

The *Mayflower* Factor

How *They* Became *Us*, and Does It Still Matter?

by Jerry Roberts

This year, as we reach the quadricentennial of the *Mayflower*'s arrival on the shores of Massachusetts and the introduction of the people we now call the Pilgrims into the American narrative, it is a good time to take a look at this incredible story and how this one voyage has impacted our nation and, indeed, our world. Amidst all the hoopla, however, some might ask an obvious question: In a nation of rapidly evolving demographics and diversified cultural identities, where the melting pot has done a lot of melting in the past 400 years, is the *Mayflower* story still actually relevant, and to whom?

We all came here from somewhere else. Whether our ancestors migrated from Asia twelve thousand years ago, disembarked at Ellis Island, were transported on a slave ship against their will, landed at JFK airport, walked across the Canadian or Mexican borders, or stepped ashore on the windswept beaches of New England in 1620, every family has its own *Mayflower* story in one form or another. The Pilgrims and their descendants, of course, are no

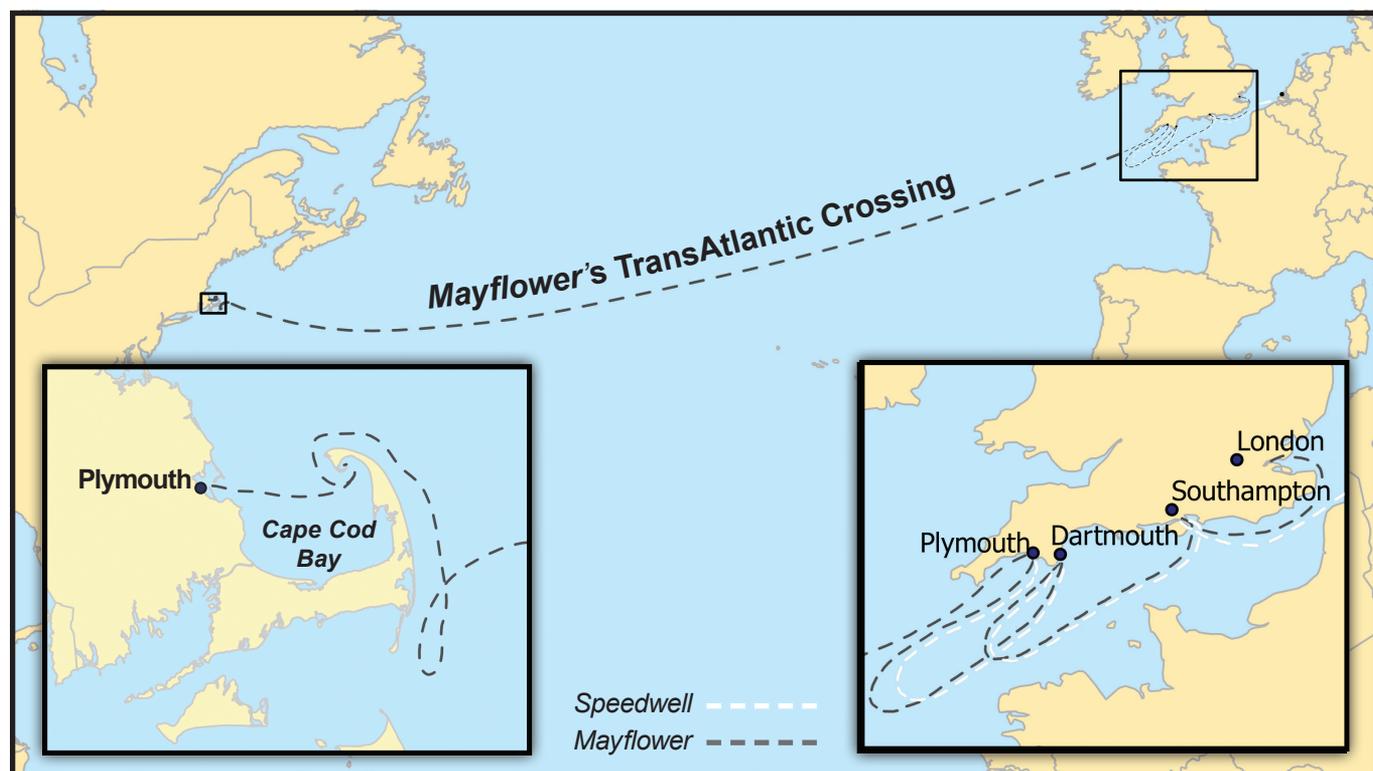
more "American" than anyone else, including the hundreds of thousands of people who had established themselves here long before Europeans "discovered" North America.

Pilgrims 1.1

The *Mayflower* story begins with a small group of religious dissenters who had separated from the established Church of England and fled to the Netherlands to worship freely. But after nine years of self-exile in Leiden, they feared they were losing their identity and decided to create their own settlement in the "New World," where they could maintain their English identity, but worship as they chose. To achieve this goal, they would need permission from the Crown, and a patent from the Virginia Company of London—and, of course, funding. With money provided by a group of London-based investors known as the "merchant adventurers," they formed a joint stock company. The investors would risk capital for the potential of financial reward from a monopoly on marketable goods and materials that would be

sent back from the colony. As their part of the bargain, the Leiden separatists would invest their time and effort to produce these commodities. The financiers were only risking their money—the settlers would also be risking their lives. In order to bolster their numbers to establish a more viable colony, additional settlers, also eager for a chance to better their lot in the New World, joined the venture. Collectively they are now known as the Pilgrims, not to be confused with the Puritans who came to Dorchester by the thousands, beginning in 1630, and established the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The *company* secured a patent to establish a colony near the mouth of the Hudson River, at the northernmost end of the Virginia Colony, about 250 miles up the coast from the English settlement at Jamestown. While the King was not thrilled with religious dissenters (it was his church they were rejecting, after all), he was eager to get more English settlements established in the Americas to counter the growing regional ambitions of the Dutch and others.





ADOBE STOCK IMAGE

The Voyage

The company purchased a small ship named *Speedwell* to transport the Leiden group back to England, where it would meet up with the others and then head out across the Atlantic in tandem with a larger vessel, the *Mayflower*, which had been chartered for the crossing. The *Speedwell* would remain with the Pilgrims, while the *Mayflower* would return to England.

The two ships set off from Southampton on 5 August 1620, but problems with the *Speedwell* forced them to turn back and land at Dartmouth. The two vessels set off again on 23 August, but the *Speedwell* continued to have problems and forced the two ships to return—this time to Plymouth, England. At last, having written off the smaller ship, 102 passengers and approximately thirty crewmen set sail aboard the *Mayflower* on 6 September.

It was already dangerously late in the season, and a series of storms put the passengers and crew through a grueling 66 days at sea. When at last they were in sight of the coast on 9 November, the ship was off Cape Cod, more than 230 miles northeast of their intended destination. After an attempt to sail through Pollock Rip in

hopes of passing through Nantucket Sound, the ship's master and part owner, Christopher Jones, decided to turn back and seek protection in Cape Cod Bay. They anchored inside the tip of Cape Cod, near what is now Provincetown, Massachusetts, on the 11th. Realizing they were now well outside the jurisdiction of the Virginia Colony, the leaders drafted the Mayflower Compact and it was signed by most of the adult males on board. This document is now recognized, along with the Magna Carta and

the United States Constitution, as one of the three most important documents in world history establishing self-government.

The desperate search for a site to start building their settlement involved several expeditions ashore using small boats, sometimes wading waist-deep in the cold water, and some challenging encounters with the local indigenous people. The fact that the Pilgrims stole a Pamet family's winter store of corn and disturbed two graves did not help matters any.



PAINTING BY JEAN LEON GEROME FERRIS 1899, COURTESY LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Signing the Mayflower Compact, 1620

A promising site was eventually identified on the western side of the bay, and the *Mayflower* sailed there, dropping anchor off Plymouth on 16 December. The process of building shelters ashore commenced immediately, but the effects of exposure and exhaustion soon began to take their toll. During their first winter ashore, nearly half of the passengers perished. Aboard the *Mayflower*, the crew suffered the same 50% casualty rate. The surviving group comprised a number of new widows, widowers, and orphans. More than half of the survivors were under sixteen. When the *Mayflower* departed for England on 5 April 1621, Captain Jones offered to take any of the survivors who wanted to return with him. Yet, despite the casualties and suffering, they all decided to stay.

The Pilgrims had landed in the heart of Patuxet, a region already populated by large groups of indigenous Wampanoag people with their own millennia-old civilization. Tragically, the once-flourishing Wampanoag, on whose lands the Pilgrims settled, had themselves been decimated by illnesses carried across the ocean by earlier European explorers. The story of the Pilgrims' interaction with the native people is far too complex to do it justice here, but it is nevertheless a story worth exploring. The Pilgrims were fortunate to receive critical assistance when they needed it the most, and built a positive relationship with Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoag. But interactions with other tribes were not so harmonious. In the decades that followed,

as thousands of additional English settlers began to pour into New England, life became more and more difficult for the indigenous population. In 1675 these conflicting dynamics erupted into what the English would call King Philip's War. Casualties on both sides were staggering, and it hastened the further degradation of an ancient way of life for the indigenous peoples of New England and beyond. While most Americans celebrate Thanksgiving today as an extension of the Pilgrim legacy, to others it is understandably a day of mourning.

The *Mayflower* Factor

So, 400 years later: Does a handful of outcasts, only half of whom even survived their first three months ashore, really matter in a modern nation of more than 330 million people? They do. Like pennies invested in a bank with compound interest, generational mathematics can be staggering. Today, conservative estimates hold that more than ten million Americans—know it or not, like it or not—are direct descendants of one or more of the *Mayflower* Pilgrims. Some have suggested the number could be as high as 25–32 million! Within many of these vast family trees are a surprising number of people who have helped shape our nation, indeed the world we live in today. But what if things had worked out just a little bit differently? What if just a few more, even one or two, had not made it through that first winter. Would it matter now, four centuries later?

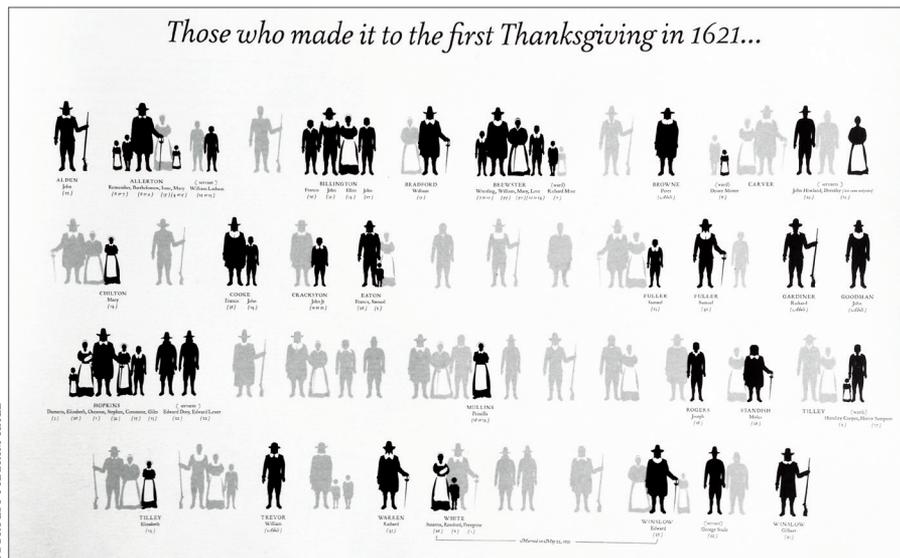
A Box of Bones

Plymouth, Massachusetts, is strewn with statues and monuments honoring the Pilgrim legacy. The waterfront itself is dominated by the grand columned structure that dwarfs Plymouth Rock within. Moored nearby is the *Mayflower II*, a full-scale reproduction of the ship that brought 102 men, women and children to this shore in 1620. Under the stewardship of Plimoth Plantation museum, the ship has attracted thousands of visitors annually for the past sixty years, and it has just gone through a nearly six-year, \$10 million refit that will allow it to continue to do so.



BERY ROBERTS

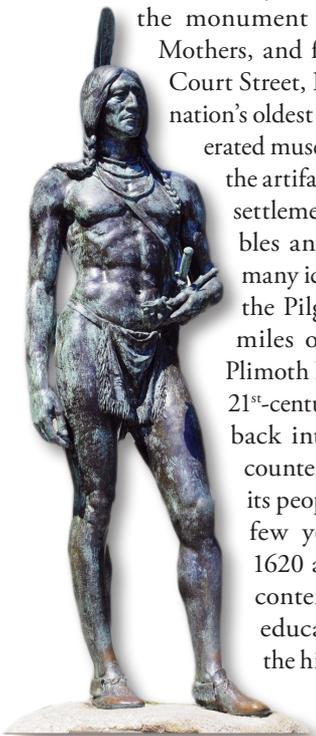
Memorial statue of Gov. William Bradford in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Bradford became one of the best known of all those involved with the Mayflower story. He joined the separatist church as a teen and ended up as the Plymouth Colony's long-term governor. But he came very close to perishing that first winter. As he lay near death with fever in the newly built storehouse that was being used to treat many of the stricken settlers, it caught fire and burned. He was rescued and was nursed back to health. On a personal note, if he had been one of the 51 who perished, the twelve generations leading through my father's family to me would never have been born. I remind my kids of this every Thanksgiving. The math is that real.



COURTESY PILGRIM HALL

Close by stands a bronze statue of William Bradford, the orphan from a small village in the English countryside who became a teenage separatist, a social revolutionary, a prisoner of the Crown, a fugitive, a Pilgrim, a colonial governor, and our nation's first written language historian (notwithstanding the millennia-deep oral traditions of native peoples). Directly above Bradford looms Cole's Hill, atop which stands another bronze statue. This one is not dedicated to the *Mayflower* or its passengers, but to the man who for a time held their fate in his hands. Massasoit, the Wampanoag sachem, could have easily destroyed the surviving Pilgrims or simply let them starve, but instead he ended up working out a mutually beneficial treaty with Bradford and others, which provided an environment within which the colony could survive and eventually succeed. Sadly, in the next generation that all came apart, leading to our nation's first war and the eventual subjugation of its original inhabitants.

There are many other statues and markers and significant locations, including the towering National Monument to the Forefathers in the hills above the town, and Burial Hill, where William Bradford and many others were laid to rest. Across the street from Plymouth Rock stands the monument to the Pilgrim Mothers, and further down on Court Street, Pilgrim Hall, the nation's oldest continuously operated museum, which holds the artifacts of the original settlement, including bibles and weapons, and many iconic paintings of the Pilgrim saga. Three miles outside of town, Plimoth Plantation allows 21st-century visitors to step back into time and encounter the colony and its people as they were a few years after their 1620 arrival, and meet contemporary Native educators who share the history and culture of the Patuxet Wampanoag.



The crypt on Cole's Hill

But by far the most poignant of all of these grand tributes and monuments lies back up on Cole's Hill, just a few yards from Massasoit's bronze feet. Here, overlooking the harbor, Plymouth Rock, Bradford, and the *Mayflower II*, stands a simple edifice that silently tells a powerful story to those willing to stop and do the math. It's not the oft-told story of Thanksgiving with buckle-shoed Pilgrims eating turkey with cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie. It looks more like a sarcophagus—a tomb. In fact, it *is* a tomb. Buried here within a small zinc box are a handful of bones unearthed long after the hill had been used as the colony's first burial ground. Set into the sides of the crypt with patinaed bronze letters are the names of the men, women, and children who reached New England but who did not survive the first winter to celebrate the much-storied first Thanksgiving the following autumn.

While the other plaques, statues, and monuments celebrate the beginning of a "new" England and the nation that grew from it, this solemn edifice marks the end of the story for these individuals. These names represent those who had sacrificed years of exile and months at sea, only to have their *Mayflower* adventure end on the shores of this tenuous beachhead far from home.

The mathematical equation is astoundingly clear. Of the 102 passengers who set sail aboard the *Mayflower* on 6 September 1620, only 51 survived the first year. These figures vary depending on exactly who, and when, you are counting, but fifteen generations later, as the 400th anniversary of the *Mayflower's* arrival is being observed, the names on Cole's Hill represent literally mil-

Massasoit statue in Plymouth, MA

lions of future Americans who were never born, their family trees severed before any roots could take hold on the shores of Plymouth Bay. Who knows how these people might have altered our history, our culture, or contributed to science, medicine, leadership, war and peace. We will never know.

We do know a lot more about those who survived. Of these, only 28 produced offspring to carry on into a second *Mayflower* generation who, in turn, created their own family trees that would eventually help build a new nation that has changed the world, and the course of history forever.

Not my Story?

With only 28 progenitors, no wonder most people think of *Mayflower* descendants as an elite little club. Relevance? The General Society of Mayflower Descendants has registered a total of only 95,000 members since its inception in 1897. That is a pretty small group indeed. The fact is, the vast majority of *Mayflower* descendants have no idea they have the DNA of a handful of survivors flowing through their veins. Even the most conservative estimate of 10 million means that at least one in every 33 Americans is a direct descendant of one or more of the *Mayflower* Pilgrims. The higher estimates would of course make this number substantially larger. Because of the multicultural demographics that would evolve over the generations that have followed, these descendants are in fact a true cross section of our national melting pot.

Some very simple math reveals the basics of how family trees grow. We each have two biological parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, sixteen great-great grandparents, etc. A *Mayflower* descendant born in 2000 might well be a 13th-generation descendant of William Bradford, and, likewise, Bradford would be only one of their 2,028 tenth-great grandfathers. It's the same for all of us, and that means we all have tens of thousands of ancestors and family stories we probably know little or nothing about. We should all do a bit more climbing around in our own family trees.

What might our world look like if the math on Cole's Hill had been different, if a few of those who survived had not. What would our world look like without nine US



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(above) President and General Ulysses S. Grant, (right) award-winning journalist and author Cokie Roberts, and (below) aviator Amelia Earhart were all direct descendants of Mayflower passenger Richard Warren, as was “Little House” author Laura Ingalls Wilder (top right).

presidents—including founding father and second president, John Adams, or his son John Quincy Adams? What about Zachary Taylor, or Ulysses S. Grant? How would the Second World War have turned out without FDR or Winston Churchill, neither of whom would have been born if one or two pivotal Pilgrims had not survived? Would we have missed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt, Humphrey Bogart, Marilyn Monroe, Bing Crosby, Laura Ingalls Wilder, the Baldwin brothers, and of course several million other Americans?



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P.D.

Three Pivotal Pilgrims Whose Survival Changed the World

John Alden was an unintentional Pilgrim. He was the 21-year-old cooper hired in England to manage the barrels in which all the provisions were stored during the voyage. Their survival depended on his skills. Alden survived the terrible three months in which half of the passengers and crew perished. Despite the grim conditions, Alden chose to stay with the Pilgrims when the *Mayflower* sailed back to England. If he had not chosen to cast his lot in with these people, whose cause was not his, six presidents, including John Adams and FDR, would never have been born.

Priscilla Mullins was in her late teens when she boarded the *Mayflower* with her parents and younger brother. Within three months she was the only survivor of her family group. Nonetheless, she elected to remain with the others when the *Mayflower* returned to England, and two years later she married John Alden. They would produce ten children and one of the largest groups of descendants of all the *Mayflower* passengers. If she had died along with her family or returned to England with the *Mayflower*, General Ulysses S. Grant, who helped Lincoln save the Union, would never have been born, and neither would have FDR and six other presidents, or Longfellow, who made Priscilla the star of his famous poem, the “Courtship Of Miles Standish.”

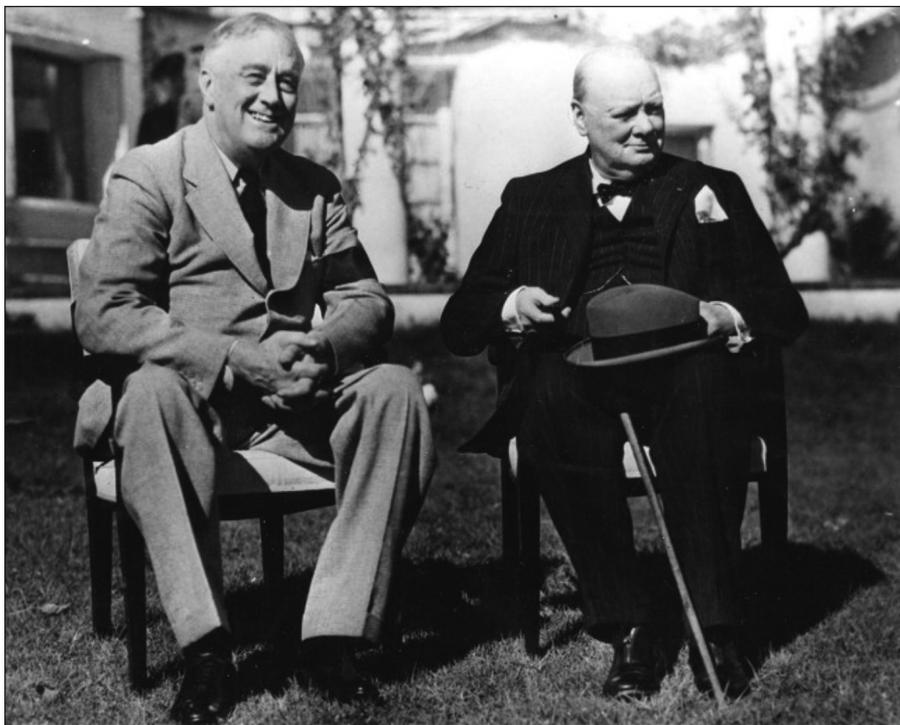


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John Howland: If Harry Potter was the boy who lived, John Howland was certainly the man who should have died. During the transAtlantic crossing, he was swept overboard during a storm. By a stroke of luck, a loose line was trailing off the side of the ship. He grabbed it and managed to hold on, despite being dragged underwater at several knots. Against all odds, two crewmen saw the mishap and were able to haul him back aboard with nothing but his grip separating him from certain death in the open ocean. He would become an important part of the community as it began to stabilize and eventually thrive. It was also because he survived that his brother Arthur came over from England and joined the community several years later. This brother set down his own line of descendants, which eventually included Jennie Jerome, the American heiress who would marry Lord Randolph Churchill in 1874 and give birth to Winston Churchill that same year. Churchill would also never have been born if another Pilgrim, surgeon Samuel Fuller, had not survived.

Mayflower II

I have been aboard the *Mayflower II* many times over the past forty years at her dock in Plymouth, Massachusetts, but this past February, climbing down the companionway into her cargo hold, as her multi-year refit was nearing completion in Mystic, Connecticut, was a different experience. The smell of fresh linseed oil and pine tar



Allies in World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill are 8th cousins twice removed and descendants of Plymouth Colony Pilgrims.

transported me into a different era, and I could once again imagine 102 men, women, and children cramped here, doing their best to endure their 66-day crossing from the old world to the new. But with tools still scattered about and unfinished projects being attended to, I was reminded that this is also a modern story. A few days earlier, I had met with Quentin Snediker, director of the Henry B. duPont Preservation Ship-

yard at Mystic Seaport Museum, where the work has been carried out. We talked about the monumental undertaking and of the unique opportunity that projects like this provide to pass along centuries-old skills to new generations of craftsmen.

A few days later, I was making my way through the ship with Whit Perry, *Mayflower II*'s captain. These two men, together with their teams of professionals and volunteers, have spent the better part of the past six years overseeing the daunting logistics of breathing new life into this iconic ship. The partnership between these two institutions, both dedicated to keeping history alive through authentic first-hand experiences, is something all of us who value and support maritime history should be grateful for. Although this is obviously

Mayflower II was restored at the Henry B. duPont Preservation Shipyard at Mystic Seaport and relaunched in September 2019 with great fanfare, which included a rechristening by Harriet Cross, British Consul General to New England; keynote speech by bestselling author Nathaniel Philbrick; and the leadership of Plimoth Plantation and the Mashpee Wampanoag nation.



COURTESY MYSTIC SEAPORT MUSEUM



MAYFLOWER II PHOTOS COURTESY PILMOUTH PLANTATION

Mayflower II was built in Brixham, England, and launched in 1956.

not the original vessel that brought the Pilgrims here 400 years ago, it now has a well-earned history of its own and should not be dismissed as some modern replica or attraction vessel. Like other recreated historic ships, including those at Jamestown Settlement in Virginia, it serves as a living, breathing time machine. Built of wood and rigged with iron, bronze, rope, and canvas, ships like these are keeping old skills alive and teaching us all about the evolution of seafaring technology upon which much of the progress of our modern world has depended.

Mayflower II was built in Brixham, England, over a 14-month period by master shipbuilder Stuart Upham and his team of Devon craftsmen, and launched in September of 1956. Its backstory is pretty incredible in its own right. In 1947, as Henry Hornblower was creating Plimoth Plantation, a place where 20th-century visitors can come face to face with a recreation of the Pilgrims' early settlement, he also envisioned building a replica of the *Mayflower* itself. He hired naval architect William A. Baker to research and design a credible reproduction of the iconic ship. Baker had no plans from which to work, but started with the slim description offered by Pilgrim leader William Bradford in his epic account of the settlement, *Of Plymouth Plantation*. There had also been some deductive research done by maritime historian R. G. Marsden in the early 1900s in an attempt to narrow down which of the many ships named *Mayflower* might have actually carried the Pilgrims in 1620. There was nothing spectacular about the original ship. It was operated by its master and part owner, Christopher Jones, between England and North Sea ports. It was just another working merchant vessel, in this case designed to carry up to 180 tons of cargo, typically wine. The word *tun*, by the way, was a measure of *capacity*, not weight, based on a specific size of large cask.

Coincidentally, across the Atlantic, Englishman Warwick Charlton had founded Project Mayflower. Charlton had served alongside American forces during World War II and wanted to honor the strong bonds between the two nations. When he heard about Baker's work, he contacted Hornblower and the two projects were

serendipitously merged. Baker supplied the plans, and Project *Mayflower* raised the funds and built the vessel. On 20 April 1957, *Mayflower II* set sail from Plymouth, England, under the command of legendary Australian mariner Alan Villiers. Near the end of the 54-day crossing, as the ship approached the New England coast, it encountered a violent squall. With no manual on how to handle a 17th-century vessel under these conditions, Villiers remembered that Bradford had written that when Christopher Jones met similar conditions he lay the ship *ahull*, sails down and the tiller lashed to leeward, keeping the bow off the wind by about 45 degrees instead of trying to fight the seas head on, or run before it, under power (similar to *heaving to* under sail). It worked, and Villiers and his crew aboard *Mayflower II* arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on 13 June 1957 to a massive reception; the ship settled into its new home, moored at the heart of the Pilgrim universe within sight of Plymouth Rock.

By 2013, *Mayflower II* had welcomed more than 20 million visitors in Plymouth and during visits to several ports along the Eastern Seaboard. Wooden ships, however, are perishable, and despite decades of regular maintenance and repairs, it was clear that the ship needed more than a patch-up to remain afloat, let alone play an active role in the 2020 quadricentennial, or serve another 60 years for that matter. It needed a major rebuild from stem to stern, from keel to top-masts. Plimoth Plantation chose to have the work done at the shipyard at Mystic Seaport Museum, which had recently completed an extensive restoration of the 1841 whaleship *Charles W. Morgan* and which maintains the museum's fleet of historic vessels. Not only were the facilities and expertise available at Mystic Seaport a perfect fit for the *Mayflower* project, but the two institutions share compatible missions, and the shipyard work could be done in view of the public on the museum's campus.

Mayflower II was brought to Mystic Seaport Museum in December 2014 to begin the first phase of her restoration, which included comprehensive survey and inspection work, requiring the removal of the ship's 130 tons of ballast, as well as some

hull work and extensive re-caulking to enable the ship to return to Plymouth for the summer of 2015. She returned to Mystic for the winter of 2015–16, then back to Plymouth for the summer. In November 2016 she returned to Mystic Seaport, where she would remain for the next three and a half years undergoing the most comprehensive rebuild in her history.

More than 70 percent of the ship has been laboriously and faithfully refabricated, including frames, knees, planking, and masts. It took numerous expeditions to locate and secure the quantities and varieties of wood required for the project. This included timber from Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Virginia, and even Denmark. Meanwhile, the vessel's standing and running rigging, with all of the associated deadeyes, chain plates, etc. was either restored or replaced. Of course, none of these elements can be bought off the shelf. They were all painstakingly fabricated by hand. The difference between the vessel that came out of the water at Mystic in 2014 and the one that was relaunched and officially rechristened in September 2019 is a dramatic reincarnation of the original (1956) ship and is a testament to the two incredible institutions and craftsmen that pulled it off. The ship is now ready to sail on into the 21st century and inspire new generations, telling old stories that still impact who we are, even now. *Mayflower II* was built as a reproduction of a physical ship from hundreds of years ago, but at 64 years old she has become a historic vessel in her own right and will be seeking National Historic Landmark status after her return to Plymouth in 2020. †

Jerry Roberts is a writer and historian who has served in leadership and creative roles with several major museums over the past 35 years. He has written several books, documentaries, and articles, and has been a long-time contributor to Sea History. Roberts is an avid mariner and storyteller, and by chance, is a descendant of William Bradford. Learn more at jerrypaulroberts.com. For updates on Mayflower 400th anniversary commemoration events, visit: www.mayflower sails2020.org, www.plimoth.org, and in the UK, www.mayflower400uk.org.