

Sisters woman traces her descent to the Mayflower

By Jim Cornelius, News Editor

Thanksgiving has a little extra resonance for Susan Wilson of Sisters.

Wilson recently had it officially confirmed that she is a descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims. And not just any Pilgrim either: Part of her father's line in America started with William Bradford, who served as governor of the Plymouth colony for 30 years.

Bradford also left journals that provide much of what we know of the founding of the early colony in what would become Massachusetts.

Wilson moved to Sisters two years ago from Portland, after vacationing here for many years. She grew up in Michigan.

"Most of my relatives are there and they go way back," she said.

Her father had always told her that she descended from William Bradford — but it remained family lore until Wilson took a vacation to Cape Cod (Plymouth is on the northern landward base of the Cape). She became intrigued, and contacted the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, commonly called The Mayflower Society, to see what she might learn.

Wilson put in an application, documenting her family history back to Robert Bradford, who emigrated from Massachusetts to Michigan as a farmer. The Mayflower Society confirmed that Wilson is, indeed, a descendant of the key Pilgrim leader.



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Wilson noted that she was raised a Congregationalist, which is the church of the Pilgrims, and did work at Harvard, the university founded by the early Congregationalist settlers. That gave nailing down her heritage a special resonance.

"I got to see my heritage come full circle," she said. "It was very meaningful. I felt very proud to be part of that — just that special connection."

Wilson has visited the Plymouth graveyard where her ancestors are buried. But her connection with her personal past is not dead. She believes strongly in the ideals of religious liberty that motivated the Pilgrims to risk all in a terrible voyage across the Atlantic to a New World.

She reflected that, "It's a good thing to think about when Thanksgiving comes around — what it's really all about."

Who was William Bradford?

By Jim Cornelius, News Editor

Susan Wilson's many-times-great-grandfather was a remarkable man, whose life was scarred by tragedy, yet who played a critical role in the establishment of English settlement in North America.

William Bradford was born in 1590 in Austerfield, Yorkshire. His father died when he was barely a year old; his grandfather took him in, but died when he was 6, followed by his mother a year later. He and his orphaned sister were raised by an uncle, Robert Bradford.

In his teens, Bradford was drawn to the Separatist religious movement of the era. Puritan believers, who had serious issues with the Church of England, were repressed, and many migrated to Holland in search of religious toleration. Bradford sailed to Amsterdam in 1608 and thence moved with his church to Leiden, Holland. In 1613, he married Dorothy May, another English separatist refugee in Holland.

Bradford became a silk weaver in Holland, though economic opportunity was not as great there as the migrants had hoped. In 1620, at the age of 30, Bradford determined to join a company of his fellow churchmen who planned to sail to North America, sponsored by commercial investors known as Merchant Adventurers. Dorothy accompanied him, but they left their 3- or 4-year-old son behind to spare him the rigors of the Atlantic crossing.

The crossing on the Mayflower was hellish, lasting two months before landfall at Cape Cod in September 1620. The company spent another month on board sailing about the area exploring for a place to settle. While exploratory parties searched for a site, tragedy struck again. Bradford's wife, Dorothy, fell overboard from the Mayflower and, weighted down by her woolen skirts and layers of petticoats, she drowned.

The Pilgrims faced a winter no less hellish than the crossing. Forty-five out of the 102 immigrants died of various illnesses during that first winter. The tiny colony's governor, John Carver, died in April 1621, and Bradford was elected governor to succeed him. It was a post he would hold for three decades — evidence of the esteem in which his people held him.

Bradford would preside over a three-day harvest feast in the fall of 1621 (see related story, page 18), celebrating the bounty of the Pilgrims' first successful crops. Gradually the precarious colony stabilized and began to grow with new immigrants.

In 1623, Bradford married the widow Alice Southworth, with whom he had three children — all of whom, remarkably for the time, survived into adulthood.

Bradford ably presided over the colony, conducting a generally peaceful foreign policy with the local Wampanoag tribes, dealing with sometimes-fractious neighboring colonies that sprang up quickly along the New England coast.

The colonists were required by contract to produce revenue for their backers among the Merchant Adventurers. The fur trade, specifically in beaver pelts, became Plymouth's economic lifeline, launching the English settlers into the trade that would be a primary economic engine through the first 250 years of the exploration and settlement of North America.

In 1630, Bradford began writing a history of the Plymouth Colony, which would be published as "On Plymouth Plantation." It was and remains the critical source for the early history of the colony.

Bradford fell ill in the winter of 1656-57 and died on May 9, 1657, at the age of 68. Thus ended the remarkable life of one of the key figures in early American history.

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