

NICHOLS FAMILY HISTORY AS TOLD BY
LEON NELSON NICHOLS IS A FAIRY TALE

By George L. Nichols

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Mark Twain might have said that man is the only animal that traces his family history. He might have added that he often lies about it, too, if he finds the truth is not impressive. He is not above creating an appealing myth about his family's origins in order that he may attach himself to such background.

Leon Nelson Nichols, was an eighth generation descendant of the first Thomas Nichols of Newport, Rhode Island, through his fourth son Benjamin. Nelson was born in 1868 at Middleville, Herkimer County, New York. He was graduated from Cornell University in 1892. He became a librarian in the New York City library system. Interested in family history, he availed himself of the resources of the New York Library to pursue his family research.

In 1919, he published a 16-page monograph titled Origins of the Nichols Family. His paper starts as chatty newsletter describing how he, together with N. R. Nichols of Sudbury, Vermont and E. M. Nichols of Philadelphia were establishing a Nichols family association. He extended an invitation to members of the Nichols family to join with them to further their aims of discovering why Nichols family members are "so great and influential in today's world." Then he unfolded his manufactured treasure-house of information about the past history of the family. The resources of the New York Library, supplied him with historic material around which he built his European history of the family.

There are three focal points in his history: (1) The Nichol family at Llantwit Major (Glamorgan County, Wales); (2) Urban, first Norman bishop at Llandaff, Wales; and (3) Nigel or Niel Aubigny, a chieftain of Normandy. Those people all existed and are verifiable in history. With those points established, Nelson Nichols proceeded to fill in the gaps about the Nichols family derived from the recesses of his mind, or using existing documents or books as references which did not refer to the Nichols family at all.

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The early settlers of the American colonies came to the New World for economic as well as religious reasons. Rhode Island, established by Roger Williams as a haven from the religious straitjacket of Massachusetts Puritans, attracted dissenters from that colony as well as from England. Those who went to Rhode Island would have to be classified as "poor," and Quakers made up

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more than half of the population of colonial Rhode Island.

We are not certain where the first Thomas Nichols of Newport, Rhode Island came from, but the chances are that he came from England. He may have left England as a bond servant for Barbados, an English possession in those years. In the middle of the 17th century, England moved shiploads of bonded laborers to Barbados to meet the needs of the English sugar plantation owners. But English laborers did not adjust well to the climate of Barbados, and plantation owners began to replace them with Negro slaves. As the English were freed from bondage, many went to Rhode Island because it offered them land and freedom from religious oppression. J. N. Arnold in the Narragansett Historical Register III:230. says, "It is a well-known fact that many of our earliest settlers came from England by this way (Barbados), and that many of them stayed there a while before coming to Rhode Island." Because the beginnings of the new inhabitants of Rhode Island were not auspicious, they usually neglected to mention how they got to the New World.

I have examined the biographical sketches of seven or eight notable Nichols families which descend from Thomas Nichols and Hannah Griffin, families which lived in the 19th century and whose pedigrees appear in Cole's 1889 History of Washington and Kent Counties (Rhode Island), and in J. H. Beers' Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island, published 1908. All of those worthy people easily traced their roots back seven or eight generations to Thomas Nichols and his wife Hannah Griffin, who were at Newport before 1664. None of those families claimed any noble lineage, any relationship to important church figures of the past, or even to European minor gentry.

John Osborne Austin's Genealogical Dictionary of Rhode Island, published in 1887, begins its historical record of Thomas Nichols in Newport, where he became a freeman in 1664. Austin makes no mention of country of origin or noble ancestry in Thomas Nichols' family tree.

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Nelson Nichols felt the formula for creating a fabulous family history should include a Norman/British noble family, a bishop or two, and a family of at least the level of minor gentry.

His library researches uncovered a Nichol family of minor gentry at Llantwit Major in Glamorgan County in southern Wales. We discovered the same family quite by accident in the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City in September 1995. Glamorgan County History, Vol. 4, 1980, page 84, states: "The Nichol family of Llantwit Major numbered at least three generations of surgeons in its midst in the 16th and early 17th centuries and

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seems to have been recognized as a family of minor gentry." Nelson Nichols seized upon that family to connect with, doubtless influenced by its status as 'minor gentry.'

He also discovered a few miles from Llantwit Major a village called Llandaff, which had, and still has, a small cathedral with an interesting history. A man by the name of Urban was the first Norman bishop (1107-1133) of that cathedral. More interesting to Mr. Nichols was the fact that the third bishop (1148-1183) was a man named "Nicolas ap Gwrgant" (Nicolas, son of Gwrgant). Here again was a potential connection with our family. Perhaps Nicolas was the son of Urban, spelled Gwrgant, he reasoned. Unlikely, but a possibility, if one is engaged in the creation of a mythical family legend.

In 1986 we visited Llandaff, Wales and copied the names of the three earliest bishops of the Cathedral from a wall plaque on an inside wall. Here they are as recorded there:

1107-1133	Urban
1140-1148	Uchtryd
1148-1183	Nicolas ap Gwrgant

Despite changes in orthography, there is no way that Nicolas ap Gwrgant can be rationalized as the son of Urban. If he had been, the record would have read Nicolas ap Urban. By no stretch of the imagination can Gwrgant be magically converted to Urban, or vice versa. But Nelson Nichols found a way. He decided to re-name Urban 'Gurgan.'

There is another obvious flaw here: Those men were Catholic priests and were supposed to be celibate. Nelson Nichols, in recognition of that problem, declared flatly that "In those days Catholic priests married and had families." That bland statement, with its pretended authority, misrepresents the truth with respect to celibacy and the Catholic priesthood.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, 15th Edition, 1974, there was a period of crisis in the practice of clerical celibacy which resulted from the Norse invasions of Europe. However, the invasion of England from France by William the Conqueror and his soldiers in 1066 was accomplished by Normans who were practicing Catholics. William's invasion of England had been authorized and blessed by the Pope. The first and second Lateran Councils (1123 and 1129) put an end to the legality of theoretically "continent" clerical marriages. But there is no evidence that the Church sanctioned marriage by priests in the period in question. There have been occasions when married men, often with children, were permitted to become priests, but such exceptions were made under the condition that they also become celibate.

Searching through John Pym Yeatman's folio volume, House of Arundel, (Mitchell and Hughes, London 1882), Nelson Nichols found a chapter on the Viscounts of St. Sauveur, in which he discovered the names "Nigel" and "Niel." He thought those names were close to the Nichols name, and that fact encouraged him to adopt those people into the family. Then in a most audacious step, Nelson took the liberty of changing the names Nigel and Niel, which Yeatman used interchangeably, to "Nicol."

By 1911, Mr. Nichols had prepared a family lineage for his Nichols family which reached back 41 generations to Ivar, Jarl of Upland, Norway. He first published this remarkable piece of genealogical history in narrative style in a 16-page pamphlet in 1919, titled Origins of the Nichols Family. The 41-generation pedigree for the family appeared about 1923 in a book entitled Nichols Genealogy, edited by Nathan Round Nichols, a minister of Sudbury, Vermont. In 1983 M. Q. Nichols of Bridge City, Texas published a family history entitled White Roots: A Nichols Genealogy, in which the compiler makes use of generous quotes from Nelson Nichols' pamphlet. In 1988, I published my family history entitled A Nichols Genealogy, in which Nelson Nichols' false lineage was shown, along with other information which he included in his original paper.

N. R. Nichols, the minister from Sudbury, Vermont, was a willing collaborator who aided and abetted the fraud. He included in his family book the fictitious family pedigree plus a number of articles attributed to Nelson Nichols' letters and with some credited to an unidentified Elizabeth Nichols: "Nichols Heraldic Arms," "Some Welsh Shrines," "The Turbervilles," and "The Stradlings." N. R. Nichols also included in his family book a fictional "Edmond Nichol's Will," which I discuss later, and an article "Ancestry of the Danby, Vt. Family of Nichols," both of which credit Leon Nelson Nichols as the source. In the latter article Nelson attempts to obscure the fact that Thomas of Danby, Vt., and East Greenwich, R.I., was born out of wedlock, by changing his year of birth from 1723 to "1725 of 1726."

Nelson Nichols' brief writings about the family, contained in his "Origins," traced our family to the Nichol family in Llantwit Major, Wales, the family of "minor gentry," and noted for its surgeons. From the Llantwit Major family, he stepped backward in time for 19 generations, about 500 years, to Urban, first Norman bishop (1107-1133) of the cathedral of Llandaff, a short distance from Llantwit Major, in Wales. From Urban he takes us back another six generations, about 150 years, to Nigel, Viscount of St. Sauveur, in Normandy. Finally, in another six generations, he takes us back to Ivar, Jarl of Upland in Norway.

In this record of so many generations, Nelson Nichols shows us no break, no wavering in the record. Every generation is

there, firm and steadfast. Just as surprising in the remarkable family lineage is the absence of sources for this wonderful amount of family information.

It hardly needs to be said that a family historian, like any author of history, owes his readers clues and sources to enable them to verify independently the information presented. Therefore, the principal criticism of Nelson Nichols' paper and lineage is the almost total absence of documentation for the wealth of information. This fact alone casts doubt over the whole story. Where references are made, they consistently fall short of proving the author's statements. In the case of Yeatman, Nelson audaciously rewrote and contradicted that author, substituting his own story.

James T. Faasen of Grand Rapids, Michigan, has been an avid researcher of the Nichols line. When I told him that I consider the whole Norman/Welsh background furnished by Nelson Nichols to be a fraud, he sent me an interesting letter. Some quotes from his letter of November 22, 1995, expose the fraud better than I can: "In my research to find source material to corroborate Leon's work," he says, "I was never able to verify any of the links between the Norman house of Aubigny and Bishop Urban. Moreover, I found no connection between the Nichol family of Llantwit Major and Thomas Nichols of Newport. Finally, my correspondence with a genealogist in Wales with an interest in the Nichols lineage was not fruitful in respect to Thomas Nichols' Welsh heritage, his role in the English Civil War (1640-1645), nor the relationship of Bishop Urban to Bishop Nicolas. My research finally brought me face to face with the simple truth that the only authority for these matters was Nelson Nichols himself.

"In my review of Yeatman's work and other materials on the Albini family, I never found any mention of an Ithel or Iltet as Leon claimed. When I reviewed "Glamorganshire Genealogies, a work cited by N. R. Nichols, I discovered that the pages he referred to were concerned with the Stradling and Turberville families, with no mention of any Nichols, except a passage stating that a William Nichols was Chamberlain at St. Donat's Castle.

"In addition, correspondence with a Genealogist in Wales with an interest in the Nichols line in Glamorgan was not fruitful in regard to Thomas' family, his role in the Civil War, Dr. John Nichols' marriage into the Stradling family, nor Bishop Urban's relationship to Bishop Nicolas. So all in all, my research has reached a dead end."

The same criticism applies to Nelson Nichols' stories of Thomas Nichols of Newport, of the shipping business, of the ships (quaintly named Landwit and Landoff as a reminder of the preten-

ded Welsh origin), of younger brother Philip and older half-brother Edmund, of participation in the English Civil War. We have only the statements of Nelson Nichols himself, without verification of any kind.

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Nelson Nichols' independent authority for the Norman history of the Viscounts of St. Sauveur is Pym Yeatman's chapter on that family in his folio volume on The House of Arundel, published in 1882. Here we find him (Nelson Nichols) creating his own nomenclature for the Viscounts, calling them "Nicol" rather than "Nigel" or "Niel," as Yeatman consistently did. According to Augustin Thierry, historian of the Norman invasion of England, the Nicol name was known to the Normans of that period (1066). On page 202 of the Dutton & Company edition of 1907 of his Norman Invasion of England, Thierry states, "Having departed from Lincoln, which, by a sort of French euphony, they called Nicole, the soldiers of the invasion marched upon York . . ."

It would be expected, then, that Yeatman would have used the Nicol name if it had been appropriate. But Yeatman never mentions that name at all. And the theory that the name of Nicol originated from Nigel or Niel is ludicrous. A brief examination of the Encyclopedia Britannica tells us we have one of the oldest names known to history. Saint Nicholas of Myra goes back to the 4th century; Pope Saint Nicholas the Great (819-867) was the first of five early popes who took the name. Nicolaus of Damascus was a first century BC Greek historian and philosopher. In the Bible (Acts 6:5) we find a reference to "Nicholas a proselyte of Antioch." We don't have to reach for impossible derivations of our family name. The obvious origin of our name is at our fingertips.

Nelson Nichols acknowledged that "philologists have roughly surmised that the source of the name Nicol was Nicholas, a name that was well known to history." But, says Nelson, the two names are separate and distinct. Then he peppers his family pedigree with "Nicol" so many times that we want to strangle him.

Nicholas (and variations) was a popular name among the ancients; it is natural that it would evolve in modern languages to such names as Nicola or Nicolo in Italian and Nicol or Nicole in French. To convert Nichols from Nigel or Niel one must ignore the obvious and strain for the impossible. Nicholas becomes Nichol merely by dropping the final syllable. If you consider the probability that the "g" in Nigel was silent, you recognize that Ni(g)el and Niel are the same name, one which has no possible relation to Nichol, with its hard "k" sound in the middle.

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In 1995, we had our first opportunity to examine Yeatman's folio volume of the House of Arundel (London 1882), in the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah. We copied the chapter which deals with the history of the family of St. Sauveur, the Viscounts of the Cotentin. This is the crucial chapter which deals with the Norman family that Nelson Nichols claimed our Nichols family descends from. There is a marked difference between Yeatman's and Nelson's accounts; Yeatman's scholarly genealogical history is cautious; he can tell us little with any certainty about the history of Nigel the Viscount. However, Nelson's story is bold and direct, and he hesitates not at all to set forth his own facts regardless of what Yeatman says or does not say. Nigel (or Niel), was an important historical figure of the 11th century because he was the leader of the revolt in 1046 against Duke William. According to Yeatman, Nigel had been exiled and moved to England before the Battle of Hastings (1066), after his defeat at Val-es-Dunes (1047).

Note that Edward the Confessor, who became king of England 1042, had been raised in Normandy. When he became king, he was followed to England by a large group of Normans. This movement was called the "First Norman invasion of England."

But Nelson Nichols needed a hero at Hastings and gave the job to Nigel's son Nigel (or Nicol, as Nelson persistently and erroneously calls him), saying he commanded a wing of the Norman army at the Battle of Hastings, and "was showered with honors and lands by the Conqueror." But Yeatman says researchers have found no name or variation which would place the Aubignys (Albinis in England) among the invading Norman army.

Pym Yeatman says, "Domesday shows that the Albinis (Nigel and his family) were settled in England before the Conquest." Using the emphasis of repetition, Yeatman again says, "There is little doubt but that the family of St. Sauveur were already settled in England, at the time of the Conquest, under the name of Albini . . ."

But what happened to the Aubigny (Albini) family in the 11th century has no significance to our Nichols family, except in the imagination of Nelson Nichols.

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Nelson Nichols created two brothers for the first Thomas Nichols of Newport. One of these, Philip, says Nelson, went to Virginia, where he was lost to history. Of the other, a half-brother named Edmund, Nelson says that he stayed on at Newport to manage the shipping business. However, Nelson gives us no information about Thomas' half-brother Edmund until, on page 137 of N. R. Nichols' Nichols Genealogy, a strange document appears

with the caption "Edmund Nichol's Will." This document, rather than verifying Edmund as a real person, calls into question the matter of his existence. We remember that Edmund's name does not appear anywhere in the early official and unofficial records of Newport. Yet his half-brother Thomas, our first Nichols ancestor in Rhode Island, was quite active. Thomas was accepted in 1664 as a freeman of Newport. He was a juryman in 1671; he was elected five times as a deputy in the colonial legislative assembly. In 1677, with 47 other inhabitants of Newport, he was granted land across Narragansett Bay from Newport in the area of the present East Greenwich, as a reward for services in King Philip's War. But Edmund is conspicuously absent.

John Osborne Austin's Genealogical Dictionary of Rhode Island, published 1887, fails to mention an Edmund Nichol. Edmund seems to be lost to history in Newport.

Examination of the document entitled "Edmund Nichol's Will" reveals that it is not a Will at all, but a letter or memorandum addressed to nephew Benjamin Nichols, one of Thomas' sons, instructing him to prepare a Will in legal form for Edmund's signature. In this memorandum there are several interesting bequests:

1. Money to the "aged mother of my brother Thomas of Bristol, Old England"
2. Money to "my aged aunt Betsy Price of Bristol, Old England"
3. To Benjamin, "my slave Tom, plus my parts of the boats Landwit and Landoff" etc., etc.

In a few lines, the document mentions personages, places and events that needed verification, including participation in the English Civil War. In the final paragraph of notes furnished with the document, N. R. Nichols, editor of Nichols Genealogy, thanks Nelson Nichols of the New York Public Library for furnishing the copy of Edmund Nichol's Will. This acknowledgement leaves no question as to its author.

The so-called Will presents a number of problems. First, it is not a Will at all but a memorandum. Wills were drawn in Colonial days, just as they are drawn today and are relied upon for facts about families of prior generations. If a real Edmund had wanted to prepare his last Will and Testament, he would have had the ability to do that by calling in a notary and a couple of friends to witness the signing of the document. To write a letter or memorandum to a nephew to prepare a Will would be strange and unusual when the means of creating a legal Will would have been available to a man like Edmund was supposed to have been.

The memorandum Will is too transparent to deserve our credulity, giving money to ladies in England who would have long since been dead, if they had ever lived. The Will commits a gross error by calling the ships Landwit and Landoff, "boats." An old sea dog like Edmund was supposed to have been would never have labelled ships as boats.

The real author of the memorandum Will was not Edmund, but the one who must have felt the "Will" was needed to provide verification for "facts" which were nowhere in evidence, but existed only in Nelson's fertile imagination.

Leon Nelson Nichols wove his fabulous history of the Nichols family, but failed to prove his story in any respect, and we must discard it as a source of our family history.

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J. Alden Nichols, history professor emeritus of the University of Illinois at Urbana, provides the motive for Nelson Nichols to develop his mythical history of the Nichols family. His Nichols family history project was a money raising scheme, planned jointly with N. R. Nichols of Sudbury, Vermont and E. M. Nichols of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Under date of January 10, 1996, Alden Nichols, wrote to me advising that in 1911 Nelson Nichols had written to and later visited some members of Alden's family.

In a 1911 letter Nelson wrote, "The chain of evidence is of a very peculiar character, and some of it might be untrustworthy had I not proved the evidence from other sources . . . Rank, property, and position has been with our family surely since the year 1500 . . . I have an immense amount of additional material on the family and should appreciate your advice as to its publication and how best the money is to be raised. If we can tack on the other prominent Nichols families of America and England, and I believe it can be done, there ought to be enough millionaires and other wealthy men to contribute the money while I furnish the material to show how we are one of the best and oldest families of America and Great Britain."

Although the "grand plan" failed to come to fruition, Nelson's little pamphlet and N. R. Nichols' book have been seen by hundreds of members of the Nichols family in the LDS Family History Library in Salt Lake City as well as in genealogy libraries throughout the country. Some have been convinced that the story is true and others wish that it might be true. It's an interesting fairy tale, but that's all it is.

George L. Nichols
6123 Doliver Drive
Houston, Tx. 77057

November 27, 1996

Julie Steinfelt
Aquisitions
Family History Library
35 North West Temple St.
Salt Lake City, Utah 84150

Dear Ms. Steinfelt,

Enclosed is my paper (two copies) on the subject of the false family history material on the Nichols family prepared by Leon Nelson Nichols, included in his 16-page monograph of 1919, Origins of the Nichols Family. Much of his false history is also included in Nathan Round Nichols book, published about 1923 and entitled Nichols Genealogy, Ancestry and Descendants of Thomas Nichols of East Greenwich, Rhode Island and Danby, Vermont.

I will appreciate any suggestions regarding the publication of my paper. If you can suggest any publications that would entertain such material, please advise.

I request that you affix one copy of my material inside of the front cover of my family book, A Nichols Genealogy. 1988.

Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,



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