As we approach Gloucester’s quadricentennial, I summon memories of 1623, the year my ancestor Roger Conant first landed in Massachusetts. But I also point to Gloucester’s tricentennial year 1923 and Roger’s 11th generation descendant, my father, Harold Conant Varney. A strange confluence of events beginning in that year led to Harold’s multiple name changes, referred to herein as “The strange saga of Harold Varney.” Finally, I come full circle to 2023, to myself and my son Roger, the 13th generation descendant and namesake of the immigrant Conant.

Where My Story Began

Roger Conant was one of New England’s founding fathers; but one might ask why Harold is so significant. There are other direct descendants of Roger Conant who can and will recount Conant family history; but there is nothing quite like an enigma wrapped in a riddle to bring out the closet genealogist in all of us. The strange saga of Harold Varney spurred me, his son Earl, to delve deeply into genealogical research on our ancestor Roger Conant. I studied everything I could find on Roger and the period 1623-1630 of the budding Massachusetts Bay Colony. In grade school, I learned that the Pilgrims came in 1620 and Governor Winthrop brought his fleet of Puritans in 1630; but all the history books just skipped over that whole decade of the 1620s! Given my connection to Roger, I knew there had to be a lot more — and I now have an entire bookcase of books and research notes on this period that includes Gloucester and Salem histories, Pilgrim and Puritan manuscripts.
In the period 1607-1630, basically 4 categories of people came to the New England shores: 1) fishermen, 2) planters (also called "settlers," persons who tried to start plantations and farm the land), 3) preachers, and 4) outcasts such as criminals and orphans that many overcrowded London institutions wanted to jettison.

Roger Conant

Many fishermen visited Gloucester’s shores; but attempts to settle the land in 1623-24 ended in failure. Roger Conant was recognized as the first planter to successfully start and maintain a Gloucester settlement in 1625. Specifically, he was the first to create a settlement and not a) die trying, b) return to England discouraged, or c) migrate further South in search of arable lands and or religious freedoms such as the early Quakers who were forced to leave New England or be persecuted.

Roger arrived at the Plymouth Colony on the ship “Prophet John” in 1623, although many records wrongly had him on the ship “Ann.” It was Roger’s older brother Christopher who came on the “Ann,” but no record exists for him after 1630. He either died in America or returned to England – without a wife or any children. Roger came to America with a wife and had a LOT of children once here, 10, to be exact. “Lot” was in fact his 4th child’s name and this biblical name was reused multiple times in the ancestral generations to follow, including for my father Harold.
In Plymouth, Roger and his men had theological differences with the Separatist Pilgrims who had actually “separated” from the Church of England. Conant’s group still followed the tenets of the mother church but were “nonconformist Puritans.” Thus, Conant relocated to Nantasket (modern day Hull, MA) in 1624. In 1625, Rev. John White of Dorchester England, Father of the Cape Anne (later “Ann”) Colony, asked Roger to come to Cape Anne and be the first Governor of the colony. There was a dispute over the fishing rights between Miles Standish and Capt. Hewes at Fisherman’s Field (today, Stage Fort Park), but Roger managed to keep the peace. This is memorialized in a tableau on a huge boulder in the park where my family and I have spent many Sunday evenings listening to the band concerts under its gaze.

Although Cape Ann, and specifically Gloucester, was the first seat of the settled colony, Roger soon decided that the land wasn’t arable – not suitable for farming. As one genealogist cynically told me, “the main crop in this area was rock.” Yes, the fishing was great, but the farming not so much. So, in 1626, Roger sought better soil in Naumkeag (present day Salem, MA). But Roger’s term as Governor of the Colony would end in 1628 when John Endicott arrived with orders from the King of England to take charge. Then, in 1630, a huge new wave of ships arrived – the Winthrop Fleet – and John Winthrop was in charge. Winthrop moved the seat of the colony from Salem to Shawmut (present day Boston, MA), and of course the old “Cape Anne Colony” was now supplanted by the “Massachusetts Bay Colony!!!” And the rest, as they say, is history!
1923 – Harold Conant Varney

Now, time travel forward 300 years to Roger’s descendent Harold. The strange saga of Harold Varney begins. Actually born in 1922 as Harold Lot Hodsdon Conant, Harold’s saga began on March 21, 1923 with the death of his birth mother Bertha Hodsdon Conant. His father, Frank, was left alone to raise their four children. When Harold, and then wife Janice, my parents, died, I inherited their files and records – a vast treasure trove of family secrets. I discovered original birth certificates, of which Harold had several, as well as other documents and letters. Through those items a chronology of Harold’s identity presents a very confusing saga.

~ In 1922 – A "stork" postcard: Mr. & Mrs. Frank Grovernor Conant announce the birth of Harold Lot Hodsdon Conant on June 8, 1922. HLHC is born!

~ Later in 1922 – A postcard signed "Merry Christmas" from Bertha Conant, with a picture of her son Harold at age 5 months. HLHC as baby.

~ On March 21, 1923 – A letter from Dawn Conant (Frank’s sister and Harold’s aunt): “We have met with a great sorrow. Bertha passed away suddenly of heart failure yesterday.” HLHC was 9 months old.

Now the twist. Shortly after Bertha’s death, Frank set about asking his sisters to raise his four children for him. The older three (Edna – DOB 1911, Francis DOB 1917, and Roxa DOB 1918) went to live with their aunt Dawn Conant. The baby – Harold – went to another sister, his aunt, Roxa Ellen Conant Varney. But there was no formal adoption here. So, upon the request of an unknown relative, Earl B. Hodsdon brother of the deceased Bertha and town clerk printed up a new birth certificate.
for Harold identifying his parents as Charles E. Varney and Roxa E. Conant. Yes, a forged birth certificate and even backdated. The forged birth certificate states the child’s name as Harold Hodsdon Conant Varney. His middle name ‘Lot’ was gone, Varney was appended. And thus, HHCV was born. Although Later in life, Harold dropped the "H" for Hodsdon and became HCV.

The truth slowly began to unravel in 1975 when Roxa Conant died of breast cancer at age 57. Born in 1918, remember she had been raised by their Aunt Dawn. In her Last Will and Testament she named Harold as her blood brother. Of course, Harold had no idea he was actually Roxa’s brother. When confronted, Harold’s “adoptive” mother, Roxa Ellen Conant Varney, refused to “come clean” about the illicit adoption. Instead, she attributed the sister-brother characterization in the Will as "a typo."

More than five years went by and in 1981 Roxa Ellen Conant Varney died. Harold, at age 60, finally learned the truth about his identity. Harold was crushed by this late-in-life discovery of his true identity. Several factors influenced his feelings. Firstly, everyone else in the family already knew and we all kept this family secret, a secret mandated by the Matriarch Roxa! Even Harold’s wife Janice, my mother, held this secret in her heart for years. A medical concern in my infancy caused my mother great concern. Matriarch Roxa allayed those concerns by disclosing the real parentage of my father but swore her to secrecy. When I reached adulthood, my mother shared her burden of knowledge with me but in the deepest of confidential agreements.
Secondly, Harold adored, idolized, his “adoptive” father Charles Varney, Roxa’s husband. A pillar of his community, a superintendent of schools, he was well known and respected. Conversely, Harold’s biological father, Frank Conant, was considered a family pariah. Harold had to also confront this truth. Frank pawned off all of his children before remarrying and starting a wholly new and separate family. Harold had supposed this second batch of children to be his cousins, but they were actually his half-sisters and half-brothers.

Ironically, despite his Conant lineage, Harold wasn’t my first parent or ancestor to live in Gloucester, spending glorious summers on this eastern shoreline. That would have been my mother, Janice Steely Varney.

Harold returned from his WWII service in the U.S. Army Air Force and became a graduate student at Boston University. While there he met 17-year-old Janice, also a Boston University student but at six and one-half years younger, she was an undergraduate freshman. At a University dance Harold, instantly smitten, was determined to marry her. Although Janice’s parents, Alice and Lyle Steely, liked this 24-year-old “young” man, they told him that he had to wait until Janice turned 21. If, of course, he was still interested he could marry her then. A whole four years hence, Janice turned 21 in February 1950. They wed in June of that same year.

Janice’s maternal grandparents, Emil Lassen and Johanna Ljungberg, had emigrated from Denmark and Sweden respectively. They married and settled in Gloucester in 1880. Many years later in 1937,
their daughter Alice and her husband Lyle, Janice’s parents, purchased a cottage on Mill River in the Riverdale section of Gloucester. When Alice and Lyle became aged, they sold the cottage to Janice and Harold, my parents. My brother Ross and I grew up enjoying our summers in Gloucester, our second home. Now, we continue those summer traditions having inherited this peaceful and memory-laden summer cottage.

I never thought I would be interested in history; I was a "Math nerd" with a degree in Applied Mathematics from Brown University and an MBA in Finance from Wharton. As first a Loan Officer and later as a Risk Manager, my entire working career was spent in the financial services industry. About the only “historical” research I ever did was to collect baseball cards of my heroes from the 1960’s! But when I learned that I was a direct lineal descendant of Roger Conant, my long-dormant “history” gene was awakened.
The focus of my Gloucester 400 Story has been 1623 (Roger) and 1923 (Harold); but I thought it’d be fun to walk through each of the four centuries of Conant and Gloucester history. So, let me Chart the Centuries of my Conant Family from 1623 to 2023 for you.

1623: First Generation Roger Conant, 31 years old, youngest of 8 children of Richard (1548-1630) and Agnes Conant of East Budleigh, Devonshire, England, set sail for America. Roger had married Sarah Horton in 1618 and had 10 children; but a daughter and 4 of their 5 sons died young. Roger was my great, great ... great (9 “greats”) grandfather.

1723: Fifth Generation Lot Conant, 5 years old, having been born in 1718 in Bridgewater MA. He would marry Betty Holmes and have 6 children. Lot was my great, great ... (5 “greats”) grandfather.

1823: Eighth Generation Lot Conant, 3 years old, having been born in 1820 in Turner, Maine. This Lot would marry Roxa Staples and have 6 children – one of which was my great grandfather, Joseph Henry Conant. This Lot, however, was my great, great grandfather.

1923: Eleventh Generation Harold Lot Hodsdon Conant, aka Harold Conant Varney, was 9 months old when he was taken in by Charles Varney & Roxa Ellen Conant Varney and raised as their own son, whom you know by now was my father.

2023: Twelfth Generation Earl Varney and Thirteenth Generation Roger Hale Varney, my son. Together we continue the Conant legacy. Yes, Roger was named for our immigrant ancestor! Roger is a Research Scientist currently based in California.
Our Conant/Varney family – me, my wife Mina, our son Roger and daughter Hilary – dream of celebrating our heritage in 2023 – a time to hopefully reunite with Conants in New England. We pray for generations of Conant descendants to come—in Gloucester and beyond—and a world where we all have learned to love and respect one another, whether or not one is a descendant of Roger Conant!

- Written and Submitted by Earl Varney

Sources
Conant and Varney family personal communications
Conant and Varney family documents
Books and research notes on Gloucester and Salem histories
Pilgrim and Puritan manuscripts