



**A WOMAN OF VALOR:
ELIZABETH WARREN OF PLYMOUTH COLONY**
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*"A woman of valor, who can find? Far beyond pearls is her value...
Give her the fruit of her hands, and she will be praised at the gates by her very own deeds."*
Proverbs 31:10

The "Pilgrim Mothers" are mysteries. These intrepid women of 17th century Plymouth Colony are known by their husbands and known by their children. Their own lives, however, are seen only in glimpses, pale images reflected off the activities of the families which revolved around them. The women themselves are almost invisible.

While the court records of Plymouth Colony reveal much about the daily activities of the law-abiding men of the Colony, they tell us little about the women (except for those few women who broke the law). There was, in fact, no officially recognized role for the law-abiding married woman. The activities and contributions of those women, although vital to the survival and success of the Colony, are nowhere registered or officially acknowledged.

According to the accepted legal convention of the times, all married women, even those conducting business independently, were regarded as representatives of their husbands. Only widows could be legally recognized as agents in their own right. Very few widows availed themselves of the privileges and the responsibilities that such independent status would entail.

One Pilgrim woman, however, breaks through the patriarchal conventions of 17th century society. By the longevity of her widowhood and by the independence of her actions, Elizabeth Warren emerges from the collective category of "Pilgrim Mother" as a highly individual woman.

Elizabeth Warren appears full-grown on the shores of American history. Nothing is known of her English background, apart from her marriage to Richard Warren. Richard was one of the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower*, that sailed into Plymouth Harbor in December 1620.

Many of the *Mayflower* passengers traveled as families. Some families, however, with many young children or other family responsibilities, or those thought (in Pilgrim William Bradford's words) "most unfit to bear the brunt of this hard adventure," separated. The men sailed in 1620 and the women and children delayed their sailing, planning on joining their menfolk after the Colony was established. Richard Warren was among the men who sailed alone in 1620.

According to family tradition, Richard Warren brought with him on the *Mayflower* a particularly treasured (and very portable) family possession - a large linen damask napkin, woven in the Netherlands c.1600, now on display at Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts.

The napkin's woven design forms horizontal bands. One band shows a series of symbols – maces encircled by laurel branches and flanked by winged cherubs -- representing the city of Amsterdam, with the words "Amster Dam" appearing beneath each symbol. Another band shows the city with houses, churches and canal bridges. The harbor below has rows of small boats with festive figures that appear to be dancing among barrels and boxes on the near shore.

The Warren family was separated for three years. One small ship, the *Fortune*, arrived in Plymouth in 1621 carrying a number of "lusty young men, and many of them wild enough" to supplement the

fledgling Colony's manpower. It was not until 1623 that two ships, the *Anne* and the *Little James*, arrived in Plymouth carrying 80-some new immigrants to Plymouth Colony, including members of the separated families. Among them were Fear and Patience Brewster, the daughters of *Mayflower* passengers William and Mary Brewster, as well as Samuel Fuller's wife Bridget. Francis Cooke, who had voyaged on the *Mayflower* with his teenage son John, was joined by his wife, Hester, and their three younger children Jane, Jacob and Hester. Richard Warren was reunited by his wife Elizabeth and the five Warren daughters, Mary, Anna, Sarah, Elizabeth and Abigail.

The Warrens joined in the life of the small but growing agricultural community : Richard would have played a role in public affairs and worked the fields. Elizabeth would have run the large household that included not only the immediate family but also their farm workers and hired help. On occasion, she would have joined Richard in the fields. The Warren home would have been small and modestly furnished.

Very little furniture survives from the early years of Plymouth Colony. Most pieces were simple and sturdy, suited to life in a frontier community. The Warren "joint stool," so-named for its joined mortise-and-tenon construction, would have been used both as seating furniture and as a table. The Warren stool is now in the collections of Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Two sons were born to the Warrens after Elizabeth's 1623 arrival in Plymouth Colony. Their birth dates are not recorded but evidence of their presence can be found in the "1627 Division of Cattle." In 1627, the Colony's livestock, formerly held in common, was divided among the Colony's residents. Every person living in Plymouth in 1627 was assigned to a "Lot," generally arranged by family group, and the name of every resident was individually recorded in *Plymouth Colony Records Volume I*. Listed there we find not only Richard and Elizabeth and their five daughters, but also the names of their two young sons, Nathaniel and Joseph Warren.

Richard Warren died in 1628. Elizabeth, left a widow with 7 children (five young women, ranging from early teens to probably early twenties, and two small boys under the age of 5), never remarried. Elizabeth outlived her husband Richard by 45 years.

Unlike the majority of Plymouth Colony women, Elizabeth Warren's name appears regularly in the records of Plymouth Colony during the long period of her widowhood. She appears first as paying the taxes owed by all heads of household. She appears next as executor of her husband's estate. Elizabeth then appears as one of the Plymouth Colony "Purchasers." In 1626, 53 (male) citizens of Plymouth Colony agreed to underwrite some of the Colony's debt in a complicated arrangement with its financial backers. Richard Warren was one of the original 1626 Purchasers. The list of the names of the Purchasers did not appear in the Plymouth Colony Records, however, until several years had passed. During that time, Richard Warren had died. In a startling break with tradition, the list of Purchasers does not contain the name of Richard Warren but, instead, "Elizabeth Warren, widow." The Court felt it necessary to explain this unprecedented move, noting that Elizabeth was listed in Richard's stead because Richard, "dying before he had performed the bargain, the said Elizabeth performed the same after his decease."

In 1635, Elizabeth Warren appears in the Records of Plymouth Colony in a totally new role. No longer seen as acting to fulfill the obligations of her long-deceased husband Richard, Elizabeth now enters the recorded life of the Colony as a totally independent agent. We have not only a court case involving Elizabeth, we hear an echo of her actual words.

Elizabeth brought her servant Thomas Williams before the Court for "speaking profane & blasphemous speeches against the majesty of God." In a disagreement between mistress and servant, Elizabeth Warren had exhorted Thomas Williams "to fear God and do his duty. He answered, he neither feared God, nor the devil." Although Governor William Bradford advocated "bodily punishment," the judgment of the Court was that a reproof was sufficient, Williams having "spoken in passion and distemper," and making "humble acknowledgment of his offense." Elizabeth's activities continue to be documented to an unusual extent in the Records of Plymouth Colony. In the late 1630s, she appears in the Records deeding land from the Warren holdings in

Plymouth's Eel River Valley to her sons-in-law.

The Warren daughters had matured and married: Mary to *Anne* passenger Robert Bartlett, Anna to Thomas Little, Sarah to *Mayflower* passenger John Cooke, Elizabeth to Richard Church and Abigail to Anthony Snow. Relations within the large extended family seemed amicable.

In 1652, however, trouble suddenly loomed! Elizabeth's deeds to her sons-in-law, deeds that had been executed 15 years previously, were challenged by persons unnamed. The *Plymouth Colony Records* report a petition brought by Elizabeth's son-in-law Robert Bartlett asking for clarification of Elizabeth's right to deed land because "sundry speeches have passed from some who pretend themselves to be the sole and right heirs unto the lands on which the said Robert Bartlett now liveth, at the Eel River, in the township of Plymouth, which he, the said Robert, had bestowed on him by his mother-in-law Mistress Elizabeth Warren."

The Court decided, unequivocally, in Elizabeth's favor, finding that she had the power to give the land, since she had been "by an order of Court bearing date March the 7th, 1637, and other acts of the Court before, invested into the state and condition of a Purchaser." The Court once again ratified and confirmed her status as a Purchaser and specifically ruled that Elizabeth Warren had the right to dispose of her lands, including the gifts of land she had made to her sons-in-law.

Even this clear-cut Court ruling was insufficient to settle the quarrel. And as the dispute continued, the identity of those "who pretend themselves to be the sole and right heirs" was revealed to be Elizabeth's own son Nathaniel Warren and his grandmother-in-law Jane Collier.

Nathaniel, now married and in his mid-to-late 20s, claimed that **he** "hath right unto as heir unto the lands of Mr. Richard Warren, deceased." The two sides in the quarrel agreed to submit the argument to arbitration, each choosing 2 members to sit on the 4-man arbitration panel. Elizabeth Warren chose William Bradford and Thomas Willett. Nathaniel Warren chose Thomas Prence and Myles Standish.

The arbitration panel came swiftly to its unanimous conclusion. Nathaniel Warren received an acknowledgment of his right to share in the Warren lands. The panel confirmed what had never seemed to be in doubt, namely that Nathaniel could continue to hold the land he currently possessed. Nathaniel was also granted 2/3 of the Warren "Purchase Lands" which had not as yet been assigned and possession, after Elizabeth's death, of 3 acres of land near his current holdings.

The major finding of the arbitration panel, however, must have come as a severe shock to young Nathaniel! The expected outcome by law and by custom would certainly have favored Elizabeth's son. But, far from vindicating his patriarchal claims, the panel issued a stunning and resounding confirmation of Elizabeth's status as head of her household and of her authority to act as an independent agent. The panel not only found that she "shall enjoy all the rest of her lands and all of them to whom she hath already at any time heretofore disposed any part thereof by gift, sale or otherwise, or shall hereafter do the same, to them and their heirs for ever without any trouble or molestation" but severely rapped Nathaniel's unfilial knuckles.

The Court concluded by bidding Nathaniel to

forever cease all other or further claims, suits, questions, or any molestations or disturbance at any time hereafter concerning the premises, but that his said mother and all her children, or any other to whom she has any way disposed any lands or shall hereafter do the same, but that they may quietly and peaceably possess and enjoy the same.

Elizabeth Warren seems, indeed, to have quietly and peaceably enjoyed the remainder of her days. When she died in 1673, this remarkable woman received the unprecedented but well-earned tribute of a eulogy in the Records of Plymouth Colony

Mistress Elizabeth Warren, an aged widow, aged above 90 years, deceased on the second of October, 1673. Who, having lived a godly life, came to her grave as a shock of corn fully ripe.