

WHAT'S THIS CONNECTION TO ROBERT COLLEGE?

John Melvin Biggs went to Robert College in Istanbul, Turkey, in 1942-45 to “teach Engineering to cadets of the Turkish Army”. He left there in June of 1945 and returned to the US with my mother Margaret. He had graduated from MIT in 1941. He was working for Curtiss Wright in Buffalo during the intervening year.

I always wondered about the connection to Robert College. The College was an American school tracing its origins back to 1863. It's still going strong today. How was it that Melvin went there?

The son of a friend of ours from the Sweet church, Adam McConnel, has been teaching at Robert College for several years. When I shared some of this information with him, he was most interested in Mel's connection to the US Army. Apparently there has been some question about the US involvement in Turkey during WWII.

Upon the passing of my mother, Margaret, in February 2018, we had occasion to look through several boxes of papers, photos and mementos that had been stored in Andy's attic. Interestingly, there are other references to Robert College. While members of the various Thomson generations lived in Istanbul or Sofia for decades, I find nothing to connect Robert College to John Melvin. He wasn't “attached” to the Thomson clan until he married Margaret in 1945.

For example, a letter dated Sept 10, 1945, written to Margaret from Mary Ostrander (apparently a cousin of mine?), says *“I'm sure that you have been thoroughly coached on your Thomson relatives in this country (US), although all except Henrietta are on the West coast and somewhat inaccessible. Its very curious that history repeats itself in a family. I wonder whether your attention has been called to this particular instance as you are the one involved. Over 70 years ago, your grandfather Thomson's sister Eliza, then living in her father's home in Bebek, married Luther Allen Ostrander, one of the first American tutors at **Robert College** and came here to live. And now you have left parents and homeland just as she did, and under similar circumstances.....”*

A great source of Thomson history is a massive work completed by “Cousin” Katherine Kaye in the 1980s, complete with detailed family tree going back to Robert Thomson 1760. (She was a librarian and daughter of Ina and Nicholas Kaye. I recall meeting Katherine and Ina several times – particularly meeting at Lake Tahoe on a cross country trip in 1962). Excerpts:

*“Wherever it may have been that our great-grandparents were married (Alexander & Elizabeth), they established a home in Bebek, a small community on the shores of the Bosphorus some seven or eight miles from the center of Constantinople. It is the next door settlement to Hissar, where **Robert College** would later be established; the two communities were apparently the center for English speaking families for many years”. (In 1860, great-grandfather Alexander was appointed Agent of the British and Foreign Bible Society. In fact, several Thomsons over the years were busy working on translating the Bible into many languages).*

*“...the communities of Bebek and Hissar, on the Bosphorus a few miles out of Constantinople, were not only neighbors in location but also both included considerable colonies of English speaking people. Those in Bebek seem to have been chiefly British, while in Hissar the American **Robert College** had drawn a similar colony of Americans. They often combined for social life, and it was in this way that Eliza met a young American tutor at the college, Luther Allen Ostrander. (could it also explain how John Melvin met Margaret?)*

*“**Robert College** had opened in Bebek in 1863, moving to Hissar later, and great-uncle Allen was one of the first tutors to serve in it. He went out immediately following his 1865 graduation from Hamilton College in New York state. He stayed to teach from 1865 to 1868, during which time he and Eliza met. He returned to New York and entered Auburn seminary, and after finishing his course there he went back to Turkey.”*

*“Roy Ostrander also graduated from Hamilton College in New York State. In 1895 he went out to Bebek to take a position as a tutor to a young boy.....Roy spent most of his free days in Bebek with either the Thomsons, the Binnses or various friends. He often attended services, and played tennis, at **Robert College**.....By that Spring, Roy’s pupil had evidently progressed so far that the two of them went to board at Dr. Washburn’s home at **Robert College** so the boy could attend college classes.”*

*In the 1870s Robert Thomson graduated from the University of Edinburgh. “When he finished his course there, he evidently was still undecided as to what he wanted to do with his life, so he returned to his parents’ home in Bebek. For something to do, he took a summer job at **Robert College**, the American College which was next door in Hissar. He worked in the library, and while there he became acquainted with several young men who were students from Bulgaria.”*

*My grandfather, Duncan Thomson, and his sisters, Henrietta “Tommie”, Katharine and Ina, and brother William, were born while the family lived in Bebek (birthdates 1882-1895). Some years earlier, at the time of the Crimean War, an American educator named Cyrus Hamlin had rented part of their house. “He was in Bebek trying to help young boys learn how to have useful lives. He rented part of that house and started a practical school. Seeing the needs of the wounded soldiers in hospital at Scutari across the Bosphorus (where dreadful conditions attracted Florence Nightingale to start her famous work), Hamlin launched into teaching his boys to bake bread. Then they would take boatloads of good fresh bread across to the hospital. During this time, he and Mr. Robert met, and soon (1859) planning began for the educational institution that from the small beginnings in Hamlin’s school for boys ultimately developed into **Robert College**.”*

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