

The Next Debate Over Remembrance?



Wampanoag Homesite at Plimoth Plantation, September 2017. Photo by Francis J. Bremer.

Recent controversy over the memorialization of Confederates and demands that we remove statues and change street and building names has prompted considerable discussion of how we remember and reflect on the past, and not just that of the Civil War. Protestors recently splattered red paint on the statue of Theodore Roosevelt that stands outside New York's Museum of Natural History, castigating the former president as a symbol of "patriarchy, white supremacy, and settler-colonialism." The debate has come to include figures from our colonial past. In September the Portland, Maine, City Council voted to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day. In New York City there is discussion of renaming

Columbus Circle and removing the statue of the Italian explorer. In New Mexico protests continue over the commemoration of the conquistador Don Juan de Onate, while in California activists have repeatedly defaced statues of the Franciscan friar Junipero Serra.

Thus far there has been little questioning of memorials dealing with seventeenth-century New England, though there has been some controversy in Connecticut, the scene of the Pequot War. The statue of John Mason, the leader of the colonial forces against the Natives, once seated atop the site of the Mystic Fort massacre in the Pequot War, was removed from that perch in the 1990s following Indian protest. In Massachusetts the National Day of Mourning, a Native counterpoint to the celebration of Thanksgiving, has been an annual event since 1970. But for the most part, New Englanders' historical attention has focused on Revolutionary War history, and the seventeenth century has faded from public cultural consciousness. That is likely to change over the next decade and more as we record the 400th anniversary of key events in the settlement of the region. It is highly likely that this will prompt debates about how those events were memorialized in the past and how we should remember them moving forward. As we prepare for such discussions, those of us who are interested in the colonial past might remind ourselves of the American Historical Association's recent statement on the topic:

Historians and others will continue to disagree about the meanings and implications of events and the appropriate commemoration of those events. The AHA encourages such discussions in publications, in other venues of scholarship and teaching, and more broadly in popular culture; historical scholarship itself is a conversation rooted in evidence and disciplinary standards.

To plan for the observation of the events central to the history of seventeenth-century New England, a partnership of organizations and individuals was formed as New England Beginnings in 2015. In contrast to efforts to promote tourism through birthday celebrations loosely linked to the past, the goals of New England Beginnings are to encourage and promote activities that mark the various cultures that shaped early New England. Two words in the stated goals are critical. The partnership, which includes Native spokespeople, intends to commemorate rather than celebrate, and to address the various cultures that played a role in shaping the region. The activities the partners are focused on are designed to 1) tell the stories of the region in the seventeenth century to a wide, general public audience, and 2) enhance accessibility of resources for future scholarship in the field. As currently constituted, the group consists of twenty-six American institutions and programs, six international partners, six ancestry institutions, and forty-one individuals, a list of which follows this essay.



Wampanoag Homesite at Plimoth Plantation, September 2017. Photo by Francis J. Bremer.

New England Beginnings is not financed by any group. It is a cooperative partnership largely consisting of institutions that are under-staffed and under-funded but that have a commitment to recognizing the good and bad in our past—to paint a portrait that includes, as the English puritan Oliver Cromwell put it, “warts and all.” The members seek to prompt discussion of possible programs, to bring together members that can produce programs, and to promote those efforts. The results of such efforts are respected by the full range of partners while not being seen as representative of the views of all the partners.

With over two years to go before the arrival of the Pilgrims is commemorated, New England Beginnings has already begun to see some results. In order to enhance resources for further scholarship, the Colonial Society of Massachusetts and the New England Historic Genealogical Society have assembled a team of Ken Minkema, Jeremy Bangs, Paula Peters, and me to produce a new, online edition of William Bradford’s *Of Plimoth Plantation*, with annotation including Native perspectives. The Massachusetts Historical Society has placed the early volumes of the Winthrop Papers online in a searchable form. The Congregational Library and Archives is continuing to add New England church records to its successful “Hidden Histories” project.

There have also been a variety of partner efforts to bring the latest understanding of early New England to a non-scholarly audience. The Congregational Library and Archives took the lead in producing a phone and tablet app, “Puritan Boston Tests Democracy,” with information on the people, places, and events central to the history of seventeenth-century Boston and a map that can allow the app to serve as a tour guide. New England Beginnings’ most ambitious activity is its “Guest Scholars Program.” Twenty-five experts on the cultures of early New England have offered to provide video-conferenced lectures to high school classes for \$100 an “appearance” and to other groups for \$200. The experts include David D. Hall, Ashley Bissonnette, Linford Fisher, Adrian Weimer, Paula Peters, David Silverman, and Abram Van Engen, and they are prepared to speak on topics including religion, Native life, and society and politics. Full details on these and other programs

of interest can be found on the partnership's [website](#).



Plimoth Plantation, September 2017. Photo by Francis J. Bremer.

As we get closer to the events to be commemorated, exhibits are planned to illustrate the story of seventeenth-century New England. Jeremy Bangs, the director of the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, is developing an exhibit on the intellectual world of the Pilgrims in conjunction with the Leiden Municipal Museum, De Lakenhal. The exhibit will open in the Netherlands and then come to the States. Called "Intellectual Baggage," it will examine the Pilgrims' world of ideas as represented by the books in the library lists found in their probate inventories. The plan is to consider the ways ideas influenced the form of their society, their concept of interaction with the Natives, and particularly any influences their exile period in Leiden might have had on their colony. At least fifty books will be part of the exhibit, covering the broad range of topics that the inventories reveal—history, geography, exegesis, sermons, news reports, military tactics, botany, etc. There will also be several Leiden still-life paintings, maps, and engravings relevant to the topic. Some other objects mentioned in the inventories, such as tools, clothing, and household objects, will also be part of the exhibit.

Plans are underway for the partnership to host a panel discussion next fall on how we reflect on, remember, and memorialize the past, particularly the early history of New England. The panel will include public and academic historians, and Native and non-Native members. Details will be available on the partnership website as we get closer to the event. Other panels and presentations are anticipated to engage interested individuals in discussion of the centrality of various Native peoples to the history of New England, aspects of the colonial social order, the role of puritanism, the influence of early New England on the region's Revolutionary leadership, and other topics. It will be important to work with educators to examine how a nuanced understanding of the cultures of the region in the seventeenth century can be incorporated into crowded secondary school curricula.

The challenges facing those of us revisiting the seventeenth century are considerable. One of these is to provide a balanced and accurate understanding of the colonists and their legacy. A little less than 100 years ago, in the aftermath of the tercentenary of the founding of Massachusetts, Samuel Eliot Morison lamented that despite his efforts and those of his Harvard colleague Kenneth Murdock, New England's puritan settlers were still misunderstood. Outside the academy, the stereotypes that had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries still predominated. Early New England continued to be viewed as a land of narrow-minded, steeple-hatted religious bigots with poor fashion sense who persecuted dissenters and executed innocents as witches.

Within academia, in the mid-twentieth century Perry Miller, followed by Edmund S. Morgan and a host of scholars influenced by them such as Timothy H. Breen, Stephen Foster, David D. Hall, Robert Middlekauff, and Michael McGiffert sought to understand the puritans in terms of what they said about themselves. These scholars demonstrated an understanding of the religious beliefs central to the puritans. More recently, a younger generation of scholars (many represented in *New England Beginnings*) have transformed how early New England and its people are understood within academic circles. Abram Van Engen, Adrian Weimer, and Michael Winship have enriched our understanding of the puritan settlers. Kate Grandjean, Linford Fisher, Andrew Lipman, Sarah Rivett, David Silverman, and others have helped us understand how deeply colonizers were embedded in a dynamic world of Native as well as transatlantic politics and ideas.

We no longer ignore the "warts." But others make them the only story. Shaped by a political climate in which evangelicals push what I and many others see as an illiberal political and social agenda, and unable or unwilling to distinguish faith from fanaticism and religious belief from superstition, non-specialists have largely written puritanism out of America's history except as an explanation for episodes such as persecution of dissent, the execution of witches, extreme hostility to Native peoples, and the practice of slavery. The partnership hopes the upcoming anniversaries can be an occasion for new and more nuanced dialogue in the field.

The challenges facing historians are not limited to our discussions with one another. It is incumbent on us to convey our views to a general audience. And there we are challenged by popular views and the politicization of our past. Many, if not most, Americans accept the negative stereotypes of puritan New England as fact. I have been involved in public programs where the interest in the puritans is focused on learning how much more enlightened we are. Focusing only on ways in which the puritans did not live up to modern ideals can become the basis for attacks on any memorialization of them.



Plimoth Plantation, September 2017. Photo by Francis J. Bremer.

On the other hand, there are those who still cling to the filio-pietistic embrace of the puritans and their values that were expressed by politicians at Plymouth's Forefathers Day celebrations in the nineteenth century. Many of these individuals react strongly to any suggestion that their heroes were imperfect. If I had any doubts about the challenge for the New England Beginnings partnership, they were dispelled after publication of an Associated Press article in December 2016 that discussed the group, its goals, and its programs. The article or portions of it ran in well over 100 papers in this country and abroad. The responses it prompted in e-mails to the partnership website and comments on newspaper websites are instructive. They included

- "Liberal army assault continues unabated. The only way to stop liberals from their agenda is to treat this as a war and they are the enemy."
- "To conquer a people, it's inherently important to help them forget where they came from by destroying their history. Plain, simple, globalization goal."
- "These are not historians. These are leftist revisionists who boast about Greek, Mongol, Roman and Ottoman empire conquest while railing on American conquest. Their only goal is to throw fuel onto the fire of various grievance communities and put far-left politicians in power."
- "The story will be, no doubt, shedding 'new' light on how White People screwed over everybody. It started with Columbus, and will no doubt end when liberals get tired of crapping on White People."



Francis J. Bremer at Plimoth Plantation, September 2017. Photo by Barbara A. Bremer.

It should be possible to examine ways in which the puritan legacy was both positive and negative. But we also need to find a way to bring into the dialogue the extreme defenders and foes of the early colonists.

Much of what I have been discussing has focused on the puritans, but they represented only one of the cultures that shaped New England. Equally important is an understanding of the region's various Native peoples and traditions. The hope is that as the partnership grows, it will include more Indigenous voices. Just as puritan New England should not be understood as Boston writ large, so the Wampanoag are not representative of all regional Native Americans. Just as we should tell a broad story of puritan New England, we should seek to identify the variations within the broader themes. And I hope that the Indigenous partners in New England Beginnings will develop programs that discuss the beliefs and practices of their ancestors that have been passed down to the present and that tell the story of how they were victimized by the European expansion into the Americas and New England. This is the mission of the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbor, Maine, where the history and culture of Maine's Native people, the Wabanaki, are showcased through changing exhibitions, special events, teacher workshops, archaeology field schools and craft workshops for children and adults. Similar programs are provided by the Tomaquag Museum, a New England Beginnings partner that is dedicated to promoting dialogue on Indigenous history, culture, arts, and Mother Earth as well as Native issues of today. An excellent example of this type of program is the traveling exhibit "Our Story: 400 Years of Wampanoag History." Initiated before the formation of New England Beginnings and not a project of our partnership, the exhibit was produced by Wampanoag tribal member Paula Peters through her company SmokeSignals and with the support of the Indian Spiritual and Cultural Training Council and the Plymouth 400, Inc.

Discussion of how we remember and memorialize the past will certainly not fade in the coming years or decades. While it provides a challenge to all of us who study the colonial period, it also offers us an opportunity to tell the stories we are committed to studying and teaching.

The New England Beginnings partnership:

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Partner Institutions

[Abbe Museum](#)

[American Antiquarian Society](#)

[Boston Public Library](#)

[Colonial Society of Massachusetts](#)

[Commonwealth of Massachusetts Commission on Indian Affairs](#)

[Congregational Library and Archives](#)

[Fairbanks House Museum](#)

[Harvard University Libraries Colonial North American Project](#)

[Historic Burying Grounds Initiative](#)

[Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University](#)

Marblehead Architectural Heritage

[Massachusetts Archives and Commonwealth Museum](#)

[New England Historic Genealogical Society](#)

[New England Quarterly](#)

[Old South Meeting House](#)

[Partnership of Historic Bostons](#)

[Paul Revere Memorial Association](#)

[Peabody Essex Museum](#)

[Pilgrim Hall Museum](#)

Pilgrim Society

[Plymouth Antiquarian Society](#)

[Salem in 1630: Pioneer Village](#)

The Massachuset-Ponkapoag Tribal Council

[The Yale Indian Papers Project](#)

[Tomaquag Museum](#)

[Webb-Deane-Stevens Museum](#)

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Ancestry Organizations

[General Society of Mayflower Descendants](#)

[The Winthrop Society](#)

[Endecott-Endicott Family Association](#)

[National Society of Colonial Dames-Massachusetts](#)

[The Alden Kindred of America](#)

[Pilgrim John Howland Society](#)

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International Partners

[Dissenting Experience](#)

[Gateway to Early Modern Manuscript Sermons](#)

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[Leiden American Pilgrim Museum](#)

[National Museum of Bermuda](#)

[University of East Anglia History Department](#)

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Robert Allison, Suffolk University

Robert Charles Anderson, independent scholar

Emerson Baker, Salem State University

James Baker, independent scholar

Peggy Baker, independent scholar

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