

## Lyford and Oldham

Bradford uses the terms “general” and “particular” to describe two sorts within the colony’s population: those who partook in the common ownership and working of the land, and those who were independent planters or entrepreneurs.

At first, until the time when the common stock was abolished in 1623, nearly all were in the “general.”

But within a short time, the London investors began sending over more and more people who were on their own “particular”.

At least, that was their status on paper: for the general were often expected to support them until they were established, or ended up having to do so because those on their particular proved particularly incompetent.

In either case, these were significant drains on the colony’s resources, which made it more difficult and extended the time it took to pay their debts.

As noted by Bradford, one such “particular” was John Lyford. Lyford had studied at Oxford. He had then gone on to be a preacher in the Church of Ireland, which was an ideal position for a Puritan because King James had allowed ministers in Ireland to implement whatever Puritan policies they wanted to.

They didn’t have to do any of the church rituals they disapproved of, like pledging allegiance to the Book of Common Prayer, making the sign of the cross or wearing the surplice. That meant that Puritans who didn’t want to compromise their ideas could move to Ireland to help convert the locals. The Church of Ireland had become dominated by Puritans, and Lyford had chosen to settle in one of the most contentious counties.

Then, he had an illegitimate child while in Ireland, and another. Then he got married, but after his marriage he got caught having raped a woman. After that, he was expelled from the Church of Ireland, and forced to return to London.

That’s where he connected with the Merchant Adventurers, who had sent him to Plymouth as a new minister. They’d already sent one minister, but he’d simply stayed a year, and lived quietly, written Latin poems, and left everyone alone. (Sarah Tanksalvala)

While his stay in the colony began well, Lyford soon collected a faction of discontented people, led by John Oldham. The two of them wrote a number of letters to the investors, which Governor William Bradford described as “full of slanders & false accusations, tending not only to their prejudice, but to their ruin and utter subversion.” (Plimoth Patuxet)

As noted by Bradford,

“When this man first came a shore, he saluted them with that reverence & humilitie as is seldome to be seen, and indeed made them ashamed, he so bowed and cringed unto them, and would have kissed their hands if they would have suffered him ...”

“... yea, he wept & shed many tears, blessing God that had brought him to see their faces; and admiring ye things they had done in their wants, &c. as if he had been made all of love, and ye humblest person in ye world.”

“And all ye while (if we may judge by his after carriage) he was but like him mentioned in Psa: 10. 10. That croucheth & boweth, that heaps of poore may fall by his might. Or like to that dissembling Ishmael, ! who, when he had slain Gedalia, went out weeping and mette them yt were coming to offer incense in ye house of ye Lord; saing, Come to Gedalia, when he ment to slay them.”

The Pilgrims “gave him ye best entertainment yey could, (in all simplisitie,) and a larger allowance of food out of ye store then any other had, and as the Govr had used in all weightie affairs to consulte with their Elder, Mr. Brewster, (together with his assistants,) so now he called Mr. Liford also to counsell with them in their weightiest businesses.”

“After some short time he desired to joyne himselfe a member to ye church here, and was accordingly received.”

“He made a large confession of his faith, and an acknowledgement of his former disorderly walking, and his being intangled with many corruptions, which had been a burthen to his conscience, and blessed God for this opportunitie of freedom & libertie to enjoye ye ordinances of God in puritie among his people, with many more such like expressions.” (Bradford)

Bradford then speaks about John Oldham,

“I must here speake a word also of Mr. John Oldom [Oldham], who was a copartner with him in his after courses. He had bene a cheefe sticler in ye former faction among ye perticulers, and an intelligencer to those in England.”

“But now, since the coming of this ship and he saw ye supply that came, he tooke occasion to open his minde to some of ye cheefe amongst them here, and confessed he had done them wrong both by word & deed, & writing into England ...”

“... but he now saw the eminent hand of God to be with them, and his blessing upon them, which made his hart smite him, neither should those in England ever use him as an instrumente any longer against them in any thing ...”

“... he also desired former things might be forgotten, and that they would looke upon him as one that desired to close with them in all things, with such like expressions.”

“Now whether this was in hipocrisie, or out of some sudden pang of conviction (which I rather thinke), God only knows.”

“Upon it they shew all readynesse to embrace his love, and carry towards him in all frendlynes, and called him to counsell with them in all cheefe affairs, as ye other, without any distrust at all.”

“Thus all things seemed to goe very comfortably and smoothly on amongst them, at which they did much rejoyce; but this lasted not long, ...”

“... for both Oldom and he grew very perverse, and shewed a spirite of great malignancie, drawing as many into faction as they could; were they never so vile or profane, they did nourish & back them in all their doings ...”

“... so they would but cleave to them and speak against ye church hear; so as ther was nothing but private meetings and whisperings amongst them ...”

“... they feeding themselves & others with what they should bring to pass in England by the faction of their freinds their, which brought others as well as them selves into a fools paradise.”

“Yet they could not cary so closly but much of both their doings & sayings were discovered, yet outwardly they still set a faire face of things.” (Bradford)

The Pilgrims became suspicious that Lyford almost immediately joined with John Oldham (both non-Pilgrims) in sending letters to London criticizing the colony and its leadership to the Merchant Adventurers. These criticisms had included criticism of everyday life, policy, and even the colony's religious nature.

When confronted, Lyford denied the accusations.

Bradford was determined to find out what he was doing, so he asked the captain of the next boat carrying mail to England to pause after they were beyond the view of the Plymouth colonists. He followed in a small boat, intercepted the vessel and opened Lyford's mail. (Sarah Tanksalvala)

As noted by Bradford,

“At lenght when ye ship was ready to goe, it was observed Liford was long in writing, & sente many letters, and could not forbear to communicate to his intimats such things as made them laugh in their sleeves, and thought he had done ther errand sufficiently.”

“The Govr and some other of his freinds knowing how things stood in England, and what hurt these things might doe, tooke a shalop and wente out with the ship a league or 2. to sea, and caled for all Lifords & Oldums letters.”

“Mr. William Peirce being mr. of ye ship, (and knew well their evil I dealing both in England & here,) afforded him all ye assistance he could.”

“He found above 20. of Lyfords letters, many of them larg, and full of slanders, & false accusations, tending not only to their prejudice, but to their ruine & utter subversion.”

“Most of the letters they let pas, only tooke copys of them, but some of ye most material they sent true copyes of them, and kept ye originalls, least he should deny them, and that they might produce his owne hand against him.”

“Amongst his letters they found ye coppinges of tow letters which he sent inclosed in a leter of his to Mr. John Pemberton, a minster, and a great opposite of theirs.”

“These 2. letters of which he tooke the coppys were one of them write by a gentle-man in England to Mr. Brewster here, the other by Mr. Winslow to Mr. Robinson, in Holand, at his coming away, as ye ship lay at Gravsend.”

“They lying sealed in ye great cabin, (whilst Mr. Winslow was bussie aboute the affairs of ye ship,) this slye marchante taks & opens them, taks these coppys, & seals them up againe; and not only sends the coppys of them thus to his friend and their adversarie, but adds thertoo in ye margente many scurrilous and flouting anotations.”

“This ship went out towards eving, and in the night ye Govr retured.”

“They were somwaht blanke at it, but after some weeks, when they heard nothing, they then were as briske as ever, thinking nothing had been knowne, but all was gone currente, and that the Govr went but to dispatch his owne letters.”

“The reason why the Govr & rest concealed these things the longer, was to let things ripen, that they might ye better discover their intents and see who were their adherents.”

“And ye rather because amongst ye rest they found a letter of one of their confederats, in wch was written that Mr. Oldame & Mr. Lyford intended a reformation in church and commone wealth; and, as soone as the ship was gone, they intended to joyne togeather, and have the sacrements, &c.”

“For Oldame, few of his leters were found, (for he was so bad a scribe as his hand was scarce legible,) yet he was as deepe in ye mischeefe as the other. And I thinking they were now strong enough, they begane to pick quarells at every thing.”

“Oldame being called to watch (according to order) refused to come, fell out with ye Capten, caled him raskell, and beggerly, raskell, and resisted him, drew his knife at him; though he offered him no wrong, nor gave him no ille termes, but with all fairnes required him to doe his duty.”

“The Govr, hearing ye tumulte, sent to quiet it, but he ramped more like a furious beast then a man, and cald them all treatours, and rebels, and other such foule language as I am ashamed to remember; but after he was clapt up a while, he came to him selfe, and with some slight punishmente was let goe upon his behaviour for further censure.”

“But to cutt things shorte, at length it grew to this esseue, that Lyford with his complices, without ever speaking one word either to ye Govr, Church, or Elder, withdrewe them selves & set up a publick meeting aparte, on ye Lord's day; with sundry such insolente cariages, too long here to relate, begining now publicly to acte what privatly they had been long plotting.” (Bradford)

It seemed clear that Lyford and Oldham were partnering with a faction of investors at home and planning to overturn the religious and political leadership of the colony, ending the independence movement within the colony, and turning into a mainstream Puritan colony. (Sarah Tanksalvala)

So, Lyford and Oldham were put on trial.

“It was now thought high time (to prevent further mischeefe) to calle them to accounte; so ye Govr called a courte and sumoned the whol company to appeare. And then charged Lyford & Oldom with such things as they were guilty of.”

“But they were stiffe, & stood resolutly upon ye deneyall of most things, and required prooffe.”

“They first alledged what was write to them out of England, compared with their doings & pactises hear; that it was evident they joyned in plotting against them, and disturbing their peace, both in respecte of their civill & church state, which was most injurious; for both they and all ye world knew they came hither to injoye ye libertie of their conscience and ye free use of Gods ordinances; and for yt end had ventured their lives and passed through so much hardshipe hitherto, and they and their freinds had borne the charg of these beginings, which was not small.”

“And that Lyford for his parte was sent over on this charge, and that both he and his great family was maintained on ye same, and also was joyned to ye church, & a member of them ...”

“... and for him to plote against them & seek their ruine, was most unjust & perfidious.”

“And for Oldam or any other that came over at their owne charge, and were on ther perticuler, seeing they were received in curtesie by the plantation, when they came only to seeke shelter & protection under their wings, not being able to stand alone ...”

“... that they, (according to ye fable,) like the Hedghogg whom ye conny in a stormy day in pittie received into her borrow, would not be content to take part with her, but in the end with her sharp pricks forst the poore conny to forsake her owne borrow; so these men with the like injustice indevored to doe ye same to thos that entertained them.”

Lyford denied writing the letters, but then he was shown the letters he wrote,

“Lyford denyed that he had any thing to doe with them in England, or knew of their courses, and made other things as strange that he was charged with.”

“Then his letters were prodused & some of them read, at which he was struck mute.”

“But Oldam begane to rage furiously, because they had intercepted and opened his letters, threatening them in very high language, and in a most audacious and mutinous maner stood up & caled upon ye people, saying, My maisters, wher is your harts?”

“... now shew your courage, you have oft complained. to me so & so; now is ye time, if. you will doe any thing, I will stand by you, &c.”

“Thinking yt everyone (knowing his humor) that had soothed and flattered him, or other wise in their discontente uttered any thing unto him, would now side wth him in open rebellion.”

“But he was deceived, for not a man opened his mouth, but all were silent, being stricken with the injustice of ye thing.”

“Then ye Govr turned his speech to Mr. Lyford, and asked him if he thought they had done evill to open his letters; but he was silente, & would not say a word, well knowing what they might reply.”

“Then ye Govr shewed the people he did it as a magistrate, and was bound to it by his place, to prevent ye mischeefe & ruine that this conspiracie and plots of theirs would bring on this poor colony.”

“But he, besids his evill dealing hear, had delte trecherusly with his freinds yt trusted him, & stole their letters & opened them, and sent coppies of them, with disgracefull anotations, to his freinds in England.”

“And then ye Govr produced them and his other letters under his owne hand, (which he could not deny,) and caused them to be read before all ye people; at which all his freinds were blanke, and had not a word to say.”

“It would be too long & tedious here to inserte his letters (which would almost fill a volume), though I have them by me.”

Bradford then notes the evidence, questions and answers put to Lyford and Oldham and their responses,

“I shall only note a few of ye cheefe things collected out of them, with ye answers to them as they were then given; and but a few of those many, only for instance, by which the rest may be judged of.”

“1. First, he saith, the church would have none to live hear but them selves. 21y. Neither are any willing so to doe if they had company to live elswher.”

“Ans: Their answer was, that this was false, in both ye parts of it; for they were willing & desirous yt any honest men may live with them, that will cary them selves peacably, and seek ye comone good, or at least doe them no hurte. And againe, ther are many that will not live els wher so long as they may live withthem.”

“2. That if ther come over any honest men that are not of ye seperation, they will quickly distast them, &c.”

“A. Ther answer was as before, that it was a false callumniation, for they had many amongst them that they liked well of, and were glad of their company; and should be of any such like that should come amongst them.”

“3. That they excepted against him for these 2. Doctrins raised from 2. Sam: 12. 7. First, that ministers must some times perticularly apply their doctrine to spetiall persons; 2ly, that great men may be reprovred as well as meaner.”

“A. Their answer was, that both these were without either truth or colour of ye same (as was proved to his face), and that they had taught and beleevd these things long before they knew Mr. Liford.

"4. That they utterly sought ye ruine of ye perticulers; as appeareth by this, that they would not suffer any of ye generall either to buy or sell with them, or to exchaing one comioditie for another."

"Ans: This was a most malicious slander and voyd of all truth, as was evidently proved to him before all men; for any of them did both buy, sell, or exchaing with them as often as they had any occation."

"Yea, and allso both lend & give to them when they wanted; and this the perticuler persons them selves could not deny, but freely confest in open court. But ye ground from whence this arose made it much worse, for he was in counsell with them."

"When one was called before them, and questioned for receiving powder and bisket from ye guner of ye small ship, which was ye companys and had it put in at his window in the night, and allso for buying salt of one, that had no right to it, he not only stood to back him (being one of these perticulers) by excusing & extenuating his falte, as long as he could, but upon this builds this mischeeous & most false slander: That because they would not suffer them to buy stolne goods, ergo, they sought their utter ruine. Bad logick for a devine."

"5. Next he writs, that he chocked them with this; that they turned men into their perticuler, and then sought to starve them, and deprive them of all means of subsistance."

"A. To this was answered, he did them manifest wrong, for they turned none into their perticuler; it was their owne importunitie and earnest desire that moved them, yea, constrained them to doe it. And they apealed to ye persons them selves for ye truth hereof. And they testified the same against him before all present, as allso that they had no cause to complaine of any either hard or unkind usage."

"6. He accuseth them with unjust distribution, and writeth, that it was a strang difference, that some have bene allowed 16li. of meale by ye weeke, and others but 4li. And then (floutingly) saith, it seems some mens mouths and bellies are very litle & slender over others."

"Ans: This might seeme strange indeed to those to whom he write his leters in England, which knew not ye reason of it; but to him and others hear, it could not be strange, who knew how things stood. For the first comers had none at all, but lived on their corne."

"Those wch came in ye Anne, ye August before, & were to live 13. months of the provissions they brought, had as good allowance in meal & pease as it would extend too, ye most part of ye year; but a litle before harvest, when they had not only fish, but other fruits began to come in, they had but 4li. Having their libertie to make their owne provissions."

"But some of these which came last, as ye ship carpenter, and samiers, the saltemen & others that were to follow constante imployments, and had not an howers

time, from their hard labours, to looke for any thing above their allowance; they had at first, 16li allowed them, and afterwards as fish, & other food coued be gott, they had as balemente, to 14. & 12. yea some of them to 8. as the times & occasions did vary.”

“And yet those which followed planting and their owne occasions, and had but 4li. of meall a week, lived better then ye other, as was well knowne to all. And yet it must be remembered that Lyford & his had allwais the highest allowance.”

“Many other things (in his letters) he accused them of, with many aggravations; as that he saw exceeding great wast of tools & vesseles; & this, when it came to be examened, all ye instance he could give was, that he had seen an old hogshed or too fallen to peeces, and a broken how or tow lefte carlesly in ye feilds by some. “Though he also knew that a godly, honest man was appointed to looke to these things.”

“But these things & such like was write of by him, to cast disgrace & prejudice upon them; as thinking what came from a [123] minister would pass for currente.”

“Then he tells them that Winslow should say, that ther was not above 7. of ye adventurers yt souight ye good of ye collony. That Mr. Oldam & him selfe had had much to doe with them, and that ye faction here might match ye Jesuits for politie. With many ye like greevius complaints & accusations.

“1. Then, in the next place, he comes to. give his freinds counsell and directtion. And first, that ye Leyden company (Mr. Robinson & ye rest) must still be kepte back, or els all will be spoyled. And least any of them should be taken in privatly somewher on ye coast of England, (as it was feared might be done,) they must chaing the mr. of ye ship (Mr. William Peirce), and put another allso in Winslows stead, for marchante, or els it would not be prevented.”

“2. Then he would have such a number provided as might oversway them hear. And that ye perticulers should have voyces in all courts & elections, and be free to bear any office.”

“And that every perticuler should come over as an adventurer, if he be but a servante; some other venturing 10li., ye bill may be taken out in ye servants name, and then assigned to ye party whose money it was, and good covenants drawn betweene them for ye clearing of ye matter; and this (saith he) would be a means to strengthen this side ye more.”

“3. Then he tells them that if that Capten they spoake of should come over hither as a generall, he was perswaded he would be chosen Capten; for this Captaine Standish looks like a silly boy, and is in utter contempte.”

“4. Then he shows that if by ye forementioned means they cannot be strengthened to cary & overbear things, it will be best for them to plant els wher by them selves; and would have it artickled by them that they might make choyse of any place that they liked best within 3. or 4. myls distance, shewing ther were farr better places for plantation then this.”



“5. And lastly he concluds, that if some number came not over to bear them up here, then ther would be no abiding for them, but by joyning with these hear.”

“Then he adds: Since I begane to write, ther are letters come from your company, wherin they would give sole authoritie in diverce things unto the Govr here; which, if it take place, then, Ve nobis. “

“But I hope you will be more vigilante hereafter, that nothing may pass in such a maner. I suppose (saith he) Mr. Oldame will write to you further of these things. I pray you conceall me in the discovery of these things, &c.”

“Thus I have briefly touched some cheefe things in his leters, and shall now returne to their proceeding with him. After the reading of his leters before the whole company, he was demanded what he could say to these things.”

“But all ye answer he made was, that Billington and some others had informed him of many things, and made sundrie complaints, which they now denyed.”

“He was againe asked if that was a sufficiente ground for him thus to accuse & traduse them by his letters, and never say word to them, considering the many bonds betweene them.”

“And so they went on from poynte to poynte; and wisht him, or any of his freinds & confederats, not to spare them in any thing; if he or they had any prooffe or witness of any corrupte or evill dealing of theirs, his or their evidence must needs be ther presente, for ther was the whole company and sundery strangers. He said he had been abused by others in their informations, (as he now well saw,) and so had abused them.”

“And this was all the answer they could have, for none would take his parte in any thing; but Billington, & any whom he named, denyed the things, and protested he wronged them, and would have drawne them to such & such things which they could not consente too, though they were sometimes drawne to his meetings.”

“Then they delte with him aboute his dissembling with them aboute ye church, and that he professed to concur with them in all things, and what a large confession he made at his admittance, and that he held not him selfe a minister till he had a new calling, &c.”

“And yet now he contested against them, and drew a company aparte, & sequestred him selfe; and would goe minister the sacrements (by his Episcopall caling) without ever speaking a word unto them, either as magistrats or bretheren.”

Lyford and Oldham were convicted and exiled.

“In conclusion, he was fully convicted, and burst out into tears, and ‘confest he feared he was a reprobate, his sinns were so great that he doubted God would not pardon them, he was unsavorie salte, &c.; and that he had so wronged them as he could never make them amends, confessing all he had write against them was false & nought, both for matter & maner.”

“And all this he did with as much fullnes as words & tears could express.”

“After their triall & conviction, the court censured them to be expeld the place; Oldame presently, though his wife & family had liberty to stay all winter, or longer, till he could make provision to remove them comfortably.”

“Lyford had liberty to stay 6. months.”

“It was, indeede, with some eye to his release, if he caried him selfe well in the meane time, and that his repentance proved sound.”

“Lyford acknowledged his censure was farr less then he deserved.”

“Afterwards, he confest his sin publikly in ye church, with tears more largely then before. I shall here put it downe as I find it recorded by some who tooke it from his owne words, as him selfe utered them.”

“Acknowledging ‘That he had don very evill, and slanderously abused them; and thinking most of ye people would take parte with him, he thought to cary all by violence and strong hand against them.’”

““And that God might justly lay inocente blood to his charge, for he knew not what hurt might have come of these his writings, and blest God they were stayed.’”

““And that he spared not to take knowledg from any, of any evill that was spoaken, but shut his eyes & ears against all the good; and if God should make him a vacabund in ye earth, as was Caine, it was but just, for he had sined in envie & malice against his brethren as he did.’”

““And he confessed 3. things to be ye ground & causes of these his doings: pride, vaine glorie, & selfe love.’”

“Amplifying these heads with many other sade expressions, in the perticulers of them.”

“So as they begane againe to conceive good thoughts of him upon this his repentance, and admitted him to teach amongst them as before; and Samuell Fuller (a deacon amongst them), and some other tender harted men amongst them, were so taken with his signes of sorrow & repentance, as they professed they would fall upon their knees to have his censure released.”

“But that which made them all stand amased in the end, and may doe all others that shall come to hear ye same, (for a rarer president can scarce be showne,) was, that after a month or 2. notwithstanding all his former confessions, convictions, and publick acknowledgments, both in ye face of ye church and whole company, with so many tears & sadde censures of him selfe before God & men, he should goe againe to justifie what he had done.”

Lyford and Oldham briefly stayed with a new band of colonists at Naumkeag, which would later become Salem. From there, they went to Virginia, where Lyford seemed to have been made a minister at either the Wests’ or John Martin’s plantation, but died just a few months later. Oldham later apologized for his participation in the affair and rejoined Plymouth colony.

The Lyford affair nearly tore the investors apart. Investors in London split into two groups, but most of the company's powerful backers supported Lyford. In fact, the majority of all the investors backed Lyford, and he had as his advocate a well-known Puritan lawyer named John White. White himself was elected to Parliament in 1640 for the radical London seat of Southwark as an outspoken foe of the Bishops and the King. Lyford and his London associates weren't meek and mild Anglicans. They were the most radical of Puritans.

London investors wrote to Plymouth, accusing the settlers of being "contentious, cruel and hard-hearted among your neighbors, and towards such as in all points both civil and religious, jump not with you."

Meanwhile, Bradford said that Oldham and Lyford were evil, profane and perverse, a human manifestation of the anti-Christ, and malignants.

Then, within a year of the affair, John Robinson was dead. Even from Holland, he had been their heart and their guide, rebuking them when they behaved poorly, and encouraging them when they were struggling. Brewster took control as Plymouth's spiritual leader, but the congregation didn't warm to another minister for decades.

In the couple years after Robinson's death, nearly a quarter of Plymouth's residents decided to relocate, either back to England or to Virginia, or to Maine. (Sarah Tanksalvala)

Information here is from Bradford; Sarah Tanksalvala; Plimoth Patuxet.

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