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Cape Cod and town of Plymouth, detail of 1639 Dutch map of northeast North America

## “in these hard and difficult beginnings”

### Surviving the First Winter of the Plymouth Colony, 1620-1621

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 1656, excerpts

William Bradford served as governor of the Plymouth Colony five times between its founding in 1620 and his death in 1657. His famed history of the colony, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, published the year before his death, recounts the hardship of the Pilgrims' first winter and their early relations with the Patuxet Indians, especially the unique Squanto, who had just returned to his homeland after being kidnapped by an English seaman in 1614 and taken to England. Here we take up Bradford's account of the colony's founding after the adoption of the Mayflower Compact on November 11, 1620.

After this [the signing of the Mayflower Compact] they chose, or rather confirmed, Mr. John Carver (a man godly and well approved amongst them) their Governor for that year. And after they had provided a place for their goods, or common store (which were long in unlading for want of boats, foulness of the winter weather, and sickness of diverse [various kinds]) and begun some small cottages for their habitation, as time would admit, they met and consulted of laws and orders, both for their civil and military Government, as the necessity of their condition did require, still adding thereunto as urgent occasion in several times, and as cases did require.

In these hard and difficult beginnings they found some discontents and murmurings arise amongst some, and mutinous speeches and carriages in other; but they were soon quelled and overcome by the wisdom, patience, and just and equal carriage of things by the Governor and better part, which clave faithfully together in the main. But that which was most sad and lamentable was that in two or three months' time half of their company died, especially in January and February, being the depth of winter, and wanting [lacking] houses and other comforts; being infected with the scurvy and other diseases, which this long voyage and their inaccomodate condition had brought upon them, so as there died sometimes two or three of a day, in the aforesaid 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 [healthy] persons who, to their great commendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night or day, but with abundance of toil

and hazard of their own health, fetched them wood, made them fires, dressed [prepared] them meat, made their beds, washed their loathsome clothes, clothed and unclothed them; in a word, did all the homely and necessary offices for them which dainty and queasy stomachs cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cheerfully, without any grudging in the least, showing herein their true love unto their friends and brethren. A rare example and worthy to be remembered. . . .

But I may not hear pass by another remarkable passage not to be forgotten. As this calamity fell among the passengers that were to be left here to plant [farm], and were hasted ashore and made to drink water, that the seamen might have the more bear, and one in his sickness desiring but a small can of beer, it was answered, that if he were their own father he should have none; the disease began to fall amongst them also, so as almost half of their company died before they went away, and many of their officers and lustiest [hardest] men, as the boatson, gunner, quartermasters, the cook, and others. At which the master was something stricken and sent to the sick ashore and told the Governor he should send for beer for them that had need of it, though he drunk water homeward bound. But now amongst his company there was far another kind of carriage in this misery than amongst the passengers; for they that before had been boone companions in drinking and jollity in the time of their health and welfare, began now to desert one another in this calamity saying they would not hazard their lives for them, they should be infected by coming to help them in their cabins, and so, after they came to lie by it, would do little or nothing for them, but if they died let them die. But such of the passengers as were yet aboard showed them what mercy they could, which made some of their hearts relent, as the boatson (and some others), who was a proud young man, and would often curse and scoff at the passengers; but when he grew weak, they had compassion on him and helped him; then he confessed he did not deserve it at their hands, he had abused them in word and deed. O! saith he, you, I now see, show your love like Christians indeed one to another, but we let one another lie and die like dogs.

Another lay cursing his wife, saying if it had not been for her he had never come this unlucky voyage, and anon [soon] cursing his fellows, saying he had done this and that for some of them, he had spent so much and so much amongst them, and they were now weary of him and did not help him, having need. Another gave his companion all he had, if he died, to help him in his weakness; he went and got a little spice and made him a mess [meal] of meat once or twice, and because he died not so soon as he expected, he went amongst his fellows, and swore the rogue would couden [deceive] him, he would see him checked before he made him any more meat; and yet the poor fellow died before morning.

All this while the Indians came skulking about them, and would sometimes show themselves aloof of, but when any approached near them, they would run away. And once they stole away their tools where they had been at work and were gone to dinner. But about the 16th of March a certain Indian came boldly amongst them and spoke to them in broken English, which they could well understand, but marvelled at it. At length they understood by discourse [conversation] with him that he was not of these parts but



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J. W. Smith, *Landing of the Pilgrims in the Year 1620*, engraving, ca. 1823 (detail)

belonged to the eastern parts, where some English ships came to fish, with whom he was acquainted and could name sundry [several] of them by their names, amongst whom he had got his language. He became profitable to them in acquainting them with many things concerning the state of the country in the east parts where he lived, which was afterwards profitable unto them; as also of the people here, of their names, number, and strength; of their situation and distance from this place, and who was chief amongst them.

His name was Samasett [Samoset]. He told them also of another Indian whose name was Squanto, a native of this place, who had been in England and could speak better English than himself. Being, after some time of entertainment and gifts, dismissed, a while after he came again, and five more with him, and they brought again all the tools that were stolen away before, and made way for the coming of their great Sachem [chief], Massasoit, who, about four or five days after, came with the chief of his friends and other attendants with the aforesaid Squanto. With whom, after friendly entertainment, and some gifts given him, they made a peace with him (which hath now continued this twenty-four 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 they should do the like to his.
- 4• If any did unjustly war against him, they would aide him; if any did war against them, he should aid them.
- 5• He should send to his neighbors confederates [allies] to certify them of this, that they might not wrong them, but might be likewise comprised [informed] in the conditions of peace.
- 6• That when their men came to them, they should leave their bows and arrows behind them.<sup>1</sup>

After these things he returned to his place called Sowams, some forty miles from this place, but Squanto continued with them and was their interpreter, and was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation. He directed them how to set [plant] 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 never left them till he died. He was a native of this place, and scarce any left alive besides himself.<sup>2</sup>

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### Anno ·1621·<sup>1</sup>

They now began to dispatch the ship away which brought them over, which lay till about this time, or the beginning of April. The reason on their part why she stayed so long was the necessity and danger that lay upon them, for it was well towards the end of December before she could land anything here, or they able to receive anything ashore. Afterwards, the 14th of January the house which they had made for a general randevoze [rendezvous/meeting house] by casualty fell afire, and some were fain to retire aboard for shelter. Then the sickness began to fall sore amongst them, and the weather so bad as they could not make much sooner any dispatch. Again, the Governor and chief of them, seeing so many die, and fall down sick daily, thought it no wisdom to send away the ship, their condition considered, and the danger they stood in from the Indians, till they could procure some shelter; and therefore thought it better to draw some more charge upon themselves and friends, than hazard all. The master and seamen likewise, though before they hasted the passengers ashore to be gone, now many of their men being dead, and of the ablest

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<sup>1</sup> This treaty was renewed by Ousamequin [Massasoit] and his son, Moanam [Wamsutta, or Alexander], in 1639, with certain additions to the terms, one of them being that "hee or they shall not give, sell, or convey away any of his or their lands, territories, or possessions whatsoever, to any person or persons whomsoever, without the priutie and consent of this gouernment, other then to such as this gouernment shall send and appoint." *Plymouth Col. Rec.*, 1. 133. The peace lasted during the life of Massasoit and during the times of his two sons who succeeded him, until the termination of the war, known by the name of the younger, that of Philip, in 1675. [Footnote in White, et al., eds. *History of Plymouth Plantation*, p. 202]

<sup>2</sup> Most of the Patuxet Indians had died in an epidemic during the previous decade. See p. 4.

of them (as is before noted) and of the rest many lay sick and weak, the master durst [dared] not put to sea, till he saw his men begin to recover, and the heart of winter over.

Afterwards they (as many as were able) began to plant their corn, in which service Squanto stood them in great stead, showing them both the manner how to set it, and after how to dress and tend it. Also he told them except they got fish and set with it (in these old grounds) it would come to nothing,<sup>3</sup> and he showed them that in the middle of April they should have store enough come up the brook, by which they began to build, and taught them how to take it, and where to get other provisions necessary for them; all which they found true by trial and experience. Some English seed they sow, as wheat and peas, but it came not to good, either by the badness of the seed or lateness of the season, or both, or some other defect.

In this month of April whilst they were busy about their seed, their Governor (Mr. John Carver) came out of the field very sick, it being a hot day; he complained greatly of his head, and lay down, and within a few hours his senses failed, so as he never spake more till he died, which was within a few days after. Whose death was much lamented and caused great heaviness amongst them, as there was cause. He was buried in the best manner they could, with some volleys of [gun] shot by all that bore arms; and his wife, being a weak woman, died within five or six weeks after him. . . .

Having in some sort ordered their business at home, it was thought meet [wise] to send some abroad to see their new friend Massasoit, and to bestow upon him some gratuity [gift] to bind him the faster unto them; as also that hereby they might view the country and see in what manner he lived, what strength he had about him, and how the ways were to his place, if at any time they should have occasion. So the 2nd of July they sent Mr. Edward Winslow and Mr. Hopkins, with the foresaid Squanto for their guide, who gave him a suit of clothes and a horseman's coat, with some other small things, which were kindly accepted; but they found but short commons, and came both weary and hungry home. For the Indians used then to have nothing so much corn as they have since the English have stored them with their how's [plows] and seen their industry in breaking up new grounds therewith.

They found his place to be forty miles from hence, the soil good, and the people not many, being dead and abundantly wasted in the late great mortality which fell in all these parts about three years before the coming of the English, wherein thousands of them died; they not being able to bury one another, their skulls and bones were found in many places lying still above ground, where their houses and dwellings had been, a very sad spectacle to behold. But they brought word that the Narragansetts lived but on the other side of that great bay, and were a strong people, and many in number, living compact together, and had not been at all touched with this wasting plague.

