

**LIFE OF FRANCIS HIGGINSON,
FIRST MINISTER IN THE
MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY,
AND AUTHOR OF "NEW
ENGLAND'S PLANTATION" (1630)**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649029457

Life of Francis Higginson, First Minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and Author of "New England's Plantation" (1630) by Thomas Wentworth Higginson

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THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

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AND AUTHOR OF "NEW
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“MAKERS OF AMERICA”

LIFE

OF

FRANCIS HIGGINSON

*FIRST MINISTER IN THE MASSACHUSETTS
BAY COLONY, AND AUTHOR OF “NEW
ENGLAND’S PLANTATION” (1630)*

BY

THOMAS WENTWORTH HIGGINSON

NEW YORK
DODD, MEAD, AND COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

1891

US 12768.1

~~117.11.12~~



The American

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University Press :
JOHN WILSON AND SON, CAMBRIDGE.

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LIFE OF FRANCIS HIGGINSON.

I.

AN ENGLISH PARSONAGE IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.

When a modern American makes a pilgrimage, as I have done, to the English village church at whose altars his ancestors once ministered, he brings away a feeling of renewed wonder at the depth of conviction which led the Puritan clergy to forsake their early homes. The exquisitely peaceful features of the English rural landscape, — the old Norman church, half ruined, and in this particular case restored by aid of the American descendants of that high-minded emigrant; the old burial-ground that surrounds it, a haunt of such peace as to make death seem doubly restful; the ancestral oaks; the rocks that soar above them; the flocks of sheep drifting noiselessly among the ancient gravestones, — all speak of such tranquillity as the eager American must cross the Atlantic to obtain. . . . What love of their convictions, what devotion to their own faith, must have been needed to drive the educated Puritan clergymen from such delicious retreats to encounter the ocean, the forest, and the Indians! — T. W. HIGGINSON: *A Larger History of the United States*.

COTTON MATHER, writing in his "Magnalia" the memoirs of more than thirty of the founders of New England, places at their head the name of Francis Higginson. After a prolonged prelude of quaint learning as to the scriptural Noah and the classical Janus, he proceeds to twine their laurels together, and

to lay them on the modest brow of the subject of his discourse, whom he places "first in a catalogue of heroes." "Without pursuing these *curiosities* any further," he says, "I will now lay before my reader the story of that worthy man; who, when 't is considered that he crossed the *sea* with a renowned *colony*, and that having seen an *old world* in *Europe*, where a flood of iniquity and calamity carried all before it, he also saw a *new world* in *America*; where he appears the first in a catalogue of heroes, and where he and his people were admitted into the *covenant* of God; whereupon a hedge of *piety* and *sanctity* continued about *that* people as long as *he* lived; may therefore be called the *Noah* or *Janus* of *New England*. This was Mr. *Francis Higginson*."¹

Thus far Cotton Mather; and in the same strain of comparison a later American historian has written: "Among the Argonauts of the first decade of New England, there was perhaps no braver or more exquisite spirit than Francis Higginson."²

Francis Higginson came of what may fairly be called, in the very best sense, a gentle lineage; for his paternal grandmother, Joane Higginson, dying a widow in the sixteenth century, bequeathed £7 a year to the poor of Berkeswell, co. Warwick, England. This fact is known by its being mentioned in the will of Joane Higginson's son, Thomas Higginson of Berkeswell, yeoman, which will was dated Nov. 29,

¹ *Magnalia Christi Americana*, ed. 1820, i. 322.

² Tyler, *History of American Literature*, i. 166.

1573, and proved Feb. 10, 1574. Joane Higginson's death must therefore have occurred as early as 1573, and probably much earlier; and the sum bequeathed by her would now, allowing for the difference in the value of money, be worth £70 (\$350) annually. She is probably the earliest person of the name to whom the present English and American families of Higginson can trace back their origin; but they may well be contented. A pious widow, thrifty enough to have this sum to bequeath, and generous enough, after providing for her own children, to leave it to the poor, is surely a satisfactory fountain-head for any family; nor has the spirit she manifested ever been wholly wanting among her descendants during more than three hundred years.

Thomas Higginson of Berkeswell, the son of Joane, left legacies to his sons Robert, Thomas, and George; to his daughters Joyce, Dorothy, Ursula, and Elizabeth. He also left legacies to his brothers Nicholas and Mr. John Higginson. The prefix Mr. or Magister was at that period almost wholly confined to persons in holy orders, and this makes it practically certain that this brother was a clergyman. The only English clergyman bearing these names at that period, as appears from the records of the two universities Oxford and Cambridge, was the Rev. John Higginson, who was of Jesus College, Cambridge, B.A. 1564-5 and M.A. 1568. He was instituted to the Perpetual Vicarage of Claybrooke, Jan. 23, 1571-2, as appears by