

**COLLECTIONS CONCERNING THE
EARLY HISTORY OF THE
FOUNDERS OF NEW PLYMOUTH,
THE FIRST COLONISTS OF NEW
ENGLAND**

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Collections concerning the early history of the founders of New Plymouth, the first colonists of New England by Joseph Hunter

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BY
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1849.

THE FIRST COLONISTS

OF

NEW ENGLAND.

GOVERNOR HUTCHINSON, writing in 1767, when he is about to give an account of the arrival of the first company of English emigrants on the shores of New England, at the point where is now the town of New Plymouth, remarks, that "the settlement of this colony occasioned the settlement of Massachusetts Bay, which was the source of all the other colonies in New England. Virginia was in a dying state, and seemed to revive and flourish from the example of New England;" and he further says: "I am not preserving from oblivion the names of heroes whose chief merit is the overthrow of cities, provinces, and empires, but the names of the founders of a flourishing town and colony, if not of the whole British Empire in America."²²

As time has passed on, the interest about these fathers of the Anglo-American race has gathered strength. The latest English traveller who has given us the result of his observations among the people of New England, describes with some minuteness the memorials of this event which he found at New Plymouth; the relics which are exhibited of these "Pilgrim-fathers," as they are affectionately called, and the traditions which are

* The History of the Province of Massachusetts Bay, &c. 8vo, Boston, 1767, p. 462.

cherished respecting them ; and, having done so, he observes—
“ When we consider the grandeur of the results which have been realized in the interval of 225 years since the *May Flower* sailed into Plymouth Harbour, how in that period a nation of twenty millions of souls has sprung into existence and peopled a vast continent, and covered it with cities and churches, schools, colleges, and railroads, and filled its rivers and ports with steamboats and shipping—we regard the pilgrim relics with that kind of veneration which trivial objects usually derive from high antiquity alone. For we measure time not by the number of arithmetical figures representing years or centuries, but by the importance of a long series of events which strike the imagination.”*

I leave to others to dilate on the magnitude of this event, of which it is *the beginning only* that I have to treat—the great things accomplished, and the greater things to be discerned in the distant future, both in the new nation and new order of society in the country itself, and in the reaction upon the state of Europe: not proposing to treat the subject in a philosophic but in an antiquarian spirit; to be a mere collector of facts from sources seldom visited, and occasionally to intermix conjectures, which the reader will receive or reject according to his own judgment on the apparent probability attending them. My business with these founders of New England relates to the time before they abandoned their native country to gain that freedom of religious profession which they could not enjoy at home. When they have set their feet on the American shore I have done with them; and even that part of their intermediate history, while they were living

* *A Second Visit to the United States of North America.* By Sir Charles Lyell, 12mo. 1849, vol. i, p. 117.

in Holland, does not fall within the scope of my design. It is to shew who and what the leaders of this enterprise were *while they lived in England*, to trace the few whom it is possible to trace, to their homes; but especially BREWSTER and BRADFORD, the Aaron and Moses of the enterprise, who were originally neighbours and friends in a little obscure district of England.

The subject has, therefore, an English as well as an American interest; but it is to America that I must chiefly look for the toleration of such minute inquiry, where the "first comers" are regarded with a veneration almost superstitious, as if one day, like the founders of more ancient states and cities, they are to be worshipped with honours little less than divine.

The accounts which are given by all later writers of the origin of this settlement are substantially the same; and they must needs be so since they are all derived from one source, no later writer having entered upon the course of inquiry on which we are about to enter, or made any material additions to the information which they drew from that source. That source, however, is most eminently deserving of the respect which has been paid to it; and probably no modern colony, and certainly no ancient state, has such authentic and minute information of all events in their earliest history. They are Commentaries, written by Bradford himself, the most active of the persons engaged in the enterprise, and one who for a series of years was annually elected to the office of governor of the new colony; a man who had enjoyed, indeed, few advantages of education, differing in this from his colleague Brewster, but possessed of excellent sense, and master of a simple, natural eloquence. He ought to take his place amongst English authors; his works, so they may be called, being these: 1. *Some Account of the Religious Community of*

which he was a member, before its removal to Holland in 1608, and from thence to its greater removal to the wilds of America in 1620. 2. A Diary of Occurrences during the first year after their landing, in which Edward Winslow, another of the emigrants, had a share with him. 3. A Dialogue between Young People of the Colony and Ancient People, in which the latter give an account of the principles and the grounds of those principles, out of which the state of things arose which determined the members of this church or community to abandon their native land. 4. A Biographical Account of William Brewster, who, more than any other person, is to be regarded as the founder of the community, and who administered the ecclesiastical affairs, while the civil were so ably conducted by Bradford.

These are the original authorities for the primeval history of the Plymouth colony: they are almost the only authorities for anything relating to it previously to the actual landing of the first company of pilgrims. The history of these writings is something curious. The second of them was printed in England as early as 1622; but the others remained in manuscript, and while in that state have been used most liberally by a succession of writers. First, by Bradford's nephew, Nathaniel Morton, in his valuable work entitled 'New-England's Memorial,' published in 1667; again by Prince,* and afterwards by Hutchinson, who was Governor in the reign of George the Third of the colony of Massachusetts Bay, a later settlement, to which Plymouth was united in 1692. In one or other of

* Thomas Prince, whose 'Chronological History of New England' was printed at Boston in 1736. He appears to have been acquainted with writings of Bradford not now known to be in existence: see his preface, p. vi. So dangerous it is to allow valuable writings to remain in single copies.

the published writings of these persons, nearly the whole of Bradford's facts are to be found. But a higher justice has lately been done to him by the publication of his writings in an entire form. This service to historical literature has been rendered by a gentleman of Boston, in New England, Mr. Alexander Young, who has collected in the same volume other early tracts, and a few letters and other memorials of Bradford and the first settlers, and has illustrated the whole with many very valuable notes.*

It would seem by this enumeration of the literary remains of Bradford, that he would have left little to be told for the satisfaction of a reasonable curiosity. But it is otherwise. Bradford deals far too much in general statements. He avoids, indeed, in the most tantalizing manner, to give us dates or names of persons or places. He speaks of the church of which he was a member, but he nowhere tells us where it was situated, or rather where it held its meetings for discipline and worship. He speaks of the persecutions of the persons composing it in terms of such energy, that we might think they approached in atrocity to the persecutions of the Protestants in the days of Queen Mary; but he rarely points out a sufferer by name, he points out no particular oppressor, he gives no date of any one act of this kind, nor any particular account of any distinct act of oppression which drove them from their homes. This is unfortunate on an historical account. But I must think that he ought to have supported his severe remarks by particular instances, which would now admit of examination and proof. But while I write thus, I am fully sensible of the value of these historical remains, and shall be

* *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers of the Colony of Plymouth from 1602 to 1625, &c.* Boston, 8vo. 1844. Second Edition.

greatly indebted to them as we proceed. They are most authentic and valuable, *as far as they go*.

A most important passage in Governor Bradford's history of the Church or Religious Community,—I use the terms indifferently,—illustrates this want of particularity :

“Several religious people near the joining borders of Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, and Yorkshire, finding their pious ministers urged with subscription, or silenced, and the people greatly vexed with the commissary courts, apparitors, and pursuivants, which they had borne sundry years with much patience, till they were occasioned, by the continuance and increase of these troubles and other means, to see further into these things by the light of the Word of God: how that not only the ceremonies were unlawful, but that the lordly and tyrannous power of the prelates, who would, contrary to the freedom of the Gospel and the consciences of men, and by their compulsive power, make a profane mixture of things and persons in divine worship; that their officers, courts, and canons were unlawful; being such as have no warrant in the Word of God, but the same that were used in Popery, and still retained. Upon which the people shake off this yoke of anti-Christian bondage, and, as the Lord's free people, form themselves by covenant into a Church-state, to walk in all his ways made known or to be made known to them, according to their best endeavours, whatever it cost them.”

Now, who specifically were these “religious people,” for they were the true beginners of the New England colony? What district is specifically meant by “near the joining borders of Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire, and Yorkshire?”—To this second question an explicit answer will now be given. To the first an answer will be given, though but an incomplete