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## Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony

John Demos\*

OUR traditional picture of the earliest New England communities is essentially a still life. By emphasizing the themes of steadfast piety, the practice of the old-fashioned virtues, measured forms of civil government, and a closely-ordered social life, it suggests a placid, almost static kind of existence. We take for granted the moral and religious aims which inspired the founding of many of these communities; and we accept the assumption of the colonists themselves, that success in these aims depended on maintaining a high degree of compactness and closeness of settlement.

Yet, in the case of the Plymouth Colony at least, this picture is seriously misleading. It has served to obscure certain striking elements of movement and change—indeed, a kind of fluidity that is commonly associated with a much later phase of our national history. Individuals frequently transferred their residence from one house, or one town, to another. Land titles changed hands with astonishing rapidity. Families were rearranged by a wide variety of circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

These tendencies can be traced back to the first years of the settlement at Plymouth. Some of the original townspeople began to take up lots across the river in Duxbury even before 1630; among them were such prominent figures as John Alden, Myles Standish, Jonathan Brewster, and Thomas Prence. The process was accelerated by the arrival to the

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<sup>1</sup> Such conclusions, and the observations which follow, are based upon an examination of several sorts of records. Town and church records have been useful for determining certain vital statistics such as dates of birth, marriages, and deaths. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff and David Pulsifer, eds., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth, in New England* (Boston, 1855-61), offers a broad picture of laws and law-breaking, and, less directly, of deeper social and economic forces at work in 17th-century Plymouth. Numerous genealogical studies provide many relevant dates and places, and are obviously indispensable for establishing family relationships. Land deeds reveal much about the economic and geographic layout of the colony; there are also other deeds relating to such things as marriage and apprenticeship. Finally, of particular importance are the wills, perhaps the prime source of information about family and community organization.

north of the settlers at Massachusetts Bay. An important new market for cattle and corn was thereby opened up, and the compact town of Plymouth was not large enough to meet the demand for increased production.<sup>2</sup> But the profits to be made from farming were probably not the only, or even the major, stimulus to expansion. The land beckoned because it was empty; the colonists were excited simply by the prospect of ownership for its own sake.

In any case, by the mid-1630's this pattern of geographical expansion had become well established. In 1636 the town of Scituate was officially incorporated and began to send its own representatives to the General Court. Duxbury achieved a similar status the following year; and by 1646 seven other new towns had been established. The direction of the earliest expansion was north and south along the coast; then a westerly thrust began, which led to the founding of such towns as Taunton, Rehoboth, Bridgewater, and Middleborough, all well inland. Still other groups of people pushed onto Cape Cod; indeed, in the early 1640's there was a move to abandon the original settlement at Plymouth altogether and relocate the town on the outer cape. This proposal was finally defeated after much discussion in the meetings of the freemen, but some families went anyway, on their own, and founded the town of Eastham. By 1691, the year that Plymouth ended its independent existence and joined with Massachusetts Bay, it contained no less than twenty-one recognized townships, and many smaller communities as well.<sup>3</sup>

This steady dispersion of settlement caused considerable anxiety to some of the leaders of the colony, and sporadic efforts were made to keep it under control. On several occasions when new land was parceled out, the General Court directed that it be used only for actual settlement by the grantees themselves.<sup>4</sup> Also, the Court criticized the unrestrained way

<sup>2</sup> See William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel E. Morison (New York, 1952), 252-253.

<sup>3</sup> Plymouth, 1620; Scituate, 1636; Duxbury, 1637; Barnstable, 1639; Sandwich, 1639; Taunton, 1639; Yarmouth, 1639; Marshfield, 1641; Rehoboth, 1645; Eastham, 1646; Bridgewater, 1656; Dartmouth, 1664; Swansea, 1667; Middleborough, 1669; Edgartown, 1671; Tisbury, 1671; Little Compton, 1682; Freetown, 1683; Rochester, 1686; Falmouth, 1686; Nantucket, 1687.

<sup>4</sup> See the terms of the grant to Charles Chauncey, John Atwood, and Thomas Cushman at Mattapoisett, in *Plym. Col. Recs.*, II, 9. Also Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Morison, 253-254, where another kind of attempt to control expansion is described: "Special lands were granted at a place general called Green's Harbor" to "special persons that would promise to live at Plymouth, and likely to be helpful to the church or commonwealth and so [to] tie the lands to Plymouth as farms for

in which lands were distributed by the freemen in certain of the newer townships. Grants were no longer confined to upright, religious-minded settlers. Towns accepted, with no questions asked, almost anyone who proposed to move in. Such was the charge leveled against the people of Sandwich, for example, in 1639. A similar situation seems to have prevailed in Yarmouth, for in 1640 the Court specifically directed the town elders there to require of each new arrival a "certificate from the places whence they come . . . of their religious and honest carriage."<sup>5</sup>

William Bradford was one of those to whom the process of dispersion came as a great disappointment; it runs through much of his famous history of Plymouth as a kind of tragic refrain. "This I fear will be the ruin of New England, at least of the churches of God there," he wrote at one point, "and will provoke the Lord's displeasure against them." When the plan for moving the town to Eastham was debated, Bradford, and others of like mind, discerned the real motive behind the proposal: "Some were still for staying together in this place, alleging men might here live if they would be content with their condition, and that it was not for want or necessity so much that they removed as for the enriching of themselves." Finally, near the end of his work, with more and more of the original stock moving away, Bradford described Plymouth as being "like an ancient mother grown old and forsaken of her children, though not in their affections yet in regard of their bodily presence and personal helpfulness; her ancient members being most of them worn away by death, and these of later time being like children translated into other families, and she like a widow left only to trust in God. Thus, she that had made many rich became herself poor."<sup>6</sup> He could hardly have chosen a better metaphor. It is extremely telling as a literary device, and—more than that—is highly suggestive from a historical standpoint. It describes an experience that must have been quite real, and quite painful, for many Plymouth settlers. The whole process of expansion had as one of its chief effects the scattering of families, to an extent probably inconceivable in the Old World communities from which the colonists had come. This was particularly hard upon elderly people; their anxiety that they should be

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the same; and there they might keep their cattle and tillage by some servants and retain their dwellings here." No sooner was the plan put into effect, however, than its beneficiaries demanded permission to move directly onto their new farms. "Alas," concludes Bradford, "this remedy proved worse than the disease."

<sup>5</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, I, 131, 142.

<sup>6</sup> Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Morison, 254, 333-334.

properly cared for in their old age is readily apparent in the wills they wrote. The flow of men into new areas was inexorable, but it took a profound psychological toll, even among those who were most willingly a part of it.

Nearly every category of person—young and old, rich and poor, immigrant and old settler—was involved in the expansion of the Plymouth community. The careers of the four Winslow brothers who arrived at various times during the early years of the colony may be regarded as more or less typical.<sup>7</sup> Kenelm Winslow came from England to Plymouth in 1629 and moved to Marshfield in 1641; Edward came in 1620 from Leyden and returned to England in 1646; John went from England to Leyden, to Plymouth, and in 1656 to Boston; and Josiah Winslow arrived in Plymouth from England in 1631, moved to Scituate in 1637, and then went from there to Marshfield. Although two of the sons of Kenelm Winslow remained in Marshfield on land that he bequeathed to them, another son moved to Yarmouth and the fourth one moved three times, to Swansea in 1666, to Rochester in 1678, and to Freetown in 1685. And third-generation Winslows could be found scattered among many different towns of Massachusetts and in other colonies as well. Nor did William Bradford's strong convictions on the matter of expansion prevent his own children from leaving Plymouth. His daughter married a Boston man; two sons moved to the neighboring settlement of Kingston; and a third led a large Bradford migration, mostly third generation, to Connecticut.<sup>8</sup>

The movers were often young men, but not invariably so. Indeed there were many who moved in middle age and with a large family. Experience Mitchell and William Bassett, both of whom arrived in the early 1620's, were among the original proprietors—and residents—of three different towns. After several years in Plymouth they resettled in Duxbury (each one, by this time, with a wife and young children), and in the 1650's they went to Bridgewater.

For the most part, removals were arranged and carried out by individuals; they were not affairs of large groups and elaborate organization. Family ties were sometimes a factor, as in the case of the Connecticut Bradfords, but even here the pattern was rather loose. It was usually a

<sup>7</sup> See David-Parsons Holton, *Winslow Memorial . . .*, I (New York, 1877).

<sup>8</sup> See Ruth Gardiner Hall, *Descendants of Governor William Bradford* (Ann Arbor, 1951).

matter of one man moving to a new community, and then several other members of his family following, separately and later on.

An obvious concomitant of such general mobility was a rapid rate of turnover in the ownership of land. In this connection the land deeds and proprietary lists that survive from the period become an important source. For example, there are two lists of proprietors for the town of Bridgewater, one made in 1645 at the time of its incorporation, and the other in 1682 when additional grants of land were being debated.<sup>9</sup> Of the fifty-six names on the first list only twelve reappear thirty-seven years later. To the latter group should be added five sons of original proprietors who had died in the meantime, making a grand total of seventeen men who retained their interest in Bridgewater. But this means that thirty-nine relinquished their holdings altogether, fully 70 per cent of the initial group. It is probable that some of them never lived in Bridgewater at all, acquiring rights there only in order to sell.

This pattern of land turnover is further exemplified by the varied transactions of certain individuals, as noted in the *Colony Records*. Samuel Eddy, a good case in point, came to Plymouth in 1630 as a young man of twenty-two. In the next fifty years he was involved in at least eighteen transactions for land and housing.<sup>10</sup> Presumably there were still more, of which no record remains, as in some cases we find him selling lands not previously identified as being in his possession. At least three times he seems to have moved his residence within Plymouth (selling one house in order to buy another), and as an old man he left the town altogether and went to Swansea in the western part of the colony. Two of his sons had already settled there, and he probably wished to be near them. A third son had gone to Martha's Vineyard; and a fourth, who seems to have been particularly restless, moved from Plymouth to Sandwich, to Middleborough, back to Plymouth, back to Middleborough, back to Plymouth, to Taunton, and back once more to Middleborough, over a period of some forty years.

Seven of Samuel Eddy's land transactions seem to have been directly connected with his changes of residence; the rest were for the purpose of enlarging his estate, or for profit. Eddy, incidentally, was a tailor by trade and not a rich man; most of the business in which he engaged was for

<sup>9</sup> "A Description of Bridgewater, 1818," in Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 2d Ser., VII (Boston, 1826), 137-176.

<sup>10</sup> Byron B. Horton, *The Ancestors and Descendants of Zachariah Eddy of Warren, Pa.* (Rutland, Vt., 1930), 29-31.

relatively small amounts of land and money. The profit motive was equally clear in the dealings of many other Plymouth residents. Perhaps one more example will suffice. In June 1639 John Barnes bought four acres of meadowland from John Winslow for eight pounds and a month later resold them to Robert Hicks for nine pounds, fifteen shillings. Soon afterwards he made a similar deal in which he bought a parcel of land for twelve pounds and sold it within a few months for eighteen.<sup>11</sup>

It would be interesting to know more about the lives of these people, and the lives of their ancestors, before their migration to America. Perhaps there was more mobility among inhabitants of the English countryside than is commonly supposed.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the first colonists at Plymouth were conditioned for change by their prior attempt to establish themselves in Holland. It is hard to say. In any case, the settlers were doubtless predisposed to conceive of wealth in terms of land, and the circumstances of Plymouth, where currency was so scarce and land so plentiful, probably strengthened this instinct. It is clear from the wills they left that their desire to possess and to expand was usually satisfied. Even a man of relatively moderate means usually had several plots of land to deed away, and wealthy ones had as many as twelve, fifteen, or even twenty.<sup>13</sup> In some cases these holdings were located in a number of different townships—showing that their owners could not always have thought in terms of actual settlement at the time of acquisition.

It would be interesting to know how many people lived in Plymouth Colony during these years. Three scholars have offered guesses based on varying kinds of evidence.<sup>14</sup> Their findings do not agree, but suggest, when averaged together, that the total number of Plymouth residents was probably around 300 in 1630, and did not exceed 1,000 before the early 1640's. It had passed 3,000 by 1660, 5,000 by 1675, and by the time the colony had merged with Massachusetts probably stood somewhere between

<sup>11</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, XII, 45, 64-65, 69.

<sup>12</sup> For recent works directed to this point, see E.E. Rich, "The Population of Elizabethan England," *Economic History Review*, 2d Ser., II (1949-50), 247-265; and Peter Laslett and John Harrison, "Clayworth and Coggenhoe," in H. E. Bell and R. L. Ollard, eds., *Historical Essays, 1600-1750, Presented to David Ogg* (London, 1963), 157-184.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the wills of Samuel Fuller (Barnstable, 1683) and Thomas Cushman (Plymouth, 1690) in *Mayflower Descendant*, II (1900), 237-241; IV (1902), 37-42.

<sup>14</sup> See Richard LeBaron Bowen, *Early Rehoboth . . .*, I (Rehoboth, 1945), 15-24; Joseph B. Feet, "Population of Plymouth Colony," in American Statistical Association, *Collections*, I, Pt. ii (Boston, 1845), 143-144; and Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Morison, xi.

12,000 and 15,000. The rate of growth, if not spectacular, was steady and fairly sharp; the population seems to have doubled about every fifteen years.

This growth was due, in part, to immigration but perhaps even more to certain characteristics of the people within the colony itself. For example, the popular impression today that colonial families were extremely large finds the strongest possible confirmation in the case of Plymouth. A sample of some ninety families about whom there is fairly reliable information, suggests that there was an average of seven to eight children per family who actually grew to adulthood. The number of live births was undoubtedly higher, although exactly how much higher we cannot be sure because no trace exists today of many who died in infancy and early childhood.<sup>15</sup>

SIZE OF FAMILIES IN PLYMOUTH

TABLE I

	Average Number of Children Born	Average Number Lived to Age 21
Sixteen First-Generation Families	7.8	7.2
Forty-seven Second-Generation Families	8.6	7.5
Thirty-three Third-Generation Families	9.3	7.9

Even allowing for the obvious likelihood that errors in the figures for the number born are somewhat greater than in the figures for those who grew to maturity, the rate of infant mortality in Plymouth seems to have

<sup>15</sup> Various attempts to subject evidence to quantitative analysis have been an important part of my "method," such as it is. It is not possible to achieve anything approaching total accuracy in these computations; the sources simply are not that exact. I have not knowingly employed doubtful figures, but probably a small portion of those that I have used are incorrect. In certain cases I have accepted an approximate date (e.g. 1671, when it might as well be 1670 or 1672), but only where it would not prejudice the over-all result. In general, the numerical data that I shall present should be regarded as suggestive rather than conclusive in any sense. Above all, I have sought to keep my focus on individual lives and to build up my story from there. The people about whom I have assembled information total roughly 2,000. (It is very difficult even to estimate the total number of people who lived in Plymouth Colony between 1620-91, but it was probably between 25,000 and 50,000.) Only a part of these could be employed in the treatment of any particular question, since the data for most individuals are not complete. But a sample of several hundred should still be enough at least to outline certain general patterns.

With respect to the data on family size (Table I), I have used only families in which both parents lived at least to age 50, or else if one parent died, the other quickly remarried. That is, in all these families there were parents who lived up to, and past, the prime years for childbearing.



been relatively low. In the case of a few families for which there are unusually complete records, only about one in five children seems to have died before the age of twenty-one. Furthermore, births in the sample come for the most part at roughly two-year intervals<sup>16</sup> with relatively few "gaps" which might indicate a baby who did not survive. All things considered, it appears that the rate of infant and child mortality in Plymouth was no more than 25 per cent<sup>17</sup>—less than half the rate in many parts of the world today.

These figures seem to indicate a surprising standard of health and physical vigor among Plymouth residents, and a study of their longevity—the average life expectancy in the colony—confirms this impression. The following tables (II and III) are based on a sample of more than six hundred people, who lived at least to the age of twenty-one and for whom the age at death was ascertainable.

## LIFE EXPECTANCY IN PLYMOUTH

TABLE II

(The figures in the left-hand column are the control points, i.e., a 21-year-old man might expect to live to age 69.2, a 30-year-old to 70.0, and so forth.)

Age	Men	Women
21	69.2	62.4
30	70.0	64.7
40	71.2	69.7
50	73.7	73.4
60	76.3	76.8
70	79.9	80.7
80	85.1	86.7

TABLE III

(The figures in columns two and three represent the percentages of the men and women in the sample who died between the ages indicated in column one.)

Age group	Men (percentages)	Women (percentages)
22-29	1.6	5.9
30-39	3.6	12.0
40-49	7.8	12.0
50-59	10.2	10.9
60-69	18.0	14.9
70-79	30.5	20.7
80-89	22.4	16.0
90 or over	5.9	7.6

<sup>16</sup> This spacing is quite interesting in itself, for it immediately raises questions as to how Plymouth parents avoided having even higher numbers of children. Probably the mothers nursed their babies for at least one year, but—contrary to popular belief—there is no proved biological impediment in this to further conception. Since effective contraceptive methods are a fairly recent development, it seems likely that Plymouth couples simply eschewed sexual contact over long periods of time. In many less advanced cultures of the world today there are taboos on sexual relations between husband and wife for one year or more following the birth of a child. It is just possible that a similar custom prevailed in Plymouth.

<sup>17</sup> It is impossible to estimate what proportion of these were infants (less than one year old) and what proportion were young children, for in most cases the records say only "died young."

The figures in II are really astonishingly high. Indeed, in the case of the men, they compare quite favorably with what obtains in this country today. (The life expectancy of an American male of twenty-one is now a fraction over seventy, and for a female of the same age, is approximately seventy-six.) It is at least possible that some selective bias, built into the data, may have distorted the results. For example, as between two men one of whom died at thirty and the other at ninety, it is more likely that the latter should leave some traces for the genealogist and historian to follow up. Still, I do not believe that this has been a serious problem in the above sample. A good part of the information on longevity has come from a few especially well-preserved graveyards in the Plymouth area, and presumably these offer a fairly random selection of the adults in the community. Moreover, those families for which information is relatively complete—where we know the age at death of all the members—present a picture not very different from that of the total sample. And even if we do allow for a certain inflation of the figures, the outcome is still striking.

The difference in the results for men and women is mainly due to the dangers attendant on childbirth. A young woman's life expectancy was seven years less than a man's, whereas today, with childbirth hazards virtually eliminated by modern medicine, it is six years longer. The second table shows that 30 per cent of the women and only 12 per cent of the men in the sample died between ages twenty and fifty, the normal years of child bearing. If a woman survived these middle years, her prospects for long life became at least as good as those of a man, and indeed a little better. A majority of those who lived to a really very old age (ninety or more) seem to have been women.

The records which reveal this pattern of growth and dispersion in the colony of Plymouth also provide much information about courtship, marriage, and family life. Courtships were usually initiated by the young people themselves, but as a relationship progressed toward something more permanent, the parents became directly involved. In fact, a requirement of parental consent was written into the colony's laws on marriage: "If any shall make any motion of marriage to any mans daughter . . . not having first obtayned leave and consent of the parents or master so to doe [he] shall be punished either by fine or corporall punishment or both, at the discretion of the bench and according to the nature of the of-

fence.”<sup>18</sup> The attitude of parents toward a proposed match depended on a variety of spiritual and material considerations. Speaking very generally, it was desirable that both parties be of good moral and religious character. Beyond that, the couple would hopefully have enough land and possessions, given to them by both sets of parents, to establish a reasonably secure household.

But in a community as fluid as Plymouth it is unlikely that parental control over courtship and marriage could have been fully preserved. A few surviving pieces of evidence suggest that it was possibly quite an issue. In 1692 the widow Abigail Young died without leaving a will. The court moved to settle her estate on the basis of her intentions as revealed in several conversations held before her death. Two sons, Robert and Henry, were the prime candidates for the inheritance. Witnesses testified that “when shee dyed [she said] shee would Leave all the estate that shee had with Henry, if Robart had that gierl that there was a discourse about: but if he had her not I understood that the estate should be devided betwix them.” A third son, Nathaniel, confirmed this. “My mother young,” he reported, “told me that if Robirt had that gierl which there was a talke about shee would not give him a peny.”<sup>19</sup>

The first official step toward marriage was normally the betrothal or “pre-contract”—a ceremony before two witnesses at which the couple exchanged formal promises to wed in due time. A period of several weeks or months followed, during which these intentions were “published.” A betrothed couple was considered to have a special status, not married but no longer unmarried either. They were required to be completely loyal each to the other; the adultery laws treated them no differently from husbands and wives. Sexual contact between them was forbidden; but the penalty for it was only a quarter of what was prescribed for single people.<sup>20</sup> It may be that this actually encouraged premarital relations

<sup>18</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, XI, 29, 108, 190. Occasionally there were prosecutions under this statute, the most notorious of which involved Elizabeth Prence, the daughter of a governor of the colony, and Arthur Howland, Jr., who belonged to another of Plymouth's leading families. Many of the Howlands had become Quakers, young Arthur among them; the Governor, on the other hand, was firmly opposed to this new and “foreign” religious movement. Twice he brought Howland before the General Court for having “disorderly and unrighteously endeavored to obtain the affections of Mistress Elizabeth Prence.” But the story had a happy ending: after seven long years the Governor relented, and the couple were finally married in the spring of 1668. *Ibid.*, IV, 140, 158-159. For another case of this kind, see *ibid.*, III, 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Mayflower Descendant*, XV (1913), 79-80.

<sup>20</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, XI, 172.

among betrothed couples because of its implication that fornication was much less reprehensible in their case than otherwise.<sup>21</sup> The Court records show sixty-five convictions for misconduct of this kind, over a forty-five year period. (Note that this total comprises only those who were *caught*, and whose cases were recorded.) In some instances members of the most prominent families were involved: for example, Peregrine White, Thomas Delano, and Thomas Cushman, Jr. Occasionally the basis for conviction was the arrival of a child less than nine months after the wedding ceremony. Perhaps innocent couples were sometimes punished under this system; but the number of "early" babies was, in any event, extremely high.<sup>22</sup>

Once the betrothal was formalized, considerable thought had to be given to the economic future of the couple. In all but the poorest families each child could expect to receive from its parents a "portion"—a certain quantity of property or money with which to make an independent start in life. In most cases this occurred at the time of marriage, and its purpose was everywhere the same. A man was to use it to "be for himself" (in the graphic little phrase of the time); a woman would transfer it to her husband for the greater good of the household which they were starting together. To make special provision for the possibility that he might die while his children were still young, a man usually directed in his will that his "overseers" hold part of his estate intact to be distributed later as portions, at the appropriate time.

There was no set formula governing the actual substance of these portions. More often than not, however, a male child was given land, cattle, tools, and a house or a promise of help in the building of a house; a woman, for her part, usually received movable property, such as furniture or clothing and money. Occasionally the terms of these bequests were officially recorded in a "deed of gift";<sup>23</sup> more often they seem to have been arranged informally. Most parents hoped to have accumulated sufficient property by the time their children came of age to make these

<sup>21</sup> This point is argued at greater length in George Elliott Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions . . .*, II (Chicago, 1904), 169-200. Howard's discussion of marriage customs in colonial New England is, in general, quite helpful.

<sup>22</sup> For example, a random sampling of fourth-generation Bradfords turned up nine couples whose first child arrived within eight months of their wedding and all but two of these within six months. Also, it appears that Thomas Cushman's first baby was not only conceived, but actually born, before his marriage.

<sup>23</sup> As on the occasion of the marriage of Jacob Cook and Damaris Hopkins in 1646. *Mayflower Descendant*, II, 27-28.

gifts without suffering undue hardship. Some had to buy land specifically for this purpose;<sup>24</sup> others petitioned the Court "to accommodate them for their posterities," i.e., to give them a free grant.<sup>25</sup> It appears that fathers sometimes retained the title to the lands which they gave as portions: there are many Plymouth wills which direct that a son shall inherit "the land wherein he now dwells," or use words to this effect.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps this practice served to maintain some degree of parental authority beyond the years of childhood.

It is widely supposed that people married early in the colonial period. For Plymouth, however—and I suspect for most other communities of that time—this impression cannot be sustained. Indeed, the average age of both men and women at the time of their first marriage was considerably higher than it is today—and quite possibly has never been exceeded at any subsequent point in our history.

TABLE IV  
FIRST MARRIAGES IN PLYMOUTH  
(Based on a sample of some 650 men and women)

	Born Before 1600	Born 1600-25	Born 1625-50	Born 1650-75	Born 1675-1700
Mean age of men at time of 1st marriage	27.0	27.0	26.1	25.4	24.6
Mean age of women at time of 1st marriage	—*	20.6	20.2	21.3	22.3
Percentage of men married at age 23 or over	25%	18%	25%	26%	38%
Percentage of men married at age 30 or over	44%	23%	27%	18%	14%
Percentage of women married at age 25 or over	—*	9%	10%	20%	28%

\*Insufficient data for women born before 1600.

This table is largely self-explanatory. Only one point requires additional comment: the steady, if unspectacular, narrowing of the age gap between the sexes at the time of marriage. At the start this gap averaged

<sup>24</sup> In 1653, for instance, John Brown of Rehoboth bought land from Capt. Thomas Willet, which he immediately deeded over to his sons, John and James. *Ibid.*, IV, 84.

<sup>25</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, III, 164.

<sup>26</sup> See, for examples, the wills of John Thompson and Ephraim Tinkham, *Mayflower Descendant*, IV, 22-29, 122-125.

six and one-half years; by the end it was verging on two. Men were marrying earlier and women later. During the early years of the colony there was certainly a shortage of women; spinsters were a rarity, and marriageable girls, of whatever charm and property, must have received plenty of offers. At some point, however, new factors began to come into play, and this imbalance in the sex ratio was gradually corrected. Above all, the process of expansion removed substantial numbers of young men from the areas that had been settled first, and by the end of the century some towns may well have held a surplus of females. Wherever women outnumbered men, there were some who did not find husbands until relatively late and at least a few who never married at all. Conversely, the men had a larger and larger group to choose from and tended to marry somewhat earlier. By 1700 there were occasional marriages in which the woman was older than her husband, and for the first time the number of spinsters had become noticeable. The earliest official count of males and females in Plymouth that still survives comes from a census taken for all Massachusetts in 1765. At that time all of the eastern counties showed a substantial majority of women over men; the reverse was true for the western counties. In the towns which formerly belonged to Plymouth Colony the figures were 53.2 per cent female as against 46.8 per cent male. It is my guess that this surplus began as much as a century earlier.<sup>27</sup>

Marriage was conceived to be the normal estate for adults in colonial New England. When one spouse died, the other usually remarried within a year or two. Most were in their thirties and forties at the time of their remarriage, but some were much older. Robert Cushman, Jr., for instance,

<sup>27</sup> See J. H. Benton, Jr., *Early Census Making in Massachusetts, 1643-1765* . . . (Boston, 1905). The dimensions of the problem, for Plymouth, can be further refined. The findings in the 1765 census are divided into two parts: people under 16, and people 16 and over. The 53.2 to 46.8 ratio, quoted above, is for the 16-and-over group. But, as almost all males remained single until age 21, a more significant ratio would be one for only those males and females who were 21 or over. We can assume, from a breakdown of other parts of the census, that the 16-21 grouping composed about 10 per cent of the total over 16. We also know from the census that the ratio of males under 16 to females under 16 was 51.2 males to 48.8 females. If this ratio of 51.2 to 48.8 is projected to the 16-21 age group for the purpose of eliminating those under 21 from the final ratio, we discover that the ratio of men 21 or older to women 21 or older becomes approximately 53.8 to 46.2. This means that for one out of every seven girls there was no man, at least in her own home area. In a few individual towns the situation was worse—as high as one in four.

took a new wife at eighty! This pattern affected a very considerable portion of the community, as the following table shows.

TABLE V

## RATES OF REMARRIAGE IN PLYMOUTH COLONY

(The figures for men and women are separate, and in each case there is a percentage for all those who lived to be fifty or more, and another for those who lived to be seventy or more. The sample, comprising over seven hundred people, does not include anyone who died before the age of fifty.)

Number of Marriages	Men		Women	
	Over 50	Over 70	Over 50	Over 70
1	60%	55%	74%	69%
2	34%	36%	25%	30%
3	6%	8%	1%	1%
4	—*	.5%	—	—
5	—*	.5%	—	—
Total married more than once	40%	45%	26%	31%

\*Less than one half of one per cent.

Generally speaking, the property of husband and wife was not merged in a second marriage to the extent customary for a first one. The main reason for this, of course, was to preserve the claims of the children by the first marriage to a just inheritance. In fact, wills were always framed with this point in mind. Often the bulk of a man's estate was transmitted at his death directly to his children, or if to his wife, only until she married again. The part that remained to herself alone was usually one third of the estate, and sometimes less. Widows in Plymouth did not control a large amount of property.

When a marriage between a widow and widower was planned it was customary to make an explicit agreement as to terms. The man pledged a certain sum to his (new) wife in the event of his death, but it was often only a token amount, much less than the "thirds" that a first wife might expect. The woman, for her part, retained the right of "sole disposition" of any property she might possess; it never became part of her husband's estate.<sup>28</sup>

A widow's children were placed in a doubtful position when their

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the agreement between Ephraim Morton and Mary Harlow, widow. *Mayflower Descendant*, XVII (1915), 49. There were, admittedly, some exceptions to the pattern. When William Sherman died in 1680, he left six small children and no will. His widow remarried soon afterwards. When her new husband agreed to provide for the children, the courts ordered Sherman's estate made over to him, because of the obvious expenses he would have to meet. *Ibid.*, IV, 171 ff.

mother remarried. Sometimes the new husband agreed to take them into his household, but more often they were placed elsewhere. Occasionally the first husband had anticipated this problem before his death. Anthony Besse's will provided that should his widow remarry, "the five bigest [children] to bee put forth and their Cattle with them according to the Descretion of the overseers." Another father,

Lawrance Lichfeild lying on his Death bedd sent for John Allin and Ann his wife and Desired to give and bequeath unto them his youngest son Josias Lichfeild if they would accept of him and take him as their Child; then they Desired to know how long they should have him and the said Lawrance said for ever; but the mother of the child was not willing then; but in a short time after willingly Conceded to her husbands will in the thinge; if the said John and Ann would take the Child for their adopted Child; whereunto they Assented . . . [The boy too] being asked by his owne mother . . . if hee Did Concent and Chuse to live with the said John and Ann as hitherto by the space of about nine yeares hee had Done; Willingly answered yea.

No doubt the boy was deeply attached to the Allens after having lived with them for so long. The agreement, then, imposed no particular hardship on anyone involved; it simply continued, and formalized, a previous arrangement.<sup>29</sup>

If children did remain with their mother after her remarriage, their stepfather was not supposed to exercise normal parental authority over them. Although at the time of his marriage to the widow, Mary Foster, Jonathan Morey contracted to "bring up" her son Benjamin at his own expense, he also agreed not to interfere in any future plans for binding the boy out. A fairly common solution to the problem of stepchildren was to keep them with their mother for a few years and then as they grew older to "put them out." Ultimate responsibility for such children passed to some persons specially designated in their father's will—often to his overseers, occasionally to his own parents. When Jacob Mitchell and his wife were killed by Indians at Rehoboth in 1675, their small children went to live with Mitchell's father in Bridgewater. John Brown of Swansea wrote in his will: "Conserning all my five Children I Doe wholly leave them all to the ordering and Disposeing of my owne father . . . for him to bring them up not once questioning but that his love and Care

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV (1912), 152; XII (1910), 134.



for them wilbee as it hath bine for my selfe." Brown's wife survived him, and the children probably remained in her day-to-day care, or else were "bound out"; but over-all direction of their lives was henceforth in the hands of their grandfather.<sup>30</sup>

It has been widely assumed that the "extended family" was characteristic of Western society everywhere until at least the eighteenth century, and that the change to our own "nuclear" pattern came only with the Industrial Revolution.<sup>31</sup> The term "extended family" in its strict sense means a household consisting of several couples, related as siblings or cousins, and their children, and perhaps their children's children. This pattern, of course, still prevails in many parts of the world. Its most striking results are a diffusion of affections and authority within the whole, or extended, family, and a sharing of economic responsibilities. The term is also applied, somewhat more loosely, to situations where the various family members do not form one household in the sense of living "under one roof" but still live close together and share loyalties and responsibilities which go beyond their own offspring or parents.

In colonial Plymouth, there were no extended families at all, in the sense of "under one roof." The wills show, beyond any doubt, that married brothers and sisters never lived together in the same house. As soon as a young man became betrothed, plans were made for the building, or purchase, of his own house. For example, when Joseph Buckland of Rehoboth married his father promised "to build the said Joseph a Convenient house for his Comfortable liveing with three score of acres of land ajoyning to it."<sup>32</sup> Some young men moved out of the family even before marrying, either to join in the expansion toward the interior or simply to "be for themselves" while remaining nearby. Girls stayed with their parents until they found a husband, but never beyond that time. I know of only one case in which there is documentary evidence suggesting that two couples shared a house, and it is truly the exception that proves the rule. The will of Thomas Bliss (Plymouth, 1647) contained this

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV, 15-16; XXI (1919), 185; XVIII (1916), 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> However, a few very recent studies have thrown some doubt on this idea. See Laslett and Harrison, "Clayworth and Coggenhoe," for evidence implying very small families indeed in rural English villages of the late 17th century.

<sup>32</sup> *Mayflower Descendant*, XVI (1914), 82. When Thomas Little of Taunton died leaving two teenage sons, his will directed that £10 be paid to each toward the building of houses "when they shall have occation." *Ibid.*, IV, 162.

clause: "I give unto my soon Jonathan my house and home lot Conditionally that hee shall give unto my sonninelaw Thomas Willmore his lot which hee now hath and also the one half of my broken up ground for two yeares and shall healp him to build him an house and let him peacably and quietly live in the house with him untell they shall bee able to set up an house for him."<sup>33</sup>

In a true extended family the death of the father, or even of both parents, causes no radical change in living arrangements. The widow or the children, or both, continue their lives much as before, and the functions of the deceased are assumed by other relatives (uncles or cousins or grandparents). When a man died in Plymouth, however, his household usually broke up. If the children were still young, some might remain with their mother, but others were likely to be placed in new families. If the children were adult, the "homestead" was given to a certain designated one of them, who was then obliged to pay to each of his brothers and sisters an amount equivalent to some fair proportion of the property's value.<sup>34</sup>

An unusually wealthy man in Plymouth Colony, and especially one who participated directly in the founding of new towns, could accumulate enough land to provide his sons with lots near or adjoining his own. Wills and land deeds show, for example, that John Washburn divided up his very large estate in Bridgewater with three sons, and that John Turner did the same kind of thing in Scituate.<sup>35</sup> This sort of arrangement comes as close to being an extended family as anything found in and around Plymouth—and it is not very close at all. There is no evidence of shared economic activity, no mention in the wills of profits or crops to be divided up. Moreover, in both the Washburn and the Turner families there were other sons who do not seem to have remained nearby.

Among those who were less wealthy, the drive to expand and to increase their property proved more powerful than the bonds which might have held families together. Children left, when they came of age, to take up new holdings several towns and many miles away. The process of dispersion was, in fact, sometimes encouraged by the very system of portions described earlier. Often a father simply had no land to spare in

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, VIII (1906), 85.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the will of David Linnell (Barnstable, 1688), *ibid.*, X (1908), 100-101.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, XV, 248-253; V (1903), 41-46.

the immediate vicinity of his own farm. He might, however, own property in one, or two, or three, of the newer townships; and this was what he passed on to his children. The will of William Bradford, Jr., shows that he had sons living in Connecticut (on land which he had given them); and he made additional bequests, to his youngest children, in Plymouth and Duxbury. Similarly, when Benjamin Bartlett died he left his children a wide variety of lots in Duxbury, Middleborough, Little Compton, and Rochester.<sup>36</sup> In some cases the recipients may have sold these gifts soon afterwards, but at least as often they went to make their homes on them.

What we would most like to know is something of the effect of this dispersion on a whole range of more intimate aspects of family life. A court case at Plymouth in 1679 throws some light on such matters. An elderly man named Samuel Ryder had just died and left his whole estate to two sons, Benjamin and John. A third son, Joseph, had been left nothing. What made this especially hard was the fact that Joseph had already built a house on a piece of land belonging to his father and had expected to receive title to it in the father's will. The Court approached the problem by taking a number of depositions from friends and family. Elizabeth Mathews was called first and gave the following testimony: "I being att the Raising of Joseph Riyders house; Joseph Ryders Mother Came into the house Joseph then lived in and Cryed and wrong her hands fearing that Joseph would Goe away; Josephs Mother then said that if you would beleive a woman beleive mee that youer father saith that you shall never be Molested; and you shall Never be Molested." Samuel Mathews verified this report and supplied additional details: "In the Morning before wee Raised the house old Goodman Ryder Joseph Ryders father Came out and marked out the Ground with his stick; and bid the said Joseph sett his house where it Now stands . . . the occation of the womans Lamenting as above said was fearing her son would Goe away; for shee said if hee went shee would Goe too."<sup>37</sup>

There are several striking things about this episode: the mother's distress at the thought that her son might leave (even to the point of suggesting that she would follow him); the hint of hostility between father and son; the threat to go away used by the son as a means of forcing a

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, IV, 143-147; VI (1904), 44-49.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, XI (1909), 50-53. In this context to "molest" means to make trouble about the ownership of something.

gift from his father; and the implication that parents could, and did, use gifts of land to induce their children to stay nearby. Evidence bearing directly on the human dimension of life in Plymouth is extremely hard to come by, but something like the Ryder case does offer a glimpse of the enormous strain that the whole pattern of geographic mobility must have placed upon family ties and sanctions.

Land and property represented one advantage still possessed by most parents when they wished to rearrange their own lives and the lives of their children. They tried to use it in a variety of ways. Bequests to children were often hedged by a requirement of good behavior: "I give [my estate to] my two sonnes Daniell and Samuell [ages 15 and 17] upon this proviso that they bee Obeidient unto their mother and carrye themselves as they ought . . . but if the one or both live otherwise then they ought and undewtyfully and unquietly with their Mother . . . then hee that soe carryeth himselfe shall Disinherit himselfe of his parte of this land." Another legacy, this one to a daughter, was made conditional on her "pleas[ing] her mother in her match." In still another case a man left his widow to judge their child's behavior and reward him accordingly from out of his estate. And the reasoning behind this was made explicit: "I would have the boy beholding to my wife; and not my wife to the boy."<sup>38</sup> Sometimes portions were shaped in the same way. One of the rare letters that survives from seventeenth-century Plymouth describes a father bestowing upon his son "the full of his porshon except upon his sons better behavior [he] should deserve more."<sup>39</sup>

It is likely, then, that rewards in the form of property were held out as an inducement to all sorts of "better behavior." But this was especially true in regard to the care of elderly couples and widows. Virtually every man who left a widow directed in his will that she be looked after by one of their children, and made a large bequest contingent thereupon. Usually the family homestead went to a particular child, with one room or more reserved for the widow. Often the instructions were spelled out in great detail: She would have full rights to the use of the "garden" and "orchard"; yearly payments of a certain specified amount must be made to

<sup>38</sup> Will of Thomas Hicks (Scituate, 1652), will of Samuel Newman (Rehoboth, 1661), and depositions concerning the estate of John Allen (Scituate, 1662), *ibid.*, XI, 160; XV, 234-236; XVII, 218.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Brewster to Daniel Wetherell, date not known, *ibid.*, II, 113.

her, wood must be brought to her door in wintertime, her cows milked, etc.<sup>40</sup>

Some men made arrangements of this kind even before their deaths. John and Deborah Hurd of Barnstable, for example, deeded "all that our hom sted" to their daughter and son-in-law in exchange for "the whole and sole Care and charge of us . . . for and during the tarm of our Natural Lives." And Robert Sprout of Middleborough gave his farm to his sons Ebenezer and James, on condition that they "pay yearly for my support . . . the sum of forty pounds to that child which I live with and provides for me and looks after me."<sup>41</sup> These conditions are nailed down so tightly in so many wills (and similar deeds) that it is tempting to infer some particular anxiety behind them.<sup>42</sup> It clearly was the general custom for aged parents to live with one of their children who would provide the care and support they needed. Probably in the majority of cases this was managed without too much difficulty; but in a society as fluid as Plymouth there must have been some elderly fathers and mothers who were more or less neglected. One recalls Bradford's vivid image of the "ancient mother, grown old and forsaken of her children, though not in their affections, yet in regard of their bodily presence and personal helpfulness."

Although one set of parents with their own children always formed the core of a Plymouth household, this nuclear pattern was, as we have seen, sometimes modified by the inclusion of one or more aged grandparents. It was often further modified by servants and apprentices, who lived in the houses of their masters. Among such people were at least a few Negroes and Indians whose service was normally for life.<sup>43</sup> The vast majority, however, were young boys and girls, "bound out" for a specified term of years. Some of them were orphans but many others had both parents living. Often, in fact, the parents had made all the arrangements and signed a formal contract with the couple whom their child served. In

<sup>40</sup> See, for examples, the wills of Thomas King, Sr., of Scituate and of Robert Hicks of Plymouth, *ibid.*, XXXI (1933), 101; VIII, 144-146.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI, 219; VI, 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> One eldest son who inherited his father's homestead complained that the conditions attached to the bequest, especially with regard to his father's widow, were such as to make him virtually "a servant for life." *Ibid.*, XII, 106.

<sup>43</sup> The inventory of the property of John Gorham of Yarmouth in 1675 included the item "1 Negro man." *Ibid.*, IV, 156. For similar treatment of Indian servants, see the wills of Samuel Fuller and Anthony Snow, *ibid.*, II, 237-241; V, 1-5.

1660 "An agreement appointed to bee Recorded" stated that "Richard Berry of yarmouth with his wifes Conccent; and other frinds; hath given unto Gorge Crispe of Eastham and his; wife theire son Samuuell Berry; to bee att the ordering and Disposing of the said Gorge and his wife as if hee were theire owne Child, untill hee shall accomplish the age of twenty one yeares; and in the meane time to provide for the said Samuuell in all things as theire owne Child; and afterwards if hee live to marry or to goe away from them; to Doe for him as if hee were theire own Child."<sup>44</sup> It is noteworthy that the Crispes took full responsibility for young Samuel—even to the point of promising him a portion. This is, then, a virtual deed of adoption.

No age was indicated for Samuel Berry, but it is clear from other cases that the children involved were often very young. John Smith and his wife gave their four-year-old son to Thomas Whitney "to have the full and sole disposing of him . . . without annoyance or disturbance from the said John Smith or Bennit his wife."<sup>45</sup> Samuel Eddy arranged apprenticeships for three of his sons, at ages six, seven, and nine. Two of them went to the same man, Mr. John Brown of Rehoboth. Upon reaching maturity, they both received property from Brown, and, in addition, were given modest portions by their father. It appears from this that Eddy continued to take a direct interest in his children even after they had left his household.

The most difficult question these arrangements raise is, what purpose lay behind them? No answer that would serve in all cases suggests itself. In some, poverty was obviously a factor. For example, Samuel Eddy, in the apprenticeship papers for his sons, pleaded his "many children" and "many wants." On the other hand, George Soule of Duxbury bound out his daughter to John Winslow, and Soule was a wealthy man. In certain cases, learning a trade was mentioned, but in a perfunctory manner. When young Benjamin Savory was bound out to Jonathan Shaw in 1653, the papers directed that he be taught "whatsoever trad[e] the said Jonathan Shaw can Doe." Something must have gone amiss with this arrangement, because four years later the child was placed with still another family. The terms were only slightly less vague: his new master, Stephen Bryant, was to "teach him in learning that is to say to read and write and to Intruct him in husbandry."<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, XV, 34.

<sup>45</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, XII, 181-182.

<sup>46</sup> *Mayflower Descendant*, II, 30; V, 90; XII, 133.

Another possible motive was to improve a child's educational opportunities. Instruction in reading and writing was often included among the conditions of the contract, as in the case of Benjamin Savory above. Finally, Edmund Morgan has suggested in his *The Puritan Family* that "Puritan parents did not trust themselves with their own children . . . and were afraid of spoiling them by too great affection";<sup>47</sup> it was for this reason, he argues, that so many children were placed in families other than their own. It is an interesting thought, but there is simply no explicit proof for it. At least Morgan found none, and I have had no better luck with the materials for Plymouth.

The household of Samuel Fuller seems to have been about as varied as any in Plymouth, and is worth mentioning in this connection. When Fuller died in 1633 it included nine people, six of whom were not of his own immediate family. There were, beside himself, his wife, and his son, a nephew, two servants, a ward, and two "additional children." The last of these had been sent to him for education, from families in Charlestown and Sagos. The ward was the daughter of a close friend who had died some years before. Meanwhile, Fuller's own daughter was living with "goodwife Wallen." Fuller was obliged to leave instructions about all these people in his will.<sup>48</sup> His daughter was to continue where she was for the time being. The children from Charlestown and Sagos should be returned to their former homes. The ward was committed to his brother-in-law, and passed thereby into her third family. Fuller's son should continue to live in the "homestead" and one day would inherit it; but the same brother-in-law was to take charge of his education. Fuller's wife would have the day-to-day care of the youth until she died or remarried. She would also take charge of the servants for the remainder of their contracted term.

Fuller's household was hardly typical, however. A close reading of hundreds of Plymouth wills has turned up no other family as complicated as this one. In many there were one or two people not of the immediate family—aged grandparents, servants, wards, or additional children—but rarely more. The basic unit remained one set of parents and their children or stepchildren, living apart from all other relatives.

Clearly children in seventeenth-century Plymouth often found themselves growing up in a household other than that of their parents. The

<sup>47</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* . . . (Boston, 1956), 38.

<sup>48</sup> *Mayflower Descendant*, I (1899), 24-28.

records are so scattered that it is impossible to calculate how many this category actually included. It must, however, have been a considerable number; my own guess is somewhere between a third and a half of all the children. This figure does not seem too high when it is remembered that one in three of the parents in the colony married twice or more, and that some children were placed in new homes even when their own father and mother were living.

The impact of these situations on the children cannot be proved—only imagined. But a hint of what they could mean comes to us in the story of a rather sad little episode, which by a lucky chance has been preserved in the *Colony Records*. Christian (Penn) Eaton and Francis Billington, widow and widower, were married in Plymouth in 1635. Christian's son, Benjamin Eaton, was "put forth" into another family immediately thereafter. The couple began to have children of their own: first, Elizabeth, and then, Joseph—both of whom were also placed in other families. But little Joseph apparently did not take to this arrangement very well, for in 1643 the Court was obliged to issue the following order:

Whereas Joseph, the sonn of Francis Billington . . . was . . . placed with John Cooke the younger, and hath since beene inveagled, and did oft departe his said masters service, the Court, upon longe heareing of all that can be said or alleadged by his parents, doth order and appoynt that the said Joseph shalbe returned to his said master againe immediately, and shall so remaine with him during his terme; and that if either the said Francis, or Christian, his wyfe, do receive him, if he shall againe depart from his said master without his lycence, that the said Francis, and Christian, his wyfe, shalbe sett in the stocks . . . as often as he or shee shall so receive him, untill the Court shall take a further course with them.<sup>49</sup>

Joseph Billington was five years old.

<sup>49</sup> *Plym. Col. Recs.*, II, 58-59.