Bringing Early Plymouth to Life at Plimoth Plantation

By Lynn Betlock

Plimoth Plantation, a living history museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, re-creates and interprets life in Plimoth Village in 1627. At that time, the original Plymouth settlement was populated by approximately one hundred and sixty colonists who had arrived on the *Mayflower* (1620), the *Fortune* (1621), the *Anne* (1623), and the *Little James* (1623). In the Plantation's re-created village all the major facets of Pilgrim life are represented, albeit on a smaller scale. A dozen timber-framed houses line the main street, an acre of corn is under cultivation, and rare breeds of livestock inhabit the pens. The village bustles with activity as colonial interpreters go about the business of everyday life in 1627.

Visitors to Plimoth Plantation — between three and four hundred thousand each year — are undoubtedly captivated by their "time travel" experience. The sights, sounds, and smells provide twenty-first-century visitors with a bridge to early seventeenth-century life. Interactions with colonial interpreters offer meaningful insights into the actions and motivations of the original colonists. Visitors depart with a renewed sense of history and an appreciation for the work undertaken by the Plimoth Plantation staff. Re-creation and interpretation in the Plimoth village requires examining the often-scanty historical evidence, and literally bringing it to life.

Plimoth Plantation staff historian Carolyn Travers offers her perspective — gained during thirty-one years of employment at the Plantation — on how early Plymouth research is integrated into a living history experience. According to Travers, Plantation staff members use the resources of established organizations like the New England Historic Genealogical Society and the General Society of Mayflower Descendants. They draw on the large body of work published about early Plymouth colonists, particularly those who came on the *Mayflower*. The following are the most frequently consulted:

• *The English Ancestry and Homes of the Pilgrim Fathers Who Came to Plymouth on the* Mayflower *in 1620, the* Fortune *in 1621, and the* Anne *and the* Little James *in 1623* by Charles Edward Banks

• *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1633* and *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England, 1634–1635* by Robert Charles Anderson

• The "Mayflower Families Through Five Generations" project of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants

• *Plymouth Colony: Its History and People 1620–1691* by Eugene Aubrey Stratton

• Articles in *The American Genealogist*, *The Genealogist*, *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, and other genealogical journals.

In addition, Plimoth Plantation staff members examine a variety of other historical sources. Knowledge of a colonist's background is necessary to interpret how he or she would have reacted to conditions in Plymouth. The following questions are asked, "What was this person's way of life prior to leaving for New England?" and "How would people have reacted to New England conditions based on their previous ways of life?"

In 1984, Plimoth Plantation sponsored several major research trips designed to answer these questions. Researchers went to Leiden and the North and South of England to explore all aspects of the places where the early Plymouth colonists were believed to have originated. Staff members spoke with local experts about a variety of topics, including architecture, the landscape, regional dialects, the experience of childhood, crops and diet, people of note, and local happenings. The goal was to amass a wealth of detail about the colonists' experiences of everyday life in England or Leiden, which in turn would be used to create a realistic portrayal of everyday life in Plymouth.

When a colonist's origins are unknown, though, a background must be created. Obviously, it would not be a rewarding interaction if a colonial interpreter told a visitor that he didn't know where he was from and didn't know the names of his parents. In these cases, historian Carolyn Travers makes a series of educated guesses to construct a realistic background. Take the case of Stephen Deane, who arrived on the *Fortune* in 1621. His surname — Deane — is difficult to research. It is not unusual and it is not area-specific. The typical background provided in such situations is

London or Southwark because those areas were highly populated, and many people passed through them. Birth and marriage dates often must be estimated, based on when the first child was born, when a spouse arrived in the colony, or when men, on average, first married. If a colonist's parents' names are unknown, names must be chosen for them. In order to select believable names, Travers follows the convention of naming children after parents or grandparents. Stephen Deane's father, then, might also be given the name Stephen, and his mother might be given the name of one of Stephen's daughters: Elizabeth, Miriam, or Susanna. Or a parent might be given one of the common names of the time: Mary, Ann, or Elizabeth for a woman and William, Thomas, Edward, Robert, or John for a man. Staff interpreters receive biographies about their characters and the manufactured details are marked accordingly. In the end, all the "statistically likely" information contributes to developing and rounding out the personalities of the colonists.

In addition to character profiles, the interpreters use other sources to prepare for their roles, including four Plimoth Plantation training manuals, William Bradford's history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford and Edward Winslow's work, *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, and *Three Visitors to Early Plymouth: Letters About the Pilgrim Settlement in New England During Its First Seven Years*. Many interpreters undertake further research into their characters' origins, dialects, and occupations. Staff members prepare for their roles during two weeks of lectures and workshops on topics ranging from history to cooking safety to learning styles to emergency procedures. During the training period, new interpreters are paired with experienced interpreters. Also, those cast as members of a family interact and construct the stories they will relate to visitors. For instance, although there is no record of how married couples met, husbands and wives need to have an agreed-upon answer for that question. Ultimately, staff interpreters need to possess a solid historical background as well as both people and period skills.

Because Plimoth Village is self-guided and the characters do not give set speeches, visitor interests and questions are of primary importance. Consequently, the experience is much more visitor-driven than at most museums, and interpreters never know where the next question might lead. Commonly, visitors begin conversations by asking about the tasks in which characters are engaged. They might ask about the period tools or objects being used. And they may ask when the colonist arrived in Plymouth, how Native peoples are viewed, and what relations are like with the next door neighbors. People often discuss their own personal interests with the interpreters, whether it be cooking, fishing, or religious beliefs. Visitors tend to gravitate toward characters whose life situations are similar to their own; mothers with small children are likely to speak to the mothers with small children in the village and kids look for child interpreters.

Since so many people are descended from early Plymouth colonists, interpreters are often asked genealogical questions. Visitors should be aware that the family history information provided by interpreters might not necessarily be true; as described earlier, when key information is unknown, it is often created. Obviously, then, genealogists wouldn't want to add this "new" information into their family trees. On the other hand, the staff at Plimoth Plantation tries to keep abreast of all the latest scholarship and when a discovery is made, it will be added to the character portrayal. For instance, when a 2003 article in *The American Genealogist* revealed that Richard Warren's wife Elizabeth was the daughter of Augustine Walker, that information was incorporated immediately. Genealogists must understand that since it is 1627 the characters cannot acknowledge their descendants as such. Many visitors will greet characters by introducing themselves as descendants. In those cases, the interpreter will simply recognize that the person is family and steer the conversation into more fruitful channels.

Interpreters at Plimoth Plantation converse with visitors and also demonstrate the tasks of everyday life in the early seventeenth century. The chores can be quite taxing and often physically demanding. Interpreters in the village cook both inside and outside; bake; clean; sew; garden; build fences; repair roofs; build and rebuild; care for cows, goats, chickens, and sheep; tend cornfields; clean and salt fish; and undertake a variety of other chores. The interpreters use period-appropriate hand tools, and perform all their tasks in the attire of the time, which means the interpreters generally wear wool, linen, and leather clothing. Interpreters can be challenged further by the weather, which might be hot, cold, windy, or wet, or by the natural lighting, which especially in the fall can be insufficient. Clearly, being an interpreter is a special calling!

Plimoth Plantation employs between forty and forty-five full-time colonial interpreters; approximately fourteen are on duty in the village at any given time. In addition, a few child volunteers, generally the children of staff members,

portray some of the younger members of the colony during the summer. The interpreters are drawn from a surprisingly large geographic area; some commute from quite a distance, even from as far as Connecticut and New Hampshire. They hail from a wide variety of backgrounds, with many having previously worked in education, theatre, and history. Those who enjoy the work tend to stay, and many return year after year — one interpreter has been with Plimoth Plantation since 1979. Although first-year interpreters are assigned roles, over time people can request specific roles or general categories (i.e. a married woman who arrived on the *Mayflower*, for instance). Needless to say, the interpreter must be an appropriate match: a young interpreter is not cast to play a character that would have been old in 1627 and vice versa. Many interpreters find it interesting to portray different characters over time; for example, they receive different perspectives when they play *Mayflower* passengers and when they play colonists who came on the later ships.

The physical details of Plymouth Colony are subject to the same intense study and scrutiny as the characters. Houses in the village are built according to the peculiarities of construction in Plymouth in its first years. The original houses were built primarily by people who were not skilled carpenters but were directed by several experienced craftsmen. Over time, as scholarship about building construction methods progresses, new information is incorporated into the next version of a house. And, yes, the houses do need to be replaced periodically. They must appear realistic for 1627; if a house was allowed to stand for decades it would look too old for a building of less than six years. Similarly, a twenty-year-old rosebush had to be uprooted because a rosebush of that age simply couldn't have existed in Plymouth in 1627.

For people able to make the trip, a visit to Plimoth Plantation offers an extraordinary journey to the past, facilitated by skilled interpreters. The interpretive lessons taught by Plimoth Plantation, though, can be extrapolated by genealogists, no matter where they live. The goal of Plimoth Plantation's Pilgrim Village is to immerse visitors in the world of 1627 Plymouth and help them understand all aspects of the lives of its early residents. How often do genealogists research their ancestors to place them in a similar context? Do you know what dialect your ancestors spoke? What tasks made up their workdays? What differences existed between the places they emigrated from and to? It might be instructive to select an ancestor, and, as an exercise, immerse yourself in his or her world. You might be surprised at how much there is yet to learn about your forebears and, like the twenty-year-old rosebush at Plimoth Plantation, about the many anachronistic ideas about them need to be discarded.

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Coming Soon!

***The Pilgrim Migration: Immigrants to Plymouth Colony, 1620–1633* by Robert Charles Anderson**

This new hardcover volume, to be published by the end of 2004, will feature 215 biographical sketches on immigrants to Plymouth who arrived between 1620 and 1633. The profiles, which originally appeared in *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England 1620–1633*, have been revised and updated for this volume. Genealogists with New England roots will welcome this convenient — and comprehensive — biographical dictionary for early Plymouth.

For more information, watch for updates in *NEHGS eNews* and on *NewEnglandAncestors.org*, or call NEHGS Member Services toll-free at 1-888-296-3447.

For more information

• **Plimoth Plantation**: Visit Plimoth Plantation online at *www.plimoth.org*.

• **Plymouth Ancestors**: Plimoth Plantation and NEHGS are collaborating on a project to provide the most up-to-date genealogical information on the inhabitants of the Plymouth Colony in 1627. Visitors to Plimoth Plantation can learn more onsite; those unable to visit in person can visit *www.PlymouthAncestors.org*.