

John Law of Acton, Massachusetts, and Reuben Law of Acton, Massachusetts, and Sharon, New Hampshire

Submitted by Alfred Woollacott III^[1]

“A people which takes no pride in the noble achievements of remote ancestors will never achieve anything worthy to be remembered with pride by remote descendants” – Thomas B. Macauley

JOHN¹ LAW may have arrived in the colonies as a Scottish prisoner of war.^[2] The Scots fought Cromwell at Dunbar on 3 September 1650 and a year later at Worcester. The results of both battles were similar – the Scots were decimated. Prisoners from the Battle at Dunbar arrived in Boston on the *Unity*^[3] December 1650, and from the Battle of Worcester later on the *John and Sara*. No passenger list exists for the *Unity*^[4] but a partial one exists for the *John and Sara*.^[5] John Law or any name that might remotely be considered Law (e.g., Lawson, Lawrence) does not appear on the *John and Sara*'s list.^[6]

In 1655 Concord was granted 2,000 acres for public grazing.^[7] The land west of Concord Center was referred to as New Grant or Concord Village. John Law settled there soon after. New Grant was eventually incorporated as Acton in 1735. While John Law may have been Acton's first settler, John Shepard, who received a grant in 1661, is the first documented settler there.^[8] John Law built his shelter on what is now known as Laws Brook Road in Acton near its intersection with School Street. John Shepard settled just to the north.^[9] For the ensuing forty years, controversy surrounded John Law's claim to his land.^[10] Houghton says, “we know he was stubborn, proud and held himself aloof from outsiders, but he was brave, hard working, and

¹ The author is John Law's seventh and Reuben Law's fourth great-grandson and is in process of writing a novel about Reuben and some of his ancestors and descendants.

² William Richard Cutter, *Historic Homes and Places Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*, 3 vols. (New York, N.Y.: Lewis Historical Publishing Company 1908), 3:1237.

³ E. N. Hartley, *Ironworks of the Saugus*, 4th ed. (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 199, “Traveling in the ship, *Unity*...one hundred and fifty Scots reached Massachusetts in Dec. 1650.”

⁴ Hartley, *Ironworks of the Saugus*, 199, “No list of *Unity*'s passengers has survived.”

⁵ Hartley, *Ironworks of the Saugus*, 199, “Another great batch of prisoners was accumulated at the Battle of Worcester which came in September, 1651, a year after Dunbar. This time more than 270 Scotsmen embarked on the *John and Sara* ...presumably reached Boston in late January or early February.” See also Diane Rapaport, “Scots for Sale: The Fate of the Scottish Prisoners in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts,” *New England Ancestors* 4 (2003):1:30–32 at 30, which implies that the list is complete.

⁶ “Scotch Prisoners Sent to Massachusetts in 1652,” *Register* 1 (1847):376–78.

⁷ Marion E. H. Houghton, “Acton's Forgotten Man – ‘The First Settler,’” *Assabet Valley Beacon*, Acton, Mass., 28 Jan. and 8 Feb. 1968, online at http://www.colonial-acton.com/id62__acton_s_forgotten_man_.htm: “The next year, 1655, 5,000 acres were given to Concord “for feeding.”

⁸ Houghton, “Acton's Forgotten Man,” 3, “In 1661 another change came into John Law's life when he acquired a neighbor, John Shepherd.”

⁹ “Generalized Map of the First and Second Divisions” in Isabella V. Choate and Elizabeth S. Conant, “The Clerk's Book of the Concord Village Proprietors, presentation to the Acton Historical Society, January 23, 1994,” copy at the Acton Public Library; Harold R. Phalen, *History of the Town of Acton* (Cambridge, Mass.: Middlesex Printing, Inc., 1954), 18.

¹⁰ Houghton, “Acton's Forgotten Man,” 4, “After forty years persistence had paid off, and the town was finally willing to admit his (John Law's) claim.”

devoted to his family.”^[11] Like his father, John’s son Stephen had disagreements with the Concord selectmen who called the proprietors together “to decide what to do about Jno. Law & his son Stephen who do neglect & refuse to agree and hire land & meadow that they do now improve in ye village.” From the 3 September 1700 meeting:

To empower the selectmen to use such methods with Stephen Law as may effect some absolute conclusion as to his eregular improvements of ye premises. Also voted to empower selectmen to set bounds to lands which Jno. Law doth improve to prevent him from encroaching fa[r]ther upon the Townes New Grant.^[12]

John’s will dated 13 December 1707 was dictated to Samuel Buttrick and signed with a flourish. While he referred to “my beloved wife” and the children’s “honored mother,” he gave her no name. He gave sons Steven, Thomas, and Samuel land and moveables in the house, with Steven and Thomas caring for their mother. Daughter Mary was to have only “my great brass kettle” and to pay her sister Elizabeth twenty shillings as her share of the kettle. It was proved on 7 March 1707/8.^[13]

JOHN¹ LAW was born in Scotland about 1635^[14] and died in Concord, Massachusetts, but surely in the southeast corner of what is now the town of Acton, on 4 January 1707/8.^[15] He married in Concord on 5 March 1659/60,^[16] **LYDIA DRAPER**, born in Concord on 11 November 1641, daughter of Roger^[17] and Mary (___) (Hadlock) Draper.^[18] She died in Concord on 6 January 1732/3 in her 94th [*sic*] year.^[19]

Children of John and Lydia (Draper) Law, born in Concord (now Acton):

- i. **JOHN² LAW**, born 7 March 1660/1;^[20] died Concord 26 Dec. 1690.^[21]
- ii. **THOMAS LAW**, born 10 Sept. 1663;^[22] probably died young.
- iii. **STEPHEN LAW**, born 28 Aug. 1665;^[23] died Concord 25 Nov. 1733 in his 68th year,^[24] two years before Acton was made a separate town; married **DEBORAH** ____,^[25] and they had no children recorded in Concord. She is probably the “wid. Deborah” who died in Acton 11 Sept. 1754.^[26]

¹¹ Houghton, “Acton’s Forgotten Man,” 4.

¹² Phalen, *History of the Town of Acton*, 18.

¹³ Middlesex County Probate, John Law, file 13639. His will is in the handwriting of Samuel Buttrick who signed as witness along with Mary Shephard and Elisabeth Buttrick.

¹⁴ Cutter, *Historic Homes ... Middlesex County*, 3:1237; Houghton, “Acton’s Forgotten Man,” 2, “Family tradition says that he (John Law) was a Scot born ca. 1635.”

¹⁵ *Concord, Massachusetts, Births, Marriages, and Deaths, 1650-1850* (Concord, Mass.: The Town, c. 1891), 69, “Husband to Lydiah his wife.”

¹⁶ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 9.

¹⁷ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 2, “11^o. (9^o.) 1641.”

¹⁸ Houghton, “Acton’s Forgotten Man,” 3; Thomas Bellows Wyman, *The Genealogies and Estates of Charlestown*, 2 vols. (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1879), 1:308, 451, says Roger, of Concord, married (2) Mary, widow of Nathaniel Hadlock as does Thomas Waln-Morgan Draper, *The Drapers in America* (New York: John Polhemus Printing Co., 1892), ix, which lists their children including Lydia.

¹⁹ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 128, “Relict Widow of John Law.”

²⁰ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 9, “son of John law & liddiah his wife.”

²¹ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 55, “son of Jn^o Law and Lydiah his wife.”

²² *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 11, “son of John law & liddiah his wife.”

²³ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 12, “Stiuen, sonn of John law and lidia his wife.”

²⁴ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 128, “Husband to Deborah his wife.”

²⁵ Named on his death record.

²⁶ *Vital Records of Acton*, 284.

- iv. **ELIZABETH LAW**, born say 1678; died Simsbury, Conn., 13 May 1738;^[27] married (1) Concord 29 April 169_ [probably 1699], **JACOB READ**,^[28] born Concord 30 March 1673[4?], son of Philip Read and Abigail (Rice) Law,^[29] died Simsbury 3 Dec. 1709.^[30] Elizabeth married (2) Simsbury in 1711 **WILLIAM MOSES**.^[31]
- v. **SAMUEL LAW**, born 28 May 1680;^[32] died Groton, Conn., 29 or 30 April 1727.^[33] married Concord 15 March 1708, **MARTHA (WIGGLESWORTH) WHEELER**,^[34] born Malden, Mass., 21 Dec. 1683,^[35] daughter of Reverend Michael and Martha (Mudge) Wigglesworth and widow of Dr. Joseph Wheeler, died Stonington, Conn., 4 Dec. 1719.^[36] Samuel became a doctor, sold his house and moved to Groton, Connecticut. From the *New England Weekly Journal*: “Groton April 30. Last night Dr Samuel Law ... not being very well, made up two pills of physick, which he had just receiv’s from Boston, for himself, and gave two of the same to a woman in the house... the woman waking before morning and finding herself very sick, went up to Dr Law and asked his advice what to do, but found him gasping for breath, and he dy’s in a few minutes; and the woman her selfe is like to dye also.”^[37]
- 2. vi. **THOMAS LAW**, again, born probably in June 1682,^[38] married **SARAH** ____.
- vii. **MARY LAW**, born say 1684;^[39] married in Concord, probably in 1710, **SAMUEL DAVIS**,^[40] probably born Concord 21 Jan. 1669[70?], son of Samuel and Mary (Mead or Meadows) Davis,^[41] and widower of Abigail (Read) Davis, sister of Mary’s brother-in-law Jacob Read.^[42]

2. **THOMAS² LAW** was born in Concord, probably in June 1682. According to Acton vital records, taken from his gravestone, Thomas Law died 16 April 1760 at age 77 years 10 months.^[43] However, the age contradicts the birth date of the earlier Thomas Law as recorded in the Concord vital records by some twenty years. His stone in Woodlawn Cemetery in Acton is beside that of Susanah, his daughter, who preceded him in death.^[44] Since the known son of John born in 1663 would have been well over 40 when he married, and since at least one of his siblings was born as late as 1680, it is reasonable to suppose that he was born in 1682. He

²⁷ George E. McCracken, FASG, “Richard Rice of Concord, Massachusetts,” *Register* 112 (1958):65–70 at 69.

²⁸ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 47.

²⁹ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 23; *Register* 112:68.

³⁰ Charles William Manwaring, *A Digest of the Early Connecticut Probate Records, Hartford District*, 3 vols. (Hartford, Conn.: R.S. Peck & Co., 1904-1906; reprint Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1995), 2:276.

³¹ Manwaring, *Early Connecticut Probate Records*, 2:276–77; McCracken, “Richard Rice,” *Register* 112:69.

³² *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 24.

³³ Maxine Stansell, “The Middlebrook Sisters: Mother and Mother-in-law of Michael Wigglesworth,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 156 (2002):308–21 at 320.

³⁴ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 71.

³⁵ Deloraine P. Corey, *Births, Marriages and Deaths in the Town of Malden, Massachusetts, 1649–1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: University Press, 1903), 103.

³⁶ Stansell, “The Middlebrook Sisters,” *Register* 156:320.

³⁷ Houghton, “Acton’s Forgotten Man,” 5; *New England Weekly Journal*, 8 May 1727.

³⁸ The date based on his age at death. See the discussion below.

³⁹ Her last child recorded in Concord, Deliverance, was born 27 Nov. 1722 (*Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 105). If she were age 43, she was not likely born before ca. 1679.

⁴⁰ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 76, no date on the record but with other marriages in 1710 and 1711. A son John was born 22 Sept. 1711 (*ibid.*, 78)

⁴¹ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 14 (birth), 12 (parents’ marriage); Horace Davis, *Dolor Davis* (Cambridge, Mass.: the author, 1881), 40–41.

⁴² McCracken, “Richard Rice,” *Register* 112:69.

⁴³ *Vital Records of Acton, Massachusetts, to the Year 1850* (Boston: NEHGS, 1923), 284, from his gravestone in Woodlawn Cemetery.

⁴⁴ *Vital Records of Acton*, 84. See a photograph at findagrave.com.

married about 1710 SARAH ____.^[45] If she were age 43 when her last child was born in 1727, she would have been born about 1684, which agrees well with a husband born in 1682.

Thomas's father gave him a deed to some land on 4 March 1704 and by 5 May 1710 Thomas had built a house. On the latter date he mortgaged to Nathaniel Jones of Concord, taylor, for a "valuable sum" two acres of meadow "on the Great Brook formerly called Laws Brook," ten acres of upland on which he had built the house and three square rods of land behind the house "that my father died possessed of." While the deed was not written as a mortgage, Nathaniel quitclaimed on the same lands back to Thomas "for divers good reasons" on 8 December 1723, which does imply that it was a mortgage.^[46]

Two deeds suggest that Thomas owned rights to other lands. On 14 October 1719, he quitclaimed to Eleazer Brown on "my lot in Rutland," suggesting that there might be information about him in proprietors' records of the Town of Rutland, Massachusetts. For some reason Eleazer did not have Thomas acknowledge this until 8 April 1757.^[47] On 25 November 1729 he sold "a 61st right in Concord Village or New Grant" which had belonged to the place where [his grandfather] Roger Draper had lived.^[48] Thomas's only other recorded sale is that for £300 to his son Titus on 2 April 1740, which reveals that he then owned 23 acres with the house, another 8 acres with a barn and 9 more, "chiefly medow."^[49]



*Thomas Law's gravestone in Woodlawn Cemetery,
photo by Carol Conrov*

Children of Thomas and Sarah (____) Law, all born in Concord:

- i. **LYDIA³ LAW**, born 14 Jan. 1711/2;^[50] died Littleton, Mass., 27 Feb. 1765;^[51] married Littleton 25 March 1738^[52] or Acton Jan. 1739 **BENNET WOOD**,^[53] born Littleton 15 March 1717

⁴⁵ The name Shepherd appears in various online sources, e.g., WorldConnect at *Rootsweb.com* and <http://goodrichconnection.org/aggoodrich/web/albertgar/pafg07.htm>. However, while both John¹ and his only son John² Shepard of Concord had daughters named Sarah, they married other men. See Gerald Faulkner Shepard, *The Shepard Families of New England*, Donald Lines Jacobus, ed., 3 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: New Haven Colony Historical Society, 1971–1973), 3:51–53. Some have suggested that her maiden name was Symonds, but that was the wife of Thomas Low who married at Ipswich, Mass., 2 Dec. 1687 (*Vital Records of Ipswich, Massachusetts, to the End of the Year 1849* [Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1910–19], 2:292

⁴⁶ Middlesex County Deeds, 15:563; 22:571. The deed from his father is not recorded.

⁴⁷ Middlesex County Deeds, 56:435, recorded 18 June 1757.

⁴⁸ Middlesex County Deeds, 32:160.

⁴⁹ Middlesex County Deeds, 43:301.

⁵⁰ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 78, "Daughter of Thomas Law and Sarah his wife."

⁵¹ *Records of Littleton, Massachusetts* (Littleton, Mass., 1900), 93.

⁵² *Records of Littleton*, 509.

⁵³ *Vital Records of Acton*, 197; William Smith Wood, *Descendants of the Brothers Jeremiah and John Wood* (Worcester, Mass.: Charles Hamilton, 1885), 13, 44. This work does not name Lydia's parents but gives her age at death, 54 years 1 month 13 days, probably from her gravestone. The age precisely matches her date of birth.

- [1717/8?], son of Jeremiah and Dorothy Wood,^[54] died 28 April 1797 in his 81st year, buried Littleton.^[55]
3. ii. **JOHN LAW**, born 15 Sept. 1714;^[56] married **SARAH BARKER**.
 - iii. **TITUS LAW**, born 26 Oct. 1716;^[57] died in Acton 16 Feb. 1801 at age 84 [*sic*], buried in Woodlawn Cemetery;^[58] married ca. 1743 **MARGARET** _____,^[59] born ca. 1726, died 20 Nov. 1792 age 66, buried in Woodlawn Cemetery.^[60] In the 1744 Acton Church records: “It was the custom to labor at length with the erring and try to impress upon them the magnitude of their sins. Many times the effort was a success but now and again a recalcitrant sinner seemed bent on damnation. Such was the case of Titus Law who, remaining completely immovable after five years of exhortation was suspended and allowed to go his own way.^[61] On 8 Oct. 1745 Titus Law and Daniel Shepard divided a fence between them.^[62] Thus the Laws and Shepards were still neighbors. In 1774 Titus’s dwelling was consumed in fire and he sought to have his taxes abated, which the town denied.^[63] On 15 May 1780 Titus refused to take the oath to be a surveyor for which he had been chosen on 6 March 1780.^[64]
 - iv. **SARAH LAW**, born 14 March 1719/20.^[65]
 - v. **SUSANNA LAW**, born 20 Oct. 1723;^[66] died 14 May 1754 age “30 y. 5 m. 24 d.”^[67] buried in Woodlawn Cemetery in Acton.
 - vi. **STEPHEN LAW**, born 8 July 1727;^[68] died 7 Nov. 1804 age 77, buried in Woodlawn Cemetery with Titus;^[69] married Boston 16 June 1768, **REBECCA PRESCOTT**,^[70] born ca. 1741, died Acton 31 Jan. 1809 age 68.^[71]

JOHN³ LAW, was born in Concord on 15 September 1714. He died before 18 February 1762.^[72] He married in Acton on 7 August 1737 **SARAH BARKER**,^[73] born 4 December 1716, daughter of

⁵⁴ *Records of Littleton*, 6, 30, 107.

⁵⁵ Wood, *Wood*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 84; Cutter, *Historic Homes ... Middlesex County*, 3:1238.

⁵⁷ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 88.

⁵⁸ *Vital Records of Acton*, 285.

⁵⁹ First child, Elizabeth, born 20 Dec. 1744 (*Vital Records of Acton*, 77).

⁶⁰ *Vital Records of Acton*, 284.

⁶¹ Phalen, *History of the Town of Acton*, 39.

⁶² “Mr. Titus Law 1716 – 1801,” Colonial Acton–Acton genealogies at www.colonial-acton.com.

⁶³ Phalen, *History of the Town of Acton*, 64.

⁶⁴ “Mr. Titus Law 1716 – 1801,” Colonial Acton–Acton genealogies at www.colonial-acton.com.

⁶⁵ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 99.

⁶⁶ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 108.

⁶⁷ *Vital Records of Acton*, 284.

⁶⁸ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 117.

⁶⁹ *Vital Records of Acton*, 284.

⁷⁰ [Thirtieth Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston] *A Volume of Records Relating to the Early History of Boston Containing Boston Marriages from 1752 to 1809* (Boston: Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 362.

⁷¹ *Vital Records of Acton*, 284, “wid. Stephen, ‘the eldor.’”

⁷² Middlesex County Probate, John Law, file 13640. On 18 Feb 1762 in Acton Sarah Law refused to administer the estate of her husband and chose her brother Joseph Barker to do so.

⁷³ *Vital Records of Acton*, 197.

John and Elizabeth (Harwood or Haywood) Barker.^[74] She may be the Sarah Barker who married, intentions filed at Acton on 1 November 1775, Jonathan Piper.^[75]

“When the town of Acton was incorporated Titus Law (1735) was living on the road from mill corner, Stow, to Concord. On the same road, on part of the old homestead no doubt, were John, Stephen and Amos his brothers.”^[76]

A John Law was in service of the King in 1757^[77] and a John Law (often noted as his first born son) is said to have died in the French and Indian War in 1759.^[78] However, it was not until 8 February 1762 that his widow Sarah declined to administer his estate and Joseph Barker was appointed. Sarah received a dower and the remainder of his estate was distributed to his eldest son John.^[79] The 1771 Acton valuation lists a John Law.^[80] So John Jr. did not die in 1759. But his father, John, died shortly after that war, apparently after a long illness, as the largest estate bill was paid to a Dr. Cummings.^[81] The father John Law might have incurred injuries in the war.

The children of John and Sarah (Barker) Law, born in Acton:^[82]

- I. **LUCY⁴ LAW**, born 10 March 1738 [1737/8].
- ii. **JOHN LAW**, born 24 Oct. 1739.
- iii. **THOMAS LAW**, born 28 Nov. 1741.
- iv. **SAMUEL LAW**, born 27 Aug. 1744.
- v. **JAMES LAW**, born 27 Oct. 1748.
4. vi. **REUBEN LAW**, born 22 Oct. 1751,^[83] married (1) **ALLIS PIPER**; (2) **RUTH (REED) PIPER**.
- vii. **ANDREW LAW**, born 4 July 1754.

Alfred Woollacott III spent more than thirty years in the business world auditing financial statements. Now retired, he has turned to researching his family history. He is currently working on a novel based on some of his illustrious ancestors in the Law family. When not working on family genealogy, he spends time with his wife of 37 years, four children, and eight grandchildren. He enjoys golf, crossword puzzles, cooking and landscaping. He now resides full time on Martha's Vineyard and may be contacted at MV4AL@aol.com.

To be continued.

⁷⁴ *Concord Births, Marriages, and Deaths*, 88 (daughter of John and Elizabeth), 62 (“Jn^o Barker Sen^r and Elizabeth Ha[rod written in by hand]” married 10 Oct. 1704), but 71 (John Barker and Elizabeth Harwood married 25 Nov. 1708).

⁷⁵ *Vital Records of Acton*, 197. “History of the John Law House,” copied from notes of Robert H. Nylander, by his wife, Barbara Nylander, who was a member of the Acton Historical Society, states that Sarah, widow of John, lived with her eldest son John and married a second husband, Jonathan Piper in 1775.

⁷⁶ Cutter, *Historic Homes ... Middlesex County*, 3:1237.

⁷⁷ H. Thorn King, Jr. *Sliptown – The History of Sharon, New Hampshire 1731 – 1941* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1945), 46.

⁷⁸ King, *Sliptown*, 46; Cutter, *Historic Homes ... Middlesex County*, 3:1237.

⁷⁹ “History of the John Law House”; Middlesex Co. Probate, John Law, File 13640.

⁸⁰ Bettye Hobbs Pruitt, *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation lists – 1771* (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1998), 166.

⁸¹ “History of the John Law House”

⁸² *Vital Records of Acton*, 77–78.

⁸³ King, *Sliptown*, 46. Facing p. 42 is a picture of Reuben Law; Cutter, *Historic Homes ... Middlesex County*, 3:1238.