

Part 1: The Society of Mayflower Descendants: Who they are, where to find them, how to apply

By Alicia Crane Williams

Of all the names of the many ships that came to the new world, *Mayflower* is easily the most recognized, and the Pilgrims who came to New England on the ship *Mayflower* are among the most celebrated of American immigrants. Descent from a *Mayflower* passenger – one of the “first comers” – has long been considered a matter of pride. Today there may be as many as twenty to thirty million descendants of these Pilgrims; 26,500 of whom are currently members of the Mayflower Society.

The General Society of Mayflower Descendants, established in 1897, is the national organization of descendants of the passengers of the ship *Mayflower* that arrived in Plymouth, New England, in 1620 (note, there was *no* second voyage). Of the 102 passengers on board, there are twenty-six heads of families who have descendants (listed on the Society’s website <http://www.themayflowersociety.com/>) recognized for membership in the Mayflower Society. The head of family represents his spouse and children who also came on the ship. For example, you may join the Society under the head of family, William Mullins, who also represents his wife Alice, son Joseph, and daughter Priscilla Mullins (who married passenger John Alden); or you may join under John Alden, who also represents his wife Priscilla Mullins. An individual with more than one *Mayflower* head of family may file supplemental lineages after the initial application is completed.

Individuals join one of the fifty-two “state” societies (including the District of Columbia and the Dominion of Canada) that make up the General Society. Each sets its own fees and dues, so cost of membership will vary. You may join any state society regardless of residence, although for obvious reasons joining the state where you live provides more opportunities to participate in activities. You may also have dual memberships in two or more state societies, and annual memberships may be transferred to another state (life memberships cannot be transferred). Contact information for each state society is available on the website.

Each state society also has its own schedule of events. The Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, for example, holds three state-wide events each year: an annual meeting in the spring, a “Peregrination to Plymouth” in June, and a “Compact Day” meeting in the fall. Most societies hold Compact Day meetings to celebrate the signing of the famous “Mayflower Compact” (the contract that established how the new colony would be governed, necessitated by their having landed outside the bounds of their legal grant). Some state societies have scholarship programs for their members, such as the Massachusetts society, which also annually awards a scholarship to descendants of the Wampanoag tribe. Societies also publish newsletters for their membership, distribute educational material to schools, and have other projects. The Massachusetts Society publishes the scholarly genealogical magazine *The Mayflower Descendant*, and the New York Society holds an annual debutante ball for the benefit of their educational programs.

All members receive *The Mayflower Quarterly*, the publication of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, which includes news about the national organization, state societies, photographs, and historical and genealogical articles.

The General Society also researches and publishes the series *Mayflower Families Through Five Generations* and *Mayflower Families in Progress*, as well as various other books, including the vital records of Dennis and Raynham, Massachusetts (see the website under “Books, Insignia, and Educational Materials” for details on the available books). The *Mayflower Families* project has been ongoing for more than forty years with the goal of thoroughly researching and documenting the first five generations of descendants of all *Mayflower* passengers. . New editions of all of these volumes are published as needed to reflect updated research, so it is important to pay attention to the edition when citing these works.

The first step in joining the Mayflower Society is to contact the state and request a Preliminary Application. You will receive information about the membership categories, requirements, application fees, and dues of that state organization. In Massachusetts, Annual and Life memberships are open to descendants who are eighteen years of age or older and Minor Life memberships are for all descendants under age eighteen. Some state societies have Junior

memberships for children.

The preliminary package will also include a “synopsis” form with instructions to fill in the names in your direct line of descent from the *Mayflower* passenger you wish to join under (no details or documentation are required at this point). The State Historian will use the synopsis to determine how much of your line has previously been filed and documented by the Society. A printable synopsis is available on the website under “Proposed Application Review Form.”

When your Preliminary Application, synopsis, and payment for the type of membership you want are received, the State Historian will send a worksheet lineage paper and instruction sheets. The worksheet will be filled in with the information that has already been documented and the instructions will tell you how to complete the rest of the paper and what documents are acceptable as proof for the line.

The lineage paper has three columns: place, date, reference. For each generation, the place and date of birth, marriage, and death must be filled in (if known) for both the line carrier and the spouse, and citations to documentation supporting each event must be listed in the reference column on the same line as the event.

Primary documentation – birth, marriage, death certificates, Bibles, wills, deeds, census, etc. (records that were made at the time of the event or by a reliable witness to the event) – is preferred whenever possible. Secondary documentation – published genealogies, histories, transcriptions, etc. – may be used (with some restrictions). Published genealogies that cite the sources for their information are preferred over those that give no sources. Unpublished typescripts and manuscripts are *not* acceptable (although, if they contain unique information relevant to the line, they may be submitted for informational use). The last three generations on each lineage paper *must* be fully documented with birth, marriage, and (as appropriate) death records for the line carrier (the applicant, applicant’s parents, and applicant’s grandparents). For the earlier generations, the rule of thumb is “the more primary documentation the better.” References to the Mayflower books noted above may be used for the first five generations on each lineage paper descending from a passenger who has been published (at this writing, all of the passengers, except John Howland, have been covered in one or the other of these series). When you have filled in your worksheet and collected your documents, you will send the worksheet and the copies of documents to the State Historian for review. If you are asked to send original documents in addition to copies, the originals will be returned to you after they have been examined. The State Historian will contact you if there are questions or if more documentation is needed.

When the State Historian is satisfied that your worksheet and documentation are complete, it will be time to prepare final lineage papers. Some states will do this for you; other states will send the forms for you to type. After your signed papers are received, the State Historian will sign and forward the papers and documents to the Historian General’s office in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where everything will be reviewed again by the Historian General and assistants. Should there be further questions, the Historian General will contact the State Historian, who will pass the questions on to you – all correspondence is channeled through the state; applicants do not contact the Historian General directly.

If the Historian General is satisfied the line is confirmed, the paper will be approved and returned to the state and you will be elected to membership. Both a State Society number and a General Society number are assigned to the paper, and finally, a photocopy of the signed and approved paper is sent to you for your files. If other members of your family wish to join the Mayflower Society using your file, they should refer to your State and General Society numbers. They will not have to duplicate the documents you have already filed.

Occasionally, a child, grandchild, or near relative of a former member of the Mayflower Society wishes to join, but is told that the lineage papers on file were not properly documented and the new applicant must now provide the missing proof. This unfortunate situation has several causes. First, documentation standards throughout the genealogical world have drastically changed in the last thirty years. Some sources that were accepted a hundred years ago are no longer acceptable. New sources are now available or are more readily accessed. Second, the General Society offices suffered a fire in 1947 that destroyed or damaged many lineage files. Some of these files were replaced from state copies, but much could not be replaced. Finally, the most egregious old practice was *not* requiring *any* documentation at all for the last three generations on each lineage paper. Therefore, a lineage filed by a child of the original member would have four undocumented generations; a lineage filed by a grandchild would have five undocumented generations; a lineage

filed by a great grandchild would have six, and so forth! By the 1970s there were lineage papers in the Society's files that had as many as eight undocumented generations.

Documentation standards today are more stringent and emphasis is placed on primary records or good secondary sources. In future columns we will explore the sources available for Mayflower genealogy and discuss the best practices to assure acceptance of your Mayflower application.

For more information on the history of the ship *Mayflower* and her passengers, see <http://www.mayflowerhistory.com/>.

Also see [Applying for membership in the Mayflower Society](#) .