Thomas Robie (1689-1729) is regarded as a colonial scientist and physician. Born and raised in Boston, he graduated from Harvard in 1708 and then taught school in Watertown. However, Robie held this position for only six months before returning to Boston, where he put his scientific training to good use by preparing an almanac for 1709. This endeavor was so successful that he published annual almanacs through 1720.

Robie stayed active in Harvard while living in Boston. He was awarded an M.A. degree in 1711 and the next year was appointed the “Library-Keeper.” In 1713 he was selected as a “Fellow of the House,” the official designation for Tutor at the time. The discussion in this chapter has shown that he exerted a substantial influence on both the first American mathematician Isaac Greenwood and Yale president Thomas Clap. Up to 1723, when he moved to Salem, Robie carried out research in astronomy and meteorology. As a meteorologist he was mainly an observer, recording weather conditions in Cambridge during 1715-1722 for William Derham in London, but his article on an earthquake at Salem was published in the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. He published two other papers in that journal, “An account of a large quantity of alcalious salt produced by burning rotten wood” in 1721 and one on three separate topics: “Concerning the effects of inoculation, the eclipse of the sun in November 1722; and the venom of spiders”

Robie’s fame, however, was based on his astronomical investigations, including a published paper on the natural causes of a meteor from 1719 and an investigation of a solar eclipse in 1722 using a new, 24-foot refractor that Thomas Hollis had presented to Harvard earlier that year to replace a 10-year-old, 8-foot telescope. Robie was also knowledgeable about chemistry, as evidenced by a paper he wrote on the abnormally high content of alkali salt that remained after the rotten wood from a white oak tree was burned.

As if this were not enough activity for Robie during the productive period 1708-1723, he also became interested in medicine, a field he taught himself because there were no medical schools in the Colonies at the time and he never crossed the Atlantic. The highlight for him may have occurred in 1721, when he was one of only three medical personnel to perform inoculations in the smallpox epidemic in spite of extremely antagonistic opposition. He also served as the family physician for John Leverett, Harvard president 1708-1724.
Thomas Robie moved to Salem in 1723 to marry and to practice medicine, effectively ending his scientific investigations. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society two years later. His place in Colonial science was described as follows:\(^3\)

The real significance of Robie as a scientist lay not only in his individual achievements but also in his position in that Harvard stream of science which flowed through Thomas Brattle, Thomas Robie and Isaac Greenwood, and which burst forth under the aegis of Professor John Winthrop.

**Endnotes:**

1 For further details on the life and work of Robie see Frederick G. Kilgour, Thomas Robie (1689-1729), Colonial scientist and physician, *Isis* 30 (1939), 473-490.
2 This author’s son lived in Leverett House for three years, 1997-2000.
3 On p. 490 of Kilgour, “Robie.” [Endnote 1.]