

2. Legacy of the Pilgrim Fathers

Living in Dangerous Times

England was Roman Catholic until 1534 when King Henry VIII declared himself head of the Church of England. Religious turbulence was not quelled in 1593 when parliament decreed Anglican as the approved religion. Standardised practices and principles were imposed to the disgust of Puritans, determined to "purify" the church of rituals, adornments, rigid procedures and associations with popery. The warnings were clear. In that year Congregationalists John Penry, Henry Barrow and John Greenwood were put to death for their religious beliefs and for publishing seditious material.

Concerning Puritans most was the influence of the clerical hierarchy with imposition of their interpretation of religious practice and closer alignment of doctrines with the New Testament. Added to this was an unhealthy concentration of both temporal and ecclesiastical powers now vested in King James 1 as both head of state and the church; an abomination for Puritans.

William Brewster Senior was appointed Receiver and Bailiff of the Archbishop of York's estates in 1575, entitling him to live at Scrooby Manor in North Nottingham. He was also appointed Master of the Queen's Postes in 1588, having all the right credentials. By good fortune the village of Scrooby was a natural stopping point on the long journey from London to Scotland.

His son William was born in 1566. William Jr studied briefly at Peterhouse College, Cambridge, before entering the service of William Davison, ambassador to the Netherlands and secretary of state, entrusted by Queen Elizabeth I with the warrant for the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587. Elizabeth agonised over the decision before finally sanctioning the sentence of death. Full of remorse, she blamed Davison for releasing the warrant of execution.

Davison, fined and threatened with imprisonment, kept in touch with Brewster who returned to Scrooby to work in his father's postmaster business. By now, disillusioned with the politics of court and church, he joined the Puritan All Saints Church, Babworth, seven miles away.

Young orphan, William Bradford, who in later life became the second governor of Plymouth Colony in America, met William Brewster in 1602 when about 12 or 13. Brewster tutored him in Latin, Greek and religion and they would travel to Babworth to hear Richard Clyfton preach seditious ideas - how everyone, not just priests, had a right to discuss and interpret the Bible; how parishioners should take an active part in services; how anyone could depart from the official Book of Common Prayer; and how everyone should be able to speak directly to God.

In 1604, the Church introduced 141 canons, a spiritual test of conformity. These declared that anyone rejecting the practices of the established church excommunicated themselves. Every member of the clergy had to accept and publicly acknowledge royal supremacy and authority of the Prayer Book. These edicts reaffirmed the use of church vestments and sign of the cross in baptism. Ninety clergy, refusing to embrace these canons, were expelled from the Church of England, including Richard Clyfton of All Saints Church, Babworth.

In calmer times, the assaults on convention might have passed with little notice but these were nervous and fraught years, like many periods in the preceding century. James I became king in 1603. Just two years later came the Gunpowder Plot when Guido Fawkes, the Catholic conspirator, was foiled at the last minute in the cellars below Parliament. Everyone departing from the decreed religious procedures was under suspicion. Anything hinting of subversion,

whether Catholic, Protestant or other religion was liable to be challenged. "I shall make them conform," James proclaimed, "or I will hurry them out," a euphemism for drastic action.

Escape to the Netherlands

Most Puritans did not want separation from the Church of England but wished to reform it from within. Brewster and fellow Puritans knew how dangerous it was to worship in public. They held secret services at Scrooby Manor and in private houses with a second service on Sunday in Old Hall, Gainsborough. They could listen to the preaching of Baptist minister John Smyth, son of a yeoman and educated at Christ's College, or Congregationalist preacher John Robinson, educated at Corpus Christi. Cambridge and vicinity was the centre of Puritanism.

The penalty for subversion was severe. Those preaching "contrary to the laws and statutes of the realm, and being thereof lawfully convicted, shall be committed to prison, there to remain without bail mainprise (release) until they shall confirm and yield themselves to same church." The authorities were closing in. It was time to flee England.

In 1607, a boat was chartered to transport the Puritans to the Netherlands but escape was thwarted when the captain betrayed them. According to Bradford, they were made into "a spectacle and wonder to the multitude which came flocking on all sides to behold them." Now relieved of books, clothes and money, these Puritans were held in custody for a month.

The following year 50-60 men, women and children, including Gainsborough Separatists, set off in a relay of small boats from Killingholme Creek on the Humber. The group stayed briefly in Amsterdam, befriended by 'the Ancient Brethren', a 300 strong Separatist movement known to Brewster. Soon, the group became embroiled in theological disputes and moved to Leiden.

Brewster's family settled in Stincksteeg, or 'Stink Alley', a narrow, back alley. William taught English whilst 16-year-old Jonathan, his son, became a ribbon maker. William Bradford was a maker of fustian (corduroy) whilst others worked as brewers' assistants, tobacco pipe makers, wool carders, watchmakers and cobblers.

With large gatherings, and access to a printing press, the Puritans attracted attention and in England too. In 1618, a pamphlet, *The Perth Assembly*, attacked James I and bishops for interfering with the Scottish Presbyterian Church. The ambassador in Holland was instructed to bring Brewster to justice for "atrocious and seditious libel" but Dutch authorities refused to arrest him. It was time to move again, fearful too of another Catholic Spanish invasion as a peace treaty had almost expired. They were not unhappy, recoiling from Dutch permissive values, a "great licentiousness of youth" and the "manifold temptations of the place."

Voyage to the New World

The aim was to forge a new life on the east coast of America but the question was where. It would also take time to organise as by now there were protocols, procedures and patents to consider and the logistics of travel, not least food and other supplies. After careful thought, the Puritans decided to establish a farming village in the northern part of Virginia.

As there were insufficient funds for the voyage and to build a village, they had little choice but to enter into an agreement with financial investors. The company would provide passage and supply tools, clothing and materials. The colonists in return would work for the company, sending natural resources such as fish, timber and furs back to England. All assets, including land and houses, would belong to the company until seven years had elapsed, when all of it would be divided amongst each investor and the colonists. In theory it sounded fine.

In July 1620, the Puritans left Leiden, sailing in the *Speedwell*, a stubby overrigged vessel. At Southampton they gathered supplies and docked in Plymouth before setting sail for America in the 60-ton *Speedwell* and 180-ton *Mayflower*, a converted wine-trade ship, chosen for its robustness and cargo capacity. After "they had not gone far," said Bradford, the *Speedwell*, though refitted, sprang leaks and limped into Dartmouth, accompanied by the *Mayflower*.

More repairs were made, and both set out again near the end of August but the *Speedwell* began leaking again. Both ships put into Plymouth where some 20 people, discouraged by the omens thus far, returned to Leiden or decided to remain in Britain, parlous as that was.

The *Mayflower* left for America on 6 September with about half of its 102 passengers from the Leiden church on board. The ship was battered by heavy storms. One man, swept overboard, was rescued. Another succumbed to "a grievous disease, of which he died in a desperate manner," said William Bradford. The colonists intended to settle near the Hudson River but winds and dangerous shoals forced them to seek shelter at Cape Cod further north. Finally, on 9 November 1620, some scrubby heights came into view. The voyage had taken 65 days.

Anchored offshore, on 11 November a group of 41 male passengers signed a document they called the Mayflower Compact. This agreement formed a Colony composed of a "Civil Body Politic" with "just and equal laws for the good of the community." Some days later, Susannah White gave birth to a son aboard the *Mayflower*: the first English child born in New England. He was named Peregrine, derived from the latin word meaning traveller, often to distant parts and for a reason. A name associated with a pilgrim was a fitting choice.

A party of the most able men began exploring the area to find a suitable place to settle. On 25 November, arriving at an abandoned Wampanoag community, they discovered a number of graves. The omens were not good and neither were the bleak surroundings of Cape Cod. They decided to leave and on 16 December 1620 arrived at Plymouth Harbour.

While houses were being built, the group continued to live on the ship. Many fell ill, suffering from scurvy due to a poor salt rich diet and pneumonia from lack of shelter in the cold, wet weather. By the end of the first winter, less than half of the crew and passengers were alive. As many as two or three died each day in the first two months. Attack by the Wampanoag Native Americans was of concern too. In February 1621 Christopher Jones, captain, ordered the cannons, each weighing nearly half a tonne, to be moved to the mainland. In early April, the *Mayflower* sailed back to England in less than half the time of the outward journey – and with half its crew.

Developing the Plimoth Plantation

The Wampanoag inhabited the entire area where the Pilgrims landed. Each tribe had its own territory where they would fish and harvest. Hunting grounds had strict boundaries. Skilled at cultivating land and hunting, the Wampanoag often moved; in summer staying near the coast and in winter moving inland into dense forests.

Occasionally, the Pilgrims caught glimpses of the Wampanoag but only communicated with them four months after arrival. Reticence was for good reason, with bitter memories, as ship captains would capture them to be sold as slaves. The Wampanoag had also been attacked by neighbouring tribes, losing areas of land along the coast. Then between 1616 and 1619, up 90% died during an epidemic of disease, most probably brought by Europeans.

In March 1621, a treaty of mutual protection was agreed with the Pokanoket Wampanoag leader, Ousamequin, also known as Massasoit to the Pilgrims. Neither party would harm the

other; if anything was stolen it would be returned; the offending person would return to his own people for punishment; both sides agreed to leave their weapons behind when meeting and the two groups would serve as allies in times of war. Squanto, who spoke a little English, had been taken captive by English sailors and lived for a time in London. He came to live with the colonists, instructing them in various skills and crafts in the 'Plimoth plantation.'

The Narragansett, another Native American tribe, had not been affected by the epidemic and were powerful, forcing the Wampanoag to provide valuable goods as tribute. Massasoit then formed an alliance with the Plymouth Colony to help repel the attacks. In response, in 1621, the Narragansett issued a threat in the form of a bundle of arrows, wrapped in a snakeskin. William Bradford, Plymouth colony governor, responded in kind by filling the snakeskin with bullets and gun powder. The message was clear and the Narragansett chose not to attack.

Mourt's Relation is a journal written from November 1620 to November 1621 and describes 'proceedings of the English plantations settled at Plimoth in New England.' The first section, written by William Bradford, refers to Plymouth Colonists as pilgrims. "They knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country; and quieted their spirits." It was produced and published in book form in London by John Bellamy in 1622. The Pilgrims marked their first harvest with a celebration. Massasoit and 90 of his tribe were invited for three days of feasting and entertainment.

Over the next six years, more English colonists arrived. Many, staying behind in England or Holland when the *Mayflower* left England, were able to join their families. By 1627, Plymouth Colony was stable and comfortable. Harvests were good and families were growing. In 1627, about 160 people lived there.

In 1789, George Washington declared Thursday, 26 November a Thanksgiving Holiday but for that year only. Connected to the Pilgrim feast in giving thanks to God, the day was intended as a formal "public thanksgiving and prayer." It was devoted to "the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be."

Enter a 19th century author, poet and magazine editor, Sarah Josepha Hale. She was editor of the influential *Godey's Lady's Book* for 40 years from 1837 to 1877. Highly patriotic, she had heard about the 1621 Pilgrim feast and became captivated with the idea of turning it into a national holiday. She published recipes for turkey and stuffing and pumpkin pie and lobbied to make Thanksgiving an official annual holiday, writing an annual editorial from 1846. With Civil War still raging, in 1863 Abraham Lincoln agreed Thanksgiving as an official holiday, to be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November every year. The tradition was born!

Formation of the Massachusetts Bay Company

Our starting point is Richard Bushrod, born in Sherborne in 1576. He became a "haberdasher of hats requiring a 7-10 years apprenticeship with a Master, before becoming a 'freeman' able to trade. He moved to Dorchester, a small thriving market town. In proximity to Weymouth it formed a convenient junction between Sherborne, Exeter and Poole.

What became known as The Great Fire of Dorchester occurred on 6 August 1613, destroying about half the town. The crisis cemented the reputation of John White, vicar of St Peter's Church in the High Street. He fought tirelessly for relief to rebuild the town. Having endured the plague three times, the fire was yet another indicator of retribution for wayward living and lax morals. White's equally Puritan churchwarden was Richard Bushrod, the town's second MP from 1614 – 24 and again in 1626 when he served the last of three years as Bailiff.

Bushrod had been a merchant adventurer for years, investing in the fur trade and fishing for cod in New England. Cured pelts and salted fish were to be sold on the continent where they fetched a higher price. From there he imported linen cloth via Weymouth, intending to form a lucrative three-way trade. John White persuaded him to retain a colony of fishermen in New England, ready to join the fishing fleet the next season. White's aim was to establish a settlement of traders and friends, free from religious persecution. Approval was given by the Council for New England on 18 February 1623 and in March 1624 the Dorchester Company was formed in Dorchester. It had 119 stockholders, each paying £25 per share.

Records show an active trade initially. Two ships, *Amitye* and *Fellowship*, returned in autumn 1625 bringing: dry fish, codfish, oil, quarters of oak and skins of fox, raccoons, pine martens, otter, muskrat and beaver but trade was sluggish. In 1626 the company folded. Despite this setback, both White and Bushrod were listed as members of the New England Company that was formed on 19 March 1628. Two ships were registered: *The Peeter* of 40 tons and *The Happy Entrance* of 20 tons, both operating from Weymouth.

With a potentially growing business, many new investors joined and the headquarters moved to Cornhill, London. A Royal Charter, obtained on 4 March 1629, gave permission to govern the territory under a renamed enterprise: The Massachusetts Bay Company.

Meanwhile, John White was preparing his own ship, *Mary and John* with another group of west country planters. The Weymouth master of the ship, Thomas Squibb, was told not to land at Salem but to take them to the Charles River. More friends of John White arrived on the *Abigail* in 1629 and their families the following year. For reasons still unclear, John White remained in Dorchester for the rest of his life.

In March 1629, Charles 1 dissolved parliament that would not meet for eleven years. Puritan fears were raised once again. A leading company member was Trinity College educated John Winthrop, Lord of the Manor at Groton. In the Puritan crackdown he lost his position in the Court of Wards and Liveries. Emigration was now urgent and Winthrop was instrumental in formulating the Cambridge Agreement, signed on 29 August 1629. His legal training was put to good use. Control of the company would be in New England, not London, and only those who intended to emigrate could buy shares. Both decisions were ratified on 20 October.

On 8 April 1630, four ships left the Isle of Wight carrying Winthrop and other leaders of the new colony, followed by seven other ships with about 700 migrants. Arriving at Salem they found it unsuitable and moved to the Shawmut Peninsula, enabling them to disperse along the Charles River. Fittingly, given so many East Anglican connections, it was called Boston.

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