

WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST:

THE MAYFLOWER PILGRIMS

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When the ship *Mayflower* sailed from Plymouth, England, in September 1620 on her voyage into history, she carried 102 passengers, of which nearly half were women and children. Eighteen of the passengers were wives accompanying their husbands to the New World; with them they brought thirty-one children ranging in age from a nursing infant to teenagers. In addition, at least three of the women were pregnant during the voyage. . . .

Elizabeth Hopkins gave birth to her son Oceanus at sea while also mothering her two-year-old daughter Damaris and her stepchildren, thirteen-year-old Constance and ten-year-old Giles. Miraculously, all survived the voyage and the first winter, though Oceanus and Damaris did not live to adulthood. Five more children eventually were born to the Hopkinses in this inhospitable new land. . . .

In early December 1620, Susanna White gave birth to her son Peregrine on board the *Mayflower* while it was anchored in the shelter of Cape Cod. Two months later her husband William died, leaving her with the baby and their five-year-old son Resolved. In May, Susanna married Edward Winslow, whose first wife had died during the winter. Susanna and Edward's marriage, the first performed in the new colony, produced five children, though only two survived their childhoods. Resolved and Peregrine lived to adulthood. . . .

Mary Allerton did not fare as well as Elizabeth and Susanna. She made the journey with her husband Isaac and their three young children—eight-year-old Bartholomew, six-year-old Remember, and four-year-old Mary. On December 22, a month after the

Mayflower reached Cape Cod, Mary gave birth to a stillborn son and in February 1621 followed him to the grave. The other Allertons survived; Isaac remarried twice, was accused of cheating the colonists in business matters, and moved to New Haven. Both Bartholomew and Remember also left the colony; he returned to England, while she moved to Salem. Mary died in 1699, the last survivor of the *Mayflower* passengers (excluding Peregrine White, not yet born during the voyage). . . .

Dorothy Bradford, William's wife, left behind her only child, two-year-old John, when she accompanied her husband to the New World. She fell overboard from the *Mayflower*, anchored near Cape Cod, while William was away searching for a settlement site. Although Bradford and his contemporaries recorded the event as accidental, rumors persist to the present day that Dorothy actually committed suicide.

William and Mary Brewster, who at the time were in their fifties, were the oldest man and woman to survive the "General Sickness" of that first terrible winter. Educated at Cambridge University, William had served as an assistant to one of Queen Elizabeth's secretaries of state before joining with the religious separatists and becoming a lay minister. At one time imprisoned with other members of the church, Brewster became the colonists' spiritual leader when their minister, John Robinson, chose to remain in Holland with the majority of the congregation. The Brewsters brought their two youngest sons, Love, age ten, and Wrestling, age eight, with them to the New World. Like their parents,

the two Brewster children lived through the sickness and starvation of the first year. Although Wrestling died unmarried at a young age, Love survived until 1650, leaving four children. Three older Brewster children also arrived from England on later ships.

Forty-one-year-old Elinor Billington and her family numbered among the "Strangers" aboard the *Mayflower*. Bradford called the Billingtons "one of the profanest families among us" and could not imagine how they "shuffled into [our] company." John Billington constantly quarrelled with Bradford and other leaders and kept company with troublemakers. In 1630 he was convicted of murder, gaining the distinction of being the first person executed by hanging in the New World.

The Billingtons' two sons—John, sixteen years old, and Francis, some years younger—apparently terrorized the other passengers throughout the voyage. Francis endangered the ship by firing his father's fowling piece, igniting a fire that almost spread to nearby barrels of gunpowder. And young John got lost in the woods in May 1621, only to be rescued by Indians and returned to a ten-man search party sent from the colony. The troublesome youth died a few years later, but Francis survived to marry and father nine children.

Priscilla Mullins—today probably the best-known of all the *Mayflower* colonists—would have been about sixteen years old when she supposedly attracted the simultaneous attention of friends John Alden, a cooper hired by the company in Southampton, and Myles Standish, a man of military experience who looked after the colony's defense. Priscilla had arrived in New England with her parents, William and Alice, and her

brother Joseph, all of whom perished during that first winter. Captain Standish, who was one of only two people not afflicted with the illness that took so many lives, had lost his wife Rose to the epidemic.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Courtship of Miles Standish* immortalized the legend of how Standish asked Alden to carry his marriage proposal to Priscilla, who replied, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" Married soon after, John and Priscilla had ten children, who in turn produced sixty-nine grandchildren and nearly four hundred great-grandchildren. Myles Standish found a bride elsewhere and fathered seven children.

Not all of the children on the *Mayflower* traveled with parents. Four of the youngest, in fact, found themselves virtually given away to the Pilgrim group. Mary, Richard, Jasper, and Ellen More—ages four, six, seven, and eight respectively—had become pawns in a bitter custody battle between their parents, Catherine and Samuel More. At the age of twenty-three, Catherine, an heiress and descendant of English and Scottish kings, married sixteen-year-old Samuel, her third cousin.

Catherine subsequently gave birth to four children, but divorce proceedings cast doubt on their paternity.

Samuel took the children from their mother and entrusted them to members of the Pilgrim company. In addition

to paying for their passage, food, and clothing, Samuel arranged for each child ultimately to receive fifty acres of land in the new settlement. Of the four, only Richard survived to adulthood. It is particularly ironic that these abandoned children were the only *Mayflower* passengers with proved royal ancestry.

