeport, Robert was the captain of the Bridgeport football team in 1895. He attended Yale College in 1898 and Yale Law School in 1901, becoming a lawyer at his father's practice⁴⁵.

At age 30, he married Elizabeth Wilson, eloping and surprising his father⁴⁶. Wilson passed away in 1928, and Robert remarried in 1929 to Lillian Wheeler⁴⁷. Though the two initially lived at 81 Fremont Street in Bridgeport, they began visiting the Griswold house and reconstructing it to suit their needs.

In 1948, Lillian and Robert moved in following Robert's retirement. During his career, Robert served as a lawyer, judge and public defender for the town of Bridgeport.

On September 24, 1958, they sold the house to the Guilford Keeping Society for 28,000 dollars but were allowed occupancy for one-year thereafter⁴⁸. Within the year, Robert passed away in Watrous Nursing home in Madison, and Lillian died eight years later in 1966.

Robert Griswold DeForest was buried in Alderbrook Cemetery in Guilford, once more reuniting the Griswold line with the town⁴⁹.



Robert Griswold DeForest (various photographs) and wife Lillian

ROBERT GRISWOLD DeFOREST

Our sullen, sulky dame.—Burns.

Was born at Bridgeport, but suppresses the date. His age, however, is 22:10. His father, who went to Congress, is Robert E., a lawyer, and a graduate of Yale, class of '67. In common with not a few of our more humorous classmates, Robert can trace his ancestry to his parents, and graduated from Bridgeport H. S. in '98.



Robert Griswold DeForest (Yale Law School Yearbook, 1901)

Not everyone can trace their family history to such a small area. The Griswold family is a Guilford family, thoroughly important to the history of the town. Although thousands of families just like their own lived and died here, because of their preserved dwelling, in a manner of speaking, they live on within its walls.

In conclusion, the Griswold house exists in two forms: as a former home, and as a symbol. It serves as a reminder of American history, a beacon of persistence and strength. Though each inhabitant is relatively anonymous regardless of this pamphlet, the home itself will remain a testament to their lives and to their humanity.



About the Author

Leila Ruser is currently a senior at the Guilford High School. She enjoys writing and history and hopes this pamphlet will allow for a more nuanced look into Guilford's history. Although she grew up in Guilford and has spent her entire life so far there, she cannot claim to have ancestors from the town. Through this pamphlet, she has been allowed to investigate ancestral histories in a most interesting manner.

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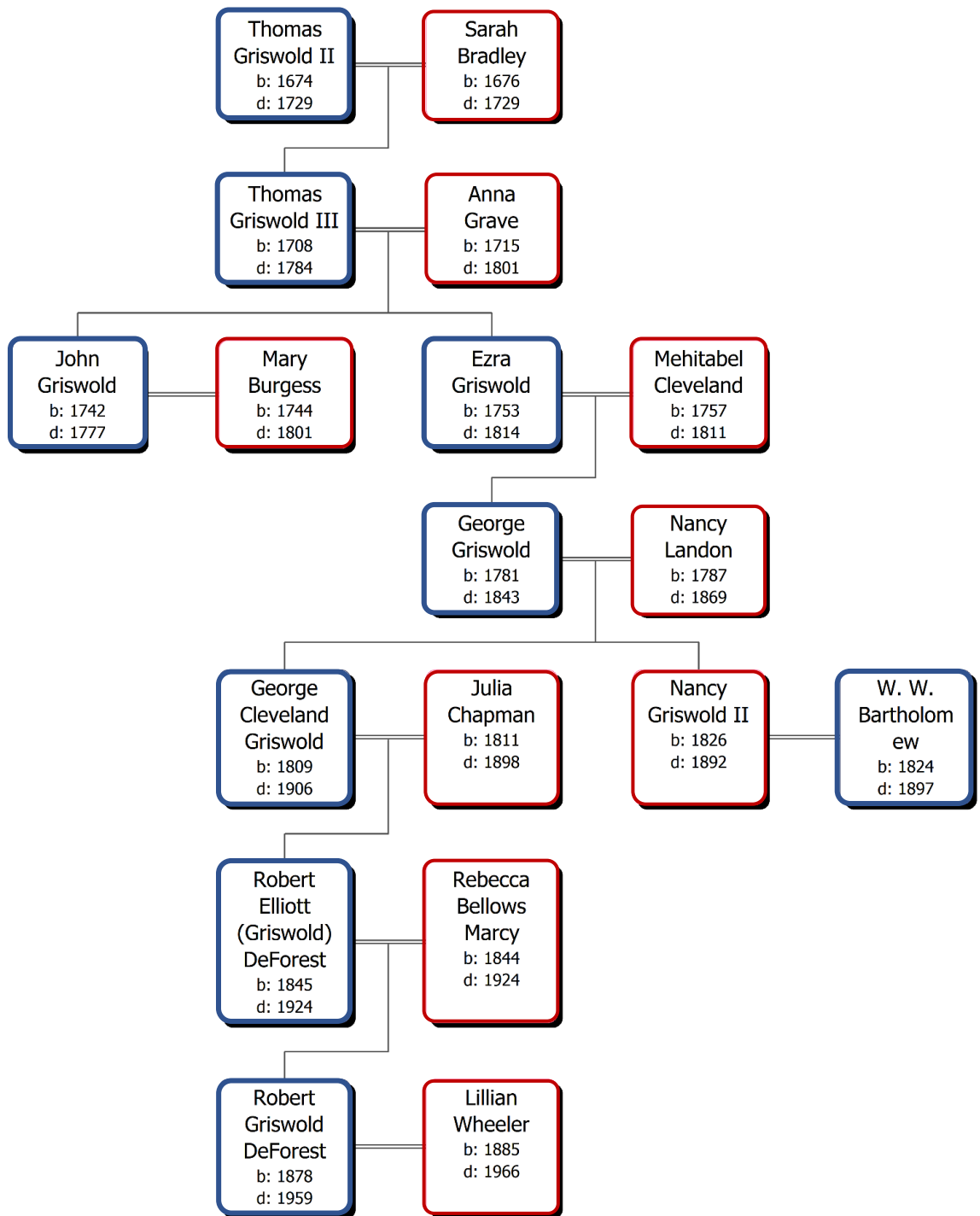
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