

THE FENNER FAMILY

Fourth Edition

*Descendants of
Captain Arthur Fenner
(1619-1703)
with additional Fenner lines
in the United States,
Germany, and Switzerland*

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1954 to 1986

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*Dedicated to Eva Fenner,
and to the other Fenner researchers
around the world*

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It's All in a Name

The derivation of the name Fenner is plainly from the Anglo-Saxon word “fen” or “fenn,” a marsh or moorland. Bardsley’s dictionary speaks of Fenn and Venner as variations of the same name. As shown by its variations, beginning with Atte Fenn, it seems fairly clear to many that Fenner is a place-name, meaning those who lived at the fenn. The change to Fenner from Atte Fenn, by omitting “atte” and adding “er” seemed to those old timers a more suitable, perhaps more genteel and French manner of saying “the one who lives at the fenn.”

Many places have been given the name Fenner. There is a Fenner Road in the vicinity of Southward, London, and a Fenn Place and Fenn Street in London. A town and its church in Madison County, New York are named Fenner after Governor James Fenner of Rhode Island. Fenner Pond, two miles southeast of old Cranston Village, Rhode Island; Fenner Brook, a new name on the Major Thomas Fenner farm, in Cranston; Fenner Street in Providence, Rhode Island; Fenner Hospital in Hobbes, New Mexico; and the hamlet of Fenner, California, all bear the name. You may also want to visit the North Fenner Lodge of Middletown, RI, or the Fenner House at Fredonia.

Fenner Street, which is two blocks long, joins two main business thoroughfares of Providence—Westminster and Broad. The statue at its entrance is that of Thomas A. Doyle, major for 18 years. The Catholic Cathedral occupies the main corner and along one side are a school, a hall, and parish buildings. Opposite the south end is Fenner House, a well-preserved two-story frame building of a style like many nineteenth century colonial residences and farm houses.

Some contest that the Fenners from this tree came from the Celtic tribe of Fens, which was instrumental in helping William the Conqueror become King of England in 1066. The name Fenner is mentioned a few times in the history of William’s conquest, and Fenners are known to have received land from William in return for their bravery. *See Historic Documents.*

Another name has been instrumental in the development of this family: God. Most of the early Fenners in this genealogy were Christians, and a good portion still are. Anyone reading this genealogy would become slowly aware that the success of this family is deeply related to its ties to Christianity. The success is worth noting: there are two governors of Rhode Island, many high-ranking military officers, prize-winning authors, Justices of the Peace, educators, doctors, ministers, and many others who demonstrated a passion for being an honorable servant to society. This alone might not qualify the name for greatness, but the fact that there are less than ten thousand Fenners in the United States should conjure up some idea of the relative magnitude of this line. Of all the Fenners that have been at war, only two have been killed. Richard L. Fenner, of Quincy, Fl., sums things up nicely: “It can be said that surely the Lord has kept his hand upon us, and for this we thank him.”

A Note From Alfred Fenner Isham

The reverend J. P. Root of Providence, Rhode Island, who was blessed with a suitable location, published a Fenner genealogy in two parts, which has been the authority on this family. His first part detailed the life of the original Captain Arthur Fenner, wherein may be found many minor facts not included in this book. The second section was devoted to the family's descendants for three generations, and to him I am indebted for the first ninety-three names in this chronology.

This family failed, like others of Colonial times, to record births, perhaps also marriages and deaths. They were obliged in very early times to use unlettered stones from the fields as tombstones. Public records included a number of Fenners as Revolutionary War soldiers whose parentage and descendants remain unknown. For these reasons, investigators are likely to experience great difficulty in connecting branches correctly. Some doubt has arisen whether Mr. Root has not omitted a name or two. This had occurred to me owing to the unaccountable number of families in the census of 1774, when the same thought was expressed by Henry Lee Pratt of Oaklawn, Rhode Island, who has been an extensive investigator of this tribe. Mr. Root devoted great pains to obtaining all names of the first three generations, and anyone who attempts to go farther with the lines of descent will discover immediately why Root desisted at that point.

The period from 1750 to 1800 was one of war and migration. The Fenners began to move from Rhode Island, but gave many of their children the same Christian names of fathers or uncles still in Rhode Island, and in so doing, lost identity. The Arthurs of the Revolutionary period and other times have been fairly well untangled.

...

The writer of this portion of this book does not assume to have improved upon Mr. Root's praiseworthy efforts. None of us can be perfect. With the aid of what has here been added to his information, many Fenners will be able to connect themselves, who could not have done so before. Libraries used were: in 1925, [New York Public Library](#) and [Providence Public Library](#) and Rhode Island Historical Library; in 1928, [Los Angeles Public Library](#) and [Sons of Revolution Library](#).

An effort has been made to gather general data of historical interest to members of the family, and a brief idea of the family prestige in England. It is my hope that the opening chapters will prove popular reading for all Fenners. In the chronology no attempt has been made to expand upon the biography, and the information in the libraries of Rhode Island upon these and a few other Fenners is too voluminous for publication in this book.

In many cases I have stated sources of information, but in a book of this kind it seems next to impossible to do this always. There must be many errors, but I trust that those who need to know of them will be able to straighten them out for their own purposes, such as the joining of patriotic societies. The descriptive matter and incidents were easily gathered, but the chronology from 1740 to 1800 has proved to

be a task well nigh insurmountable; that is, in its ideal completeness. There were many Fenners who were Revolutionary soldiers, yet those parents' and childrens' names are still unknown. There is data scattered about the country, without a doubt, among those now living, which will supply some of these missing links.

Alfred Fenner Isham
Los Angeles, California
February 15, 1929

Prologue

I still find it admirable that Eva Fenner produced most of this genealogy, and she did it without the aid of a computer. Lord knows that throughout the preparation to get this genealogy ready for publication, I might as well have had a laptop tied around my neck. Over the course of thirty years, she painstakingly researched and put together this tremendous collection of people that have all lived by the name Fenner at some time or another. Couple this with the idea that everything was typewritten and hand-corrected, and it should doubtlessly leave anyone that reads this with a sense of awe and respect for the many hours of Eva's life that were poured into establishing the story of the foundation of this small, but triumphant, family.

Many thanks go to the efforts of my father, who turned Eva's typewritten family tree into a computerized form. This was the spring-board that helped make this genealogy possible. A debt is also owed to the researchers in New York, Indiana, Florida, Maryland, and Nevada that sent updated information on their lines. These men have also put countless hours into the development of their own respective family trees, and their willingness to share their hard work is highly commendable.

I have a newfound respect for the convenience of owning a computer, which is a luxury that Eva did not have. The computer has allowed for countless revisions — appending, deleting, cross-checking — and has revealed many errors and conflicts between sources. This has also been my own undoing. Finding an error means locating the sources and consulting other publications, which can be very frustrating. There have been many instances where other publications give names and dates but do not name sources, which means that the information is being regurgitated without being verified. For an example of the confusion, see the notes on Arthur Fenner [F 1252]. This frustration is mirrored in the comments of other researchers, such as Mabel Fenner Lyons:

I don't pretend to know much about such things, but you will agree there is always plenty of room for errors. Dates on tombstones get worn away, partially or completely, and could be interpreted wrong. ... I realize the ink for some of those old records could be equally poor, and if the person compiling a book deciphered or guessed at a date or made a mistake when copying his own work, then people like us have no choice but to accept the dates or go around in circles trying to entangle a seemingly impossible relationship such as we have encountered.

Fortunately, the trouble that plagues many researchers has created a desire to make sure that this genealogy is historically accurate, meticulously documented, and easy to navigate. Hopefully, this will be a starting point for a string of related genealogies that can agree on every detail, and it will be a stopping point for the senseless duplication of someone else's errors.

Lest I forget, the goal of this genealogy is not just to straighten out history, but to provide a comprehensive account of an awesome family. This way, anyone who

wants to know where Fenner roots originate can easily find and understand information regarding our past. History, after all, is supposed to be a way to see where we've been, and to prepare the best pathway for the future.

July 4, 2000

The internet has proved to be a marvelous resource in the quest for genealogical information. It is also a valuable tool for networking people together. When fennerfamily.com was established in the summer of 2000, I knew of only a handful of Fenner researchers, and even less who had made any significant progress toward finding their roots. As people began to find the website through popular search engines or by word-of-mouth, it wasn't long before I started to get a regular flow of email from researchers across the US and even from interested people in other countries. The list of Fenners on the web has been an incredible demonstration of the power of the internet open new boundaries. Researchers who had once been alone in their searches now have an abundance of fellow researchers with which to compare notes and share information.

The amazing response to the website has resulted in a deluge of information and numerous requests for help in connecting unknown lines of Fenners. The collection of valuable information through email communication has been so overwhelming that it is now difficult to keep up with it all. I find myself in an interesting position as a genealogist: my great-grandmother performed a lot of leg-work to assemble her family tree, as many others still do, but I have had the great fortune to have people *send* me information on a regular basis. All I have to do is sort it and assimilate it into this publication. With this great fortune, however, comes great responsibility. If this publication is to continue to be a family tree for all Fenners, then the information contained within must continue to be easy to access, and it needs to provide the tools to help people continue their searches beyond the information provided here. In other words, if this publication is someone's last hope of making a connection, then it hasn't empowered them to find new ways to broaden their search. Ultimately, the success of this publication will only continue to grow if it meets the needs of researchers on every level, and the work involved is shared in such a way that the family tree does not stagnate under the limitations of having a singular editor, researcher, helper, writer, and webmaster.

The future looks bright for Fenner research. I only hope that this new network of Fenners becomes a family of researchers rather than a community of loosely related strangers.

May 17, 2002

Kalamazoo, Michigan

Chris Fenner, Editor