

John Winthrop, Jr.

Governor of the Colony of Connecticut, 1657, 1659-1676

Born: February 12, 1605/6, Groton, Suffolk, England

College: Trinity College, Dublin

Political Party: None

Offices: Assistant, General Court, Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1631-1649

Governor, Colony of Connecticut, 1657, 1659-1676

Deputy Governor, Colony of Connecticut, 1658

Died: April 5, 1676, Boston, Massachusetts

John Winthrop, often known as "John Winthrop, Junior" or "the Younger", was the eldest son of John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and Mary Forth, his first wife. His parents were wealthy, and in 1622, at age 16, he was sent to Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, for a general education. Two years later, he returned to England and studied law until 1627, when he went to sea, first to France as a secretary to a captain on a military expedition, then to Turkey, Italy, and Holland as a regular traveler. When he came home to England in August of 1629, he found that his father was preparing to leave for America as the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His father left in the spring of 1630, and John stayed behind to care for his stepmother, Margaret (Tyndal) Winthrop, and the Winthrop children, as well as his father's businesses.



On February 8, 1630/1, he married his cousin Martha Fones, daughter of Thomas and Anne (Winthrop) Fones of London. Some of their correspondence after marriage was in code, and not deciphered until almost three centuries later.

Late in August of 1631, John, his wife, and the other Winthrops left for Boston. The group arrived in October 1631, and in December, John Winthrop, Jr. was elected as an Assistant to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In March 1633 he established a settlement at Agawam (Ipswich). His wife and infant daughter died there in the summer of 1634, at which time he returned to England to visit friends. There, on July 6, 1635, he married Elizabeth Reade, daughter of Edmund Reade of Wickford, Co. Essex.

In July 1635 Lord Brooke, Lord Saye and Sele, and several others hired Winthrop to establish a colony on land at the mouth of the Connecticut River, and agreed to make him "governor of the river Connecticut" for one year after his arrival there. He and Elizabeth returned to Boston in October 1635, and in November he sent twenty men to claim the land and build some houses. He named the area "Say-Brook" in honor of his employers. In March 1636 Lion Gardner began overseeing the construction of a fort, and Winthrop arrived in April. He worked on the Saybrook project until his commission expired in July and then returned to Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony conquered the Pequots of eastern Connecticut in 1637 and considered Pequot lands to be its territory. In 1640, the Colony gave Fisher's Island, at the mouth of the Thames River, to John Winthrop, Junior, and in 1644, he received a grant of land "at or near Pequott". Winthrop chose a site on the mainland across from his island, and named it "Nameaug". It later became New London.

The Winthrop family did not come to Fisher's Island until the fall of 1646, and in 1647, they moved to New London. Winthrop was then serving in the government of the Bay Colony, and traveled back and forth to Boston. However, the New England Confederation,

formed to encourage cooperation among the New England colonies, ruled that the New London area should be a part of Connecticut. Winthrop refused re-election to the government of Massachusetts Bay Colony, was declared a freeman of Connecticut in 1650, and became active in Connecticut politics. The spring of 1651 saw Winthrop elected as an Assistant.

John Winthrop was more than a skilled leader. He was an avid chemist and practical scientist, famous for starting one of the first ironworks in Massachusetts (1633), for his interest in developing mines, and for his experiments in obtaining salt from sea water by evaporation. He had previously acquired some mineral rights in Connecticut, but in the 1650s, he obtained even more. While the cost of exploration and development was his, the knowledge he gained about the deposits benefited the Colony of Connecticut.

He was also a physician, who treated an average of twelve patients a day by traveling around the colony. It is believed that he served up to 500 families out of a population of some 5,000 persons. He was so successful as such that the people of New Haven (then a separate colony), persuaded him to move there in 1655. The real attraction for him was not the free house and other amenities that the town offered (which he refused), but that he had ironworks there that he wanted to develop.

New London tried to lure him back, but in May of 1657 he was elected governor of the Connecticut Colony, and moved to Hartford. He could not be re-elected in 1658, as the one-term-only rule for governors was still in effect. That law was changed as of 1659. During 1658, John Winthrop served as Deputy Governor of the Colony of Connecticut. From 1659 to 1676, John Winthrop was always re-elected as governor of Connecticut Colony. He continued to be successful in governmental life because he was an excellent diplomat and very popular. His diplomatic charm was now about to help Connecticut.

Normally, colonies could not be started without permission from the Crown. But the Connecticut Colony had been established without an authorized charter, though with permission of the government of the Bay Colony, in answer to church differences and crowding in the Bay Colony. This was not a problem as long as the Puritans were in power, but in 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne. This placed Connecticut in an awkward position -- a colony of Puritans, with no real legal status. It was completely at the mercy of the Crown.

Governor John Winthrop was sent to England in 1661 as the agent of the Connecticut Colony, to obtain a charter. Lord Saye, Winthrop's former employer and a Puritan, had friends in high Royalist circles. Winthrop was introduced to Lord Saye's friends, and soon had made many friends for the cause of the Connecticut Colony. He gained a charter for Connecticut in 1662, one that gave it lands from the Pawcatuck River westward to the "South Sea" (i.e., Pacific Ocean). The charter also merged the New Haven Colony (which also had no legal status) with the Connecticut Colony. This came as a surprise to most citizens of the New Haven Colony, and some of them were extremely upset. Discussions were held between the two colonies, until the Colony of Connecticut officially took over the government in 1664. A number of New Haven colonists who were still unhappy with the situation left for New Jersey in 1667. Among them was Robert Treat, who ultimately returned to Connecticut and served as its governor from 1683 until 1698.

Winthrop returned to Connecticut in 1663, and in 1664, he assisted in Charles II's surprise seizure of the Dutch New Netherlands (Manhattan Island). This act caused war between England and Holland, and Dutch harassment of shipping to the English colonies. Governor Winthrop lost at least one cargo of goods due to this, and also suffered other financial reverses. He decided in 1667 that he needed to leave the governorship and devote time to his own businesses, but the Connecticut Colony refused his resignation and exempted him from some taxes, to persuade him to stay in office. He tried to resign again in October of 1670, but the Connecticut Colony again refused to grant his request, raising his salary and giving him land as a further enticement to stay.

His second wife, Elizabeth (Reade) Winthrop, died in 1672. John Winthrop did not remarry. The couple had nine children, one of whom was ["Fitz-John" Winthrop](#), a future governor of the Colony of Connecticut.

John Winthrop was a man of many talents. He had a mind with a scientific bent, one that was curious about everything. In an age when most people had only several books, he had a library of a thousand volumes, on various subjects, in a number of languages. He corresponded with scientists in England, and during his 1661-1663 visit, was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London for Improving of Natural Knowledge. He read papers before that Society, and over the years, sent them a number of New World natural curiosities. The items caused such a sensation on one occasion, that King Charles II himself asked to see them. The unusual plants and animals were shown to the King, who was greatly taken with "pods with silk like cotton" (milkweed), and wanted a pillow made of them. The King eventually had to be persuaded that they were too delicate for such a pillow to be practical. Winthrop later shipped milkweed pods to England, especially for the King.

Winthrop's scientific interests also extended to the heavens. He had a three-and-a-half-foot telescope, and while he lived in Hartford in 1664, he claimed he saw, or thought he saw, a fifth moon of Jupiter. He reported the sighting to the Royal Society, but there was no confirmation of it. It was not until September 1892 that Edward Barnard of the Lick Observatory definitely established the existence of such a moon.

King Phillip's War had caused the New England Confederation to be convened in Boston in the fall of 1675, and the deliberations went into the spring of 1676. Winthrop had attended, and was preparing to leave Boston at the end of March, when he caught a bad cold. His health quickly worsened, and on April 5, 1676, he died in Boston. He was buried in the King's Chapel Burying-ground, beside his father, John Winthrop, Senior.

There is a community called Winthrop in Deep River, which also has a school named in his honor. New London also has a school named for Winthrop, located on the site where his house once stood. New London maintains a statue on Winthrop and has a street and an avenue named for him. His original mill in New London is still standing and is open to visitors.

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Portrait

This portrait was painted by George F. Wright (1828-1881) from a copy owned by Greenville L. Winthrop. It is 34" x 39" in its frame.

Prepared by the History and Genealogy Unit, Connecticut State Library, April 1999.