



### **JOHN, ELLEN & JOHN (2) BILLINGTON: MAYFLOWER PASSENGERS**

"The names of those which came over first, in the year 1620, and were by the blessing of God the first beginners and in a sort the foundation of all the Plantations and Colonies in New England; and their families..."

"John Billington and Ellen his wife, and two sons, John and Francis."

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed.

Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 441-3.

"The fifth day [of December, 1620] we, through God's mercy, escaped a great danger by the foolishness of a boy, one of ...Billington's sons, who, in his father's absence, had got gunpowder, and had shot off a piece or two, and made squibs; but there being a fowling-piece charged in his father's cabin, shot her off in the cabin; there being a little barrel of [gun] powder half full, scattered in and about the cabin, the fire being within four foot of the bed between the decks, and many flints and iron things about the cabin, and many people about the fire; and yet, by God's mercy, no harm done."

Mourt's Relation, ed. Jordan D. Fiore (Plymouth, Mass.:

Plymouth Rock Foundation), 1985, p. 27.

### **JOHN BILLINGTON (THE ELDER): SIGNER OF THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT**

"I shall ... begin with a combination made by them before they came ashore ; being the first foundation of their government in this place. Occasioned partly by the discontented and mutinous speeches that some of the strangers amongst them had let fall from them in the ship: That when they came ashore they would use their own liberty, for none had power to command them, the patent they had being for Virginia and not for New England... And partly that such an act by them done, this their condition considered, might be as firm as any patent, and in some respects more sure.

"The form was as followeth: IN THE NAME OF GOD, AMEN. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord King James, by the Grace of God of Great Britain, France and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc. Having undertaken, for the Glory of God and advancement of the Christian Faith and Honour of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the First Colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one of another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness

whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod, the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord King James, of England, France and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fifty-fourth. Anno Domini 1620."

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 75-76.

### **THE BILLINGTONS AND EARLY EXPLORATION & SETTLEMENT OF PLYMOUTH**

"Monday, the eighth day of January ... This day Francis Billington, having the week before seen from the top of a tree on a high hill a great sea [known today as Billington Sea, actually a large pond], as he thought, went with one of the master's mates to see it. They went three miles and then came to a great water, divided into two great lakes; the bigger of them five or six miles in circuit, and in it an isle of a cable length square; the other three miles in compass, in their estimation. They are fine fresh water, full of fish and fowl. A brook issues from it; it will be an excellent place for us in time. They found seven or eight Indian houses, but not lately inhabited. When they saw the houses, they were in some fear; for they were but two persons and one piece."

Mourt's Relation, ed. Jordan D. Fiore (Plymouth, Mass.: Plymouth Rock Foundation), 1985, p. 40.

"About the latter end of this month [July 1621], one John Billington (2) lost himself in the woods, and wandered up and down some five days, living on berries and what he could find. At length he light on an Indian plantation twenty miles south of this place, called Manomet ; they conveyed him further off, to Nauset among those people that had before set upon the English when they were coasting whilst the ship lay at the Cape, as is before noted. But the Governor caused him to be inquired for among the Indians, and at length Massasoit sent word where he was, and the Governor sent a shallop for him and had him delivered."

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 87-88.

"A voyage made by ten of our men to the kingdom of Nauset [Eastham on Cape Cod], to seek a boy [John Billington 2] that had lost himself in the woods: with such accidents as befell us in that voyage.

"The 11th of June [1621] we set forth, the weather being very fair. But ere we had been long at sea, there arose a storm of wind and rain, with much lightning and thunder, insomuch that a spout arose not far from us. But, God be praised, it dured not long, and we put in that night for harbor at a place called Cummaquid [Barnstable Harbor], where we had some hope to find the boy. Two savages were in the boat with us. The one was Tisquantum, our interpreter; the other Tokamahamon, a special friend. It being night before we came in, we anchored in the midst of the Bay, where we were dry at a low water. In the morning we espied savages seeking lobsters, and sent our two interpreters to speak with them, the channel being between them; where they told them what we were, and for what we were come, willing them not at all to fear us, for we would not hurt them. Their answer was, that the boy was well, but he was at Nauset...

"After sunset, Aspinet [Indian sachem] came with a great train, and brought the boy with him, one bearing him through the water. He had not less than a hundred with him; the half whereof came to the shallop side unarmed with him; the other stood aloof with their bows and arrows. There he delivered us the boy, behung with beads, and made peace with us; we bestowing a knife on him,

and likewise on another that first entertained the boy and brought him thither. So they departed from us."

Mourt's Relation, ed. Jordan D. Fiore (Plymouth, Mass.: Plymouth Rock Foundation), 1985, p. 59-61.

### **JOHN BILLINGTON (THE ELDER) & THE 1623 DIVISION OF LAND**

The 1623 Division of Land marked the end of the Pilgrims' earliest system of land held in common by all. Governor Bradford explains it in this way: "And so assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number, for that end, only for present use (but made no division for inheritance) and ranged all boys and youth under some family. This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been by any means the Governor or any other could use, and saved him a great deal of trouble, and gave far better content. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn; which before would allege weakness and inability; whom to have compelled would have been thought great tyranny and oppression."

William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 120.

Plymouth Colony Records, Deeds, &c, Vol. I 1627-1651 is the oldest record book of the Plymouth settlement. It begins with the 1623 Division of Land, recorded in the handwriting of Governor William Bradford. The lands of John Billington were among those designated as "their grounds which came first over in the May Floure, according as thier lotes were case" and described in this way "these lye on the South side of the brooke to the baywards."

### **THE BILLINGTON FAMILY & THE 1627 DIVISION OF CATTLE**

Plymouth Colony Records Vol. I also tells of the 1627 Division of Cattle:

"At a publique court held the 22th of May it was concluded by the whole Companie, that the cattell wch were the Companies, to wit, the Cowes & the Goates should be equally devided to all the psonts of the same company... so the lotts fell as followeth, thirteene psonts being pportioned to one lot...

"The seauenth lott fell to Stephen Hopkins & his companie Joyned to (2) him his wife Elizabeth Hopkins (3) Gyles Hopkins (4) Caleb Hopkins (5) Debora Hopkins (6) Nickolas Snow (7) Constance Snow (8) Willam Pallmer (9) ffrances Pallmer (10) Willm Pallmer Jnor **(11) John Billington Senor (12) Hellen Billington (13) ffrancis Billington.**

"To this lott fell A black weining Calfe to wch was aded the Calfe of this yeare to come of the black Cow, wch pveing a bull they were to keepe it vngelt 5 yeares for common vse & after to make there best of it. Nothing belongeth of thes too, for ye copanye of ye first stock: but only half ye Increase. To this lott ther fell two shee goats: which goats they posses on the like terms which others doe their cattell...

"The ninth lot fell to Richard Warren & his companie Joyned w'th him his wife (2) Elizabeth Warren (3) Nathaniell Warren (4) Joseph Warren (5) Mary Warren (6) Anna Warren (7) Sara Warren (8) Elizabeth Warren (9) Abigall Warren **(10) John Billington** (11) George Sowle (12) Mary Sowle (13) Zakariah Sowle.

"To this lott fell one of the 4 black Heyfers that came in the Jacob caled the smooth horned Heyfer and two shee goats."

## **JOHN BILLINGTON (THE ELDER): A 1626 PURCHASER**

In 1621, King James I authorized the Council for New England to plant and govern land in this area. This Council granted the Peirce Patent, confirming the Pilgrims' settlement and governance of Plymouth. Peirce and his associates, the merchant adventurers, were allotted 100 acres for each settler the Company transported. The Pilgrims had a contract with the Company stating all land and profits would accrue to the Company for 7 years at which time the assets would be divided among the shareholders. Most of the Pilgrims held some stock. The Pilgrims negotiated a more favorable contract with the Company in 1626. In 1627, 53 Plymouth freemen, known as "The Purchasers," agreed to buy out the Company over a period of years. In turn, 12 "Undertakers" (8 from Plymouth and 4 from London) agreed to pay off Plymouth's debts in return for trade benefits.

The list we have of the 1626 Purchasers comes from the Plymouth Colony Records. Because of some discrepancies in the names, it is usually thought that the list was compiled several years after the actual agreement was negotiated. The Plymouth Colony Records list simply "Billington" (no first name). John Billington was hung in 1630; it is assumed that the list was compiled after that date.

## **THE TROUBLESOME JOHN BILLINGTON**

"The first offence since our arrival is of John Billington who came on board at London, and is this month [March 1621] convented before the whole company for his contempt of the captain's lawful command with opprobrious speeches, for which he is adjudged to have his neck and heels tied together; but upon humbling himself and craving pardon, and it being the first offence, he is forgiven."

Thomas Prince's New England Chronology as reprinted in:  
Nathaniel Morton, New England's Memorial (Boston:  
Congregational Board of Publication, 1855), p. 291.

John Billington (Senior) was caught up in the 1624 Lyford and Oldham conspiracy against the leadership of Plymouth Colony:

"Thus all things seemed to go very comfortably and smoothly on amongst them, at which they did much rejoice. But this lasted not long, for both Oldham and he [Lyford] grew very perverse, and showed a spirit of great malignancy, drawing as many into faction as they could... So as there was nothing but private meetings and whisperings amongst them; they feeding themselves and others with what they should bring to pass in England by the faction of their friends there..."

Oldham was confronted with letters he had written, his response was:

"...that Billington and some others had informed him of many things and made sundry complaints, which they now denied ... for none would take his part in anything, but Billington and any whom he named denied the things and protested he wronged them and would have drawn them to such and such things which they could not consent to, though they were sometimes drawn to his meetings."

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647, ed.  
Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 147-158.

Bradford's opinion of John Billington is stated openly in a letter he wrote to Mr. Cushman on June 9, 1625: "Billington still rails against you, and threatens to arrest you, I know not wherefore; he is a knave, and so will live and die."

Governor Bradford's Letter Book as printed in the Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society for the year 1794; Volume III. Boston: 1810.

### **JOHN BILLINGTON (THE ELDER): HIS DEATH**

"And seeing it hath pleased Him to give me [William Bradford] to see thirty years completed since these beginnings, and that the great works of His providence are to be observed, I have thought it not unworthy my pains to take a view of the decreasing and increasing of these persons and such changes as hath passed over them and theirs in this thirty years...

"John Billington, after he had been here ten years, was executed for killing a man, and his eldest son died [John] before him but his second son [Francis] is alive and married and hath eight children."

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647, ed.  
Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 443-446.

Governor William Bradford's opinion of John Billington was not high. He says in a letter written June 9, 1625:

"Billington still rails against you [Cushman], and threatens to arrest you, I know not wherefore ; he is a knave, and so will live and die."

Governor William Bradford's Letter Book (Boston:  
Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, 1906), p. 13.

"This year [1630] John Billington the elder, one that came over with the first, was arraigned, and both by grand and petty jury found guilty of wilful murder, by plain and notorious evidence. And was for the same accordingly executed. This, as it was the first execution amongst them, so was it a matter of great sadness unto them. They used all due means about his trial and took the advice of Mr. Winthrop and other the ablest gentlemen in Bay of the Massachusetts, that were then newly come over, who concurred with them that he ought to die, and the land to be purged from blood. He and some of his had been often punished for miscarriages before, being one of the profanest families amongst them ; they came from London, and I know not by what friends shuffled into their company. His fact was that he waylaid a young man, one John Newcomen, about a former quarrel and shot him with a gun, whereof he died."

William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647, ed.  
Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 234.

Thomas Morton of Merrymount was no friend to the leaders of Plymouth Colony. Morton published a satirical and allegorical work, *The New English Canaan*, in 1637. In it, he speaks more kindly of Billington saying: "[Billington] that was choaked at Plimmouth after hee had played the unhappy Markes man when hee was purfued by a carelesse fellow that was new come into the Land ... Hee was beloved of many"

Thomas Morton, *The New English Canaan of Thomas Morton*  
(Boston: Prince Society, 1883), p. 216.

The event soon took on great significance for chroniclers of the Colony and details were added

which do not appear in the original records and cannot be corroborated:

"About September, in the year 1630, was one Billington executed at Plymouth for murder. When the world was first peopled, and but one family to do that, there was yet too many to live peaceably together ; so when this wilderness began first to be peopled by the English, when there was but one poor town, another Cain was found therein, who maliciously slew his neighbor in the field, as he accidentally met him, as himself was going to shoot deer. The poor fellow perceiving the intent of this Billington, his mortal enemy, sheltered himself behind trees as well as he could for a while ; but the other, not being so ill a marksman as to miss his aim, made a shot at him, and struck him on the shoulder, with which he died soon after. The murderer expected that, either for want of power to execute for capital offences, or for want of people to increase the Plantation, he should have his life spared ; but justice otherwise determined, and rewarded him, the first murderer of his neighbor there, with the deserved punishment of death, for a warning to others."

William Hubbard, A General History of New England (Boston:

Charles C. Little & James Brown, 1848), p. 101.

[This history was written c. 1680 & first published in 1814.]

### **ELLEN [ELEANOR], WIDOW OF JOHN BILLINGTON, SENIOR**

**14 March 1635-6:** "The placs heerafter menconed were assigned to the severall psons, for their prnt use the yeare 1636, viz..."That Phineas Pratt haue between Fr. Billington and his owne howse.

"That widow Billington haue the marsh against her owne grownd, & what is too much for her is for Mr. Done."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 1, p. 39-40.

**7 June 1636:** "John Done, yeoman, entreth an acco of slander, & layeth it in an 100 [li], against Helin Billington, widow..."

"At this Court an action of slander was tried between John Done, plaintiffe, & Helin Billington, defendant, wherein the defend't was cast in fiue pownds starling to the plaintife, and adjudged to be sett in the stocks & be whipt."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 1, p. 41, 42.

**7 November 1636:** "At the same time Tristram Clarke appointed to have eight acres of land, fowr in breadth & two in length on the south side, a pociion allotted formerly to Mr John Coombe, between Phineas Pratt & widow Billington. [Remitted because he had land elsewhere]"

Plymouth Colony Recods, Vol. 1, p. 46.

**14 January 1636-7:** "There is graunted this day, by the Court of Assistants, to James Skiffe, tenn acrs of lands, lying next unto the lands graaunted to Triston Clarke, five in length ^ two in breadth, betweene the lands of Phineas Pratt & widdow Billington"

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 1, p. 47

**3 August 1637:** "Ellinor Billington of New Plymouth Widdow hath the day and yeare aboue written or and in consideracon of the sume of twenty six pounds and six shillinges, Hath freely and absolutely bargained sould aliened enfeoffed and confirmed vnto Thomas Armitage of the same yeoman All that her Messuage or tennent at Plaine Dealeing together wth all houses edifices & buildings therevnto belonging and the lott of land therevnto lying containeing by estimacon twenty

acrees or there abouts bee it more or lesse together wth all pastures commons meaddowes and all & singuler thapprtences therevnto belonging And all her interrest right title clayme & demaund whatsoever of and into the said pmisss and every part and pcell thereof To haue and to hold the said Messuage lands and pmisss wth all and euey their appurtenences vnto the said Thomas Armitage his heires and Assignes for euer to the onely pp vse of him the said Thomas Armitage his heires and Assignes for euer."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 12, p. 22.

**20 March 1637-8:** "Memorand that Mrs Elinor Billington Widdow the twentyeth day of March Anno Dni 1637 by her deede in writing vnder her hand and seale bearing date the eight day of January 1637 in the thirteenth yeare of the Raigne of or now Souaigne Lord Charles by the grace of God Kind of England Scotland ffranc & Ireland &c Hath giuen graunted enfeoffed and confirmed All and singuler her lands meadowes pastures commons wth all & singuler the apprtences therevnto belonging scituate and being at Playne Dealing together wth all her right title and interrest of and into the said pmisss & every part and pcell thereof All which wth some pvisoos and reservacons appeareth more fully and plainely in the wordes of the deed hereafter following, viz. To all xpian people to whom these prnts shall come Ellinor Billington of New Plymouth Widdow sendeth greeting in the Lord God eulasting Know yee That I the said Elinor for and in consideraon of the naturall loue that I beare vnto ffrancis Billington my naturall sonn and for diuers other good causes and consideracons me thervnto especially mooueing Haue giuen graunted enfeoffed and confirmed, and by these prnts doe giue graunt enfeoffe and confirme vnto the said ffrancis Billington his heires and Assignes foreuer All and singuler those my lands meadowes pastures and comons wth all and singuler thapprtences therevnto belonging scituate lying and being neere Playne Dealeing wthin the gouerment of New Plymouth aforesaid, together wth all my Right title and interrest of and into the said pmisss and euey pte and pcell thereof To haue and to hold the said lands meadowes pastures and commons wth all and singuler the pmisss and their apprtences vnto the said ffrancis Billington is heires and Assignes for euer to the onely pper vse and behoofe of him the said ffrancis Billington his heires and assignes for euer Provided always & reserued vnto me the said Ellinor Billington such a pcell or quantitie of lands out of the pmisses as will make a thousand and a halfe of hills to sett wth Indian corne or sowe wth English graine wthin some pte of the pmisss wch shalbe nfenced during my naturall life if I shall please to use yt And also puided & excepted out of the pmisss a smale pcell of ground to make a garden place & erect a house vpon together wth such a quantitie of land in a new feild as the said Ellinor shall please to be at charge to manure and take in wth the said ffrancis to be hers to use during her naturall life ; Provided lastly that the said ffrancis Billington doe not sell bargaine alliene or assigne the said pmisss or any pte thereof during the life of the said Ellinor wthout her consent and approbacon And the said Ellinor Billington all and singuler the said pmisses and euey pte and pcell thereof vnto the said ffrancis Billington his heires and Assignes and euey of them against all men doth couenant and graunt by these prnts foreu to warrant and defend. In wittenesse whereof I the said Ellinor Billington haue herevnto set my hand and Seale the Eight day of January in the Thirteenth yeare of the Raigne of our Souaigne Lord Charles by the grace of God of England Scotland ffrance and Ireland Kinge Defendor of the fayth 1637.

"Ellinor Billington her mark.

Sealed & deliued in the prsence of Nathaniell Sowther, James Hurst, & Robte Lee."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 12, p. 28-29.

**28 August 1638:** "Articles of agreement made and concluded vpon the xxviiijth of August 1638 Betweene Gregory Armestrong of thone pty and Ellinor Billington, Widdow, of thother pty concning a marriage to be solempnized betweene the said pties as followeth viz.

"In primis it is concluded and agreed vpon betweene the said pties to these prnts and in consideracon of the said Marriage That whereas the said Ellinor hath two Cowes w'ch the said Gregory is pr'sently to enter vpon The said Gregory doth couenant and graunt by these p'rnts That if it please God that he happen to outliue the said Ellinor that then he shall and will at his decease giue two heiffers of a yeare old & advantage a peece to the benefitt of the naturall children of ffrancis Billington the said Ellinors naturall sonn out of the estate that he shall then haue left, and if it happen that the said Gregory dept this life before the said Ellinor that then the estate shalbe at the disposing of the said Ellinor, except some thinges to his frends at his Death according to his estate at his death.

"Itm It is also concluded vpon that the said two heiffers shalbe put forth when they fall to the benefitt of the said children by the ouersight & discretion of the Goun'r and Assistants of New Plymouth for the tyme being Always puided that the said ffrancis Billington haue the vse of them before any other, if he be then liueinge.

"Itm it is concluded vpon betweene the said pties And the said Ellinor doth couenant and graunt to and w'th the said Gregory That if hee the said Gregory shall surviue and outliue the said Ellinor that then hee the said Gregory shall enjoy the house they now lieu in and the lands they occupye during his life.

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 12, p. 33-34.

**14 September 1638:** "Memorand the fourteenth day of Septembr 1638 That wheras Willm Tench and John Carman did bequeath two acres of lands vnto John Billington deceased Now Ellinor Billington his wyfe and ffrancis Billington his sonn doe acknowledg that for and in consideracon of the sume of foure pounds sterl in hand payd haue freely and absolutely bargained and sould vnto Mr Thom Prince Goun'r the said two acres of land lying on the South side of the second brooke & next to the Inads of Mr Willm Bradford w'th all & singuler the app'rtences therento belonging and all their right title & interrest of & into same & euery pte & pcell thereof To haue and to hold the said two acres of lands w'th their app'rtences vnto the said Thomas Prence his heires and Assignes for euer to the onely pper vse and behoofe of the said Thomas Prence has heires and Assignes foreu. There was one third pt of one of the said acres excepted w'ch was giuen to Mr Bradford & was rateably to be abated for, except Mr Bradford would release the same w'ch he did in consideracon of the bargaine followinge.

"Memorand the xxijth of Septemb'r 1638 That Gregory Armestronge Ellinor his now wyfe and ffrancis Billington her naturall sonn doe acknowledge that for and in consideracon of the sume of fourty shilling sterl in hand payd by Mr Willm Bradford as also for that the sd Mr Bradford hath released his interrest vnto them in third pte of an acre of land lately sould to Mr Prince Haue freely & absolutely bargained & sould vnto the said Mr Wm Bradford one acre & a halfe of land lying on the north side of the lands of the said Will'm Bradford vpon the lowest diuision next the water side in the feild on the North side of the Towne of Plymouth together with all their Right title & interrest of and into the same w'th all & singuler thapp'rtencs therevnto belonging To haue & to hold the said acre & half of land w'th all & singuler the app'rtences therevnto belonging vnto the said Willm Bradford his heires & Assignes for euer to the onely pp use and behoofe of the said William Bradford his heires & Assignes foreu'r."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 12, p. 37-38.

"1650. Plymouth Register of Marriages and Burialls... Grigory Armstrong died the fift of Nouember."

Plymouth Colony Records, Vol. 8, p. 11.