

Preparing for Life in the Early Years in the Colonies

“Now this yeare 1629, a great company of people of good ranke, zeale, meanes and quality have made a great stocke, and with six good ships in the moneths of Aprill and May, they set sail from Thames for the Bay of the Massachusetts, otherwise called Charles River, viz. the George Bonaventure, of twenty peeces of ordnance, the Talbot nineteene, the Lions-whelpe eight, the Mayflower fourteene (different ship with the same name as the first), the Foure Sisters fourteene, the Pilgrim foure, with three hundred and fifty men, women and children, also an hundred and fifteene head of Cattell, as horses, mares, cows and neat beast, one and forty goats, some Conies (rabbits), with all provision for household and apparell, six peeces of great Ordnance for a fort, with Muskets, Pikes, Corselets, Drums, Colours, and with all provisions necessary for a plantation for the good of man”. (John Smith)

It was referenced as the Higginson Fleet after the Reverend Francis Higginson. They were bound for Massachusetts to prepare the way to expand the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Portions of a diary Higginson kept of his voyage and the first few months in the colony was published as “New England's Plantation, or a Short and True Description of the Commodities and Discommodities of that Country”(1630). A lot of the information here comes from his writing.

Rev. Higginson tried to prepare people before they came, saying,

“Before you come, be careful to be strongly instructed what things are fittest to bring with you for your more comfortable passage at sea, as also for your husbandry occasions when you come to the land.

For when you are once parted with England you shall meete neither markets nor fayres to buy what you want. Therefore be sure to furnish yourselves with things fitting to be had before you come: as meale for bread, malt for drinke, woolen and linnen cloath, and leather for shoes, and all manner of carpenters tools, and a great deale of iron and steele to make nails, and locks for houses, and furniture for ploughs and carts, and glasse for windows, and many other things which were better for you to think of there than to want them here.”

Higginson listed a “A Catalog of such needefull things as every Planter doth or ought to provide to go to New-England; as namely for one man; which, being doubled, may serve for as many as you please , viz.

Victuals for a whole yeere for a man, and so after the rate for more.

8 Bushels of meale	1 Firkin of Butter	2 Gallons of Vinegar.
2 Bushels of Otemeale.	2 Bushels of pease.	
1 Gallon of Aquavitae	1 Gallon of Oyle.	

Apparell.

1 Monmouth Cap.	1 Suit of Canvas.	4 Paire of Shooes.
1 Wast-coat.	3 Paire of Stockings.	1 Course Rug.
1 Suit of Frize.	1 Paire of Blankets.	7 Ells of Canvase to make
2 Paire of Sheets.	3 Shirts.	a bed and boulder.
3 Falling Bands.	1 Suit of Cloth.	

Armes.

1 Armor compleat.	60 Pound of Lead.	20 Pound of Powder.
1 Sword.	1 Long peece.	1 Pistoll and Goose shot.
1 Bandilier.	1 Belt.	

Tooles.

1 Broad Howe.	1 Gimblet.	1 Whipsawe.
1 Shovell.	1 Pickaxe.	4 Chissels.
1 Felling Axe.	1 Steele Handsawe.	2 Frowes.
1 Grindstone.	2 Augers.	1 Hammer.
1 Narrow Howe.	1 Hatchet.	1 Broad Axe.
1 Spade.	Nayles of all sorts	1 Hand-Bill.

Household Implements.

1 Iron Pot.	1 Kettel.	1 Frying pan
1 Gridiron.	2 Skellets.	1 Spit.
Trenchers.	Wooden Platters.	
Dishes.	Spoons.	

Also there are divers other things necessary to bee taken over to this Plantation, as Bookes, Nets, Hookes and Lines, Cheese, Bacon, Kine [cattle], Goats, &c. [and spices]" (Higginson)

Winslow also helped prepare future colonists with "Certain Useful Directions for Such as Intend a Voyage into Those Parts,"

Now because I expect your coming unto us, with other of our friends, whose company we much desire, I thought good to advertise you of a few things needful.

Be careful to have a very good bread-room to put your biscuits in. Let your cask for beer and water be iron-bound, for the first tier, if not more.

Let not your meat be dry-salted; none can better do it than the sailors. Let your meal be so hard trod in your cask that you shall need an adz or hatchet to work it out with.

Trust not too much on us for corn at this time, for by reason of this last company that came, depending wholly upon us, we shall have little enough till harvest. Be careful to come by some of your meal to spend by the way; it will much refresh you.

Build your cabins as open as you can, and bring good store of clothes and bedding with you.

Bring every man a musket or fowling-piece. Let your piece be long in the barrel, and fear not the weight of it, for most of our shooting is from stands.

Bring juice of lemons, and take it fasting; it is of good use.

For hot water, aniseed water is the best, but use it sparingly.

If you bring anything for comfort in the country, butter or salad oil, or both, is very good.

Our Indian corn, even the coarsest, maketh as pleasant meat as rice; therefore spare that, unless to spend by the way.

Bring paper and linseed oil for your windows, with cotton yarn for your lamps.

Let your shot be most for big fowls, and bring store of powder and shot. I forbear further to write for the present, hoping to see you by the next return.

So I take my leave, commending you to the Lord for a safe conduct unto us.

(Mourt's Relation, Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621)



The Earth, Water, Air and Fire of New England

Higginson described the colonies and uses the four elements in his description. "Letting passe our Voyage by Sea, we will now begin our discourse on the shore of New-England. And because the life and wel-fare of euerie Creature here below, and the commodiousnesse of the Countrey whereas such Creatures liue, doth by the most wise ordering of Gods prouidence, depend next vnto himselfe, vpon the temperature and disposition of the foure Elements, Earth, Water, Aire and Fire."

(For as of the mixture of all these, all sublunarie things are composed; so by the more or lesse injoyment of the wholesome temper and conuenient vse of these, consisteth the onely well being both of Man and Beast in a more or lesse comfortable measure in all Countreys vnder the Heauens.)

Therefore I will endeauour to shew your what New-England is by the consideration of each of these apart, and truly endeauour by Gods helpe to report nothing but the naked truth, and that

both to tell you of the discommodities as well as of the commodities, though as the idle Prouerbe is, Trauellers may lye by authoritie, and so may take too much sinfull libertie that way.

Yet I may say of my selfe as once Nehemiah did in another case: Shall such a Man as I lye?

No verily; It becommeth not a Preacher of Truth to be a Writer of Falshood in any degree: and therefore I haue beene carefull to report nothing of New-England but what I haue partly seene with mine owne Eyes, and partly heard and enquired from the Mouthes of verie honest and religious persons, who by liuing in the Countrey a good space of time haue had experience and knowledge of the state thereof, and whose testimonies I doe beleeeue as my selfe.

First therefore of the Earth of New England and all the appurtenances thereof; It is a Land of diuers and sundry sorts all about Masathulets Bay, and at Charles River is as fat blacke Earth as can be seene any where: and in other places you haue a clay soyle , in other grauell, in other sandy, as it is all about our Plantation at Salem , for so our Towne is now named, Psal. 76.2.

The forme of the Earth here in the superficies of it is neither too flat in the plainnesse, nor too high in Hills, but partakes of both in a mediocritie, and fit for Pasture, or for Plow or Meddow ground, as Men please to employ it: though all the Countrey be as it were a thicke Wood for the generall, yet in diuers places there is much ground cleared by the Indians, and especially about the Plantation : and I am told that about three miles from vs a Man may stand on a little hilly place and see diuers thousands of acres of ground as good as need to be, and not a Tree in the same. ...

The fertilitie of the Soyle is to be admired at, as appeareth in the abundance of Grasse that groweth euerie where both verie thicke, verie long, and verie high in diuers places: but it growth very wildly with a great stalke and a broad and ranker blade, because it neuer had been eaten with Cattle, nor mowed with a Sythe, and seldome trampled on by foot. It is scarce to be beleeeued how our Kine [cattle] and Goats, Horses and Hogges doe thriue and prosper here and like well of this Country.

In our Plantation we haue already a quart of Milke for penny: but the abundant encrease of Corne proues this Countrey to be a wonderment. Thirtie, fortie, fiftie, sixtie, are ordinarie here: yea Iosephs encrease in Ægypt is out-stript here with vs.

Our Planters hope to haue more then a hundred fould this yeere: and all this while I am within compasse; what will you say of two hundred fould and vpwards? It is almost incredible what great gaine some of our English Planters haue had by our Indian Corne. ...

This Countrey aboundeth naturally with store of Roots of great varietie and good to eat. Our Turnips, Parsnips and Carrots are here both bigger and sweeter then is ordinarily to be found in England. Here are also store of Pumpions, Cowcubmers, and other things of that nature which I know not. ...

For Wood there is no better in the World I thinke, here being foure sorts of Oke differing both in the Leafe, Timber, and Colour, all excellent good. There is also good Ash, Eleme, Willow, Birch, Beech, Saxafras, Iuniper Cipres, Cedar, Spruce, Pines and Firre that will yeeld abundance of Terpentine, Pitch, Tarre, Masts and other materials for building both of Ships and Houses.

Also here are store of Sumacke Trees, they are good for dying and tanning of Leather, likewise such Trees yeeld a precious Gum called White Beniamen , that they say is excellent for perfumes. Also here be diuers Roots and Berries wherewith the Indians dye excellent holyday colours that no raine nor washing can alter. Also , wee haue materials to make Sope Ashes and Salt-Peter in abundance.

For Beasts there are some Beares, and they say some Lyons also; for they haue been seen at Cape Anne. Also here are seuerall sorts of Deere , some whereof bring three or foure young ones at once, which is not ordinarie in England. Also Wolues, Foxes, Beauers, Otters, Martins, great wild Cats, and a great Beast called a Molke as bigge as an Oxe. I have seen the Skins of all these Beasts since I came to this Plantation excepting Lyons.

Also here are great store of Squerrels, some greater, and some smaller and lesser: there are some of the lesser sort, they tell me, that by a certaine Skin will fly from Tree to Tree though they stand farre distant.

Of the Waters of New-England with the things belonging to the same.

New-England hath Water enough both salt and fresh, the greatest Sea in the World, the Atlanticke Sea runs all along the Coast thereof. There are abundance of Ilands along the Shore, some full of Wood and Mast to feed Swine; and others cleere of Wood , and fruitfull to beare Corne.

Also we haue store of excellent harbours for Ships, as at Cape Anne, and at Masathulets Bay, and at Salem, and at many other places: and they are the better because for Strangers there is a verie difficult and dangerous passage into them, but vnto such as are well acquainted with them, they are easie and safe enough.

The abundance of Sea Fish are almost beyond beleeuing , and sure I should scarce haue beleueed it except I had seene it with mine owne Eyes.

I saw great store of Whales, and Crampusse, and such abundance of Makerils that it would astonish one to behold , likewise Cod-Fish abundance on the Coast, and in their season are plentifully taken. There is a Fish called a Basse, a most sweet and wholesome Fish as euer I did eat, it is altogether as good as our fresh Sammon, and the season of their comming was begun when we came first to New - England in Iune, and so con tinued about three months space.

Of this Fish our Fishers take many hundreds together, which I haue seene lying on the shore to my admiration; yea, their Nets ordinarily take more then they are able to hale to Land, and for want of Boats and Men they are constrained to let a many goe after they haue taken them, and yet sometimes they fill two Boats at a time with them.

And besides Basse we take plentie of Scate and Thornbacke , and abundance of Lobsters, that the least Boy in the Plantation may both catch and eat what he will of them.

For my owne part I was soone cloyed with them, they were so great, and fat, and lussious. I haue seene some my selfe that haue weighed 16 pound, but others haue had diuers time so great Lobsters as haue weighed 25 pound, as they assured me. Also here is abundance of Herring, Turbut, Sturghion, Cuskes, Hadocks, Mulletts, Eeles, Crabs, Muskles and Oysters.

Beside there is probabilitie that the Countrey is of an excellent temper for the making of Salt: for since our comming our Fishermen haue brought home verie good Salt which they found candied by the standing of the sea water and the heat of the Sunne, vpon a Rock by the Sea shore: and in diuers Salt Marishes that some haue gone through, they haue found some Salt in some places crushing vnder their Feet and cleauing to their Shoes.

And as for fresh Water the Countrey is full of daintie Springs, and some great Riuers, and some lesser Brookes; and at Masathulets Bay they digged Wels and found Water at three Foot deepe in most places: and neere Salem they haue as fine cleare Water as we can desire, and wemay digge Wels and find Water where we list.

Thus we see both Land and Sea abound with store of blessings for the comfortable sustenance of Mans life in New-England.

Of the Aire of New-England with the Temper and Creatures in it.

The Temper of the Aire of New-England is one speciall thing that commends this place. Experience doth manifest that there is hardly a more healthfull place to be found in the World that agreeth better with our English Bodyes.

Many that haue beene weake and sickly in old England, by comming hither haue beene thoroughly healed and growne healthful and strong. For here is an extraordinarie cleere and dry Aire that is of a most healing nature to all such as are of a Cold, Melancholy, Flegmatick , Reumaticke temper of Body.

None can more truly speake hereof by their owne experience then my selfe. My Friends that knew me can well tell how verie sickly I haue been and continually in Physick, being much troubled with a tormenting paine through an extraordinarie weaknesse of my Stomacke, and abundance of Melancholicke humours; ...

... but since I came hither on this Voyage, I thanke God I haue had perfect health, and freed from paine and vomitings, hauing a Stomacke to digest the hardest and coursest fare who before could not eat finest meat, and whereas my Stomacke could onely digest and did require such drinke as was both strong and stale ...

... now I can and doe oftentimes drink New-England water verie well, and I that haue not gone without a Cap for many yeeres together, neither durst leaue off the same, haue now cast away my Cap, and doe weare none at all in the day time: and whereas beforetime I cloathed myselfe with double cloathes and thicke Wastcoats to keepe mewarme, euen in the Summer time, I doe now goe as thin clad as any, onely wearing a light Stoffe Cassocke vpon my Shirt and Stoffe Breeches of one thickness without Linings. ...

Fowles of the Aire are plentifull here , and of all sorts as we haue in England as farre as I can learne, and a great many of strange Fowles which we know not. Whilst I was writing these things, one of our Men brought home an Eagle which he had killed in the Wood: they say they are good meat.

Also here are many kinds of excellent Hawkes, both Sea Hawkes and Land Hawkes: and my self walking in the Woods with another in company, sprung a Partridge so bigge that through the heauinesse of his Body could fly but a little way: they that haue killed them, say they are as bigge as our Hens.

Here are likewise abundance of Turkies often killed in the Woods, farre greater then our English Turkies, and exceeding fat, sweet and fleshy, for here they haue abundance of feeding all the yeere long, as Strawberries, in Summer all places are full of them , and all manner of Berries and Fruits.

In the Winter time I haue seene Flockes of Pidgeons, and haue eaten of them: they doe flye from Tree to Tree as other Birds doe, which our Pidgeons will not doe in England: they are of all colours as ours are, but their wings and tayles are farr longer , and therefore it is likely they fly swifter to escape the terrible Hawkes in this Countrey.

In Winter time this Countrey doth abound with wild Geese, wild Duckes, and other Sea Fowle , that a great part of winter the Planters haue eaten nothing but roastmeat of diuers Fowles which they haue killed.

Thus you haue heard of the Earth , Water and Aire of New England, now it may be you expect something to be said of the Fire proportionable to the rest of the Elements.

Indeed I thinke New-England may boast of this Element more then of all the rest: for though it be here somthing cold in the winter, yet here we haue plentie of Fire to warme vs, and that a great deale cheaper then they sell Billets and Faggots in London: nay all Europe is not able to afford to make so great Fires as New-England.

A poore Seruant here that is to possesse but 50 Acres of Land, may afford to giue more wood for Timber and Fire as good as the world yeelds, then many Noble Men in England can afford to doe. Here is good living for those that loue good Fires.

And although New-England haue no Tallow to make Candles of, yet by the abundance of the Fish thereof, it can afford Oyle for Lamps . Yea our Pine-Trees that are the most plentifull of all wood, doth allow vs plentie of Candles, which are verie vsefull in a House ...

... and they are such Candles as the Indians commonly vse, hauing no other, and they are nothing else but the wood of the Pine Tree clouen in two little slices some thing thin, which are so full of the moysture of Turpentine and Pitch , that they burne as cleere as a Torch. I haue sent you some of them that you may see the experience of them.

Higginson then warns of “some discommodities, that are here to be found”:

First, in the summer season, for these three months, June, July, and August, we are troubled much with little flies called mosquitoes, being the same they are troubled with in Lincolnshire and the fens; and they are nothing but gnats, which, except they be smoked out of their houses, are troublesome in the night season.

Secondly, in the winter season, for two months' space, the earth is commonly covered with snow, which is accompanied with sharp biting frosts, something more sharp than is in Old England, and therefore are forced to make great fires.

Thirdly, this country being very full of woods and wildernesses, doth also much abound with snakes and serpents, of strange colors and huge greatness.

Yea, there are some serpents, called rattlesnakes, that have rattles in their tails, that will not fly from a man as others will, but will fly upon him and sting him so mortally that he will die within a quarter of an hour after, except the party stung have about him some of the root of an herb called snake-weed to bite on, and then he shall receive no harm. But yet seldom falls it out that any hurt is done by these.

About three years since an Indian was stung to death by one of them ; but we heard of none since that time.

Fourthly and lastly, here wants as yet the good company of honest Christians, to bring with them horses, kine [cattle] and sheep , to make use of this fruitful land. Great pity it is to see so much good ground for corn and for grass as any is under the heavens, to lie altogether unoccupied , when so many honest men and their families in Old England, through the populousness thereof, do make very hard shift to live one by the other. (Higginson)

In the winter of 1630, Higginson succumbed to a fever at the age of 43, leaving a widow and eight children. He was eulogized by Governor John Winthrop as "...one of the ministers of Salem, a zealous and a profitable preacher..." Portions of a diary he kept of his voyage and the first few months in the colony was published as 'New England's Plantation, or a Short and True Description of the Commodities and Discommodities of that Country' (1630).

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