

Obadiah Holmes, of Newport, R.I.

THIS worthy Baptist champion of religious freedom was born near Manchester in 1609 being the second son of Robert Hulme who had married Catherine Johnson.

In the seventeenth century we find a remarkable number of families of this name in the south of Manchester which is evidenced by the number of their wills proved at Chester.

As a place name it appears in the city district of Hulme, the word meaning low lying land beside a stream.

To-day we find adjacent townships known as Levenshulme Kirkmanshulme and Davyhulme, while Rushulme is now always spelt Rusholme. This variant was adopted by several branches of this numerous family, of which in the Owen MSS there are over 2000 entries.

Thanks to the researches of Mr. Ernest Axon of the Manchester City Library, the particulars of Robert Hulme's household are well known. He was described as a husbandman of Reddish, and three of his sons studied at Oxford.

Both the eldest son John and a younger one named Samuel entered at Brazenose College, which owing to the scholarships there tenable by Manchester Grammar School boys, has always had a close connection with the city.

Obadiah is stated to have been the third son who went to Oxford, but his college has not been traced. He had been christened on March 18, 1609, at St. James' Chapel, Didsbury, which was then under the

Collegiate Church of Manchester where Obadiah on November 20, 1630 was married to Katherine Hyde.

In 1633 their child who had been named John died in infancy. Of his other brothers Robert Hulme junior, the seventh child, became a ruling elder at the old Presbyterian Church at Gorton, while another Obadiah, probably a nephew, appears as a contributor to the building fund of Platt Chapel in 1692.

The great civil war was looming in the near future, and Scotland had already its Covenantors sworn to resist the royal interference with their faith, when Obadiah Holmes and his young wife emigrated to New England. His mother had passed away in 1630 and his father was to follow her within two years.

From the turmoil of the old country, however, the pilgrims passed to the religious strife of New England.

The attempt by the Pedobaptist Independents to force Baptists and Friends to submit to their jurisdiction had compelled Roger Williams to migrate to Rhode Island, and Obadiah Hulme, who henceforth wrote his surname "Holmes," became a member of the First Baptist Church of Newport in that colony.

In 1651 occurred the incident which has made him famous. Appointed a church delegate to the Baptist Church at Lynn in Massachusetts, Holmes was with two friends arrested while his pastor, Dr. John Clarke, was preaching and taken forcibly to the Independent Church.

A magistrate's warrant had been obtained by the ruling sect and it was executed at the house of William Witter, also an emigrant and believed to be a member of family whose name appears among those who worshipped with the Baptist Church, Hill Cliff near Warrington, where the graves of John Witter and several of his family who died between 1676 and 1692 are seen to-day.

Holmes was fined £30 with the alternative of a public whipping. Dr. Clarke and other friends were also fined in their cases the money was forthcoming. Holmes, however, was obdurate and was sent to gaol where he remained some months. Then the barbarous sentence was carried out, and in the public square he received thirty lashes from the hangman's three-cord whip.

Some bystanders expressed their sympathy and thirteen of them were consequently sentenced to fines or whipping.

Holmes succeeded Dr. Clarke as pastor at Newport and died there in 1682 leaving a numerous family.

The "New England Historical and Genealogical Register" Vols lxiv-v Boston 1910-1 contain fuller details of the family, contributed by a descendant, Colonel J. T. Holmes. A subsequent vol. contains copy of the will of Obadiah Holmes and also further evidence of his Manchester origin.

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Now comes Mr. Allen C. Thomas, who in the Journal of the Friends' Historical Society, xiii, 38, points out that the Pilgrims at New Plymouth, passed a law on 12 June 1650 forbidding people "meeting on the Lord's Day from house to house." Under this law, Obadiah Holmes was presented on 2 October 1650, with eight others. Thus the scandal of beginning the persecution of Baptists in America rests not on the Puritans of Massachusetts, who did indeed flog Holmes next year for preaching and baptizing at Lynn in 1651, but upon the Pilgrim Fathers, whose governor was then the famous William Bradford, an exile from Austerfield for conscience' sake.