



GENETICS & GENEALOGY

Adventures with a DNA Study:

“What? I’m Not Related to George Washington!”

by David G. Ball

AS MANAGER OF THE NEW ENGLAND BALL PROJECT,^[1] I initiated a yDNA study that has produced some surprising results.

A myth exposed

Ball families throughout North America long believed that they were all related to Mary Ball, mother of George Washington. An April 1902 the Ball genealogical journal, *The Union Record*,^[2] claimed: “William Ball, of Wiltshire, Eng., had six sons, who came to America in 1635 on the ship *Planter*, namely: Alling, Francis, John, Samuel, Richard, and William. They first landed at Boston, and thence went to various parts.” However, no documentation is presented. Such a claim seems almost an April Fool’s joke; unfortunately this misinformation has been copied for more than a century.

Even earlier, Leonard Bradley (1833–1898), in a study of the descendants of Alling Ball of New Haven, Connecticut,^[3] suggested that Alling was a near kinsman of the William Ball of Virginia, who was Washington’s great-grandfather. This claim was based on the fact that both the Virginia and New England families owned a similar Ball coat of arms. Donald Lines Jacobus (1887–1970) summarily dismissed Bradley’s claim; this coat of arms was granted in 1613 to a Richard Ball of Northampton, England, and was apparently informally adopted by many unrelated Ball families.^[4] Jacobus also reported that the London will of an uncle of Alling Ball of New Haven^[5] stated clearly that the immigrant’s father was another Alling Ball, *not* a son of the William Ball of Wiltshire.

In October 2008, when the New England Ball Project went online, the story of six Ball brothers was finally proved to be a myth — through yDNA testing of descendants of various Ball immigrants. None of the tests from New England lines matched the yDNA profile of proven descendants of William Ball of Virginia.

Old books can have old errors

In his 1829 work, *A Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England*, John Farmer listed the follow-

ing under the surname Ball: “JOHN, Concord, came from Wiltshire, England, and was admitted freeman 1650, d. 1 Nov. 1655. His children were, John, who was of Watertown and Lancaster, and Nathaniel, who settled in Concord.”^[6] Through DNA testing I know I descend from John Ball, Jr., “son” of this immigrant John; via documentary sources, however, I cannot trace my patrilineal line prior to 1720. My own reason for joining a Ball DNA study was thus to identify my likely immigrant ancestor, perhaps a great- or great-great-grandfather of my last known Ball ancestor.

The first yDNA test from a descendant of Nathaniel Ball indicated a different haplotype from descendants of John, Jr. Since some Ball ancestors of that yDNA donor lived in New Hampshire, I initially thought the participant was a descendant of Peter Ball of Portsmouth (from whom we do not yet have a proved descendant for this study). But two more tests from agnate descendants of Nathaniel Ball matched that first test, so we discovered Farmer was mistaken and John Ball, “Jr.” and Nathaniel were not brothers. Whether the John Ball who died at Concord in 1655 was the father of either John or Nathaniel (or neither) remains unknown.

Surprise! Your line is broken

Any yDNA test may disprove a patrilineal descent. Two of the thirty-six participants in the New England Ball Project yDNA study did not match any of the expected Ball groups. (There are eight primary groups who descend from eight seventeenth-century immigrants; each of these groups has more than 1,000 descendants identified on the Project website while other groups have only 100 to 300 descendants identified to date.) One of the two matched forty men with the surname Montgomery and the other one had no 37-marker close matches (his 25-marker results closely match ten different surnames).

The yDNA test does not identify in which generation the “break” occurred. Several explanations for not matching a Ball group are plausible: an unrecorded

yDNA test results		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Haplotype		393	390	19/ 394	391	385a	385b	426	388	439	389- 1	392	389- 2
William Ball of Va.	I	13	22	14	10	14	14	11	14	11	12	11	28
John Ball, Jr., of Watertown and Lancaster, Mass.	G	13	22	15	11	14	17	11	12	12	12	11	28
Nathaniel Ball of Concord, Mass.	R1b1a2	13	23	14	11	11	14	12	12	12	13	13	29

adoption (from outside the agnate family); the assumption of a stepfather's surname; an extramarital liaison that produced a child; or a surname change by a patrilineal ancestor. Some people would rather not know of a "broken" line; others would be delighted by an interesting family mystery.

"Mismatched" participants can hope for tests of increasing levels of male Ball-surname cousins (first, second, third, etc.), to pinpoint the generation of a "nonpaternity event." "Mr. Ball/Montgomery" has forty potential Montgomery test takers to contact, one or more of whom may have shared a common town or county with his ancestor and thus be more closely related.

How can you say "no" to free?

Finding Ball candidates for testing can be a challenge, and a 37-marker test currently costs about \$150. If a living male Ball already knows his descent from an immigrant, the yDNA test will not add anything useful. If the living male Ball does not know his paternal ancestry beyond a few generations, identifying only a seventeenth-century immigrant ancestor may not narrow his research enough to justify the cost of the test. The New England Ball Project offers to fund needed yDNA tests on descendants of specific Ball immigrants. Often, however, potential participants decline. The test is anonymous and painless, but unfortunately other yDNA study administrators also report more refusals than acceptances. I hope this hesitation soon lessens.

The fun continues

The results of the New England Ball DNA tests often validate traditional genealogical research or provide clues that narrow possible ancestors to only one or a few somehow-related immigrants. My own test results do not yet identify which of three known candidates was the father of my earliest known ancestor. With enough tests I might some day be able to eliminate one or both of the other candidates. Both traditional

research and DNA testing will continue, I hope, until my Ball descent is proved. ♦

Notes:

¹ The New England Ball Project includes descendants of all Ball-surname immigrants to New England. The project website is www.newenglandballproject.com; tabs at the top of each page connect visitors to project background, the yDNA study, the six-brothers myth, and other topics.

² "Third Cousins of George Washington," *The Union Record* (published by Ball International Union and Keuka College, Keuka Park, N.Y.), 1 (April 1902) 2: 38–39.

³ Leonard Abram Bradley, *History of the Ball Family, Genealogy of the New Haven Branch, Allen Ball and Some of His Descendants 1638–1864* (New York: privately printed, 1916), see 23–26 for a discussion of the coat of arms.

⁴ Donald Lines Jacobus, "Notes on the Ball Family of New Haven, Conn," *The American Genealogist*, 10 (1933–1934): 208: "Mr. Bradley was not, of course, aware of the 'assumption' of arms by many American families in the eighteenth century, which destroys any evidential value they might possess for indicating blood descent from English armigerous families."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 208–209, Jacobus notes that the will in question was published in the *NEHGR*, 54 (1900):96.

⁶ John Farmer, *A Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England* (Lancaster, Mass.: Carter, Andrews, & Co., 1829), 24.

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