Of Plymouth Plantation

William Bradford
(1590–1657)
Survival in North America was a matter of endurance, intelligence, and courage. William Bradford had all three. Thirteen years after the first permanent English settlement was established in Jamestown, Virginia, Bradford helped lead the Pilgrims to what is now Massachusetts.

Seeking Freedom

Bradford, who was born in Yorkshire, England, joined a group of Puritans who believed that the Church of England was corrupt. This group wished to separate from the church. In the face of stiff persecution, they eventually fled to Holland and from there sailed to North America. Bradford provides an account of the experiences of these early settlers. Historians consider this account to be accurate.

A Long Leadership

After the death of the colony’s first leader, the Pilgrims elected William Bradford governor. He was reelected thirty times. During his tenure, he organized the repayment of debts to financial backers, encouraged new immigration, and established good relations with the Native Americans, without whose help the colony never would have survived. He also instituted the town meeting within the colonies, a democratic process that continues to take place in state government today. Bradford was largely responsible for leading the infant colony through many hardships to success.

In 1630, Bradford began writing Of Plymouth Plantation, a firsthand account of the Pilgrims’ struggle to endure. The work, written in the simple language known as Puritan Plain Style, was not published until 1856.

Background

In 1620, the Pilgrims made the difficult voyage to America aboard the tiny Mayflower. After fierce storms, they landed near Cape Cod, Massachusetts, not in Virginia as intended. It was mid-December before they could build shelters and move ashore. Once ashore, the Pilgrims found the hardships of settling in a strange land worsened by a harsh winter. They struggled to
Of Their Voyage and How They Passed the Sea; and of Their Safe Arrival at Cape Cod

[1620] SEPTEMBER 6 . . . After they had enjoyed fair winds and weather for a season, they wereency with many fierce storms, with which the ship was shrewdly shaken, and her upper works made very leeward. They were bow'd and cracked, which put them in some fear that the ship could not be able to perform the voyage; perceiving the mariners to fear the sufficiency of the ship, as appeared by their mutterings, they entered other officers of the ship, to consider in time of the danger; and rather to return then to cast themselves there was great distraction and difference of opinion amongst the mariners themselves; fasting would they (being now half the seas over), and on the other hand they were loath to hazard their lives too desperately; and others affirmed they knew the ship to be strong and firm under water; and for the buckling of the main passengers brought out of Holland, which would raise the beam into his place; the which being done, the under it, set firm in the lower deck, and other ways bound, he would make it sufficient. And as for the crew well as they could, and though with the working of the ship they would not long keep staunch, yet they not over-press her with sails. So they committed themselves to the will of God, and resolved to proceed.

In sundry of these storms the winds were so fierce, and the seas so high, as they could not bear a know together. And in one of them, as they thus lay at hull, in a mighty storm, a lusty youth, servant to Samuel Fuller, when they drew near the coast. And in one of them, as they thus lay at hull, in a mighty storm, a lusty young man (called John Howland) coming upon some occasion above the gratings, was, with a seele of the ship thrown into [the sea]; but it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards, then with a boat hook and other means got into the ship again, and his life saved; and though he was severely wounded and became a profitable member both in church and commonwealth. In all this voyage there died but one of the passengers, which was William Butten, a youth, servant to Samuel Fuller, when they drew near the coast.

But to omit other things (that I may be brief), after long beating at sea they fell with that land which is certainly known to be it, they were not a little joyful. After some deliberation had amongst themselves at about and resolved to stand for the southward (the wind and weather being fair) to find some place about where they had sailed that course about half the day, they fell amongst dangerous shoals and roaring breakers, they conceived themselves in great danger; and the wind shrinking upon them withal, they resolved to bless themselves happy to get out of those dangers before night overtook them, as by God’s providence they did, to a harbor, where they rid in safety. . . .

Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the element. . . .

But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people’s present condition, well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation (as before), they had now no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies, to, to seek for succor. It is recorded in Scripture as a mercy to the apostle and his shipwrecked company, kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they met with them (as after will appear) otherwise. And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that country know them fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search an unknown coast. Besides, this wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men? And what multitudes there might be of them they knew not of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and He heard their voice, a
therefore praise the Lord, because He is good, and His mercies endure forever. . .

from Book 2

[1620] In these hard and difficult beginnings, they found some discontent and murmurings arise amongst them in others; but they were soon quelled and overcome by the wisdom, patience, and just and equal carriage which cleaved faithfully together in the main. But that which was most sad and lamentable was that in which they died, especially in January and February, being the depth of winter, and wanting houses and other comforts, with diseases, which this long voyage and their inaccommodate condition had brought upon them; so as they were in time; that of one hundred and odd persons, scarce fifty remained.

And of these in the time of most distress, there was but six or seven sound persons, who, to their great night nor day, but with abundance of toil and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them; in a word, did all the homely and necessary stomachs cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cheerfully, without any grudging in their friends and brethren. A rare example and worthy to be remembered. Two of these seven were Mr. William Standish, their Captain and military commander, unto whom myself, and many others were much beholden in our low and sick condition. And I may say of many others who died in this general visitation, and others yet living, that whilst they had health, yea, or any strength continuing, they were not wanting to any that had need of them. And I doubt not but their recompense is with the Lord.

But I may not here pass by another remarkable passage not to be forgotten. As this calamity fell among the passengers that we had need of them. And I doubt not but their recompense is with the Lord.

But now amongst his company there was far another kind of carriage in this misery then amongst the boon companions in drinking and jollity in the time of their health and welfare began now to desert one another, and hazard their lives for them, they should be infected by coming to help them in their cabins, and so, after for them, but if they died let them die. But such of the passengers as were yet aboard showed them what they had and hearts relent, as the boatswain, gunner, three quartermasters, the master was something stricken and sent to the sick ashore and told the Governor he should send them drunk water homeward bound.

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All this while the Indians came skulking about them, and would sometimes show themselves aloof of, but run away. And once they stole away their tools where they had been at work, and were gone to dinner. But they came boldly amongst them, and spoke to them in broken English, which they could well understand, being acquainted with many things concerning the state of the country in the east parts where he lived, which was afterwards here, of their names, number, and strength; of their situation and distance from this place, and who was chief amongst them. Being, after some time of entertainment and gifts, dismissed, a while after he came some English ships came to fish, with whom he was acquainted, and could name sundry of them by their names, amongst whom he had got his language.
again all the tools that were stolen away before, and made way for the coming of their great sachem, called Massasoit, who, about four or five days after, came with the chief of his friends, and other attendance, with the aforesaid Squanto. With whom, after friendly entertainments, and some gifts given him, they made a peace with him (which hath now continued this 24 years) in these terms:

1. That neither he nor any of his should injure or do hurt to any of their people.
2. That if any of his did any hurt to any of theirs, he should send the offender, that they might punish him.
3. That if anything were taken away from any of theirs, he should cause it to be restored; and the like to his.
4. If any did unjustly war against him, they would aid him; if any did war against them, he should aid them.
5. He should send to his neighbors confederates, to certify them of this, that they might not wrong them, but might be likewise comprised in the conditions of peace.
6. That when their men came to them, they should leave their bows and arrows behind them.

After these things he returned to his place called Sowams, some 40 mile from this place, but Squanto continued with them and was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set their corn, where to take fish and to procure other commodities, and was also their pilot to bring them to unknown places for their profit, and this place, and scarce any left alive besides himself. He was carried away with diverse others by one Hunt for slaves in Spain; but he got away for England and was entertained by a merchant in London and employed to Newfoundland and other parts, and lastly brought hither into these parts. . . .

[1621] . . . They began now to gather in the small harvest they had, and to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength, and had all things in good plenty; for as some were thus employed in affairs abroad, others were exercised in fishing, about cod and bass and other fish, of which they took good store, of which every family had their portion. All the summer there was no want. And now began to come in store of fowl, as winter approached, of which this place did abound when they came first (but afterward decreased by degrees). And besides wild turkeys, of which they took many, besides venison, etc. Besides they had about a peck of meal a week to a person, or now since harvest, Indian corn to that proportion. Which made many afterwards write so largely of their plenty here to their friends in England, which were not feigned, but true reports.

Critical Reading

1. Respond: If you had been making the journey on the Mayflower, what would you have done to prepare for life in America?

2. (a) Recall: What were some of the hardships the Pilgrims faced during their trip across the Atlantic and their first winter at Plymouth? (b) Interpret: What do their troubles suggest about the climate and landscape of Plymouth?

3. (a) Recall: How do the Pilgrims explain Squanto’s role in their experience? (b) Interpret: What does this explanation suggest about the Pilgrims’ religious convictions?

4. (a) Draw Conclusions: What do you think is the message that Bradford tries to convey in this narrative? (b) Apply: How might this message have meaning for people today?

5. Hypothesize: In what ways might this account have been different if the Pilgrims had settled farther south?

6. Evaluate: How has this account changed your impression of the Pilgrims? Explain.