

CHAPTER XXVII - THE RAGAINS BRICK WALL

My earliest provable Ragains ancestor was Thomas Ragains, my 6th great grandfather, who died in 1751 in Cumberland County, New Jersey. I would like to say that he spelled his surname the way my grandfather Frank Ragains spelled his, but I can't. The fact is my ancestor, Thomas Ragains, couldn't spell his name at all. He signed his will with a crudely drawn R. Over this crudely drawn R, a witness wrote "his" and under it the witness wrote "mark." To complete the crudely drawn signature, he wrote "Thos", to the left and "Riggin" to the right of the R. Looking over my copy of Thomas Ragains' will and the accompanying probate record, Thomas' surname was spelled six different ways. In these documents, Reagain, Reagean, Ragain, Riggins, Reggin, and Rigins were all used to identify him and his sons who were named in these documents. Over the next few generations, Thomas' surname settled into the spelling, "Ragains," for my branch of the family tree. Other branches preferred Riggins, Reagan or any one of several variations of the name. My grandfather Frank Ragains was adamant as to the correct spelling. He said that the correct spelling and the only correct spelling. If they didn't spell their name "Ragains, they were not kin to us."

Nearly every genealogist that I know of has assumed that Thomas was Irish and most of them believe that he migrated to New Jersey from Ulster Ireland. I can't help but take issue with the assumption that our branch of the Ragains family is Irish. There's nothing I would like better than to prove I have the Little King's blood running through my veins. The name O'Riagain is Irish and it means "grandson of the Little King." The similarity in spelling between Ragain and Riagain isn't conclusive, however. Thomas and his sons' surname was spelled at least six different ways, none of which were Ragain or Riagain.

One source of my doubts is my grandfather Frank Regains' and his younger brother, Grant, thought of themselves as being English. Not only did grandfather claim to be English, he did so with a passion. Some of his grandchildren were named, under his influence, after English heroes. Two examples are Albert Ray Hines, named after Prince Albert, and Ray's younger brother, Winston Edward, named after Winston Churchill. My grandfather listened religiously to the news broadcasts during World War II and beamed when the English were reported as doing well.

Giving further support to my theory, as a young man, Grant Ragains was a part time newspaper columnist. In the course of my genealogical research, I came across a copy of one of his column that was written for the Elk City, Oklahoma newspaper. The name of Uncle Grant's column was "I Say Old Chap." To me, this says it all. I have no doubt that he and my grandfather thought of themselves as English.

In 2007 on a combined Genealogy Conference and Cruise sponsored by Wholly Genes Software, I met a fellow researcher named Kent Riggins from Columbia, Maryland. Kent told me that he had traced his ancestors to the first to migrate to the new world, and they were definitely English. He said that the first migrant of his blood line was a convicted criminal who was exiled to the Crown Colony of Virginia to work as slave laborer. Looking at a map of the early colonies and plotting the location of known Riggins, in the sixteenth century, and you will find the Riggins concentrated on the Delmarva Peninsular and across the Delaware River in Southern New Jersey. The Delmarva Peninsular is located in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia. It is more likely that Thomas Ragains or Riggins took a ferry across the Delaware River to New Jersey, than it would be for him to have sailed all the way from Ireland. By the same token it is more likely that my Ragains Riggins blood is English than Irish.

My research also led to the discovery that Riggins is an old English name that dates back to Lancashire in medieval England. The fact that Riggins and Ragains sound a lot alike could easily cause confusion as to the origin of our ancestral line. Spelling the surname Riggins instead of Ragains could be an indication that an Irish name was spelled the English way because the recording clerk couldn't be bothered with the Gaelic version.

Since Y-Chromosome is passed down from father to son, I submitted a sample of my cousin Jackie Carroll Ragains' DNA to Family Tree DNA for testing. I also talked a fourth cousin of mine, Herschel "Bill" Reagan into submitting his DNA for testing. Their DNA matched a perfect 25 for 25 markers. A study of their family trees shows that Thomas Ragains, the Revolutionary War patriot, is the ancestor that is common to both Jackie and Bill. Since I have been able to merge these two trees, there have been two others who match Jackie and Bill 25 for 25. They are Jerry Omer Roberson and Keith Eugene Riggins. So far, I have been unable to connect either Jerry or Keith to Jackie or Bill's family tree. Jackie, Bill and Eugene all have surnames that are a variation of Ragains. Jerry Roberson According to his DNA, Jerry should have a surname that is a variant of Ragains, but this is not the case. There are several possible explanations for this. One of Jerry's ancestors may have been adopted or perhaps the ancestor changed his name for personal reasons. It may have even been a case of a Ragains in the wood pile.

As things stand, Thomas Ragains of New Jersey remains one of my brick walls. Hopefully, if I keep chipping away at it, this wall will crumble and the origin of Thomas Ragains, of New Jersey, will crumble.