

First to Land

Who from the Mayflower was the first to touch land in America?

Legends of Plymouth Rock, found in *A Book of New England Legends and Folk Lore* by Drake, 1888 states,

The honor of having first touched the shore on the ever memorable day is shared by two claimants. Both are supported by family tradition.

That giving it to John Alden was handed down through successive generations, until it was printed in his collection of Epitaphs, by the Reverend Timothy Alden, D.D., a lineal descendant of John, and thus obtained a permanent record.

The second claimant is Mary Chilton, a maiden who subsequently became the wife of John Winslow of Plymouth, and the mother of a large family inheriting the most distinguished traits of the Pilgrims, with an honorable name.

The husband of Mary Chilton removed after a time from the Old Colony to Boston, where the family tomb, with its arms, may be seen in King's Chapel Yard.

The Clifton claim is memorialized in artwork by Henry Bacon, *The Landing of the Pilgrims*,



The Clifton claim is even memorialized in a poem by George Bancroft Griffith,

Fair beams that kiss the sparkling bay,
Rest warmest o'er her tranquil sleep,
Sweet exile ! love enticed away, —
The first on Plymouth Rock to leap!
Among the timid flock she stood,
Rare figure, near the "Mayflower's" prow,
With heart of Christian fortitude,
And light heroic on her brow!

However, Annie Russell Marble in her book *The Women Who Came in the Mayflower*, that speaks to the actions of the women onboard, does not cite who landed first. That seems a significant omission, if it actually was a woman (the focus of her book). Marble does note,

"Joyful for them must have been the day recorded by Winslow and Bradford, - 'On Monday the thirteenth of November our people went on shore to refresh themselves and our women to wash, as they had great need.'

The General Society of Mayflower Descendants website notes, "legend has it, [that Mary Chilton] was the first woman to step ashore at Plymouth Rock." So, maybe Chilton's claim is 'first woman.'

The following chronology of event put together by Thomas Prince suggests that the first to leave the *Mayflower* and set ashore was an all-male landing party of "fifteen or sixteen men, well armed, to fetch wood, and discover the land who, at night, return, but found neither house nor person."

This purportedly occurred on November 11, 1620 as noted in Prince's following chronology,

November 9

At break of day, after long beating the sea, they make the land of Cape Cod. Whereupon, they tack, and stand to the southward; the wind and weather being fair, to find some place about Hudson's river, for settlement.

But sailing this course about half a day, they fall among roaring shoals and breakers ; and are so entangled with them, as they find themselves in great hazard. And the wind shrinking upon them, at the same time; they bare up for the Cape, get out of those dangers before night; and, the next day, into the Cape Harbour: where they ride in safety.

November 11

Saturday. Being thus arrived, they first fall on their knees, and bless the God of heaven, &c. But their design and Patent being for Virginia, and not New England; which belongs to another jurisdiction wherewith the Virginia Company have no concern: before they land, they, this day, combine into a Body Politic by a solemn Contract, to which they set their hands, as the Basis of their Government in this new found country; choose Master John Carver, a pious and well approved gentleman, their Governor for the first year.

And then set ashore fifteen or sixteen men, well armed, to fetch wood, and discover the land: who, at night, return, but found neither house nor person.

Artwork by Samuel Brown in the New York Public Library, entitled Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth supports the reference to an all-male initial landing party. (However, Brown's reference date is December 22, 1620 and the number of men is a little short.)



Prince's chronology continues and notes that the "people" go ashore on November 13 (consistent with the statements of Marble).

November 13, Monday. The people go ashore to refresh themselves. And every day, the whales play round about them, and the greatest store of fowls they ever saw; but the earth here, a company of sand hills, and the water so shallow near the shore, they are forced to wade a bow shot or two to get to land. Which, being freezing weather, affecteth them with grievous colds and coughs; and which after proves the death of many, and renders the place unfit for settlement.

Bradford further supports the latter claim that it was an all-male initial landing party, noting,

Being thus arrived at Cap-Cod the 11 of November, and necessitie calling them to looke out a place for habitation, (as well as the maisters and mariners importunitie,) they having brought a large shalop with them out of England, stowed in quarters in the ship, they now gott her out and sett their carpenters to worke to trime her up; but being much brused and shatered in the shipe with foule weather, they saw she would be longe in mending.

Wherupon a few of them tendered them selves to goe by land and discovere those nearest places, whilst the shalop was in mending; and the rather because as they wente into that harbor ther seemed to be an opening some 2. or 3 leagues of, which the maister judged to be a river.

It was conceived ther might be some danger in the attempte, yet seeing them resolute, they were permitted to goe, being 16 of them well armed, under the conduct of Captain Standish, having shuch instructions given them as was thought meete .

I suspect, rather than quibble on who was on first, suffice it to say that the likely first male (and likely first overall) was John Alden and the likely first female was Mary Chilton.



All here is from Bradford; Chronological History of New England, Prince Vol III; The Women Who Came in the Mayflower, Marple

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young