

The Bobbitt Family in the Levant – Francie Kieffer

For years my family has passed down a vague tradition that our ancestor John Bobbitt had worked in Turkey in the early eighteenth century and had married a Turkish lady. We knew that their son Richard (my fifth great grandfather) had been born in Smyrna on 30 July 1744 and, when he was only six or seven years old, had been sent to England to be educated – this was confirmed by his obituary in a local newspaper [1]. John Bobbitt was mentioned as Richard's father in the record of the baptism of Richard's son [2] Until recently, the only other written confirmation of the story appeared to be in the register of the English factory at Aleppo, which recorded the death and burial there of John Bobbitt himself in August 1765 [3]. However, some lucky finds have now enabled me to fill in a little more of the story, although many questions still remain.

The first find was a copy of the will of Petronella Bobbitt [4], the widow of John's brother Henry, whom she described as having been an English merchant of the city of Smyrna. The will is dated 12 December 1764 and is neatly laid out in eleven numbered clauses. In the third clause she says: "I leave to my brother-in-law Mr John Bobbitt and to his wife and their two children, and to the two Daughters of the late Mr Richard Dobbs [5] the sum of Five Hundred Piastres to be divided equally among them." Henry Bobbitt was admitted to the Freedom of the Levant Company on 10 October 1751 [6] and is mentioned several times in the records of the Smyrna factory in the 1740s, having presumably served there as a factor. Either he or his brother John may have been the "Mr Bobet", an English merchant met at Salonica in 1740 by Richard Pococke [7]. Henry seems to have died before 1759, as a list of members of the English nation at Smyrna in that year [8] mentions Mrs Petronella Bobbitt, the widow of an English merchant, and also Mrs Ann Bobbitt, the wife of an English tailor, although no tailor is listed among the men. This Ann was almost certainly the wife of John, and it seems more likely that she was Greek or Armenian rather than Turkish, as the family tradition would have it.

Petronella's will gives some interesting details about the community in Smyrna. She refers particularly to James and Margaret Fremeaux, who had given her a diamond ring and been particularly kind to her when her husband died. She appointed as her executors her "most Intimate Friend and Protector" Daniel Fremeaux, with George Boddington, the British Cancellier, and the Count [Daniel Jean] de Hochepped, the Dutch consul. She mentions that her former house had been completely burnt down in 1753 and that her present house had been entirely built at her own expense. She appears to have been in business herself because she bequeathed five hundred piastres to her head warehouseman, Jani, "for his faithful services over so many years." Also mentioned are her brother Abraham Smerachi and her late brother Pietro Smerachi and his widow. All her furniture, clothes and linen were left to her bosom friend, Mrs Francesca Series. She directed that, after the payment of her debts and the various individual bequests, the residue of her estate be distributed to the widows and orphans and all families in need – particularly to Widow Edwards (possibly the widow of Eleazar Edwards senior) and to her daughter Anna Edwards.

Returning to Henry Bobbitt, just one month before he was admitted to the Levant Company, on 10 September 1751 he had been admitted by Redemption (i.e. by payment) to the Freedom of the City of London as a member of the Wheelwrights'

Company [9]. On the record of his admission he is described as the son of John [Bobbitt], late of Bridgwater in Somerset, innholder [i.e. innkeeper], deceased. So at last I know where the Bobbitts came from.

As for Richard, it seems that he never returned to the Levant. He had been sent to a boarding school in Yorkshire where he was very unhappy. It may have been one of the infamous schools on which Dickens based his Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Richard's father, or possibly his uncle Henry, arranged for him to move to another school and he remained in Yorkshire for the rest of his life, first as a schoolmaster and then, for fifty years, as curate of Kirk Bramwith. Most of his children emigrated to the United States, where I now live.

REFERENCES

- [1] *The Sheffield Independent and Yorkshire and Derbyshire Advertiser*, Saturday 28 July 1838, p. 5. http://levantineheritage.com/pdf/Smyrna_BMD_19th_century_British_Newspapers.pdf
- [2] Register of St Mary's, Kirk Bramwith, Yorkshire:
baptism of William Jefferson Bobbitt, 29 December 1793
- [3] *The Pedigree Register*, vol. 3, 1913-1916, p. 217.
- [4] A copy of Petronella's will, which is in Italian, is among the papers of the Fremeaux family in the Huguenot Library at University College London (Special Collections, F/ FR/ 50).
- [5] Alexander Drummond, *Travels*, London, 1754, p. 114, mentions dining with Richard Dobbs and others at Smyrna in 1745.
- [6] TNA: SP 105/333, p. 24.
- [7] Rachel Finnegan (ed.), *Letters from abroad*, Piltown, Co. Kilkenny: Pockocke Press, 2013, p. 279.
- [8] Christine Laidlaw, *The British in the Levant*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, p. 109.
- [9] London Metropolitan Archives, COL/CHD/FR/02/0754-0-761.