

History of the Surname Waite

From *The Encyclopedia of Biography*, Vol. 29

"It is interesting to note that the name Waite, which in ancient times was spelled *Wayghte* or *Wayte*, is derived from the old German "wahten" which means to keep watch; more commonly used in the sense of 'guard' or 'watchman' in all Teutonic languages :the German *Wacht*, Dutch *Vaght*, Swedish *Vakt*, and English *Watch*. When used as a verb its meaning was 'to stay in expectation of'; as a noun it denoted a minstrel watchman.

The original Waytes were found in England immediately after the Norman Conquest (1073 A.D.), but only among the retainers of the king, princes and great barons; their rank gradually declined with that of other orders of minstrels until now the name is applied only to those itinerant musicians who, in most of the large towns in England, go around the principal streets at night for some time before Christmas, play and sing two or three tunes, call the hour, and then remove to a suitable distance and repeat the performance.

When surnames were generally introduced into England in the eleventh century, those who held an office in most cases added its designation to their Christian names, thus: Richard, the minstrel-watchman, became known as Richard the Wayte, which was in turn shortened to Richard Wayte. In 1075 A.D., William the Conqueror gave the Earldom, city and castle of Norwich, in England, to Ralf de Waiet, the son of Ralf, an Englishman, by a Welsh woman; this son marrying Emma, sister to Roger, Earl of Hereford, cousin of the conqueror, etc. This is the earliest record so far found, and the sources from whence all bearing the name of Waite seem to trace their origin. The first descendants of Ralf de Waiet were pretty well scattered over England and particularly in the southern part, extending thence to North Wales, the land from which the American Waites are drawn."



"The pipe used by the Waits was termed a 'Shawm' (sometimes translated 'wayte-pipe'). It was an ancestor of the modern oboe.¹

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Waits cultivated their musical skills to the point that a variety of instruments were coming into use and paid bands were beginning to appear.

¹ An obsolete musical instrument of the hautboy type used by the Waits (q.v.) or watchmen and identical with the earlier Shawm. According to Henry Davey's *Hist. Eng. Mus.*, the statutes of Edward I (before 1296) provided for the City of London that each gate shall be 'shut by the servant dwelling there and each servant shall have a wayte, at his own expense.' In a Nominale of the 15th century the low Latin word *Calamaula*, a reed-pipe - whence the word *Shawm* - is translated 'wayte pipe', and in a 17th century MS. (Harl. 2029) there is a sketch of a reed-pipe to which is appended the threefold title 'a Howboye or a Wayte or a Shawm.' [

'Such Waytes (under Benedicitie be it spoken) few citties in the Realme haue the like, none better; who besides their excellency in wind instruments, their rare cunning on the vyoll and violin, theyre voices be admirable, eurie one of them able to serue in any Cathedrall Church in Christendome for Quiresters.'

(William Kemp | Nine Daies Wonder, 1600)

The publick waites who liveryes do own,
And badges of a City, or some Town,
Who are retain'd in constant Yearly pay,
Do at their solemn publick meetings play.
And up and down the Streets, and Town in cold
Dark nights, when th'Instruments they can scarce hold
They play about, and tell what hour it is,
And weather too, this Course they do not miss,
Most part of Winter, in the Nights; and when
Some generous Persons come to Town, these Men
As soon as they're Inform'd, do then repair
Unto their Lodgings play them some fine Ayre
Or brisk new tune, such as themselves think fit,
And which they hope, with th' Gallants fancies hit,
They cry God Bless you Sirs; again then play,
Expecting Money, e'er they go away.

(Pecunia obediunt omnia.)
Anon. c.1680

From The Official Website of the International Guild of Town Pipers. Patron: [Professor Richard Rastall](#)

...It is worth noting that the famous composer Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625) was the son of one of the Waits of Cambridge. ...Two of his brothers, Edmund and Ellis were also musicians of note. The father of composer John Banister was a Wait of St. Giles of the Fields; and another composer, John Ravenscroft, was a Wait of the Tower Hamlets.

...the waits are best remembered today as carolers who serenaded the public at Christmas time, though this was but a small part of their vocational activity. They were licensed to receive alms for their music; and there is even a record of a legal suit against unlicensed singers who were undercutting the business of some of the waits.

...to this day, one familiar Christmas hymn, 'In Bethlehem, 'Neath Starlit Skies, by Grace Stutsman, is sung to the tune, 'The Waits' Carol'." (DMW)

And again from [The Encyclopedia of Biography](#), Vol. 29

"As the story is told, three brothers - Richard, Gamaliel, and Thomas Wayte were driving cattle to one of the market-places in Wales,

sometime in the early seventeenth century, when they were suddenly set upon by a press gang working for His majesty's Navy, but they put up such a stubborn resistance that they were finally abandoned and, hurrying on to the market, they sold their beef, took the gains, and bought passage on the first colony-bound vessel, the "Confidence", which, sailed for Boston and landed in early 1636, and eventually found their way to the various settlements from which the American branches are descended."

Of the four primary progenitors of the Waite family in New England, only the paternity of Samuel of Malden seems to have been proven and is presented in the section devoted to he and his descendants. If you have any information on the parents of Richard and Gamaliel of Boston and Thomas of Portsmouth or Richard of Watertown, please let me know. I'd like to publish the information here. However, while I find it interesting to know about my European ancestors, I understand that out of necessity I must limit the scope of the information published here. Therefore, the main emphasis of this site will be on the early American branches of the family.

Further Study:

- The Waits Website. <http://www.waits.org.uk/>. Professor Richard Rastall
- The City of Lincoln Waites. <http://www.lincolnwaites.org.uk/>. Al Garrod.

Waite Family Crest

contributed by Jan Waight

The Waight family, also spelled as Waite, Wayte, Wait, and Wate dates back to Cornwall County in Wales, (which is the place where the name was first recorded, about 1100 A.D.) ...In the language of blazonry, the Waight family crest is, "*Argent a chevron gules, three bugle horns, stringed sable, garnished or...*"



ARGENT - white or silver refers to peace and sincerity; yellow or gold refers to generosity.

GULES - red refers to military fortitude and magnanimity.

CHEVRONS - refer to protection.

BUGLE HORNS - refer to the hunt and high pursuits.