

Faith Pulpit

Captain Myles Standish: Separatist Pilgrim, or Roman Catholic Soldier of Fortune?

The Mayflower set sail from England in 1620 with 102 passengers¹ (fifty men, twenty women, twenty-two boys, and ten girls).² This number includes three crew members who were hired to remain permanently in Plymouth and two crew members hired to remain for one year. Not included in the number are Oceanus Hopkins (a boy born at sea) and Peregrine White (a boy born on the ship while it was anchored off Provincetown, Cape Cod)—making the actual number of “passengers” to be 104. William Butten died at sea, and four more³ died on board after arrival at Cape Cod, making ninety-nine the total of those who actually reached “Plymouth Rock.” For half a century, the traditional number of Mayflower Separatists has been “forty-one.”⁴ Recent research, however, reveals an additional sixteen, raising the total to fifty-seven, including thirteen women, nineteen children (fourteen boys and five girls), and twenty-five men, one of whom (Giles Heale) was also listed with the crew. This means that fifty percent of the men were identified with the Christian Separatists; these men were the leaders of the mission. Those who were not Separatists were servants and adventurers.

The most recognizable addition to the list of Separatists is Captain Myles Standish,⁵ long considered a mere soldier of fortune by some and a nominal Roman Catholic by others. Such descriptions are clearly false, originating in the works of Thomas Morton and William Hubbard. After arresting Thomas Morton for supplying guns to the Indians, Captain Standish had sent him back to England. Retaliating against the Pilgrims, Morton later wrote a caricature called *New English Canaan*, which demeans Standish as the ambitious “Captain Shrimp,” (referring to his small stature).⁶ William Hubbard, a Massachusetts Bay Colony historian writing near the end of the seventeenth century, said that Standish was outside “the school of our Saviour.”⁷ Based on Hubbard’s remark, along with records of the Standish family going back to a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic family, there have been frequent references to Standish as a “Roman Catholic.” His family roots, however, can hardly be

any proof of his own position. As Jeremy Bangs noted, “The myth that Myles Standish was Catholic was created in Boston to inspire youthful Irish immigrants.”⁸ Hubbard’s negative attitude toward the Pilgrims’ relations with the Indians degenerated into a personal attack against Standish. Portraying Standish’s character as hot-tempered, Hubbard compared the captain to a “little chimney [that] is quickly fired.”⁹ Such unfounded remarks, however, are a caricature upon the character of this good man.

The following entry in the Plymouth Colony Records indicates that Myles Standish attended the Plymouth Church with his family and may have been a member at the time the record was made: “Anno 1632 Aprill 2—the names of those which promise to remove their families to live in the town in the winter time that they may the better repaire to the worship of God—John Alden, Capt. Standish, Jonathan Brewster, Thomas Prentice.”¹⁰ Perhaps the real Myles Standish will never be known, but there is more to him than popular descriptions imply. Already in Holland before the Pilgrims arrived, Standish was one of the thousands of British soldiers fighting in the Dutch army in the revolt against Roman Catholic Spanish Hapsburg dominion. In Plymouth Colony, he knew what he needed to do in regard to defending the colony. It was sometimes a messy job. He was quiet about church matters, possibly because he wanted to avoid reflecting upon the testimony of the church. There is no way to determine Standish’s personal spiritual condition. His four sons joined Separatist churches in the towns where they lived, and there are numerous records of their serving in high places of spiritual leadership, such as deaconries.¹¹ In addition to being the military captain, Myles Standish served for six years as Treasurer of the Colony. In 1649, he was made commander-in-chief for the entire Colony. He was faithful to the end in giving his life for the Separatists of Plymouth. The Christian Governor William Bradford mentions people who, during the starving time, were special examples of sacrifice and loyalty, “showing herein their true love unto their friends and brethren; a rare example and worthy to be remembered. Two of these seven were Mr. William Brewster, their reverend Elder, and Myles Standish, their captain and military commander.”¹²

William Bradford’s nephew, Nathaniel Morton, arrived in Plymouth in 1623, grew up in the Bradford home, and earned a reputation of being strict, orthodox, and Separatist. In his *New England’s Memorial* (1669), Morton wrote this of Myles Standish at his death in 1656

This year Captain Miles Standish expired his mortal life. . . . In his younger time he went over into the low countries, and was a soldier there, and came acquainted with the church at Leyden, and came over into New England, with such of them as at the first set out for the planting of the plantation of New Plimouth, and bare a deep share of their first difficulties, and was always very faithful to their interest. He growing ancient, became sick of the stone, or strangury, whereof, after his suffering of much dolorous pain, he fell asleep in the Lord, and was honourably buried at Duxbury.¹³

The Pilgrim pastor John Robinson, in one of his last letters from Leiden, refers to Myles Standish as the “Captain, whom I love, and am persuaded the Lord in great mercy and for much good hath sent. He is a man humble and meek amongst you, and towards all in ordinary course.”¹⁴ Standish left a legacy to Pastor Robinson’s granddaughter, Mercy. He refers to her in his will as “Marcye Robenson[,] whome I tenderly love for her Grandfathers sake.” Most of the books in Standish’s “Will and Inventory” are sermons and theological works of some of the greatest of the Puritans, including Jeremiah Burroughs and John Preston. He owned “Calvin’s Institutions.” He owned three “old Bibles,” plus “a Testament,” and “one Psalme booke.”¹⁵ It should not be surprising that the Pilgrims themselves regarded Myles Standish as one of the most beloved of all the passengers on the Mayflower. Isaac de Rasière, Secretary of the West India Company’s Government at Manhattan, visited Plymouth in March 1627. He penned the following description of the Pilgrims’ place of worship and order of assembling, with Captain Myles Standish occupying a prominent place in the order of the Pilgrim church.

Upon the hill they had a large square house, with a flat roof, made of thick sawn planks, stayed with oak beams, upon the top of which they have six cannons, which shoot iron balls of four and five pounds, and command the surrounding country. The lower part they use for their church, where they preach on Sundays and the usual holidays. They assemble by beat of drum, each with his musket or firelock, in front of the captain’s door; they have their cloaks on, and place themselves in order, three abreast, and are led by a sergeant without beat of drum. Behind comes the Governor, in a long robe; beside him on the right hand comes the preacher with his cloak on, and on the left hand the captain with his side-arms and cloak on, and with a small cane in his hand; and so they march in good order, and each sets his arms down near him. Thus they enter their place of worship, constantly on their guard night and day.¹⁶

Works Cited

1. For the complete story, see David Beale, *The Mayflower Pilgrims: Roots of Puritan, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist Heritage* (Belfast, Northern Ireland and Greenville, SC: Ambassador-Emerald International, 2000), 272-page hardback.
2. This study includes everyone under twenty in the “boys and girls” category.
3. Those who died on board the Mayflower, after its arrival at Cape Cod but before its arrival at Plymouth, included Dorothy Bradford, James Chilton, Jasper More, and Edward Thompson.
4. Both the number 41 and the narrow use of the word strangers have become traditional, largely from the helpful but sometimes misleading study by George F. Willison, *Saints and Strangers* (NY: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1945), 437ff. and passim. Much additional research has been done since the book appeared in 1945.
5. For a valuable and recent study, see G. V. C. Young, “Pilgrim Myles Standish: His European Background,” in *The Pilgrims in the Netherlands: Recent Research*, ed. Jeremy D. Bangs, (1985; rpt. Leiden, The Netherlands: Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, 1998), 35–43.
6. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (1952; rpt. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 204–10.
7. William Hubbard, *General History of New England* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1815), 63.
8. Jeremy D. Bangs, *Pilgrim Life in Leiden* (Leiden: Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, 1997), 45.
9. Hubbard, 63.

10. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff and David Pulsifer, ed., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England (1620–1691)* (Boston, 1855–61; rpt., 12 vols. in 6, NY: AMS Press 1968), I:1632–33.
11. For example, one of the Standish sons, Alexander, was a deacon and the town clerk at Duxbury, MA. The Plymouth Church Records contain numerous miscellaneous statistics as well. Myles Standish Jr. married Sarah, the daughter of John and Mary Winslow. Not a lean legacy for a fiery old “Shrimp!”
12. Bradford, 77.
13. Nathaniel Morton, *New England’s Memorial* (1669; rpt. Boston: Congregational Board of Publications, 1855), 170.
14. Bradford, 374–75.
15. “Myles Standish’s Will and Inventory,” *The Mayflower Descendant* 3, no. 3 (July, 1901): 154 (34 vols., compiled and published by George Ernest Bowman, from 1899 to 1937, Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants), on “Mayflower Legacy,” 43-vol. searchable CD edition, Wheat Ridge, CO: Search & Research Publishing Corporation, 1998, containing *The Mayflower Descendant With Other New England Town Records*.
16. Lyman Denison Brewster, “William Brewster,” *The Mayflower Descendant* 4, no. 2 (April 1902): 103; see also Nathaniel Morton, *New England’s Memorial* (1669; rpt. Boston: Congregational Board of Publications, 1855), 497.

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