

## Beginnings

I'm told it was snowing on April 11, 1942 when at 9:30am I was pulled abruptly into this world in a non-labor cesarean delivery in an old brick hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. I am the second child and only daughter of Ruth James English. When someone said, "It's a girl!" I was acknowledged as the youngest in a long line of women whose cells share the same mitochondrial DNA, my maternal ancestors, the mother-line.

At that moment an old cast iron griddle was sitting half-forgotten on a shelf in a cabin on a small rocky hill in Dunstable, Massachusetts, about 40 miles northwest of where I was born. I'm sure nobody had any inkling that the griddle would become the unifying icon in a book this baby girl would be working on 60 years later. Though perhaps the fact I was given the middle name, Butterfield, the maiden name of my mother's mother, should have been a clue to the perceived importance of the mother-line in our family.

Let me digress here for a moment and tell you that, while most of what I'm going to say in these scribblings is true, you should know that I see this as historical fiction. For instance, I often assume it was the griddle that was used in a certain situation when it might just as well have been another frying pan, or "spider" as my grandmother called them. The actual facts become harder and harder to verify as I peer back along my mother-line, so I have given myself the gift of the freedom that creating fiction confers on a writer. Perhaps this has the side benefit of actually making me a bit more honest in these writings, as what I say is necessarily from my own viewpoint and is inevitably colored by my own life experiences. There is much about my maternal ancestors' lives I have no way of knowing.

The griddle first entered my conscious awareness one morning in early 1989 while I, at age 46, was on my hands and knees digging through paper bags stashed away in the most remote corners of the enormous dish closet in the kitchen of my mother's old 1790 house in Tamworth, New Hampshire. Since my father's death in 1986, she had had increasing memory problems. One day she asked me, "How did I come to be living in this house?" That was the signal to my brother and me that the time had come for her to move to the assisted living wing of a nursing home closer to where he lived. We had been reluctant to move her because of the enormous importance in her life of the three old houses she had lived in: the colonial farmhouse on the creek in Portsmouth, NH where she grew up, the 1765 center-chimney colonial in Topsfield, Massachusetts where she raised me and my brother, and this even bigger 4-chimney 1790 house, built by a sea-captain as a two family home for his family and his son's family, to which my parents had retired in 1970.



*The griddle with the label*

Shortly after Ruth's move to the nursing home, my brother's wife, Judy, and I were going through the things in the Tamworth house in preparation for renting it out while we decided what to do with it. Judy's adopted daughter, Heather, who was almost three, was there with us. I pulled out one dusty old brown paper bag, and in it found a griddle with a tattered tag tied onto it with a bit of string. I recognized the handwriting on the tag as being that of my mother's mother, my grandmother Ida Rachel Butterfield James. Reading the tag and counting back the generations I realized the griddle had belonged to my great-great-grandmother who had been born in the year of the Declaration of Independence.

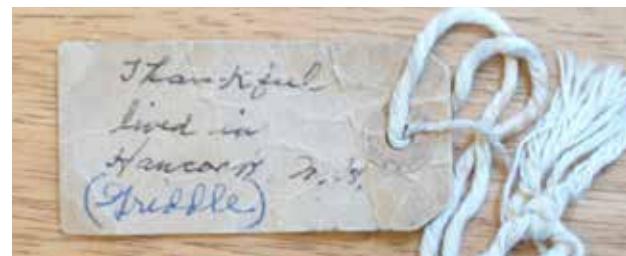
*(A note on the title of this book: The griddle belonged to my great-great-grandmother, but that would make for an awkward book title. However, from the perspective of my grandmother, Ida Rachel who first put the identifying tag on it, it was indeed her "great-grandmother's griddle")*



“Owned by Thankful Coburn Hills, born 1776”  
- in the handwriting of Thankful’s  
great-grand-daughter, Ida Rachel Butterfield James

“Mother of Rachel” (Hills)  
- written by Ruth James English, my mother

“Great-great-great grandmother of Jane English”  
- in my own printing, added about 1990



“Thankful lived in Hancock, N.H.”  
- in the handwriting of Ida Rachel Butterfield James.  
“Griddle” - written by Ruth James English

## Starting the book

Other than deciding the griddle was something I wanted to keep, I didn't pay much attention to it for the next ten years. Along with some furniture and other things, I had the griddle moved to my home in Mount Shasta, California, where I hung it on a hook behind the woodstove. Occasionally I'd show it and the tag to friends.

Then one morning in October 2000, as I sat in the old wicker rocking chair by the stove sipping on my morning cup of tea, suddenly I looked at the griddle hanging there and began to wonder. Where had it been all these years? In what houses? Which of my ancestors had cooked what on it? On what kind of stove? What were their lives like?

Ideas flowed in a jumble through my mind, and I realized I was about to embark on a new creative project in which the griddle would be the central figure. I get this feeling whenever a new project makes itself known to me. There is a sense of having begun to slide down a slope or flow down a stream. Something new is wanting to be birthed. I wonder if this is the feeling women get when they realize they are pregnant? Never having been pregnant I can't know for sure, but I suspect there are similarities.

Over the next couple of years I made several trips to my brother's house in New Hampshire where we had stored in an upstairs closet all the old family photographs and papers we had found when clearing out the Tamworth house.

I "mined" this treasure trove, finding and scanning into the computer all the old photographs now in this book. I also entered into a computer genealogy program all the family history that Aune Dena (Lucy Ardena Butterfield, my grandmother's sister) had painstakingly researched and hand-written into a notebook and onto a huge family tree chart, going back in many cases to the people who came to North America from England on sailing ships in the 1630's.

Along with this "data-mining" I took several trips, some alone and some with Heather, to the places the women in my mother-line had lived: Hancock, NH, Dunstable, MA, Portsmouth, NH, and Topsfield, MA. As I travelled people I met were quite interested in "the griddle book" and were very helpful.

Whenever I was back in California I found I could work on scanning photographs, but had a hard time getting going on writing. I knew I'd do a better job of it if I were in New England. This need, combined with a sense of having completed my work in Mt Shasta (numerous books and calendars with my photographs of the mountain), and with some family situations that pointed toward my again living near my brother's family, I sold my Mt Shasta home and moved to Vermont in the summer of 2002.

Here I have worked on the griddle book off and on, but something was missing. I didn't have the necessary enthusiasm for it. Since this book now exists, I obviously found a way past that stuck point. It centered on more fully living in my life as it is -- single, childless, age 61 and having had lots of unusual adventures, both inner and outer. I had returned east partly because I knew I needed to re-connect with, and "compost" so to speak, whatever I had run away from when I'd left New England in the mid 1960's and went west. The composting process has taken about a year and a half and I now delight in finding myself fully engaged in creating this book

Being in the same New England countryside with its old farms, brick mills, and white-steepled churches, and participating in the seasons - spring mud and buds, summer fireflies and pond swimming, fall leaf brilliance, and winter's sub-zero temperatures - that my ancestors experienced is making it easier for me to feel what shaped their living.

Since books have beginnings, middles and ends, I have arranged the stories and pictures in a linear fashion. But I want you to feel free to dip in and out of the parts of this book. go wherever your inclination leads you. Play with what I have put on these pages!



*The griddle hanging by my woodstove in Mt Shasta*

# Seventh Generation

*“In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.”*

—From the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy - which was used as a model for the US Constitution  
(seen on the wrapper of a roll of “Seventh Generation” recycled toilet paper)

Seven generations is a long span of time, longer than any living person can experience. Great-grandmothers are not uncommon, and frequently in the newspaper obituaries one reads of a 90 or 100-year-old woman who is survived by great-great-grand children, so that five generations of a family were living at the same time. The great-great grandmother knew the next four generations, but looking at the “next seven generations” requires us to think about the lives our great-great-grandchildren’s own great-grandchildren!

In my own life I do not have children and so will not literally have grand-children, great-grand-children, etc. What I do have, however is some knowledge of the previous twelve generations in my mother-line. Thankful Colburn Hills, my great-great-great-grandmother who lived from 1776 to 1867 is in the middle of this mother line, with seven generations before her and seven generations after

her in one branch of the mother-line. The youngest in this line are of the same generation as my own grand children would be if I had any.

I offer “my grandchildren” this perspective on seven generations through the stories of these women of my mother line. All of us have such a mother line of ancestors, but not many have been given the gift of knowing much about them. So let me loan you these women, this mother line, while you read this book. Imagine for a while they are your ancestors and let the progression from mother to daughter, and mother to daughter (with aunts, nieces, sisters and sisters-in-law stirred in for seasoning, along with some of the men-folk) give you a glimpse into what seven generations really means.

**Places:**

Hancock farm - 1805 (when Thankful Colburn Hills became James Hills' 2nd wife) to 1839 or later (Thankful didn't die until 1867) - cook on fireplace or stove in 1805? childhood of Rachel Hills and 7 other siblings

Taylor farmhouse outside Dunstable - 1840-1847 - Rachel Hills Taylor and Samuel Stevens Taylor live with his parents. Mary Ella Taylor born 1844. Two siblings, George and Emma Sarah Henrietta (what a long name!) Find out if we have a photo of this farm. Find out if the house is still there in Dunstable

Brick house on hill in Dunstable - 1847-1898 - RHT and SST move there in 1847 with children. George Taylor (Mary Ella's brother) dies in Civil War 1862. In 1877 Mary Ella Taylor Butterfield and George Butterfield and 3 girls move in with her parents. Youngest was Ida Rachel Butterfield who was 2 at the time. Addition made to house. In 1892 Rachel Hills Taylor died. About 1894 SST, METB and GB moved to Dunstable village house. Brick house sold. In 1898 SST died. Current owners of brick house are eager to help with the book. Lots of good descriptions in IRJ's writings. Wood cook stove.

Village house in Dunstable - 1898-1920 - Lots of good photos inside and out, except kitchen! Home of George Butterfield and Mary Ella Taylor Butterfield after her father died and 2 girls left home - Lucy Ardena still at home.

14 Liberty St in Waltham - 1899-1905 - First home of Ida Rachel Butterfield James and Walter H James. Photos inside and out - but not of the kitchen. Perhaps the griddle was never in this house and stayed in Dunstable.

James farm on Sagamore Creek in Portsmouth, NH - 1905-1919 - lots of photos inside and out. Perhaps the griddle was taken in the dory to a fishing trip/cookout on the island. We have an expense book of WHJ's mother after his father died and may be able to tell from that what fuel was bought for the cook stove - was it wood, coal or oil? Childhood of Ruth James. House burned later.

158 Dale St in Waltham - 1919-1949 - WHJ, IRJ and family and his mother moved there on Ruth's 13th birthday, August 31, 1919. We have some interior and exterior photos. Grace Barnes will be able to give us a description of the kitchen. Mary Ella Taylor Butterfield moved here when her husband died in 1920. She died in 1928. By now the griddle may have become "camping equipment." It was probably used in both camps in Dunstable. It also was probably taken on WHJ and IRJ's car trip to Montana in 1934. We have photos and diaries - even have the menu for their 35th wedding anniversary cookout by the roadside in Montana. IRJ wrote a tag giving the griddle's history and put it on it.

Whippoorwill Camp in Dunstable - at the foot of the hill north of the brick farmhouse on old Taylor farm land that was kept in the family until 1986. We have photos inside and out. It had a stone fireplace. The great hurricane of 1938 blew down the pine forest around it (we have photos of this). It was still standing in the 1940's as JBE remembers visiting it while staying at the new camp up the next hill to the north. RJE and JBE visited its site in 1986.

Gramp's Camp in Dunstable - 1939 to ? - Built from lumber sawn from the trees the hurricane blew down. It had 2 rooms, probably a small woodstove in the kitchen. A good piece of the story would be IRJ, WHJ, BWE, Sr, RJE, JBE and BWE, Jr visiting the camp, walking in the woods and cooking supper. I remember that one thing that was done at the camp was walking the boundaries of the land and finding the markers. BWE, Jr probably has more stories to tell - ask him.

111 Washington St in Topsfield - 1941-1970 - Home of RJE and BWE, Sr. Childhood of Jane and Ben, Jr. Lots of info and pictures - but again not of kitchen. The Carpenters who live there now have kept the kitchen pretty much as it was, so we can visit it. The griddle was camping equipment and was probably used when we camped in Jackson in 1952 at the

campsite down where the carhouse is now. BWE, Jr may have photos. RJE wrote "griddle" on the tag before taking it off when taking it to Jackson to camp.

Cleveland Hill Rd in Tamworth - 1970-1989? Griddle with tag probably sat in a paper bag in a closet! Jane read the tag, thought it interesting and decided to keep the griddle when Ben, Judy and Jane were sorting thru stuff in 1989.

1541 Frederick St in Mount Shasta - 1989-2000 - Jane kept the griddle with its tag hanging beside her woodstove - have a photo of it there. Jane wondered who had cooked what on it and on what kind of stoves. Hence this story! Jane planned to use the griddle on a solar cooker but didn't get around to it before sending it to NH. H & J used a frypan on a solar hotplate in 2002 -- have photos.

Thorn Hill Road , Jackson, NH - 2000-2002, Dec 2000 Heather got UPS package that contained the griddle wrapped in a sweater. Might be a good way to begin our story- with H getting the package from the UPS driver then opening it and reading the tag and asking Jane what it is about. H and J cook hotdogs on the griddle on the electric stove - photo taken.

# Moves

June 17, 2003

While I was out in the canoe on the pond this evening I felt how at home I am there “floating in the sky.” I also saw that I have not really bonded with this piece of land here. Maybe it is not yet time for me to get that kind of connection. And this is a good place to get a lot of work done.

What was it like for the five ancestor women? They all moved some.

**Thankful** lived in 4 or 5 places. She was born in Wilton, NH in 1776. She may have lived elsewhere than her parents’ home from her late teens to her marriage at age 29, perhaps in our story we have her living with Aunt Rachel Hills Colburn in Hudson or Nashua helping with her 3 sons. She lived in James Hills’ farmhouse in Hancock, NH from her marriage in 1805 to about 1845, shortly before James’ death on November 19, 1846. In her letter of April 29, 1845 to Calvin she says, “woe have move back to the shop.” So perhaps there was living space attached to his shop in the town of Hancock. After his death she still lived in Hancock, probably moving to the home of her daughter Frances Hills Thayer after she and her husband moved back to Hancock in 1855. Thankful died in Hancock in 1867.

*note added June 7, 2020* -- census data shows Thankful living in Chelsea, MA in the home of her daughter Catharine Hills Beatley from 1850 thru June 4, 1860 (the 1860 census also shows Mary Ella Taylor age 15 in Chelsea). the 1860 census in Dunstable, MA, dated August 31, 1860 shows Thankful now there with her daughter Rachel Hills Taylor, Mary Ella’s mother

**Rachel** lived in 4 places. She was born in 1811 on the farm in Hancock, was in Nashua for a while to learn tailoring, and met Samuel Stevens Taylor there. At marriage in 1839 they lived for a while with his parents in Dunstable, then bought the brick farm house on the hill, where she lived until she died in 1892.

**Mary Ella** lived in 7 places. She was born in 1844 on the Taylor farm in Dunstable and at age 2 moved with her parents to the brick house on the hill. At marriage in 1867 she and her husband George Butterfield moved to Lowell, MA to live in one of the tenement mill houses while George was a foreman in the mills. Grace and Dena were born there in 1869 and 1871. About 1872 they moved to Forge Village where he kept store and later was a nail maker, and also a night watchman at the mill (in Lowell?). In 1877 they moved back to the brick house on the hill which they shared, with an addition, with her parents

Rachel and Samuel. About 1894, after Rachel’s death, they sold the farm and moved into Dunstable village. In 1920 after George Butterfield died, Mary Ella moved into her daughter Ida’s house at 158 Dale Street in Waltham. Mary Ella died there in 1928.

**Ida Rachel** lived in 8 places. She was born in Forge Village, MA in 1875, then at age 2 moved with her family to the brick house on the hill in Dunstable. Except for being at Westford Academy and spending time living in Boston working as a secretary, she lived in that farmhouse until she married Walter H James in 1899 and moved to the 14 Liberty Street house in Waltham, MA. In 1905 they moved back to his family farm on Sagamore Creek in Portsmouth, NH where they lived until 1919. In 1919 they bought the 158 Dale Street house in Waltham and lived there until 1949 when they moved to the house at 17 Boxford Road in Topsfield. She died there in 1965.

**Ruth** lived in 7 places. She started life in 1906 on the farm in Portsmouth, moved to Waltham in 1919 at age 13, then to Tudor Road in Nahant in 1938 when she married Ben English. From 1925 to 1929 she had spent the school years living at Mt Holyoke College in South Hadley, MA. In 1941 Ruth and Ben, along with 1-year-old Ben, Jr. moved to 111 Washington St in Topsfield, MA. In 1970 they moved to Cleveland Hill Road in Tamworth, NH. In 1989 she moved into the Clipper Home in North Conway, NH where she died in 1994.

**And then there is me;** mine is a long story of many moves. In outline it looks like this:

1942-1956	111 Washington St, Topsfield, MA
1957-1970	schools, colleges and Topsfield
1970-1974	Stillpoint in several places with Gia-fu
1974-1987	wandering in California
1987-2002	1541 Frederick St, Mt Shasta, CA
2002-now	56 #10 Pond Rd, E. Calais, VT

What a contrast to my ancestors, especially during my wandering years 1970-1987. Counting all the schools, I have lived, as opposed to visited while having a home elsewhere, in 36 places, some only for a month. Longest stays are Topsfield and Mt Shasta.

# Earth

I played on the ground as a child, nose in the grass and sticks and bugs. I felt the life there, but there was little cultural support for deepening and integrating this raw knowing.

My mother tried - she sent me out to play in our large yard and woods, and there were picnics, hikes, skiing and Girl Scout camp. But that which I treasured most was not valued in the world of school and work and church. What I treasured was considered "just play." I had a few friends with whom I roamed the woods, but we grew apart as time passed and our lives became busy.

Over the years I have been attracted to various indigenous ways - Taoist, Turtle Island, Basque. I approach, feel a resonance, and then back off as I remember I can never know the true depth of any of these cultures.

I can go and play in nature as I did as a child - I still remember how to do that. Though often there is an overlay of "working," being useful in some way - photographing, gardening, doing radio on search and rescue missions, cutting brush, sitting in a fire lookout, flying people in a balloon.

But I have struggled with integrating the essence of my play in nature into relationships and community in a satisfying way.

My ancestors in the mother-line have been on Turtle Island for eleven generations. I delight in knowing their names: Elizabeth ? born in England 1625 and came to New England before her 1645 marriage to Richard Hildreth, Mary Hildreth Warren 1650, Elizabeth Warren Blodgett 1674, Thankful Blodgett Adams 1719, Mary Adams Colburn 1744, Thankful Colburn Hills 1776, Rachel Hills Taylor 1811, Mary Ella Taylor Butterfield 1844, Ida Rachel Butterfield James 1875, Ruth James English 1906, Jane English 1942 . . .

What was it like for Elizabeth to come across on a wooden sailing ship from her native England to a wild new world where she didn't know the plants and animals, the changes of the weather and the seasons of the year? To a land where there were indigenous people who her own people at best felt ambivalent about and at worst slaughtered?

Does my own feeling of not quite belonging come from her experience?

So many questions I have, and right now, so few answers.

# Farms

June 15, 2003

I was reading today some articles in *Vermont Life* about farms, how they are changing. The first 5 generations of the women in the griddle book grew up on working farms. I grew up on a farm but my father did not work there. However, since it was during WW II we had a big garden, and chickens, ducks and pigs. Horton Bradstreet's farm was almost next door. He hayed our fields with his horse-drawn cutter, rake and wagon. So I had some of the flavor of a farm without knowing all the huge amount of work involved.

Thankful and Rachel had the full farm experience, though Rachel went to Nashua to learn tailoring and there met George Taylor, her future husband. His was a farming life, and she became a farm wife like her mother.

Rachel's daughter Mary Ella grew up on the farm as did Mary Ella's husband George Butterfield. But he did not work as a farmer, rather a mill foreman, nail maker, carpenter and storekeeper. They lived on the old farm on the hill which was still run as a farm by Grandpa Taylor.

Then my grandmother Ida Rachel grew up on this farm and so lived the farm life as her grandfather kept up the old farm. Her writings give the history of this lifestyle. When she married WHJ they probably had no intention of living a farm life, as he taught at MIT. They moved into an upscale house in the Boston suburb of Waltham. Photos show them as early "yuppies!" Only when his mother finally couldn't keep up with managing the farm in Portsmouth, NH did they move back to that farm where WHJ had grown up. There my mother Ruth was born.

Ruth grew up on a working farm with her mother IRJ and grandmother Annie Mary James running the farm with the help of hired men, while WHJ continued as professor at MIT. When Ruth was 13 in 1919 they moved back to Waltham.

I think Mother and Daddy's move to Topsfield in 1941 was in great measure an attempt by my mother to re-create the farm life of her childhood, as well as to grow food and have a place to live during WW II that was safer than living right on the coast in Nahant where German submarines could attack.

## Miscellaneous

Some musings about Thankful -- I wonder what she thought of her name. What was it like to be called Thankful? Was she thankful for that name? She was in her late 20's when she married James Hills. What did she do all those earlier years? Did she care for younger siblings or for the children of her older siblings?

I called the town of Wilton, NH and was told that their town records all burned in the late 1890's. So I will have to take what little information I do have and create a story around it.

I wonder where the love of flowers and plants began. IRH says her grandmother RHT loved flowers and pretty things. Did Thankful as well? And it is obvious from the photos of the Dunstable village house that METB liked plants as well. Her journals support that, too. I know from my own experience that Mother and Gubby both had big flower gardens and lots of house plants. Grace Barnes told me that her grandmother's pressed flower collection survived until she and Leonard moved out of their big house in York, ME.