

Morton and the Maypole at Merrymount

The Pilgrims arrived on these shores in 1620 in hopes of making a better life for themselves and their children while being able to worship freely and in peace.

Their perseverance laid the cornerstone of a new Nation.

In describing the worship service before the Pilgrim church's departure from Holland, Governor William Bradford wrote that Reverend John Robinson:

...spent a good part of the day very profitably and suitable to their present occasion; the rest of the time was spent pouring out prayers to the Lord with great fervency, mixed with abundance of tears.

And the time being come that they must depart, they were accompanied with most of their brethren out of the city, unto a town sundry miles off called Delftshaven, where the ship lay ready to receive them.

So they left that goodly and pleasant city which had been their resting place near twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits.



This passage from Bradford's manuscript Of Plymouth Plantation makes reference to the Epistle to the Hebrews 11:13-16. According to the Geneva Bible (1560), the translation preferred by most Pilgrims, this reads:

13. All these dyed in faith, and received not the promises, but sawe them a farre of, and beleved them, and received them thankfully, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgremes on the earth.
14. For they that say suche things, declare plainly that they seke a cuntry.
15. And if they had bene mindeful of that cuntry, from whence they came out, they had leasure to have returned.
16. But now they desire a better, that is an heavenlie: wherefore God is not ashamed of them to be called their God; for he hathe prepared for them a citie.

The Pilgrims were Separatists.

They believed that membership in the Church of England violated the biblical precepts for true Christians, and they had to break away and form independent congregations that adhered more strictly to divine requirements.

A passage from the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians gave urgency to their actions. The Geneva translation for Second Corinthians 6: 16-18 reads:

16. And what agrement hathe the Temple of God with idoles? for ye are the Temple of the living God: as God hathe said, I wil dwell among them, and walke there; and I wil be their God, and shalbe my people.
17. Wherefore come out from among them, and separate your selves, faith the Lord: and touche none uncleane thing, & I wil receive you.
18. And I wil be a Father unto you, and ye shalbe my sonnes and daughters, saith the Lord almightie.

At a time when Church and State were one, such an act was treasonous and the Separatists had to flee their mother country. They all shared a fervent and pervasive Protestant faith that touched all areas of their lives.

The Separatists' faith experience was part of the larger English Reformation of the 16th century. This movement sought to "purify" the Church of England of its corrupt human doctrine and practices; the people in the movement were known as "Puritans."

Separatists were those who no longer accepted the Church of England as a true church, refused to work within the structure to affect changes, and "separated" themselves to form a true church based solely on Biblical precedent.

They rejected Christmas, Easter and the various Saint's Days because they had no scriptural justification, and in their worship services, they rejected hymns, the recitations of the Lord's Prayer and creeds for the same reason.

The Separatists believed that the worship of God must progress from the individual directly to God, and that "set" forms, like the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer, interfered with that progression by directing one's thoughts down to the book and inward to one's self.

The only exceptions were the Psalms and the Lord's Supper, both of which had scriptural basis, and possibly the covenant by which individuals joined the congregation.

As Pastor Robinson expressed it, even two or three "gathered in the name of Christ by a covenant [and] made to walk in all the ways of God known unto them is a church."

Sabbath services were held twice on Sunday; in addition, sermons were often given on Thursdays, and as occasion demanded, Days of Thanksgiving or Days of Fasting and Humiliation were proclaimed.

These latter were movable weekday holidays called in response to God's Providence. Both were observed in a manner similar to the weekly Sabbath, with morning and afternoon services.

According to the famous passage from Isaack de Rasiere's 1627 letter:

They assemble by the beat of drum, each with his musket or firelock, in front of the captain's door; they have their cloaks on, and place themselves in order three abreast, and are led by a sergeant without beat of drum.

Behind comes the Governor, in a long robe, beside him on the right hand comes the preacher with his cloak on and on the left hand, the captain with his sidearms and his cloak on, and with a small cane in his hand; and so they march in good order, and each sets his arms down near him.

Once they reached the meetinghouse, the men and boys sixteen and older sat on one side; the women and children sat on the other side.

John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, attended morning and afternoon Sabbath meetings while on a brief visit to Plymouth in October 1632. While de Rasiere described the manner in which the Pilgrims progressed to worship, Winthrop provides details on the order of worship.

He pays special attention to prophesying. While no examples of prophesies have come down to us, it seems to have been similar in nature to a mini-sermon, consisting of a reading or quoting of a text and an exposition of its meaning and spiritual application, with some discussion of Christian doctrine:

On the Lord's day there was a sacrament which they did partake in, and in the afternoon, Mr. Roger Williams (according to their custom) propounded a question, to which the pastor, Mr. Smith, spake briefly.

Then Mr. Williams prophesied; and after, the Governor of Plymouth spake to the questions; and after him the elder, then some 2 or 3 more of the congregation

Then the elder desired the governor of Massachusetts and Mr. Wilson to speak to it, which they did.

When this was ended, the deacon Mr. Fuller put the congregation in mind of their duty of contribution; whereupon the governor and all the rest went down to the deacon's seat and put it into the box, and then returned.

William Brewster served as the Ruling Elder of the Pilgrim church from its days in Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, England to Leiden, Holland and finally Plymouth Colony.

Ruling Elders were responsible for the government of the congregation, but as they were laymen and not ordained ministers, they could not deliver the sacraments.

Elders were often referred to as the "eyes of the church," governing and admonishing the congregation. In the absence of Pastor Robinson, who remained in Holland, Brewster preached and taught the in Plymouth.

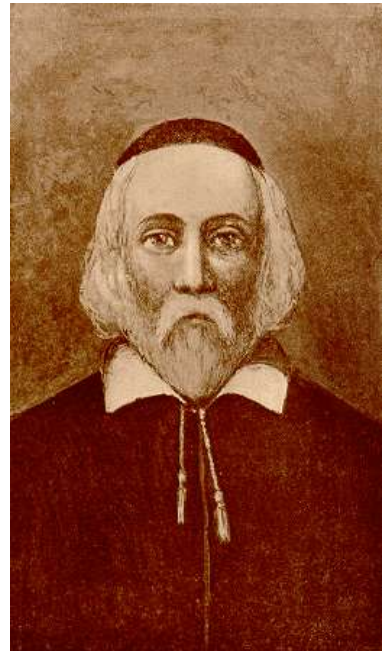
In memorializing Brewster after the Elder's death in 1643, Governor William Bradford also supplies additional details on aspects of worship in Plymouth:

In teaching, he was very moving and stirring of affections, also very plain and distinct in what he taught; by which means he became the more profitable to the hearers.

He had a singular good gift in prayer, but public and private, in ripping up the heart and conscience before God in the humble confession of sin, and begging the mercies of God in Christ for the pardon of the same.

He always thought it better for ministers to pray oftener and divide their prayers, than be long and tedious in the same, except upon solemn and special occasions as in days of humiliation and the like.

His reason was that the heart and spirits of all, especially the weak, could hardly continue and stand bent as it were so long towards God as they ought to do in that duty, without flagging and falling off.



Prayer, in keeping with Separatist belief, was completely extemporaneous. The Lord's Prayer was considered a model to be followed, but not slavishly copied. Prayer was given by the Pastor or Teaching Elder.

At this point in the service, the congregation rose. The speaker removed his hat, raised his eyes and lifted up his arms toward Heaven, and spoke. At the end, all joined in saying, "Amen."

Scripture in the 16th century was often interpreted in a metaphorical sense; scholars searched for hidden meaning. Separatists concentrated on the literal and historical possibilities, generally ignoring the metaphorical interpretations.

During this part of the service, a passage of scripture was read and expounded upon in this literal manner by the Pastor or Teaching Elder.

Finally, Psalms were the only music allowed in the service.

Hymns were rejected because they had no scriptural basis. The versions of the Psalms used in Plymouth Colony came from Henry Ainsworth's Psalter, in which he had "Englished" the Psalms in prose and metre, and set them to livelier music than had been heard before.

These were sung, without musical accompaniment, by the whole congregation. Years later, in the 1670s, when the first generation of settlers - many of whom had musical training - had died, the colonists had difficulty with the music of the psalms.

At this point, the practice of "lining" psalms began. In lining, each line of the psalm is first sung by the Pastor, then repeated by the congregation. (Plymouth Patuxet)

Then, Thomas Morton Arrived

Thomas Morton, a trader and lawyer, emigrated from England to the Plymouth Colony in the company of a Captain Wollaston in 1624.

Unable to get along with the Pilgrim authorities, Wollaston, Morton and other settlers established their own small colony of Mount Wollaston at the present-day site of Quincy, Massachusetts.

Then most of that community departed with the captain in 1626 in hopes of finding more hospitable surroundings in Virginia. Morton remained behind and renamed the village Mare Mount (Merrymount)

It is in this context of the religious focus of the Pilgrims that conflict arose when Thomas Morton came to New England.

Morton first explains what happens (in New English Canaan) ...

The Inhabitants of Pasonagessit (having translated the name of their habitation from that ancient Salvage name to Ma-re Mount; and being resolved to have the new name confirmed for a memorial to after ages) did devise amongst themselves to have it performed in a solemne manner with Revels, & merriment after the old English custome ...

... prepared to sett up a Maypole upon the festivall day of Philip and Jacob; & therefore brewed a barrrell of excellent beare, & provided a case of bottles to be spent, with other good cheare, for all commers of that day.



And because they would have it in a compleat forme, they had prepared a song fitting to the time and present occasion.

And upon May-day they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drummes, gunnes, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Salvages, that came thether of purpose to see the manner of our Revels.

A goodly pine tree of 80. foote longe, was reared up, with a peare of buckshorns nayled one, somewhat neare unto the top of it: where it stood as a faire sea marke for directions; how to finde out the way to mine Hoste of Ma-re Mount.

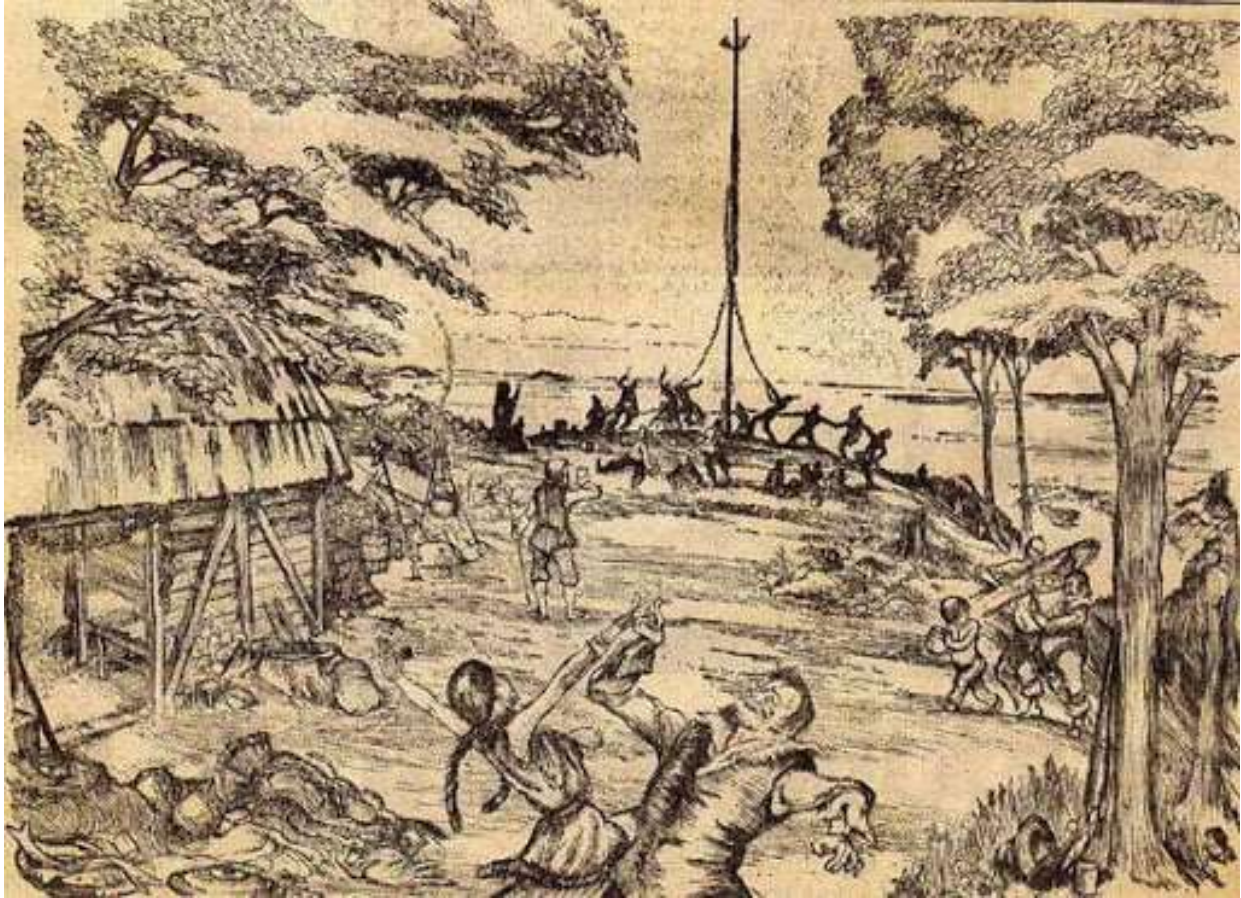
And because it should more fully appears to what end it was placed there, they had a poem in readiness made, which was fixed to the Maypole, to shew the new name confirmed upon that plantation; which although it were according to the occurments of the time, it being Enigmatically composed pussed the Seperatists most pitifully to expound it, which (for the betterment of the reader) I have here inserted.

The Poem

Rise Oedipus, and if thou canst, unfold
What means Charybdis underneath the mould,
When Scilla, solitary on the ground
(sitting in form of Niobe) was found;
Till Amphitrite's Darling did acquaint
Grim Neptune with the tenor of her plaint,
And caused him send forth Triton, with the sound
Of trumpet loud; at which the seas were found
So full of Protean forms that the bold shore
Presented Scilla a new paramour,
So strange as Samson, and so patient
As Job himself, directed thus, by fate
To comfort Scilla so unfortunate.
I doe professe, by Cupid's beauteous mother,
Heres Scogans choice for Scilla, and none other;
Though Scilla's sick with grief, because no sign
Can there be found of virtue masculine.
Esculapius, come: I know right well
Nor Cithareas power, who poynts to land
With proclamation that the first of May
At Ma-re Mount shall be kept hollyday.

The setting up of this Maypole was a lamentable spectacle to the precise seperatists: that lived at new Plimmouth.

They termed it an Idoll; yea they called it the Calfe of Horeb: and stood at defiance with the place, naming it Mount Dagon; threatning to make it a woefull mount and not a merry mount. ...



There was likewise a merry song made, which (to make their Revells more fashionable) was sung with a Corus, every man bearing his part; which they performed in a daunce, hand in hand about the Maypole, whiles one of the Company sung, and filled out the good liquor like gammedes and Jupiter.

The Songe

Drinke and be merry, merry, merry boyes,
Let all your delight be in Hymens joyes,
Jô to Hymen now the day is come,
About the merry Maypole take a Roome.

Make greene garlons, bring bottles out;
And fill sweet Nectar, freely about,
Uncover thy head, and feare no harme,
For hers good liquor to keepe it warme.

Then drinke and be merry, &c.
Jô to Hymen, &c.

Nectar is a thing assign'd,
By the Deities owne minde,

To cure the hart opprest with greife,
And of good liquors is the cheife,

Then drinke, &C.
lô to Hymen, &c.

Give to the Mellancolly man,
A cup or two of 't now and than;
This physick' will soone revive his bloud,
And make him be of a merrier moode.

Then drinke &c.
lô to Hymen &C.

Give to the Nymphe thats free from scorne,
No Irish stuff nor Scotch over worne,
Lasses in beaver coats come away,
Yee shall be welcome to us night and day.

To drinke and be merry & C.
Jô to Hymen, &C.

This harmeles mirth made by younge men (that lived in hope to have wifes brought over to them, that would save them a laboure to make a voyage to fetch any over) was much distasted, of the precise Seperatists: that keepe much a doe, about the tyth of Muit and Cummin; troubling their braines more then reason would require about things that are indifferent: and from that time sought occasion against my honest Host of Ma-re Mount to overthrow his undertakings, and to destroy his plantation quite and cleane.

Bradford, on the other hand, explains ...

... Morton, who, it should seeme, had some small adventure (of his owne or other mens) amongst them; but had litle respecte amongst them, and was slighted by ye meanest servants.

Haveing continued ther some time, and not finding things to answer their expectations, nor profite to arise as they looked for, Captaine Wollaston takes a great part of ye sarvants, and transports them to Virginia, wher he puts them of at good rates, selling their time to other men; and writs back to one Mr. Rassdall, one of his cheefe partners, and accounted their marchant, to bring another parte of them to Verginia likewise, intending to put them of ther as he had done ye rest.

And he, wth ye consente of ye said Rasdall, appoynted one Fitcher to be his Livetenante, and governe ye remaines of ye plantation, till he or Rasdall returned to take further order therabout.

But this Morton abovesaid, haveing more craft then honestie, (who had been a kind of petiefogger, of Furnefells Inne, in ye other absence watches an oppertunitie, (commons being but hard amongst them,) and gott some strong drinck & other junkats, & made them a feast; and after they were merie, he begane to tell them, he would give them good counsell.

You see (saith he) that many of your fellows are carried to Virginia; and if you stay till this Rasdall returne, you will also be carried away and sould for slaves with ye rest. Therefore I would advise you to thruste out this Levetenant Fitcher.

And I, having a parte in the plantation, will receive you as my partners and consociats; so may you be free from service, and we will converse, trad, plante, & live together as equalls, & supporte & protecte one another, or to like effecte.

This counsell was easily received; so they tooke oppertunitie, and thrust Levetenante Fitcher out a dores, and would suffer him to come no more amongst them, but forct him to seeke bread to eate, and other releefe from his neighbours, till he could gett passages for England.

After this they fell to great licenciousnes, and led a dissolute life, powering out them selves into all profanenes.

And Morton became lord of misrule, and maintained (as it were) a schoole of Athisme. And after they had gott some good into their hands, and gott much by trading with ye Indeans, they spent it as vainly, in quaffing & drinking both wine & strong waters in great exsess, and, as some reported, 10li. worth in a morning.

They allso set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing aboute it many days together, inviting the Indean women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking together, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practises.

As if they had anew revived & celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddes Flora, or ye beasly practises of ye madd Bacchinalians.

Morton likewise (to shew his poetrie) compose sundry rimes & verses, tending to lasciviousness, and others to ye detraction & scandall of some persons, which he affixed to this idle or idoll May-polle.

They chainged allso the name of their place, and in stead of calling it Mounte Wollaston, they call it Meriemounte, as if this joylity would have lasted ever.

But this continued not long, for after Morton was sent for England, (as follows to be declared,) shortly after came over that worthy gentlman, Mr. John Indecott, who brought over a patent under ye broad seall, for ye govermente of ye Massachusets, who visiting those parts caused yt May-polle to be cut downe, and rebuked them for their profannes, and admonished them to looke ther should be better walking; so they now, or others, changed ye name of their place againe, and called it Mounte-Dagon.

Now to maintaine this riotous prodigallitie and profuse excess, Morton, thinking him selfe lawless, and hearing what gaine ye French & fisher-men made by trading of peeces, powder, & shotte to ye Indeans, he, as ye head of this consortship, begane ye practise of ye same in these parts; and first he taught them how to use them, to charge, & discharg, and what proportion of powder to give ye peece, according to ye sise or bignes of ye same; and what shotte to use for foule, and what for deare.

And having thus instructed them, he employed some of them to hunte & fowle for him, so as they became farr more active in that employmente then any of ye, English, by reason of ther swiftnes of foote, & nimblnes of body, being also quick-sighted, and by continuall exercise well knowing ye hants of all sorts of game.

So as when they saw ye execution that a peece would doe, and ye benefite that might come by ye same, they became madd, as it were, after them, and would not stick to give any prise they could attaine too for them; accounting their bowes & arrowes but bables in comparison of them.

And here I may take occasion to bewaile ye mischefe that this wicked man began in these parts, and which since base covetousnes prevailing in men that should know better ...

... has now at length gott ye upper hand, and made this thing comone, notwithstanding any laws to ye contrary; so as ye Indeans are full of peeces all over, both fouling peeces, muskets, pistols, &c.

They have also their moulds to make shotte, of all sorts, as muskett bullets, pistoll bullets, swane & gose shote, & of smaler sorts; yea, some have seen them have their scruplats to make scrupins them selves, when they wante them, with sundery other implements, wherewith they are ordinarily better fitted & furnished then ye English them selves.

Yea, it is well knowne that they will have powder & shot, when the English want it, nor cannot gett it; and yt in a time of warr or danger, as experience hath manifested, that when lead hath been scarce, and men for their owne defence would gladly have given a groat a li., which is dear enoughe, yet hath it bene bought up & sent to other places, and sould to shuch as trade it with ye Indeans, at 12. pence ye li.; and it is like they give 3. or 4.s. ye pound, for they will have it at any rate.

And these things have been done in ye same times, when some of their neighbours & freinds are daly killed by ye Indeans, or are in deanger therof, and live but at ye Indeans mercie.

Yea, some (as they have aquainted them with all other things) have tould them how gunpowder is made, and all ye materialls in it, and that they are to be had in their owne land; and I am confidente, could they attaine to make saltpeter, they would teach them to make powder.

O the horiblnes of this vilanie! how many both Dutch & English have been latly slaine by those Indeans, thus furnished; and no remedie provided, nay, ye evill more increased, and ye blood of their brethren sould for gaine, as is to be feared; and in what danger all these colonies are in is too well known.

Oh! that princes & parlements would take some timly order to prevente this mischeefe, and at length to suppress it, by some exemplerie punishment upon some of these gaine thirstie murderers, (for they deserve no better title,) before their collonies in these parts be over throwne by these barbarous savages, thus armed with their owne weapons, by these evill instruments, and traytors to their neighbors and cuntrie.

But I have forgott my selfe, and have been to longe in this digression; but now to returne.



This Morton having thus taught them ye use of peeces, he sould them all he could spare; and he and his consorts determined to send for many out of England, and had by some of ye ships sente for above a score.

The which being knowne, and his neighbours meeting ye Indeans in ye woods armed with guns in this sorte, it was a terrour unto them, who lived straglingly, and were of no strenght in any place.

And other places (though more remote) saw this mischeefe would quietly spread over all, if not prevented.

Besides, they saw they should keep no servants, for Morton would entertaine any, how vile soever, and all ye scume of ye countrie, or any discontents, would flock to him from all places, if this nest was not broken; and they should stand in more fear of their lives & goods (in short time) from this wicked & deboste crue, then from ye salvages them selves.

So sundrie of ye cheefe of ye stragling plantations, meeting together, agreed by mutuall consente to sollissite those of Plimoth (who were then of more strength then them all) to joyne with them, to prevente ye further grouth of this mischeefe, and suppress Morton & his consortes before yey grewe to further head and strenght.

Those that joyned in this accion (and after contributed to ye charge of sending him for England) were from Pascataway, Namkeake, Winisimett, Weesagascusett, Natasco, and other places where any English were seated.

Those of Plimoth being thus sought too by their messengers & letters, and waying both their reasons, and the comone danger, were, willing to afford them their help; though them selves had least cause of fear or hurte.

So, to be short, they first resolved joyntly to write to him, and in a freindly & neighborly way to admonish him to forbear these courses, & sent a messenger with their letters to bring his answer.

But he was so highe as he scorned all advise, and asked who had to doe with him; he had and would trade peeces with ye Indians in dispite of all, with many other scurillous termes full of disdaine.

They sente to him a second time, and bad him be better advised, and more temperate in his termes, for ye countrie could not beare ye injure he did; it was against their comone saftie, and against ye king's proclamaion.



Cutting Down the May-pole

He answerd in high terms as before, and that ye kings proclamaion was no law; demanding what penaltie was upon it. It was answered, more then he could bear, his majesties displeasure.

But insolently he persisted, and said ye king was dead and his displeasure with him & many ye like things; and threatened withall that if any came to molest him, let them looke to them selves, for he would prepare for them.

Upon which they saw ther was no way but to take him by force; and having so farr proceeded, now to give over would make him farr more hautie & insolente.

So they mutually resolved to proceed, and obtained of ye Govr of Plimoth to send Captaine Standish, & some other aide with him, to take Morton by force.

The which accordingly was done; but they found him to stand stifly in his defence, having made fast his dors, armed his consorts, set diverse dishes of powder & bullets ready on ye table; and if they had not been over armed with drinke, more hurt might have been done.

They somaned him to yeeld, but he kept his house, and they could get nothing but scofes & scorns from him; but at length, fearing they would doe some violence to ye house, he and some of his crue came out, but not to yeeld, but to shoote; but they were so steeld with drinke as their peeces were to heavie for them; him selfe with a carbine (over charged & allmost halfe fild with powder & shote, as was after found) had thought to have shot Captaine Standish; but he stept to him, & put by his peece, & tooke him.

Neither was ther any hurte done to any of either side, save yt one was so drunke yt he rane his owne nose upon ye pointe of a sword yt one held before him as he entred ye house; but he lost but a litle of his hott blood.

Morton they brought away to Plimoth, wher he was kepte, till a ship went from ye Ile of Shols for England, with which he was sent to ye Counsell of New England; and letters written to give them information of his course & cariage; and also one was sent at their comone charge to informe their Hors more perticularly, & to prosecute against him.

But he foold of ye messenger, after he was gone from hence, and though he wente for England, yet nothing was done to him, not so much as rebukte for ought was heard; but returned ye nexte year.

Some of ye worst of ye company were disperst, and some of ye more modest kepte ye house till he should be heard from. But I have been too long about so unworthy a person, and bad a cause.

This event is also recounted in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Maypole of Merrymount.' It was first published in The Token and Atlantic Souvenir in 1836.

Information here is from New English Canaan, Plimoth Patuxet and Bradford.

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