Watertown, Massachusetts, December 28, 1620

On a cold December day, little Francis Billington surely didn’t realize that he had in his hands the potential to alter America’s (and maybe the world’s) history. Two weeks before the Mayflower landed its passengers, Francis was playing in the gunpowder storage area below decks on the ship. He was making sparks with a piece of flint and lighting twisted-rope fuses. Francis found his father’s loaded flintlock pistol and fired it off near a half-keg of powder. This ignited flames that might have sparked an enormous explosion. It would have destroyed the ship, her crew and the all the Pilgrims onboard. Fortunately, his shipmates became alarmed and the fire was extinguished. The boy was severely scolded, but it didn’t take. For years afterward he and his older brother continued to create mischief for the struggling Pilgrim settlers.

"The 5th day 5 Dec. 1620. Great danger by the foolishness of a boy who in his father’s absence had got gunpowder, and had shot off a piece or two, and made squibs, and there being a firing piece charged in his father’s cabin shot her off in the cabin...A fire being within four feet of the beds. God’s mercy no harm done." from Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers by Alexander Young