

Beyond the Mayflower: History, Culture, and Encounter in Plymouth Colony

Class 5: Learning and Legacy: Literacy, Education, and Influence

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Divisions of this Talk

Part 1: Plymouth Colony: A Cultural Backwater? Education in the Colony.

This opening segment explores the ideals of education espoused by the Pilgrims' Leiden pastor John Robinson, followed by an account of the actual record of education and the funding of schools in the colony, compared with the educational initiatives of the Massachusetts Colony.

Part 2: Books in Plymouth Colony: The Evidence of the Probate Inventories

Our main knowledge of the books owned by the first generations of Plymouth settlers is derived from the often surprisingly meticulous catalogues of books in the probate inventories taken by pairs of neighbors after a settler's death. We shall focus on some remarkable books on the shelves of two settlers in particular: William Brewster and Myles Standish.

Part 3: Governor Bradford's Use of Secular Books

We conclude by sampling some arresting uses William Bradford made of secular books present and circulating in the Plymouth Colony of his day. Especially striking are his attempts to learn Latin, Greek, and Hebrew in his old age.

Passages to be Discussed

Below are passages that will be discussed in the talk. Images of these passages will appear on the screen, but sometimes they will be abridged. Also, in several instances I'll be showing Bradford's own manuscripts without transcription, given that I think you will find his hand remarkably easy to read. But below I have supplied those passages in transcription.

Generally, in the talk I will be singling out only a few key phrases from these passages. But some of you may want to have the fuller passages handy. So here they are.

Part 1: Plymouth Colony: A Cultural Backwater? Education in the Colony.

"The Insignificance of Plymouth Colony"

If the churches of the Bay then sought the advice of Plymouth about details it would be because they were already predisposed to erect a Congregational regime, and because **they would have proceeded along essentially the same line had there been no Plymouth at all.**

—Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts 1630-1650* (1933), p. 128

The place of the Pilgrim Fathers in American history can best be stated by a paradox. **Of slight importance in their own time**, they are of great and increasing significance in our time....The first half of this paradox, **the insignificance of Plymouth Colony in the colonial era**, is one upon which almost all American historians are now agreed.

—Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Pilgrim Fathers: The Significance in History," address delivered in Plymouth, 1951

When we...discover William Bradford lauding **the pathetically unimportant Plymouth church** as a "small candle" whose "light here kindled hath shone...in some sort to our whole nation," one reasonably may surmise an English rhetorical routine whose occasional appearance in New England does not necessarily entail a great and singular Errand.

—Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (1988), p. 115

John Robinson (Pilgrims' Leiden pastor): passages from his *Observations Divine and Morall for the Furthering of knowledg, and vertue*. Amsterdam: Successors of Giles Thorp, 1625.

It is best for ordinarie capacities to travell in some few Books (though by occasion they may step into many), and the same picked by good advice, of unpartiall, and experienced men; and those throughly [sic] to digest, and discourse upon; as it is best for weak stomachs to eat of few, and wholesom dishes: Which may also be done for further use, extention, and applycation, then the Authour himself conceived, or at least, expressed.

Chapter XXIII: "Of Books, and Writings"

With these also we must join the consideration of such advantages, as the latter times have of the former, whose helpfull labours they enjoy: by which those which follow them (though in themselves meaner then they) are enabled to discern of many things better then the other that went before them; as a dwarf set upon the shoulders of a giant can see further then he.

Chapter IX, "Of Authoritie, and Reason"

John Robinson, extract from letter to William Brewster (from Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Anno 1624, MS. p. 115). Brewster, as ruling elder, had requested permission to be made teaching elder, with authority to offer the sacraments of baptism and Lord's Supper.

Now touching the question propounded by you I judg it not lawfull for you, being a ruling Elder, as rom.12.7 8 & Tim 5 17 opposed to the Elders, that teach, & exhorte, and labore in the word and doctrine, to which the sacrements are annexed, to administer them, nor convenient, if it were lawfull. Whether any larned man will come unto you, or not, I know not; if any doe, you must *consilium capere in arena*.

- *consilium capere in arena*: from Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 22.1 = "hatch a strategy in the arena" (i.e. think on one's feet, like a skillful gladiator)

William Bradford, "On the Various Heresies" (ca. 1655) - from the section on Quakers;
Bradford here stresses the importance of a learned clergy.

I wonder what madnes hath cought
mens minds too set larning at nought
For when god had great works toe doe
he alwayes fited men theretoe
Moyses in Egypt was learned
when hee from thence gods peopell led
Who mighty was in word & deed
and meete his peopell for too feed... (lines 239-46)

and Christe sente not the twelve abroad
till knowlidge of the tungen they had
And allsoe what was meete from them
the nationes for to wine & gaine
how learned was the apotell [*sic*] paule
imployed in labours more then all
The Heathen Poets he then knew
and great learned men he overthrew... (lines 251-58)

Ho what great madnes would it bee
and what Confutions should wee see
errour the truth would under mine
to barbarisme all would decline (lines 281-84)

The Plymouth settlers respond to a complaint made by disgruntled settlers, not part of the Leiden group, who had returned to England (from Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Book 2, Anno 1624, MS p. 112):

4. ob: Children not catechised, nor taught to read.

Ans: neither is true, for diverse take pains with their owne as they can, Indeed wee have no commone schools for want of a fit person, or hithertoo means to maintain one; though we desire now to begine.

Cotton Mather on Thomas Prence (Prince), governor of Plymouth after Bradford's death: *Magnalia Christi Americana; or the Ecclesiastical History of New England* London, 1702, Book II, Chap. II, "The Successors," p. 6:

"Sometimes during the Life, but always after the Death of Governour Bradford, even until his own, Mr. Thomas Prince was chosen Governour of Plymouth. He was a Gentleman whose Natural Parts exceeded his Acquired; but the want and worth of Acquired Parts was a thing so sensible unto him [i.e. obvious to him], that Plymouth never had a greater Maecenas [i.e. patron] of Learning in it: It was he that in spite of much Contradiction, procured Revenues for the Support of Grammar-Schools in that Colony."

In this period, "grammer schools" were secondary schools, including instruction in Latin (at a minimum; sometimes Greek and Hebrew as well).

Education in Plymouth Colony

"The **11 of Feb: 1635**, Benjamine Eaton, the sone of Francis Eaton, of late deceased, was, by the Governor & Assistantes, with his mothers consent, put to **Bridgett Fuller**, widow, for 14 years, shee being **to keep him at school** 2 yeares, & to imploy him in such service as she saw good & he should be fitt..."

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Court Orders, Vol. I, 1633-1649*, ed. by Nathaniel B. Shurtleff (Boston, 1855), pp. 36-37

- For more on Bridget Fuller, see Donna Watkins, *Weaker Vessels*, pp. 102-4 and 221-24.

3 June 1662: "It is proposed by the Court unto the severall Townshipes of this Jurisdiction as a thinge they ought to take into theire serious consideration That some course may be taken that in every Towne there may be a Schoolmaster sett up to traine up children to reading and writing."

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Laws 1623-1682*, ed. David Pulsifer (Boston.1861), p. 142

13 December 1670: "Att the said meeting the said John Morton proffered to teach the children and youth of the towne to **Read and write and Cast accounts** on Reasonable considerations."

—*Records of the Town of Plymouth: Vol. I: 1636 to 1705* (Plymouth, 1889), p. 115

"Att a towne Meeting held att the meeting house att Plymouth the **20th day of May 1672**; The Towne did agree and unanimously voate and Conclude that theire lands Att Sepecan Agawaam and places adjacent; the proffitts and benifitts therof shalbee Improved and Employed for and towards the Maintainance of **the free Scoole now begun and erected att Plymouth**; and that the proffitts and benefitts therof shall noe way [be] estranged from the said use ; soe longe as ther shalbe occation to use it for that end ; and in that behalfe; and the Towne have made Choise of and do Request Mr Thomas Prence and Captain Willam Bradford together with the Celect men of the Towne to Improve it the best they Can for the end aforsaid."

—*Records of the Town of Plymouth: Vol. I: 1636 to 1705* (Plymouth, 1889), p. 124

4 July 1672: "It is ordered by the Court that the charge of **the free Scoole**, which is three and thirty pounds a yeare shalbe defrayed by the Treasurer out of the proffitts ariseing by the ffishing att the Cape until such Time as that the minds of the ffreemen be knowne consarning it which wilbe returned to the next Court of election."

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Laws 1623-1682*, p. 233

4 June 1674: "This Court haveing received by the deputies of the severall townes the signification of the minds of the Major pte of the freemen of this Collonie that all the proffitts of the ffishing att Cape Code graunted by the Court for **the erecting and Maintaining of a Scoole** be still continewed for that end if a **competent Number of Scollars** shall appeer to be devoated therunto, which the Court Judges **not to be lesse then eight or ten** Doe therefore heerby confirme the Graunt of the aforsaid proffitts of the ffishing att the Cape to the Maintainance of the Scoole, and that there be noe further demaunds, besides the said proffitts of the Cape demaunded of the Country for the Maintainance of the said Scoole."

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Laws 1623-1682*, p. 237

1 November 1677: "fforasmuch as **the Maintainance of good litterature** doth much tend to the advancement of the weale and florishing estate of societies and Republicques

This Court doth therfore order; That in whatsoever Townshipp in this Goverment consisting of fifty families or upwards; any meet man shalbe obtained to teach **a Gramer scoole** such townshipp shall allow att least twelve pounds in currant marchantable pay to be raised by rate on all the Inhabitants of such Towne and those that have the more emediate benefitt therof by their childrens going to scoole with what others may vountarily give to promote soe good a work and generall good, shall make up the resedue Nessesarie to maintaine the same and that the proffitts ariseing of the Cape ffishing; heertofore ordered to maintaine a Gramer scoole in this Collonie, be destributed to such Townes as have such Gramer scooles for the maintainance therof....and further this Court orders that every such Towne as consists of seaventy families or upwards and hath not a Gramer scoole therein shall allow and pay unto the next Towne which hath such Gramer scoole kept up amongst them, the sume of five pounds p annum in currant Marchantable pay, to be levied on the Inhabitants of such defective Townes by rate and gathered and delivered by the Constables of such Townes as by warrant from any Majestrate of this Jurisdiction shalbe required.

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Laws 1623-1682*, pp. 246-47

literature: *OED*, 1. "Familiarity with letters or books; knowledge acquired from reading or studying books, esp. the principal classical texts associated with humane learning; literary culture; learning, scholarship. Now historical."

—cf. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): "*literature*: learning; skill in letters" (For "letters," Johnson gave as his fourth definition "learning," and as an example he offered the KJV version of John 7:14-15: "...Jesus went up into the temple, and taught. And the Jews marvelled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned?")

grammar school: *OED*, 1a: "Originally: a school for the teaching of Latin, esp. Latin grammar..., following a model of education developed in England before the 16th cent. Later: any of various types of school with roots in this system, regardless of whether classical languages are taught, usually offering a secondary education with high academic standards."

- Among the examples listed is from the 1647 Massachusetts School Law.

Education of Girls in Plymouth Colony? A Tantalizing Record from August, 1664

"Rehoboth, the seaventh of August, 1664. Wee, whose names are subscribed heerto, doe heerby signify to all psons whom it may conserne, that Elizabeth Walker, the daughter of Phillip Walker, of the towne of Rehoboth, was accedentially drowned; **shee, being sent to scoole**, was found alsoe accedentially in the river first by two youtthes....From the testimony of the afor specified psons,...we, the subscribers, conceive that the child, which was **two yeares and an half old**, before specified, came accedentially to her end."

—*Records of the Colony of New Plymouth: Court Orders, Vol. IV 1661-1668*, 83-4

Donna A. Watkins, *Weaker Vessels: The Women and Children of Plymouth Colony*, p. 187

Education in 17th-Century Massachusetts Colony

1635: Boston Latin School founded. (It still exists, ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* as the #1 public high school in Massachusetts. Its current mission statement is: "Boston Latin School seeks to ground its students in a contemporary classical education as preparation for successful college studies, responsible and engaged citizenship, and a rewarding life.")

1636: Harvard College founded. (At last report, this institution still exists.)

- entrance requirements: "When any Schollar is able to understand Tully [Cicero], or such like classicall Latine Author *ex tempore* and make and speake true Latine in Verse and Prose, *suo ut aiunt Marte* [i.e. without assistance]; And decline perfectly the Paradigm's of Nounes and Verbes in the Greek tongue: Let him then and not before be capable of admission into the Colledge."

(*New Englands First Fruits*, London, 1643, p. 13)

1642: First Massachusetts School Law: "This Cort, taking into consideration the great neglect of many parents & masters in training up their children in learning & labor...do hereupon order and decree, that in every towne the chosen men appointed for managing the prudentiall affaires of the same shall...have the power to take account from time to time of all parents and masters, and of their children, concerning their calling and implymment of their children, especially of their ability to read & understand **the principles of religion & the capitall laws of this country...**"

1647: Second Massachusetts School Law: "It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times by perswading from **the use of Tongues**, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the Originall might be clouded and corrupted with false glosses of Saint-seeming deceivers....it is therefore ordered that everie Township in this Jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to fifty Householders shall forthwith appoint one within their Town to teach all such children as shall resort to him to write and read...And it is farther ordered that where any Town shall increase to the number of one hundred Families or Householders, they shall set up a **Grammar-School**, the Masters therof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fitted for the Universitie..."

(cf. similar version in *The Book of the General Lawes and Libertyes Concerning the Inhabitants of Massachusetts*, Cambridge, 1660, pp. 70-71)

Part 2: Books in Plymouth Colony: The Evidence of the Probate Inventories

Notations by William Peirce (sea captain) and William Brewster in copy of first edition of Thomas Lodge's translation of the prose works of Seneca (1614). (Thanks to Pilgrim Hall Museum, Plymouth, who also supplied most of the photos of this volume.)

"William Peirse his Booke"

"Willm Brewster his booke bought of William Pierse cost xvi S in Plimmouth in New England. Hebel est omnis Adam"

Brewster's motto nests Latin within Hebrew: "A breath is every man" (based on Psalm 39:5, where the word for "breath" is rendered "vanity" in both the Geneva and KJV).

Notation by William Peirce on the back pastedown of Brewster's Seneca:

"William Peirse: his Booke exchanged with Mr Thomas Potton: for the 2th pt of Mr Perkins workes"

**Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858),
on Miles's Standish's copy of "Cecers commentaries":**

Fixed to the opposite wall was a shelf of books, and among them
Prominent three, distinguished alike for bulk and for binding;
Bariffe's Artillery Guide, and the Commentaries of Caesar,
Out of the Latin translated by Arthur Golding of London,
And, as if guarded by these between them was standing the Bible....

Nothing was heard in the room but the hurrying pen of the stripling [John Alden],
Or an occasional sigh from the laboring heart of the Captain,
Reading the marvellous words and achievements of Julius Caesar.
After a while he exclaimed, as he smote with his hand, palm downwards,
Heavily on the page: "A wonderful man was this Caesar..."

Longfellow's inspiration for this scene:

Justin Winsor, "Abstracts of the Earliest Wills in the Probate Office, Plymouth,"
New England Historical and Genealogical Register 5 (1851), pp. 335-38.

Part 3: Governor Bradford's Use of Secular Books

William Bradford, on the *Mayflower's* arrival on Cape Cod

- Being thus arived in a good habor, and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees & blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast, & furious ocian, and delivered them from all the periles, & miseries therof; againe to set their feete on the firme, and stable earth, their proper elemente. And no marvell if they were thus joyefull, seeing wise Seneca was so affected with sailing a few miles on the coast of his owne Italy; as he affirmed, that he had rather remaine twentie years on his way by land, then pass by sea to any place in a short time, so tedious, & dreadfull was the same unto him.

—Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Book 1, Ch. 9 (MS p. 46), composed around 1630

The passage in Seneca (*Epistulae Morales* 53), from Thomas Lodge's 1614 translation of Seneca's prosed works (a volume in William Brewster's library). Seneca is on a ship caught in a storm on the Bay of Naples.

- Then began I to require the Master to set me on some shoare. But he told me, that the shoars of the sea were dangerous, and unfit to land at, and that he feared nothing more in a tempest then to beare up for land, yet was I so tormented that I remembered not my selfe of any danger....I therefore importuned the Master, so, that will he nill he, I compelled him to beare for the shoare; whereto when we somewhat neered...**I cast my selfe into the water**, covered in a Velvet mantle, as they are wont who wash themselves in colde water....They are incredible things I suffered, consdidering kthat I could not support my selfe. Learne this of me, that the Sea was not so incensed at the birth of Ulysses, that it should cause ship-wracke in all places. He vomited easily. For mine own part I had rather remaine twenty yeares upon my way, then passe by Sea to any place.

—Seneca, *The Workes both Morall and Naturall of Lucius Annaeus Seneca translated by T. Lodge Dr. of Phis*: London, 1614, p. 247. (The passage was revised and corrected in the 1620 edition.)

Cotton Mather on the death of Dorothy May Bradford

- But after he had resided in Holland about half a Score Years, he was one of those who bore a part in that Hazardous and Generous Enterprize of removing into New-England, with part of the English Church at Leyden, where at their first Landing, his dearest Consort accidentally falling Overboard, was drowned in the Harbour; and the rest of his Days were spent in the Services, and Temptations, of the American Wilderness.

—Mather, *Magnalia Christii Americana, or The Ecclesiastically History of New England* (London, 1702), Book II, ch. 1 (life of Bradford), p. 4.

Seneca and Pliny in Bradford's account of the planting and harvest of 1624:

... before I come to other things, I must speak a word of their planting this year; they having found the benefite of their last years harvest and setting corne for their particuler, having thereby with a great deale of patience, overcome hunger & famine: Which makes me remember a saing of Senecas Epis: 123 That a great parte of libertie, is a well governed belly; and to be patiente in all wants...Which condition of theirs did make me often thinke, of what I had read in Plinie [marginal note: Plin: lib. 18: chap. 3], of the Romans fist beginnings in Romulus time. How every man contented him selfe with 2 Acres of land, and had no more assigned them And chap. 3 It was thought a great reward, to receive at the hands of the people of Rome, a pinte of corne. And long after, the greatest presente given to a captaine, that had gott a victory over their enemise, was as much ground as they could till in one day. And he was not counted a good, but dangerous man; that would not content him selfe with 7 Acres of land. As also how they did pound their corne in morters, as these people were forcte to doe, many years before they could get a mille.

—Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, Bk. 2, Anno 1624 (MS pp. 115-16)

Bradford on trying to learn Hebrew (from fly-papers of MS. of *Of Plimoth Plantation*)

Though I am growne aged, yet I have had a longing
desire, to see with my owne eyes, somthing of that most
ancient Language, and holy tonge, in which the Law
and oracles of God were write; and in which God,
and angels, spake to the holy patriarks, of old
time; and what names were given to things,
from the creation. And though I cannot
attaine to much herein, yet I am refresh=
ed, to have seen some glimpse hereof;
(as Moyses saw the Land of Ca=
nan a farr of) my aime and
desire is, to see how the words,
and phrases lye in the
holy texte; and to
discerne somewhat
of the same,
for my owne
contente.

"The untimly and strang deaths of many of the heathen poets, and comedians"

- a catalogue Bradford copied (with abridgements) from Prynne's *Histrion-Mastix* on a blank page in the notebook containing the *Second Dialogue*.

Ovid was banished.	The untimly, and strang deaths of many of the heathen poets and comedians
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Aischilus, his braines were dashed out with the fall of a tortois: which an Eagle let fall upon his bald-pate.

Euripides, was torne in peeces by doggs, as he went home in the night.

Sophocles, dyed suddenly on the stage by vaine joye; as was conceived.

Philippides, dyed in the same maner, being a famous comedian.

Theodectes; a play-poet, was smiten of god with blindnes, for inserting some passages of the old testament into one of his Tragedies.

Menander, a comedian (& insanus mulierum amator) [a crazed lover of women: *amatur* is Bradford's transrption error for *amator*] was drowned, as he was swiming, & washing him selfe.

Terence, the eminentest Latin-comedian, was drowned, as he returned out of Greece with 108 of Menanders comedies, which he had translated.

Plautus, an elegant Latine comicall-poet, had got a masse of money by his playes, and lost it all, by marchandise, and was inforced to grind in a mill.

Antiphanes, the composer of 355 comedies, being casually struck with a pear, dyed suddenly, and Eupolis was drowned.

- "comedians" = playwrights (both tragic and comic)
- Bradford's addition to Prynne's list in upper left-hand corner: "Ovid was banished."

Lines from Bradford's poem "Some Observations" (1655), with interpolated bits of Latin. Bradford is praying for God's protection against Plymouth's Indigenous neighbors.

give them not up, into these heathens pow'r
who like the greedy wolves,* would them devour
 *vox fere, trux vultus, verissima mortis imago ovid
and exercise on them, their cruell rage
 quamque lupi, saevae plus feritatis habent;
with torments great; & most salvage
 Atrocitatem anhelat omnis barbarus.
Th're not content; their foes only to kill
 Homo homini lupus.
but most inhumanely; torment them will

The first two interpolated Latin lines are from Ovid's poetry of exile: *Tristia* 5.7

- "savage tongue, grim faces, most accurate image of death"
 - "like wolves, but they have even more cruel savagery"
- (The third is a post-classical dictum: "Every savage breathes forth cruelty." The fourth is proverbial, first found in Plautus: "Man is a wolf to man.")