



Preface : The Two Voyages

Mayflower, by Nathaniel Philbrick

We all want to know how it was in the beginning. From the Big Bang to the Garden of Eden to the circumstances of our own births, we yearn to travel back to that distant time when everything was new and full of promise. Perhaps then, we tell ourselves, we can start to make sense of the convoluted mess we are in today.

But beginnings are rarely as clear-cut as we would like them to be. Take, for example, the event that most Americans associate with the start of the United States: the voyage of the *Mayflower*.

We've all heard at least some version of the story: how in 1620 the Pilgrims sailed to the New World in search of religious freedom; how after drawing up the *Mayflower Compact*, they landed at Plymouth Rock and befriended the local Wampanoags, who taught them how to plant corn and whose leader or sachem, Massasoit, helped them celebrate the First Thanksgiving. From this inspiring inception came the United States.

Like many Americans, I grew up taking this myth of national origins with a grain of salt. In their wide-brimmed hats and buckled shoes, the Pilgrims were the stuff of holiday parades and bad Victorian poetry. Nothing could be more removed from the ambiguities of modern-day America, I thought, than the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower*.

But, as I have since discovered, the story of the Pilgrims does not end with the First Thanksgiving. When we look to how the Pilgrims and their children maintained more than fifty years of peace with the Wampanoags and how that peace suddenly erupted into one of the deadliest wars ever fought on American soil, the history of Plymouth Colony becomes something altogether new, rich, troubling, and complex. Instead of the story we already know, it becomes the story we need to know.

In 1676, fifty-six years after the sailing of the *Mayflower*, a similarly named but far less famous ship, the *Seaflower*, departed from the shores of New England. Like the *Mayflower*, she carried a human cargo. But instead of 102 potential colonists, the *Seaflower* was bound for the Caribbean with 180 Native American slaves.

The governor of Plymouth Colony, Josiah Winslow—son of former *Mayflower* passengers

Edward and Susanna Winslow—had provided the *Seaflower*'s captain with the necessary documentation. In a certificate bearing his official seal, Winslow explained that these Native men, women, and children had joined in an uprising against the colony and were guilty of "many notorious and execrable murders, killings, and outrages." As a consequence, these "heathen malefactors" had been condemned to perpetual slavery.

The *Seaflower* was one of several New England vessels bound for the West Indies with Native slaves. But by 1676, plantation owners in Barbados and Jamaica had little interest in slaves who had already shown a willingness to revolt. No evidence exists as to what happened to the Indians aboard the *Seaflower*, but we do know that the captain of one American slave ship was forced to venture all the way to Africa before he finally disposed of his cargo. And so, over a half century after the sailing of the *Mayflower*, a vessel from New England completed a transatlantic passage of a different sort.

The rebellion referred to by Winslow in the *Seaflower*'s certificate is known today as King Philip's War. Philip was the son of Massasoit, the Wampanoag leader who greeted the Pilgrims in 1621. Fifty-four years later, in 1675, Massasoit's son went to war. The fragile bonds that had held the Indians and English together in the decades since the sailing of the *Mayflower* had been irreparably broken.

King Philip's War lasted only fourteen months, but it changed the face of New England. After fifty-five years of peace, the lives of Native and English peoples had become so intimately intertwined that when fighting broke out, many of the region's Indians found themselves, in the words of a contemporary chronicler, "in a kind of maze, not knowing what to do." Some Indians chose to support Philip; others joined the colonial forces; still others attempted to stay out of the conflict altogether. Violence quickly spread until the entire region became a terrifying war zone. A third of the hundred or so towns in New England were burned and abandoned. There was even a proposal to build a barricade around the core settlements of Massachusetts and surrender the towns outside the perimeter to Philip and his allies.

The colonial forces ultimately triumphed, but at a horrifying cost. There were approximately seventy thousand people in New England at the outbreak of hostilities. By the end of the war, somewhere in the neighborhood of five thousand were dead, with more than three-quarters of those losses suffered by the Native Americans. In terms of percentage of population killed, King Philip's War was more than twice as bloody as the American Civil War and at least seven times more lethal than the American Revolution. Not counted in these statistics are the hundreds of Native Americans who, like the passengers aboard the *Seaflower*, ended the war as slaves. It had taken fifty-six years to unfold, but one people's quest for freedom had resulted in the conquest and enslavement of another.

It was Philip who led me to the Pilgrims. I was researching the history of my adopted home, Nantucket Island, when I encountered a reference to the Wampanoag leader in the town's records. In attempting to answer the question of why Philip, whose headquarters was in modern Bristol, Rhode Island, had traveled more than sixty-five miles across the water to Nantucket, I realized that I must begin with Philip's father, Massasoit, and the Pilgrims.

My initial impression of the period was bounded by two conflicting preconceptions: the time-honored tradition of how the Pilgrims came to symbolize all that is good about America and the now equally familiar modern tale of how the evil Europeans annihilated the innocent Native Americans. I soon learned that the real-life Indians and English of the seventeenth century were too smart, too generous, too greedy, too brave—in short, too human—to behave

so predictably.

Without Massasoit's help, the Pilgrims would never have survived the first year, and they remained steadfast supporters of the sachem to the very end. For his part, Massasoit realized almost from the start that his own fortunes were linked to those of the English. In this respect, there is a surprising amount of truth in the tired, threadbare story of the First Thanksgiving.

But the Indians and English of Plymouth Colony did not live in a static idyll of mutual support. Instead, it was fifty-five years of struggle and compromise—a dynamic, often harrowing process of give and take. As long as both sides recognized that they needed each other, there was peace. The next generation, however, came to see things differently.

When Philip's warriors attacked in June of 1675, it was not because relentless and faceless forces had given the Indians no other choice. Those forces had existed from the very beginning. War came to New England because two leaders—Philip and his English counterpart, Josiah Winslow—allowed it to happen. For Indians and English alike, there was nothing inevitable about King Philip's War, and the outbreak of fighting caught almost everyone by surprise.

When violence and fear grip a society, there is an almost overpowering temptation to demonize the enemy. Given the unprecedented level of suffering and death during King Philip's War, the temptations were especially great, and it is not surprising that both Indians and English began to view their former neighbors as subhuman and evil. What is surprising is that even in the midst of one of the deadliest wars in American history, there were Englishmen who believed the Indians were not inherently malevolent and there were Indians who believed the same about the English. They were the ones whose rambunctious and intrinsically rebellious faith in humanity finally brought the war to an end, and they are the heroes of this story.

It would be left to subsequent generations of New Englanders to concoct the nostalgic and reassuring legends that have become the staple of annual Thanksgiving Day celebrations. As we shall see, the Pilgrims had more important things to worry about than who was the first to set foot on Plymouth Rock.

It is true that most of what we know about seventeenth-century New England comes from the English. Though in recent decades, archaeologists, anthropologists, and folklorists have significantly increased our understanding of the Native American culture of the time. Any account of the period must depend, for the most part, on contemporary narratives, histories, letters, documents, and poems written by English men and women.

I have focused on two people, one familiar, the other less so: Plymouth governor William Bradford and Benjamin Church, a carpenter turned Indian fighter whose maternal grandfather had sailed on the Mayflower. Bradford and Church could not have been more different—one was pious and stalwart, the other was audacious and proud—but both wrote revealingly about their lives in the New World. Together, they tell a fifty-six-year intergenerational saga of discovery, accommodation, community, and war—a pattern that was repeated time and time again as the United States worked its way west and, ultimately, out into the world.

It is a story that is at once fundamental and obscure, and it begins with a ship on a wide and blustery sea.

Copyright (c) 2006 by Nathaniel Philbrick