

NATHANIEL PHILBRICK

Mayflower

*A Story of Courage, Community,
and War*



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Thursday, January 11, was "a fair day." Given the uncertainty of the weather, they knew they must make as much progress as possible on the houses—especially since, it was still assumed, the *Mayflower* would soon be returning to England.

The frantic pace of the last two months was beginning to tell on William Bradford. He had suffered through a month of exposure to the freezing cold on the exploratory missions, and the stiffness in his ankles made it difficult to walk. But there was more troubling him than physical discomfort. Dorothy's passing had opened the floodgates: death was everywhere. It pursued them in the form of illness, and it had been waiting for them here on the blighted shores of Plymouth. Now, in the midst of winter, he could only wonder if he would ever see his son again.

That day, as Bradford worked beside the others, he was "vehemently taken with a grief and pain" that pierced him to his hipbone. He collapsed and was carried to the common house. At first it was feared Bradford might not last the night. But "in time through God's mercy," he began to improve, even as illness continued to spread among them. The common house soon became as "full of beds as they could lie one by another." Like the Native Americans before them, they must struggle to survive on a hillside where death had become a way of life.

In the days ahead, so many fell ill that there were barely half a dozen left to tend the sick. Progress on the houses fell to a standstill as the healthy ones became full-time nurses—preparing meals, tending fires, washing the "loathsome clothes," and emptying chamber pots. Bradford later singled out William Brewster and Miles Standish as sources of indomitable strength:

And yet the Lord so upheld these persons as in this general calamity they were not at all infected either with sickness or lameness. And what I have said of these I may say of many others who died in this general visitation, and others yet living; that whilst they had health, yea or any strength continuing, they were not

wanting to any that had need of them. And I doubt not that their recompense is with the Lord.

At one point, Bradford requested a small container of beer from the stores of the *Mayflower*, hoping that it might help in his recovery. With little left for the return voyage to England, the sailors responded that if Bradford "were their own father he should have none." Soon after, disease began to ravage the crew of the *Mayflower*, including many of their officers and "lustiest men." Unlike the Pilgrims, the sailors showed little interest in tending the sick. Early on, the boatswain, "a proud young man," according to Bradford, who would often "curse and scoff at the passengers," grew ill. Despite his treatment of them, several of the passengers attended to the young officer in his final hours. Bradford claimed the boatswain experienced a kind of deathbed conversion, crying out, "Oh, you, I now see, show your love like Christians indeed one to another, but we let one another die like dogs." Master Jones also appears to have undergone a change of heart. Soon after his own men began to fall ill, he let it be known that beer was now available to the Pilgrims, "though he drunk water homeward bound."

On Friday, January 12, John Goodman and Peter Brown were cutting thatch about a mile and a half from the settlement. They had with them the two dogs, a small spaniel and a huge mastiff bitch. English mastiffs were frequently used in bearbaitings—a savage spectator sport popular in London in which the two creatures fought each other to the death. Mastiffs were also favored by English noblemen, who used them to subdue poachers. The Pilgrims' mastiff appears to have been more of a guard dog brought to protect them against wild beasts and Indians.

That afternoon, Goodman and Brown paused from their labors for a midday snack, then took the two dogs for a short ramble in the woods. Near the banks of a pond they saw a large deer, and the dogs, no doubt led by the mastiff, took off in pursuit. By the time Goodman and Brown had caught up with the dogs, they were all thoroughly lost.

It began to rain, and by nightfall it was snowing. They had hoped