

FROM MATHEW TO ME
THE STORY OF THE SEAY FAMILY IN WHICH I RESIDE
by
Raleigh F. (Sandy) Seay, Jr., Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician, in searching for his philosophical roots, once posed the haunting question, “Why me, why here, why now?”

“When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am frightened and am astonished at being here rather than there; for there is no reason why here rather than there, why now rather than then. Who has put me here? By whose order and direction have this place and time been allotted to me?”¹

In searching for our genealogical roots, we might ask ourselves the same question – “Why am **I** in America now? Why am I in **America** now? Why am I in America **now**? The fact is that, unless you are a Native American, your roots are in some other country. Up until the middle 20th century, you would probably find that “other country” either in Europe or Africa, except for a few places on the west coast of America. Lately, your “other country” might be located in Asia, South America or one of the Central American or Caribbean nations. For me, however, that “other country” is Ireland.

¹ Blaise Pascal, “The Necessity of Hope,” Classics of Western Thought: The Modern World, ed. Edgar E. Knoebel, 4th ed. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich College Publishers, 1992) 51.

CHAPTER 1

MATHEW SEAY OR, PERHAPS, MATHEW SEE.

Mathew SEAY/SEE was the original immigrant to this country for my Seay family. While he may be ancestor to other SEAYs, I will only deal with my personal line in this story, because I can conclusively prove my ancestry to Mathew SEAY, through primary documentary evidence. I am 9th in descent from Mathew SEAY, the Irish immigrant.

In America, Mathew's name first appears in the records of Old Rappahannock County, Virginia, on September 1, 1685 when he brought suit against a resident of that county, a person by the name of Hugh French.²

“1 September 1685, p. 169 (248) [Old] Rappahannock County, Virginia, Court Orders: Reference granted between Mathew SEE, Plt. and Hugh French Deft. till next North side court”.

In this suit, Mathew's surname is spelled SEE. The surviving court record does not provide the reason for the suit or any other information, but it does establish the fact that Mathew was in America, in Virginia, in 1685, and that he was at least twenty-one years of age at that point. We know this because, according to the laws of Virginia at the time, a person must have been at least twenty-one years old to file a lawsuit in Virginia. Thus, in order to file the lawsuit on September 1, 1685, he must have arrived in Virginia at some point prior to that date, and must have been at least twenty-one at the time.

According to the same county records, the lawsuit was continued on December 1, 1686, some fourteen months later.

“Mathew SEE vs. Hugh French referred till next court”.³

For whatever reason, the lawsuit is not mentioned in other documents and we do not know the disposition of it. Mathew seems not to have been a resident of Old Rappahannock County, since his name does not appear on the county records while the defendant's name, Hugh French, does so appear, seeming to suggest that Hugh French was a resident of Old Rappahannock County and Mathew was not. There is no further mention of Mathew SEE in any Old Rappahannock Record that has survived.⁴ Note that Mathew's surname is spelled SEE on both court documents, one fourteen months removed from the other, leading one to wonder which way Mathew preferred to spell his surname. Was it SEE? Or, was it SEAY?⁵

² Official court records of Old Rappahannock County, specifically that part which eventually became Richmond County.

³ Ibid. 1 December, 1686.

⁴ Old Rappahannock County and Essex County later joined to form Richmond County. Mathew's name is not found on any other surviving document in those counties.

⁵ The question of original or preferred spelling is rampant in genealogy. One of the first principles of genealogical research is, “Look for the current way you spell your surname, as well as any other way it could have been spelled.

Mathew's name does not appear again on any surviving record for the next 19 years. This time, it appears King William County, Virginia, approximately thirty miles to the south of Old Rappahannock County. On May 20, 1704, Mathew purchased 200 acres of land in King William County from James and Margaret Honey.⁶

“James and Margaret Honey of St. Stephens psh county of King & Queen to Mathew SEY of King William, 200 acs in St. John's psh on the north side of Machacomico Sw. 20 May 1704.”

Please note that, in the document that records this transaction, Mathew's surname is spelled SEY. Why is his name spelled differently here? Is this a phonetic equivalent? Did Mathew tell the recorder how to spell the name? Or, did the recorder simply write down what he heard?

On October 13 of that same year, 1704, some five months later, the records reveal that the Honeys sold another 200 acres of land to a gentleman named Isaac Hill. The description of the sale states that, of the original 600 acres owned by the Honeys, the other 400 acres had been sold to “Matthew SEA and Dennitt Abney.” Note that, in this document, Mathew's Christian name is spelled with two “t's” and his surname is spelled SEA.⁷ Once again, we have a different spelling of Mathew's surname. Once again, we wonder about the correct spelling of the name. One clue that suggests that SEA may not be correct is that this citation simply *refers* to Mathew. It is *not* a citation that deals directly with Mathew. Thus, one could argue that Mathew was likely not present and that the recorder simply utilized the spelling he thought might be correct.

“James and Margaret Honey (late Margaret Dixon) of St. Stephens psh and c. to Isaac Hill of same psh and co. the remainder of a patent of 600 acs patented 13 Oct 1702, the other 400 acs having been sold to Matthew SEA and Dennitt Abney so that the afsd 200 acs is that part left at the lower end of the afsd 600 acs. Wits: John Hurt, Den't Abney, Rice Williams.”

That same year, 1704, Mathew's name again appears in an official document, the Virginia Quit Rents.⁸ The Quit Rent was an annual tribute paid to the King of England by all of those persons owning land in Virginia. The Quit Rent record of 1704 is the only year that has survived and was maintained for many years in England, which is the only reason it survives at

Particularly, look for phonetic equivalents.” Virtually any researcher discovers, on his or her first day out, that one's name may have been spelled a variety of different ways. Some of them make sense and some do not. The spelling of surnames has evolved over the centuries and continues to do so, even today.

⁶ Old King William County Abstracts, 1702-1795, Volume I, Ryland.

⁷ Old King William County Abstracts, 1702-1795, Volume I, Ryland.

⁸ The Virginia Quit Rents, 1704, ed. Harold Oliver (D&H Publishing Company, 1993) 79. Note that the name of Mathew SEE appears as having paid the quit rent on 200 acres in King William County. Note, also, that no other SEE, SEAY, SEY or SEA is listed, meaning that Mathew is the only person by this surname to have owned land in King William County in 1704. Note, also, the names of Patrick Shea and Luke Shea, whose names establish the presence in the area of landowners of Irish descent. Note further that no Abraham SEAY or SAYE or SAY or other variant spelling is listed.

all, King William being one of several so-called “burned counties” in Virginia. Since Mathew did, in fact, own 200 acres land in King William County, Virginia, he was required to pay this Quit Rent tax. On this record, Mathew was taxed for his 200 acres of land, and, on this document, his name is again spelled SEE, as it was in 1685 and 1686.

In September of 2001, I placed a call to the Library of Virginia, which is the official repository of historical and genealogical documents and records in Virginia. I spoke with one of the professional historians there and he informed me of the following. The only reason we have the 1704 Quit Rent record is that it was stored in England. The records for the other years were burned during the War Between the States. The Virginia county sheriff is the person responsible for collecting the Quit Rent and would very likely have known how tax payers preferred to spell their names. If a person owned 200 acres of prime farm land in the middle of King William County, the sheriff would have known how that person preferred to spell his name. Most of the other names on the Quit Rent list are spelled as the tax payers preferred. Thus, he said, it is likely that the spelling of Mathew’s name as SEE is the way that Mathew preferred to spell it at the time the Quit Rent was collected.

Therefore, one sees SEE on two occasions, 1685 and 1686, and one sees SEY, SEA and SEE (again) in three recordings of Mathew’s surname during the same year, 1704. These spellings suggest that his name was pronounced as SEE, or something very similar. There is no record on which Mathew’s name suggests a SAY pronunciation.

Mathew's name appears on the records for the final time (at least on surviving documents) in King William County in 1721/1722 (the date is somewhat difficult to read).⁹

The deed of land from Isaac Hill to Joseph Hail, “. . .being before sold and conveyed Part to Mathew SEAY. . . .”

In this case, the 200 acres of Honey land originally sold to Isaac Hill was being sold by Hill to Joseph Hail and, in order to describe the location of the land, the recorder stated that it was located near the land previously sold to Mathew SEAY. This citation suggests that Mathew was alive at this time (1721/22) because the notation does not include the word “deceased,” as would have been the custom, were he dead. This is the first record on which Mathew’s name is spelled SEAY. Why was it spelled this way? Again, this is a document that only refers to Mathew, it does not deal directly with Mathew. How long had the name been spelled this way? Is this a misspelling on the part of the recorder, or is this Mathew’s preference? Is this the way Mathew’s name should have been spelled all along? At any rate, **a total of thirty-six years passed from the first time Mathew’s name appears in Virginia, when it was spelled SEE, until the last document on which his name is found, on which it was spelled SEAY. Thirty-six years from SEE to SEAY, at least on the surviving documents.** During these thirty-six years, the surname was spelled SEE (3 times) on surviving documents, more often than it was spelled any other way. The SEY and SEA spellings appear to be phonetic equivalents and not preferred spellings. What was the original spelling of Mathew’s surname?

- **Charles Taliaferro’s Claim Of Mathew SEA’s Headright Proves That Mathew Was An Immigrant.**

⁹ Virginia Colonial Abstracts, Volume II.

The areas of Virginia in which Mathew's name appears were areas where many English, Scottish and Irish settlers first arrived in Virginia. For example, Thomas Monteith of Richmond County was a "Merchant of Glasgow"¹⁰ and Francis Moore was a "merchant of Dublin."¹¹ It is common knowledge, however, that most, but not all, of the early settlers in Virginia were English.

In 1705, a Virginia gentleman by the name of Charles Taliaferro claimed the headright for a person named Mathew SEA. The Taliaferro family was prominent in eastern Virginia during this time and Virginia records document the fact that they claimed numerous headrights over a long period of time, perhaps forty years or more, and that the persons whose headrights they claimed were English, Scottish and Irish.¹² I have a comprehensive manuscript describing the Talliaferro family's activities in Virginia during this time. Charles Taliaferro was a son of the English immigrant Robert Taliaferro. The following citation records Charles Taliaferro's claim of Mathew's headright:

"Charles Talliafaro -- 966 A., 56 P., Essex County; on brs. of Ware Cr. and the Mount Cr.; on back of patent called Solomans Garden; adj. patent of John Hay & Christopher Robinson; & patent of Robert Thomas, Senr. 2 Nov. 1705, p. 695. Imp. of 20 pers: Symon Miller, Jane Miller, Wm. Eale, Tho. Thrap, Henry Gibbs, John Furrell, Symon Thompson, Patience Thompson, Elice Thomason, Isabella Harmon, Ester Smith, Richd. Board, Farmer Whitley, Margt. Signey, John Parkeson, **Math. Sea**, Eliz. Lefland, Fra. Wuitley."¹³

¹⁰ "MONTEITH, THOMAS [GENTLEMAN] (circa 1694-1746/7) married by 1737 Phillis [Telis] Gallop, daughter of Robert Gallop who died testate in Richmond County in 1720. On 30 July 1714 Thomas Monteith, Merchant of Glasgow, gave a power of attorney to Thomas White of Hanover Parish, Richmond County" Marriages of Richmond County, 136.

¹¹ "MOORE, FRANCIS (1660-1718) married 170? Ann, probably nee Harbin; this surname appears inconspicuously on the Richmond County Records. Francis Moore, merchant of Dublin, Ireland, and owner of the Dublin Merchant, imported many indentured servants into Virginia beginning in 1681. He appears frequently on the records of Rappahannock, Essex and Richmond counties and in 1703-1706 in Essex County was granted certificates for thousands of acres of land for the transportation of hundreds of indebted servants into Rappahannock River. On 10 May 1705, stating his age to be '45 or thereabouts,' he made a deposition in Essex County in regard to certain 'servants . . . he brought into the Colony . . . in the ship called the Dublin Merchant' in March 1699. . . ." Marriages of Richmond County, 136. This is another example of a person who saved and collected a number of headrights in order to secure a larger claim of land.

¹² For example, please note this citation from Cavaliers and Pioneers where Charles' brother, Robert Taliaferro, claimed the headrights for 14 persons: "ROBT. TALIAFERO, sonn of Robt. Taliafer, 739 acs., Rappa. Co., in the freshes & on S. side Rappa. Ri. adj. Hen. Corbyn, Esqr. & Mr. Grimes; 17 Mar. 1672/3, p. 445. 100 his due as *Grandchild* of sd. Grimes; 639 acs. for trans. of 14 pers: Tho. Dowler, Patrick the Irishman, Isaack Johnson, Geo. Flower, Richd. Beale, Lewis Davis, Jacob Plower, John Pettit, Pestee Sutton, James Bromfeild, Robt. Franckland, Tho. Brumfeild, Elinor Foord, Edwd. Starke." It is instructive, within the context of our Seay family discussion, to note the different spellings of names, even within the same citation. Note, also, that the Taliaferro's claimed the headright of at least one Irishman.

¹³ Cavaliers and Pioneers, Nugent, p. 101 (Patent Book 9). The citation reads ". . . Mathew LEA (or SEA)." I have a copy of this document and one can clearly see the difference between the L and the S. Paul Reed has examined the document and reaches this same conclusion. There is no doubt that this letter is an S. The recorded name is SEA.

Readers of this manuscript will already know that a headright represents land given to a person by the Crown, for the transportation of immigrants to America. Thus, in Mathew's case, a person by the name of Charles Taliaferro claimed the headright of “Mathew SEA,” in 1705, for land in Essex County, Virginia. But, we know that Mathew was already in Virginia, in Old Rappahannock County (which by 1705 had been divided into two counties, Essex and Richmond), 20 years earlier, in 1685, because the records document the fact that he filed a lawsuit against Hugh French in that year, and continued it fourteen months later. Thus Charles Taliaferro claimed Mathew’s headright **for land in the same county in which Mathew filed suit against Hugh French in 1685**. Both of these events taken together -- that is, the headright claim and the lawsuit, both in the same county -- suggest that Mathew originally arrived in America in this part of Virginia. It is vital to note that the date Charles Taliaferro claimed the headright, 1705, has nothing to do with the date that Mathew arrived in America. It simply means that Charles had saved a group of headrights which he accumulated over the years, in order to claim a larger piece of property than he would have been able to obtain with only one headright. This was not an uncommon occurrence, particularly among wealthy families, such as the Taliaferros. Another interesting side note to this event is that the name Taliaferro is not pronounced as it looks – it is pronounced “Tolliver.”

Several other aspects of this citation offer interesting clues to Mathew’s status and class. First, some of the other people listed in the headright claim appear to include others of the merchant class, whose names appear on other documents in that area. If Mathew was in the same socio-economic class as they, this would mean that he was not a poor man nor an indentured immigrant. Rather, he would have been a free immigrant. One of others listed on the same headright claims list as Mathew was Captain Symon Miller. I have records showing that he was in Essex County prior to 1685, the same time as Mathew. In fact, Hugh French married Captain Miller’s widow. Hugh French was the man Mathew SEA sued in Old Rappahannock County in 1685! This means that one of the persons who ostensibly arrived in Virginia with Mathew was dead by at least 1686 so that his widow could remarry, yet his headright was claimed in 1705. This proves that Charles Taliaferro accumulated a number of headrights over the years, prior to claiming them for land.

All of this information, then, suggests that Mathew SEA was a free immigrant (as contrasted to an indentured immigrant) who came to Virginia prior to 1685 along with other persons who were of the merchant class, and that Charles Taliaferro either paid for Mathew's transportation or bought Mathew’s headright from another person who had paid for Mathew’s transportation. Charles Taliaferro’s claim of Mathew SEA's headright proves that Mathew was an immigrant. Other records, as we will discuss, connect Mathew to me.

Spellings of Mathew’s Surname from 1685 to 1723:		
<u>Year</u>	<u>Spelling</u>	<u>Event</u>
1685	SEE	Old Rappahannock County Court Records – lawsuit.
1686	SEE	Old Rappahannock County Court Records – lawsuit.

1704	SEY	Purchase of 200 acres of land from James and Margaret Honey.
1704	SEA	Sale of 200 acres of land by the Honeys to Isaac Hill.
1704	SEE	Payment of the Virginia Quit Rent on 200 acres.
1705	SEA	Mathew's headright claimed by Charles Taliaferro.
1723	SEAY	Sale of Isaac Hill's 200 acres to Joseph Hail.

What Else Does This Tell Us About Mathew?

I have found no document citing the birth record of Mathew, but it seems fair to suggest a birth date of something like 1660 -- 1665. This would give him enough time to arrive in America, bring suit in Old Rappahannock County in 1685 when he may have been twenty-one to twenty-five years old, and then have his children later on in the late 1600's and perhaps early 1700's.

So, if this birth date seems reasonable, when might one say that he died, and how long did he live? If he were alive in 1721/1722, as the Isaac Hill land sale seems to suggest, this would mean that he died sometime after that point. If he lived a normal life span of some 70 years, then perhaps he died sometime around 1730. As we will discuss momentarily, his son Isaac purchased land in Amelia County, Virginia, in 1736, suggesting that Mathew was dead by this date. Thus, one might suggest that Mathew might have been born about 1660 and died about 1730, a life span of some 70 years.

There is no evidence that Mathew was a wealthy man when he arrived in America, but he must have had a certain amount of money. For example, he possessed sufficient means to travel in Virginia and to support himself, and sufficient intelligence, education, socio-economic experience and personal courage to file a lawsuit in a strange land. We do not know what happened to Mathew during the "lost years" of 1686 through 1704, and from then on to 1721, but he must have been engaged in some activity, sufficient to produce enough wealth to purchase 200 acres of prime Virginia farm land, and he must have left at least some amount of wealth to his son Isaac, as evidenced by Isaac's purchase of 400 acres of land in Amelia County in 1736. We do know that Mathew's neighbors in King William County were persons of wealth and standing. I have a list of them in my office and they include some of the most prominent names in early Virginia, including the Madisons. By 1721, Mathew had done all right in the New World.

How Did Mathew Prefer To Spell His Surname?

The evidence with respect to the preferred spelling of Mathew's surname is inconclusive. On the one hand, we have three separate records on which his name is spelled SEE, two of which are the earliest records we have on Mathew. Both of these two early records are official court documents, on which one would expect a person's name to be spelled as the person preferred. On the other hand, we know that this was not always the case, that a person's name was sometimes spelled as it sounded to the recorder. On the other hand, again, Mathew's name was

not spelled SEAY on any surviving document until 1721, which is at least thirty-six years or more after Mathew arrived in Virginia, and that this document only refers to Mathew, it does not deal with him directly. If the correct spelling was SEAY, shouldn't it have been spelled that way earlier, on documents that related directly to Mathew, such as court records, land records and tax records? On the other, other hand, the name was spelled SEY once and SEA twice, but those documents only referred to Mathew, they were not official legal documents, like tax or real estate records, that pertained specifically to Mathew. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that they are phonetic equivalents and not preferred spellings.

Thus, it seems that Mathew preferred to spell his surname either as SEE or as SEAY. If the preferred spelling were SEE in 1685, then it must have evolved into SEAY by 1721, perhaps taking the spelling from another family, a prominent English family, who spelled the name SEAY. If the preferred spelling were SEAY, then all of the earlier recordings of the name, from 1685 until 1721, were in error, and it was only around 1721 or so that the recorders got the spelling right.

Arguing for a spelling of SEE are the following:

1. Mathew's surname was spelled SEE the first two times it appears in America, in 1685 and 1686.
2. Mathew's surname was spelled SEE on the Virginia Quit Rent record in 1704.
3. All three of these records are official documents relating specifically to Mathew.
4. According to the Library of Virginia, the Quit Rent list recorded the names as the tax payer preferred to spell them.
5. Even when the name was spelled differently, it was still spelled in a way that suggests a SEE pronunciation (SEY, SEA).¹⁴
6. At least two other persons living close to Mathew SEE/SEAY's land in King William County, and who may be related to Mathew, spelled their surname SEE (Benjamin and John SEE – see below).
7. The SEAY spelling does not appear in surviving documents until 1721.

Arguing for a spelling of SEAY are the following:

1. The name has been consistently spelled SEAY since 1721, with few exceptions.
2. SEAY is a name that is found in Virginia, in representative numbers, since pre-Colonial times.
3. There were other families in King William County, Amelia County and Goochland County, who spelled their names SEAY, mostly after 1735.

In addition, the early records of Virginia reveal two other persons whose names are spelled SEE and who may be related to Mathew SEE/SEAY. They are John SEE in,

¹⁴ One must exercise great care in suggesting a particular pronunciation during this time, as it very likely may have differed from how we pronounce similar words today. Indeed, there is no way we can know for sure exactly how the name SEE/SEA/SEY/SEAY was pronounced. For example, evidences suggests that, in England at this time, the "ea" sound was usually pronounced as "ay." There is an English folk ballad that goes, "You work all day, for the sugar in your tea (tay)." Also, according to the Introduction to The Irish Fiants of the Tudor Sovereigns, during Elizabethan times, the name Shee was pronounced as Shay. In addition, English listings of names in the 1600's and 1700's reveal SEYE, SAYE, SEAY, and SEE as variant spelling of the same name. How were they pronounced? We might suggest SAY, but we might be wrong.

1728, and Benjamin SEE, in 1800.

“1728 John SEE -- Caroline Co. -- Land patent to 150 acres, branches of Beaverdon Creek, adj. Thomas THOMAS.”¹⁵

“Benjamin SEE m. Wilmouth Burrus, 3 March 1800. Caroline County.”¹⁶

I have been unable to place the location of John SEE in Caroline County, but he was, obviously, older than Benjamin SEE. Benjamin SEE appears on Virginia tax lists in 1783 and 1784, in that part of King William County that is either very close to Caroline County or actually became Caroline County. Benjamin SEE is probably, in my opinion, the brother of Joseph SEAY (II), of King William County. Of course, these records come from burned counties and this is scant evidence. Indeed, these SEEs may be an entirely different family altogether. However, taken in sum, the evidence, at least to me, appears to point these SEEs to Mathew SEE/SEAY, particularly with regard to Benjamin SEE.

Thus, it seems to me that there is significant evidence to support the idea that Mathew preferred to spell his name SEE, and that it evolved into a SEAY spelling sometime around 1721.

¹⁵ T. E. Campbell, *Colonial Caroline: A History of Caroline County Virginia*. Dietz Press. Richmond, VA.

¹⁶ Virginia Marriages: Early to 1800, ed. Jordon R. Dodd, pub. Precision Indexing, Bountiful, Utah, 1990, p. 901.