

AMERICA'S FIRST GREAT LEADER

**WILLIAM BRADFORD,
GOVERNOR
OF PLYMOUTH COLONY**

1621 - 1657

By: Bradford D. Smart, Ph.D.

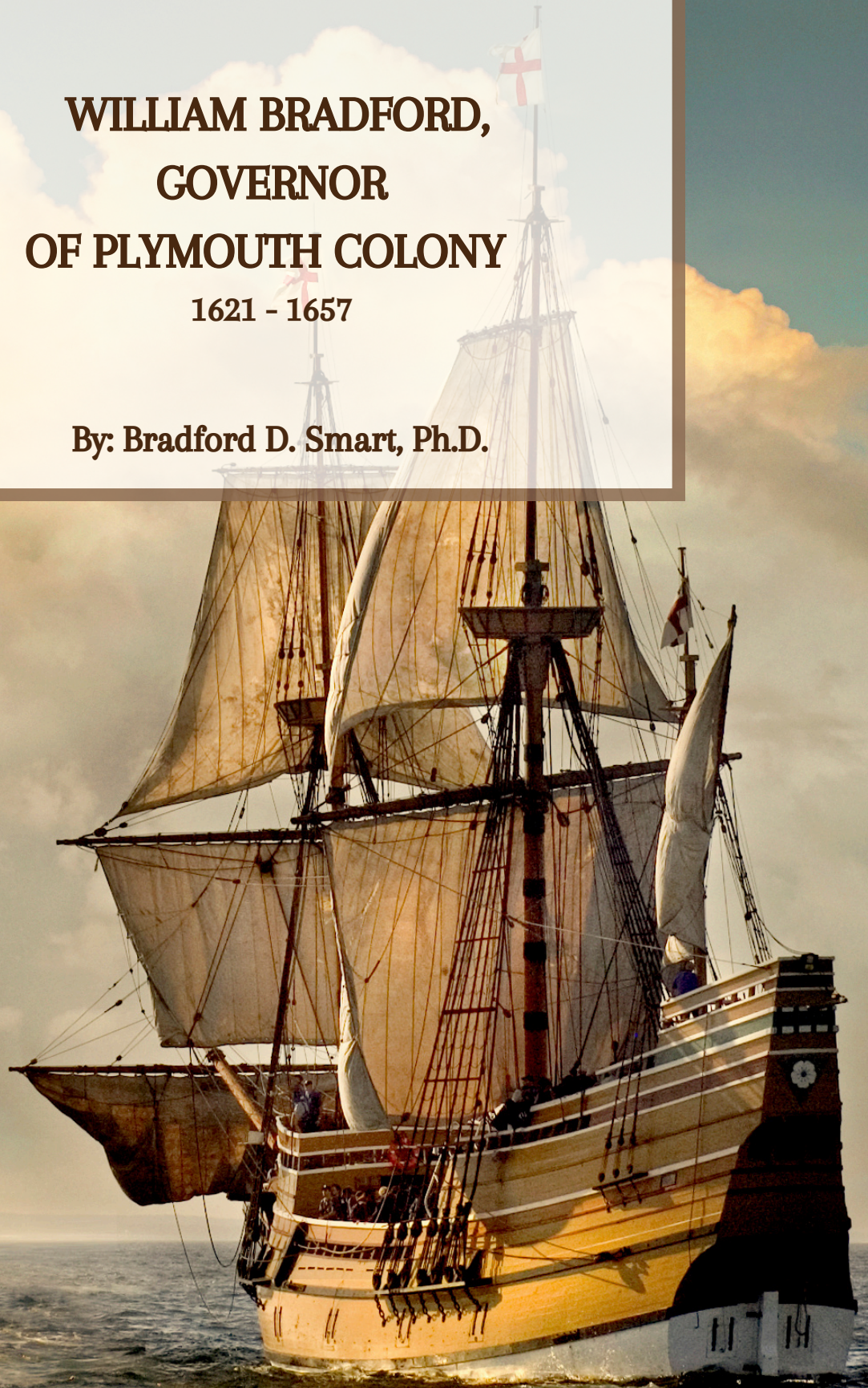


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AUTHOR

I'm honored to be an 11th-generation descendant of the legendary William Bradford, a direct link to a story of courage, resilience, and leadership that shaped America's foundations. In this powerful lineage, the 12th generation of Bradford descendants includes Geoff Smart and Kate Mursau, and the 13th generation consists of their children – Will, Kendall, Emma, and Andrew Smart, plus Malorie and Taylor Mursau – each carrying forward the Pilgrim legacy of vision and perseverance.

My profession as a management psychologist is somewhat related to this book. I have assessed and coached 6,500 CEOs and other high-level executives, learning all of their leadership history – every major success and failure, along with their strengths and weaker points. Many were outstanding leaders. All I know about Bradford is what he wrote and what others wrote about him and the Pilgrims. But the more I learn about Bradford, the more I respect and admire him, and I wonder – could any other leader have prevailed as he did?

PRINCIPAL ILLUSTRATOR

Norman Rockwell's iconic illustrations have immortalized Americans' most treasured values, depicting the essence of who we aspire to be. His timeless illustrations have captured the heart of the American spirit. With permission from the Rockwell Foundation, his works bring these pages to life through the eyes of one of America's beloved artists.

PROLOGUE

It was my father, Walter Smart, descendant of four Mayflower passengers, who first ignited my fascination with Pilgrim history. As my collection of Pilgrim history grew, I became intrigued with how crucial leadership issues were handled, from their struggles in England and Holland to the first three decades in the New World.

Starting a colony in the New World, with (inaccurate) tales of brutal, sub-human savages, and having only a handful of families and a “loan shark” deal with financial backers, seemed preposterous. Crisis after crisis could have (should have?) derailed the Pilgrim dream. But historical accounts point to one rare leader who snatched success out of the jaws of defeat, time and time again. It’s William Bradford, who was elected and re-elected Governor for more than 30 years, and served as de facto Governor those years when he declined to be Governor. A “politician” who for over three decades was highly respected, admired, and beloved by the citizens? Imagine that!

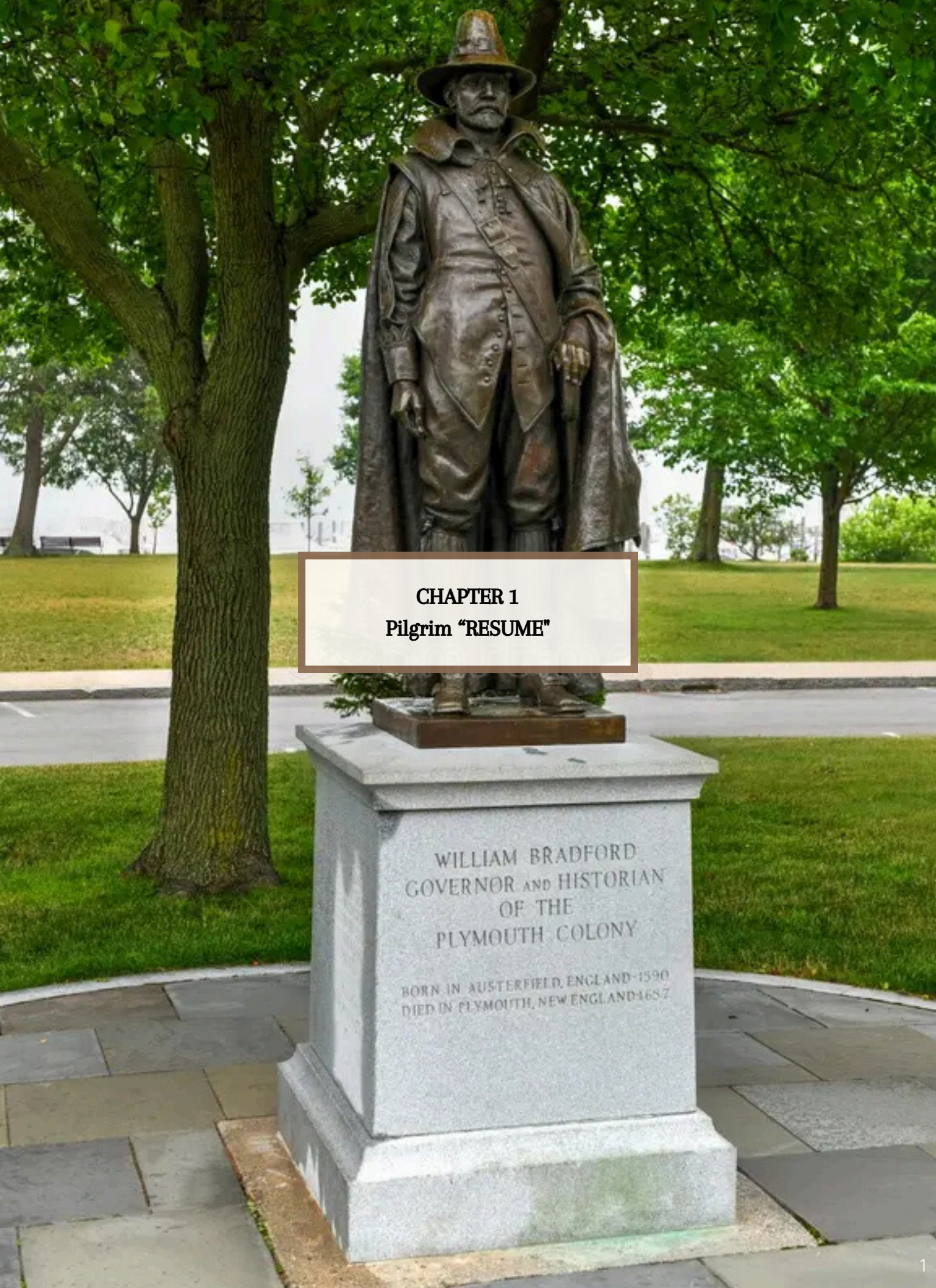
Almost all the earlier colonies in the New World failed because their leaders, all men seeking riches, could not hold their adventurers together in the face of inadequate supplies, native hostilities, disease, and internal greed. Yet Bradford’s leadership kept Plymouth alive, even during Plymouth’s darkest hours. His wisdom and fairness galvanized Plymouth, a human beacon of unwavering resolve.

In a world short on compelling role models, in a world of increasing chaos, and in a nation divided, Bradford’s story is nothing short of awe-inspiring. He laid the groundwork for America’s democracy and free enterprise and helped define what it means to be an American. Bradford’s personal qualities became core values of the Pilgrims and later, the values that would shape the nation.

Governor Bradford, in some respects, was Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, all wrapped up in one. One hundred and fifty years before the American Revolution, he mobilized and guided the Pilgrims and created a real-life Camelot of sorts – a “brief shining moment,” awesomely grand in spirit and design, yet deliberately small in scope. In his success lie vivid, compelling examples of timeless leadership qualities that continue to resonate.

In America's First Great Leader, I delve into the remarkable qualities of William Bradford through eight chapters, each showcasing examples of his leadership traits that have influenced not just the Pilgrims but all Americans. This small book is not a history lesson but a short blueprint for business and political leadership today, as Bradford exhibited "modern" leadership qualities 400 years ago.

Author's Caveat: Bradford was perhaps essential as a leader, but many others were among what he called "the chiefest among us." The Mayflower Society has celebrated other Pilgrim men and heroic women, as well as friendly Native Americans; they all deserve our respect and admiration. The Silver Books Project, tracing five generations of Mayflower descendants, is part of a fabulous library of resources available at the Mayflower Society in Plymouth, Massachusetts today. And nearby Plymouth Plantation (more recently called Plimoth Patuxet, to honor Native Americans) is an exciting, inspiring recreation of what life was like in the 1600s.



CHAPTER 1
Pilgrim "RESUME"

WILLIAM BRADFORD
GOVERNOR AND HISTORIAN
OF THE
PLYMOUTH COLONY

BORN IN AUSTERFIELD, ENGLAND-1590
DIED IN PLYMOUTH, NEW ENGLAND-1657

Bradford never had a CV or resume. If he re-emerged today and created one, his modesty would conceal his accomplishments. The thousands of executives I worked with all had a resume, a concise summary of their career, so I've created one for William Bradford. To make it a bit more plausible, let's pretend that Bradford's resume lists successes of the Pilgrims, not just him as their leader.

So ... following is a hypothetical version of a resume for a leader born over 400 years ago. In Bradford's famous history, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, he personally takes no credit for successes. He's a modest, humble man, giving credit to others. So, although resumes list individual accomplishments, I've tried to create one that features Pilgrim Colony successes, not Bradford successes.

PILGRIM RESUME

WHEN WILLIAM BRADFORD WAS GOVERNOR OF PLYMOUTH COLONY, 1621 – 1657

Home Address and Work Address: RR2 Plymouth, Plymouth Colony, The New World

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF PLYMOUTH COLONY

- **Governor of Plymouth Colony, the first permanent family settlement in the New World, for over 30 years.** Tens of thousands of British followed and formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony, assuring a dominant English foothold in the New World.
- **Established democracy in the New World.** Helped write the Mayflower Compact (historically compared to the Magna Carta), enabling laws that assured freedom, equality, and fairness for all citizens. Executed the Compact in the colony that President John Quincy Adams called the modern world's "first successful democracy." Laid foundations for the future Declaration of Independence and Constitution of the United States of America.
- **Led using "town meetings."** All members of the community enjoyed freedom of speech, and Bradford encouraged all citizens to participate in town meetings, where discussions of issues took place and leaders were elected. The town meeting format continues 400 years later.
- **Harmonious relations with Native Americans.** Signed a mutual defense pact with Chief Massasoit, which lasted 54 years (until the next generation).
- **Introduced capitalism to Plymouth.** Discontinued the socialistic system, which stifled initiative and threatened to destroy the colony. Privatized agriculture, permitting each farmer to work for individual profit; the economic strength of Plymouth immediately soared. This economic paradigm permeated New England, helped inspire the Revolutionary War, and has become firmly entrenched in the USA.
- **Assured separation of church and state.** Despite deep religious foundations, individual liberty was protected with civil (not religious, as required in England) marriage. As Governor, Bradford helped create laws preventing anyone from simultaneously holding an office in the church and an elected leadership position in Plymouth.
- **Celebrated the first Thanksgiving, which later became a national holiday.**
- **Built Plymouth into a secure, stable community.** Starting with "nothing," Plymouth grew to 24 towns and paid off its debt to English backers. By 1640, Plymouth was economically, politically, and militarily sound.

- **Established a legal system.** Instituted trial by 12 jurors for crimes such as trespassing, not paying debts, or committing murder. Governor Bradford gave up sole authority as Magistrate in order for legal issues to be resolved by “12 honest men.”
- **Established the first veterans’ benefits program in America.** Pilgrims harmed in battle were taken care of indefinitely by the colony.
- **Instituted women’s property rights.** In England, when a man died, his wife received nothing; only men could inherit. In Plymouth, when a man died, his wife inherited everything.
- **Launched America’s pastime – baseball.** During rare times of leisure, Pilgrims played stickball.

REFERENCES

- Difficult to furnish, as most sources “departed” 400 years ago. (Sorry – that’s my “sense of humor.”)



William Bradford's Personal Qualities

The Pilgrim Colony Resume is a teaser – a list of accomplishments of the Pilgrims – the “What.” The rest of the book shows the “How” – it expands on Bradford's leadership skills, providing color commentary and, hopefully, revealing Bradford's soul. In studying Bradford, eight important leadership qualities, many that overlap, stand out: P-I-L-G-R-I-M.

- **Participative.** Led using town meetings. Empowered the citizens in many “life and death” decisions. Maintained a collaborative, supportive community spirit of brotherhood; rejected dictatorship offered by King James I, and integrated non-Pilgrim Mayflower passengers into the community. Tolerated other religions.
- **Individualist.** A self-made man. Though orphaned and self-educated, achieved recognition as a thinker, linguist, businessman, magistrate, statesman, and diplomat. Helped Plymouth's populous, working-class people, pick themselves up by their bootstraps and become a successful middle class.
- **Leadership.** Made the tough calls. Was the elected Governor for over three decades. Negotiated a life-long mutual defense treaty with Chief of the Nation, Massasoit. Wrote laws to protect women and Native Americans from abuse. Women enjoyed more freedoms than in England. A change master.
- **Generous.** Took in the sick and many orphans. Received no payment for community service as Governor. Eventually, the King supported the Pilgrims and gave Bradford legal ownership of all Plymouth real estate, and Bradford divvied up all the lots as a gift to the citizens.
- **Responsible.** When British backers failed to send contracted supplies, directed Plymouth to keep its end of the bargain by paying off debts. Maintained three contracts as the basis of society – contracts with God, with merchant backers, and with citizens. Created a legal system with trial by 12 jurors. Reinforced the family unit to be the key transmitter of values.

- **Initiative.** Utilized Native American agricultural skills, without which the colony would probably have starved and failed. When promised fur trading supplies did not arrive, temporarily helped Plymouth survive by captaining a fishing boat. When the investor-mandated socialism failed, took the initiative to create a free-market capitalist system.
- **Motivated.** Maintained a passionate vision, so compelling that citizens were willing to die for it; many did. Combined pioneering spirit with hard work and courage; persisted optimistically through extreme adversity of drought, plague, pirate ships, domestic traitors, an international coup attempt, and failed crops. Served as Chief Justice, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Speaker of the General Court, and Auditor of the Treasury. While in England, at 18 years of age, jailed for defending religious beliefs. Remained true to Christian beliefs when compromise might have repeatedly improved the colony's chances of survival.

CHAPTER 2
A Short History

Image: Freedom of Want, Norman Rockwell



Norman
Rockwell

With leadership accomplishments like Bradford's, why don't schools teach more of his fascinating biography? One reason is quite simple: Bradford wrote the only definitive history – *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647* – and it disappeared for a couple hundred years. The limited history that existed until *Of Plymouth Plantation* emerged in the late 1800s portrayed the Pilgrims as unimportant, and worse – dull.

For two centuries, schoolbooks described Pilgrims as a band of pious adventurers, drab and prudish. Historian George Wilson's writings in the mid-20th century began to dispel that myth, showing Pilgrims to be dynamic English men and women who were aware of "good food, good drink, and pleasurable living." Ship's Captain Al Thorn, writing about Bradford's wedding in 1623, marveled at the dancing ... "with such noise ... and great cheer." As you will see in this small book, the Pilgrim experience day-to-day was more exciting and dramatic than can be imagined, except in movies like *Star Wars* or *Indiana Jones*.

As mentioned, Bradford was too humble to create a bronze bust or allow even a portrait of himself. Small, modest statues of Bradford that exist today in Plymouth are artists' guesses as to what this noble leader might have looked like. In his book, Bradford does not take credit for Plymouth's success. Indeed, unlike politicians today, his book reveals his warts, while praising the qualities of his peers. Not once in all his manuscripts does he praise his own accomplishments, judgment, insight, or leadership. By the time the book *Of Plymouth Plantation* was rediscovered, towering leaders like Washington and Jefferson had become far more famous than Bradford. Nonetheless, his "story" is, to use an overused word, amazing.

The Pilgrim vision was audacious – relocate to an uncharted wilderness in the New World, create a uniquely Christian society, and support that society economically with fur, corn, and fish trading – despite having no relevant experience or skills in those areas. They needed to find financial backers to pay for this idealistic national "start-up." The most daunting challenge was hiding from King James I of England, who hated what the Pilgrims stood for – freedom: freedom to elect church leaders, freedom to interpret the Bible, and freedom to run their own lives. People could be punished, even jailed, if they did not attend Sunday church services, and pastors faced the same fate if they deviated from exactly what the King dictated as God's will. The King's interpretations of "God's will" conveniently supported his total control over citizens' lives.

The Pilgrims were initially called Separatists because they wanted to separate from the Church of England altogether, which was dangerous because the King said separation was treasonous. Brits who followed the Pilgrims to the New World are typically called Puritans because they advocated tweaking the Church of England, “purifying it” as a way to gain the King’s tolerance. In history books, Pilgrims are also called Puritans, though that designation can be confusing. What followed was a journey marked by punishment and harassment. The Pilgrims snuck away to Holland for 12 years of relative freedom but had to leave due to an impending war between Holland and Spain. Where could they go? The King had jailed some (including William Bradford, for a short time) and pursued them before, during, and after their time in Holland. Their decision, of course, was to keep overcoming huge problems and forge ahead to start a colony in the New World.

So, they snuck back into England to sell their worldly possessions, arrange financing, and secure two ships for their journey. What could go wrong?



“Everything,” they found. The financial backers in Britain knew the Pilgrims were desperate and, to improve their odds of getting rich with the new colony, demanded that the Pilgrims essentially work as indentured servants. Somehow, the Pilgrims were supposed to build the colony, work extremely hard, and send back almost all goods to the backers. To the Pilgrims, extreme poverty was unexpected, but the backers knew they could get away with, “Take it or leave it – but if you don’t take our offer, your next location might be torture in the Tower of London.” Having rebelled against an over-controlling King, they now had to agree to be overly controlled by loan shark investors who insisted that the Pilgrims work as indentured servants. What a disappointing irony – the Pilgrims sought freedom, the Merchant Backers hired about 50 men with skills the Pilgrims lacked, and those adventurers were indentured servants. That was a stiff price to pay to eventually enjoy total freedom. But ...

The risks kept mounting. They had intended to depart in the spring, plant corn in the New World, and fish and hunt to survive. However, the King wanted to jail them for treason, so king-dodging delayed departure. One of the ships (the Speedwell) leaked and couldn’t be fixed, so departure was delayed six weeks. Although the Pilgrims had been negotiating with investors for three years, these understandably cautious investors demanded increasingly harsh terms all summer, delaying departure until September – meaning they’d arrive in cold November, too late to plant corn.

Without the Speedwell, many Pilgrims decided not to sail, so finally, about half the Mayflower passengers were not Pilgrims; they were adventurers (called Strangers) seeking a new life without intending to be dominated by the Pilgrims. They wanted their freedom, too, and taunted the Pilgrims. After a hellish, miserable voyage, upon arrival in the New World, another crisis threatened to demolish the Pilgrim vision: these malcontents, essential to the colony's success, didn't trust the Pilgrims and made it clear they would NOT join their church. So, there they were, all new arrivals in the New World, with the new hires on board fearful of being over-controlled (a recurring theme in the Pilgrim saga). If they mutinied, Plymouth would have failed. Mutiny was discussed!

Fortunately, John Carver (first Governor), Bradford, and others crafted a document guaranteeing that all men, Pilgrims and Strangers alike, would have a vote to choose their leaders. It's the Mayflower Compact. In England, only 5% of men could vote. "We're all equal" was the promise of the Compact, but would that satisfy the Strangers? More about the Mayflower later.

And as if nothing else could go wrong, half of the 101 passengers died of a rare disease in the first year.

You might wonder why this plague-decimated group, seeking to launch a new society, didn't pack up and go home! The weather was dreadful, their plans for building an economy seemed futile, they were buried in debt, half the passengers died, families were decimated, rumors of native savages were terrifying, and in early 1621 John Carver passed on. Mayflower Master Chris Jones didn't own the Mayflower and didn't have permission to stay in the New World, but he did stay until 1621, certain the Pilgrims would give up and he'd take them back to England. Not one person returned home to England during that chaotic first year. Why?

After Carver's death in 1621, the colony unanimously elected one man, a very sick man, barely 31 years old, to be their new leader. Since Governor Carver was elected when the Mayflower landed, Bradford was the first elected leader in what became America. If someone could save this crazy, bold venture, it would have to be this young, inexperienced leader, William Bradford. Under his leadership, Plymouth Colony survived, barely at times, but it flourished, albeit precariously. The success of the first family colony in the New World attracted tens of thousands of Brits to Boston shores. Other countries (Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Portugal) were eager to dominate the New World, but thanks to the Pilgrims, England jumped ahead of the others. Hence, we speak English. So, why might Bradford qualify as America's First Great Leader?

“American?” Yes, if we can refer to “America” as a society founded in New England by Europeans.

“First?” Yes, first — no other colony with families succeeded. Before Bradford, there were adventurers looking for quick riches operating under European laws. Because few families had relocated to the New World, no “roots” were formed.

“Great?” As Governor of America’s first permanent family settlement, Bradford chose democracy over dictatorship, capitalism over socialism, peaceful coexistence with Native Americans over expansionism, and belief in individual rights over the heavy hand of government. Not bad for an orphaned, sickly farm boy!

“Leader?” Bradford was no figurehead. His leadership embodied most of what Americans consider their most treasured and enduring values and qualities. This book is a tribute to those values and the man who did so much, for so long, to mold a successful colony and establish traditions of our most treasured values.

In this small book, I relate glimpses into Bradford — snippets that reveal his personal values and leadership qualities which you and I might find sorely lacking in politicians today. These glimpses into Bradford will, I hope, reveal the rock-solid character of the man, the soul of William Bradford.

THE PILGRIMS' PILGRIMAGE – SOME MORE DETAILS

With Holland soon to go to war, the Pilgrims decided to leave, and the only attractive option was to try to build a Christian community in the scary New World. But first, they had to sneak back into England, avoid being arrested, sell all their earthly goods, get financial backers, plan how to make an economically sound colony – to reward the backers – and sail away!

The Pilgrims approached the Virginia Company of London. Seventy investors agreed to fund their trip on the ships *Mayflower* and *Speedwell*, in exchange for Pilgrims sending them valuable New World goods. But as mentioned, the *Speedwell* was the boat to be used for trade, and it carried vital provisions and people. However, it leaked, turned back to England, and was decommissioned. This was a serious setback! This ship would have enabled trade by sailing up and down the East Coast and making deals. Without the *Speedwell*, how could they get the goods to send back to the investors in England?

The Merchant Backers had to get along with the Pilgrims. To many Pilgrims, these non-believers would be disruptive, but there wasn't time to recruit more sympathetic passengers. Winter was approaching, and the sea would be hell to cross. They had to depart – now!

But wait ... the investors decided the arrangement with the Pilgrims was increasingly risky. So they told the Pilgrims, “Here's the deal: Your vision looks likely to fail, so in order for us to take the risk of backing you, you all will have to work extremely hard, send us back almost all the goods you can, and live in poverty until all the debts to us are paid off. Take it or leave it!”

Emigrating to Holland was Plan A, building a New World colony was Plan B, and there was no Plan C. The King was after them, they'd sold all their worldly goods, Holland was going to war, so they had no choice. They resented what seemed like blackmail by loan sharks, but they had to accept becoming, effectively, indentured servants. (By the way ... Bradford made sure the debts were paid in full, but it took 25 years.)

The Pilgrim story is all about freedom. The Pilgrims separated from the Church of England to find religious freedom. The New World would bring religious but also economic freedom and civil freedom – their own government! Until the investors took that away. As the Mayflower sailed off into the dark, cold, wavy Atlantic Ocean, it would have been understandable if many wondered, “Does God really want humans to have freedom? How in the world can we build a nation-state with all the freedoms we want?” My reading of books about the Pilgrims makes me believe Bradford and others never had doubts; they believed freedom was God-given, and they’d have to overcome huge obstacles to earn it.

Bradford, then thirty, was one of 102 passengers on the Mayflower. Fifty-four were Pilgrims, the rest were hired hands, adventurers, recruited by the Virginia Company. They were also called “Strangers,” initially threatening mutiny, so how could Bradford bring them into a united community?

Visit the replication of Plymouth Colony in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and get a tour of the replication of the Mayflower (built in England). Everyone says, “Wow – this ship is tiny!” And all accounts of the 65-day, freezing trip, with humans crammed into tiny spaces, seem like a horror movie. Everyone was seasick. The storms were so severe that Master Chris Jones had to lower the sails, leaving the tiny boat to bounce all over the seas. And a key support plank broke. With all the delays, most passengers had survived hellishly jammed quarters for 65 days of crossing the Atlantic plus about six more weeks of delays, delays, delays – about 100 days in a floating cesspool. Many said, “Let’s face it – God does not want us to, so let’s limp back to England!” No way! Bradford inspired the Pilgrims and Strangers to persevere and be resourceful. The plank was put back in place and stayed in place.



THE MAYFLOW COMPACT

Following that harrowing journey, the Mayflower landed near Cape Cod. Legend has it that the Pilgrims stepped ashore onto Plymouth Rock. Before going ashore, however, Bradford and forty others signed an amazing document that created the first government in the New World – a democracy. The hired hands, the Strangers, had made it clear that they would not be dominated by these religious colonizers. There they were – anchored in the New World, but before going ashore, malcontents, threatening a mutiny, would have to be appeased. The Pilgrims came up with a revolutionary “constitution” that would make the Strangers equal to the Pilgrims – the Mayflower Compact.

The Mayflower Compact is the cornerstone of American democracy, a document that changed the course of history. Signed on November 21, 1620, it was a bold declaration of self-governance, forever altering the relationship between the people and their leaders. The Compact established a government by consent, a daring move for a time dominated by monarchies and autocracies.

John Quincy Adams said the Mayflower Compact is:

“...the first example in modern times of a social compact or system of government instituted by voluntary agreement, conformably to the laws of nature, by men of equal rights, and about to establish their community in a new country.”



In the New World, the Pilgrim democracy began with the Mayflower Compact, which some historians say was merely a piece of paper. I agree. This radical concept - democracy - was infused into every aspect of Plymouth's government, in daily decisions by Governor Bradford. He made the Mayflower Compact a solid pillar of American society. For a third of a century, Bradford was the practical, visionary paragon of democratic leadership.

The Mayflower Compact didn't make Bradford a successful leader; Bradford made the democracy within the Mayflower Compact come alive, flourish, and set the example for the world.

Artistic portrayals of the signing of the Compact adorn the Rotunda of our National Capitol (above) as well as the House of Parliament in London.



THE BRADFORD ERA

Bradford was re-elected multiple times, frequently begging that someone else serve as Governor, but usually acceding in the end. Although he served his final term in 1656, the first two decades (1620–1640) were the most pivotal, as each leadership decision molded Plymouth's embryonic culture and America's future values.

Despite initial fears of attack by “savages,” an early treaty with Chief Massasoit, whose nation encompassed Plymouth, cemented a good relationship. Indeed, the Chief both gave the Pilgrims use of the land at Plymouth and became the Pilgrims' protector for decades. Massasoit and Bradford agreed on a mutual defense pact; if attacked, each would fight to defend the other. In fact, when a group of Pilgrims, known as the Arthur Peach Gang, attacked a Native American boy for stealing wampum beads and some wool, they fled to what is now Rhode Island, were captured, and hanged. This was Bradford honoring the mutual defense pact—a detail that counters the notion that all whites stole land from Native Americans.

Reading about that first decade is inspiring. In 1621, Bradford was unanimously elected Governor of a colony, though he was deathly ill. Picture Bradford, running a high fever and probably not fully aware, waking to hear: “Will, you're alive! Praise God! We need you to lead us because we have problems, big problems.”

Bradford had to drag his aching body out of bed, walk outside his humble cabin, and face the cold... and possibly hostile Indians. He must have prayed for guidance because of the enormous challenges the Pilgrims faced. As their leader, he knew he had to begin leading the citizens as they constructed an entire society, including an economic model, the actual workings of democracy, a military, and a judicial system. Phew!

Bradford regained his health, and one day – surprise! – Squanto, who had been kidnapped and sent to England, was granted freedom and returned home... to find his tribe decimated by disease. It was fine with Squanto (and soon, Chief Massasoit) that the Pilgrims would settle there. Bradford became close friends with Squanto, who taught the Pilgrims to fertilize corn with fish.

Bradford faced one serious problem after another... and found solutions. Most Native Americans were friendly, but some threatened force. A couple of Pilgrims cheated and undermined the colony. Promised provisions repeatedly didn't arrive due to pirates and other dishonest traders. The King even tried to replace Bradford as Governor by sending a man to Plymouth, but Bradford outsmarted him. The leadership challenges Bradford faced were immense!

Gradually, Plymouth grew, becoming more prosperous and secure. Bradford decided to discard socialism (everyone working for the common good because the investors insisted) and embrace free-market capitalism (everyone could work for their own gain, after paying taxes). One other colony, Virginia, had permitted a measure of free enterprise, but at the time, it was in such disarray that there wasn't much freedom; indeed, martial law had been imposed.

The success of Plymouth attracted attention, and other nations jumped to carve out their portion of the New World. Because the Pilgrims were English and successful colonizers, hundreds of thousands of Brits immigrated, stepping ashore near Plymouth. Had the Spanish, French, Portuguese, or Dutch been more successful, imagine what language and values we'd all have today!

It is estimated that 10 million descendants of Mayflower passengers are alive in the USA. Bradford's personal qualities, including his leadership skills, can now be seen as essential in opening the door to New England and our English-speaking heritage.

Historian Usher wrote:

“They (Pilgrims) taught the English people to look upon America as a habitable and desirable home for those dissatisfied in England. In that fact lay the true germ of the United States of America.”

MASSACHUSETTS BAY COLONY

The “big money” in England, the educated aristocrats, were inspired by the Pilgrims' success and founded Massachusetts Bay Colony, based in Boston. The Pilgrims took the initial personal risks and opened the door to the British. During the 1630s, 200 ships filled with Puritans arrived in Boston. Puritan Governor John Winthrop respected Bradford's wisdom, all the while believing that Puritans were here to build major cities, not just copy the Pilgrim towns.

Pilgrims were sometimes considered Puritans, but a clearer distinction is this: Puritans sought to “purify” the Church of England by making adjustments, whereas the Pilgrims were “separatists,” wanting to separate entirely from the Church of England because the King made it mandatory to attend church weekly, and ministers were tightly controlled in what they could preach. Every sermon had to reinforce the “truth” that only the King could interpret the Word of God.

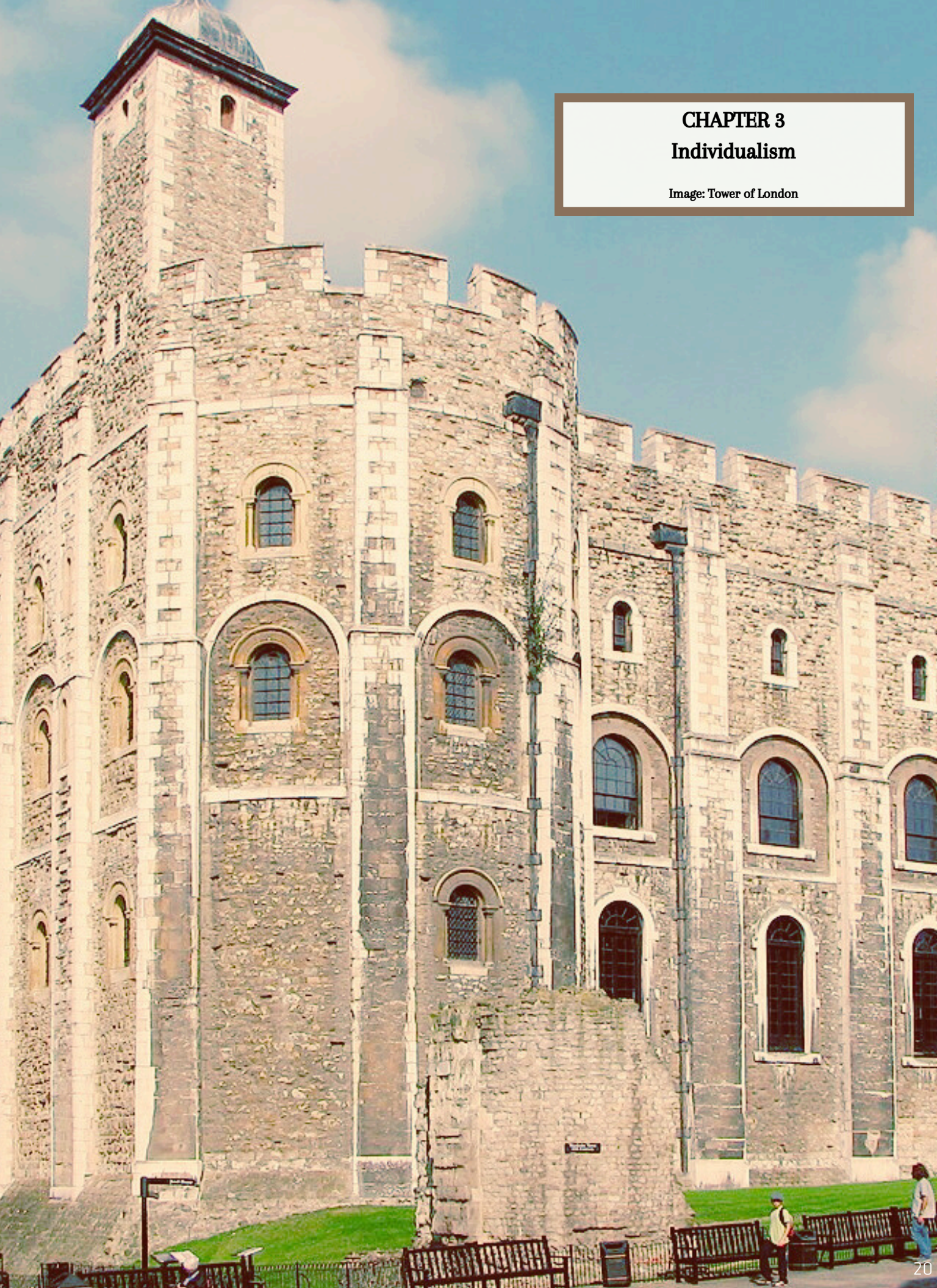
The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony, which grew rapidly and absorbed little Plymouth, weren't always pure. Winthrop was a theocrat, not separating church and state, and didn't believe in democracy. Winthrop said, “If you will be satisfied to enjoy civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then you will quietly and cheerfully submit unto authority which is set over you ... for your own good.” Salem and Boston burned 15 people accused of witchcraft. Plymouth - none. Religious tolerance was more prevalent in Plymouth than Boston. An anti-Quaker law never existed in Plymouth while Bradford was alive. Pilgrims achieved harmonious relations with the Indians, who were grateful that they were welcome in Plymouth. In contrast, Massachusetts seized Indian land.

Bradford got a little grumpy in his old age. His “Camelot” of Christian generosity, trust, and sharing—his ideal Plymouth—was quietly engulfed by Massachusetts. Plymouth citizens thanked William Bradford and explained that they were relocating throughout New England, where there was more favorable agriculture, more attractive ports, and more economic opportunity. Bradford saw greed, immorality, crime, and unfairness proliferating in the cities and was disappointed. He believed small communities, not large cities, could best foster Christian values.

After this brief overview of the history of Bradford and the Pilgrims, let's expand on Bradford's “resume” with real examples of his leadership and explore his personal qualities—values that became truly “American.”

CHAPTER 3 Individualism

Image: Tower of London



Scene #1

Young Will Risks Death for Freedom

Bradford's childhood individualism was being challenged—by his family, his community, and the King. Would he buckle under? After all, he was only a kid, in his early teens! Bradford had heard the beliefs of Separatists, and they made a lot of sense to him. The need for freedom burned in his youthful soul. But declaring himself a Separatist was risky. The Tower of London, with its torture chambers, served as a reminder that Separatists would not be tolerated.

Young Will, despite discouragement from well-meaning aunts, uncles, grandparents, and townspeople, walked 10 miles each way to attend a Separatist church each Sunday. Richard Clyfton was the minister. Also active was William Brewster, an Oxford-educated man with a good government job who eventually announced he was a Separatist. Brewster had a library and gave Will Bradford, too sickly to work in fields, a fabulous general education. Reading the great classic writers solidified his commitment to seek freedom. But not only was Will Bradford risking his life; the entire community was in jeopardy. Should the King conclude that town leaders might be Separatists who influenced Bradford ... the consequences were too horrendous to consider.

Bradford wrote to his relatives and friends:

You know that I have been diligent and provident in my calling... desirous to augment what I have, but also to enjoy it in your company, to part from which will be as great a cross as can befall me. Prescribed in His word is a thing which I must choose over your support and above life itself. Wherefore, since it is for a good cause that I am likely to suffer disaster which lay before me, you have no cause to be either angry with me or sorry for me. Yes, I am not only willing to part with everything that is dear to me in this world for the cause, but I am thankful that God has given me a heart to do so.

I have never read a teenager's words more prophetic of greatness. Every time I read it, I see more courage, maturity, humility, and raw individualism. This was no rebellious kid asserting his individualism by adopting a radical hairstyle. Will expressed his love for his neighbors and relatives but sincerely conveyed he had no choice but to worship in freedom.

Please re-read his words, imagining frail thirteen- or fourteen-year-old Will Bradford penning it in Olde English script.

Scene #2

Bradford was a truly "self-made" individual, and the examples are many. Bradford ...

- Lacked formal education

...but he taught himself five languages and read dozens of books when, as a youngster, he was too frail to work in the fields or go on trading missions.

- Saw an impending mutiny if non-Pilgrims were excluded from government

...and, as stated, he co-authored the Mayflower Compact.

- Was never trained in leadership

...but he learned "on the job."

- Was not an engineer

...but he supervised construction of Plymouth's buildings.

- Was not a lawyer

...but he established Plymouth's legislative and judicial systems and served as magistrate.

- Was not a sailor

...but he captained Plymouth's first trade mission, navigating treacherous shoals and enduring heavy storms.

- Was raised to be a farmer in England

...but he chose to be a pioneer and a leader.

Historian Smith wrote:

"In William Bradford, it is possible to see the making of the first American, the pattern of the self-made man. The other New England colonies were run by university men, Virginia by men of the court. But Bradford was homespun. He was a yeoman, he was self-educated, and with neither birth nor wealth behind him, he had made his way to the top. He had the intense local pride and the shrewdness in dealing with people that goes with this American type. Where many had failed, he clung to his toehold on the new continent and forced the riches of its forests, if not of its waters, to yield to him. And he died well-to-do."



CHAPTER 4
Leadership

Image: A Guiding Hand, Norman Rockwell

Scene #1

Bradford Made a Momentous Decision to Abandon Socialism in Favor of Market-Based Capitalism

Governmental “motivation” would be replaced with individual incentive to work.

The English backers had insisted that Plymouth function as a socialist state, sort of like, “Send us furs, send us corn, send us anything of value and keep enough food to barely survive until you pay off your debts to us; if it means you’re indentured slaves for years, tough luck.”

You’d think, if socialism could work anywhere, surely it could flourish in Plymouth. After all, these were generous, loving Christians who had lived together in Holland for 12 years, got along wonderfully, and wanted to help each other out. Surely no government, no contract was needed to motivate this utopian society to work for the common good, right?

Wrong.

It sounded good in theory, but it wasn’t working! Hard-working Pilgrims became ... lazy!

Bradford called a town meeting, not for participation in the decision, but first to openly discuss the predicament they were in. Then he announced his decision—a virtual Declaration of Independence, canceling socialism and introducing capitalism. Every family would grow crops to fulfill obligations to the investors, but then work for themselves. The GNP of Plymouth shot up! A serious risk was that the investors might withdraw their support and refuse to send much-needed goods to the emerging colony. If that happened, the Pilgrims would likely have returned to England and been jailed in the Tower of London. Not pleasant. Big risk! Was Bradford up to it?

And Bradford wrote:

... Pilgrims began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop, so that they might not languish in misery. At length, after much debate, the Governor, with the advice of the wisest among them, permitted citizens to grow and sell corn (in a free market system). And so, I assigned to every family a parcel of land, according to the proportion of their number. This had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious ... much more corn was planted (than previously, under socialism). The women now went willingly into the field and took their little ones with them to plant corn.

He subsequently criticized the "vanity and conceit of Plato and other ancients" for "assuming that the taking away of property by government would make its people happy and flourishing ... as if the philosophers were wiser than God."


What prophetic words! Bradford's economic individualism saved the day. That's not an exaggeration. Plymouth was going broke, but with market capitalism, it survived and flourished. The "gross national product" of Plymouth skyrocketed immediately! Everyone worked harder, better, smarter. Money did not trickle down; it gushed and benefited not only the Pilgrims but their financial backers, who were delighted.

Most importantly, the new riches motivated entire communities in England to join the Pilgrims in the New World. Had Bradford not made this huge change—a change he made without permission from the backers—the Pilgrims would have sailed home, financially broke and spiritually broken. This was one of those defining moments in Pilgrim history and in American history. Had Plymouth failed, one of six other countries might have conquered the New World.

Historian Smith sums it up:

"In William Bradford we see the making of the first American—the pattern of the self-made man, rising from humble roots to shape a new society."

Bradford wasn't just a leader; he was the embodiment of individualism that helped create the foundation of America.



CHAPTER 5
Generosity

Image: Scout is Helpful, Norman Rockwell

Scene #1

A Leader Who Could Have Been King, But Chose Generosity

The King, after chasing and jailing Separatists, finally recognized Plymouth's success under Bradford's leadership and deeded all of Plymouth land to Bradford. Bradford could have become a dictator, but instead, he did something extraordinary. He distributed the land to the people, awarding parcels by lottery and accepting the same allocation as anyone else. Rather than reserve the best land for himself, Bradford exhibited true leadership by setting an example of generosity. His mission was not personal wealth, but the economic well-being of the entire colony, ensuring that the community spirit remained intact. His selflessness created a Plymouth where people didn't demand more but instead embraced the shared prosperity fostered by Bradford's leadership.

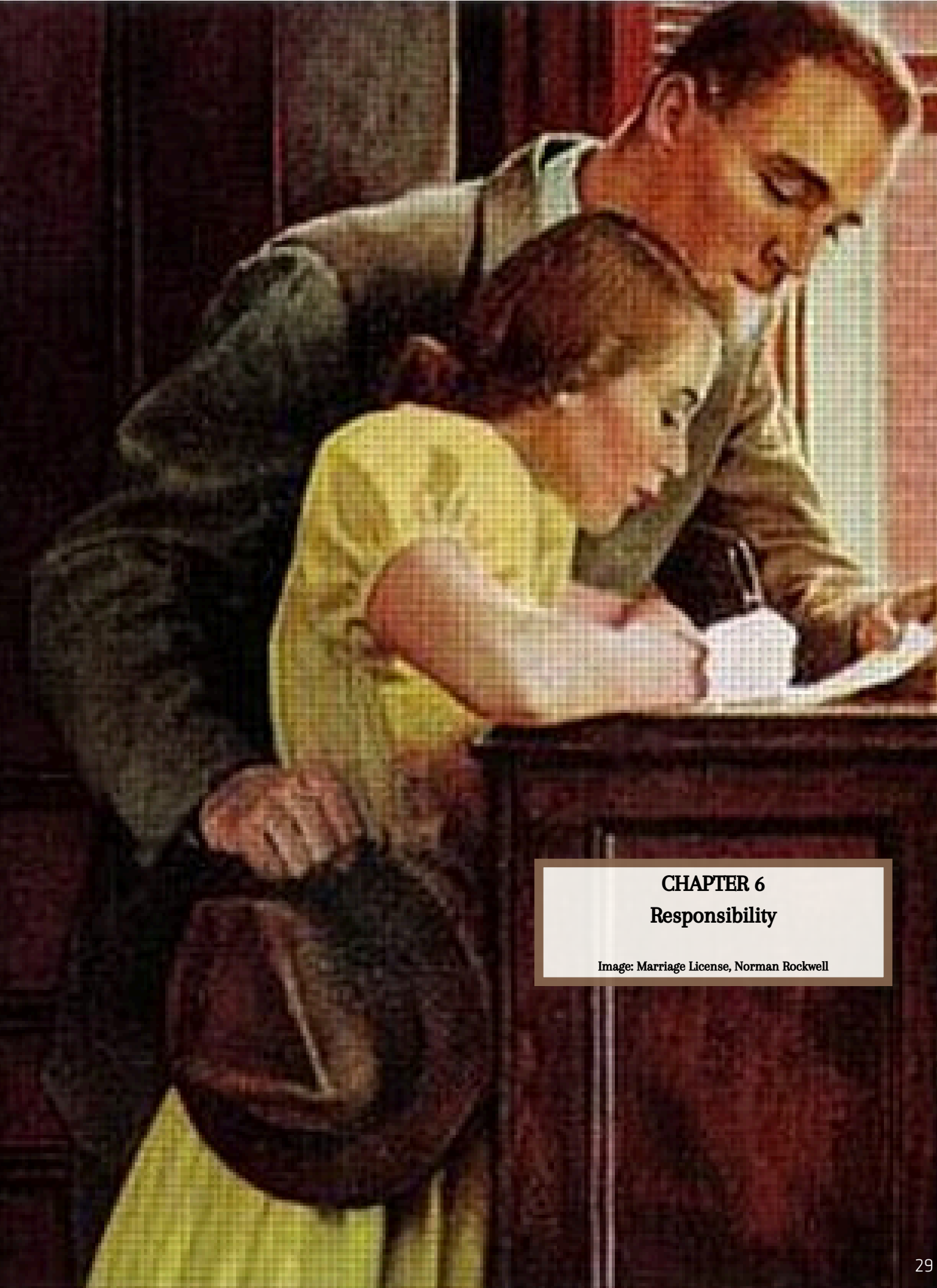
Scene #2

Saving a Friend at the Risk of War

Bradford's unwavering commitment to his principles was put to the test when he had to choose between war and saving a life. A mutual defense pact with the Wampanoag tribe, led by Chief Massasoit, required both sides to execute any traitors. Squanto, a key ally to the Pilgrims, had lied to both Massasoit and Bradford, stirring the potential for conflict. When Massasoit demanded Squanto's execution, Bradford found himself torn. He delayed, hoping for a peaceful resolution, but Massasoit's insistence threatened war. Ultimately, the crisis was defused not by military might, but by Bradford's diplomatic skill and generosity of spirit. Squanto was spared, and peace endured, not through force, but through wise and compassionate leadership.

Bradford's legacy of generosity was woven into the very fabric of Plymouth. He rejected expansionism, focusing instead on peaceful coexistence with the Native Americans. He took drastic steps to ensure fair treatment of indigenous peoples, even executing a settler who murdered a Native American. His peace treaty with Massasoit lasted over 50 years and established the Pilgrims as a stabilizing force in the region. Bradford's generosity extended beyond politics—he took no salary as governor, worked on others' homes before his own, and gave away his land. Even in his wealth, he remained a servant-leader, deeply invested in the well-being of his people. He was not without flaws, but his leadership set a moral precedent for future generations, embodying the spirit of generosity that would define America.

Bradford's approach wasn't just about personal acts of kindness; it was about fostering a community where generosity was the standard. From protecting women's rights to offering second chances to wrongdoers, Bradford's administration laid the groundwork for the values of fairness and compassion that would shape the New World.



CHAPTER 6
Responsibility

Image: Marriage License, Norman Rockwell

Scene #1

May 21, 1621 – Plymouth's First Marriage: A Declaration of Independence

On a joyful day in 1621, Plymouth witnessed its first marriage, an event that would later be recognized as not just a personal union, but a bold act of defiance. Newly elected Governor William Bradford made a revolutionary move by donning magistrate robes and officiating the ceremony of Edward Winslow and Susanna White, breaking with centuries of English tradition. In doing so, Bradford asserted his belief that marriage was a civil matter, not a religious one.

Bradford famously wrote that marriage “... is a civil thing, upon which many questions about inheritance depend... and nowhere found in the gospel to be laid on the ministers as part of their office.” In defying English canon law, which required a minister ordained by the King to perform marriages, Bradford made a clear statement about the separation of church and state. He believed that religious leaders should not be responsible for civil matters, and the power of the monarchy should not extend into the affairs of individuals. As spiritual as Bradford was, he recognized the need to keep government out of religion and religion out of government.

His decision to marry Edward Winslow and Susanna White himself was a declaration of independence—one that would risk his life. Years later, when Bradford sent Winslow back to England on a diplomatic mission, Winslow was arrested and imprisoned for the “illegal” marriage. Despite the threat of torture and death, once again, Bradford’s act stood as a powerful rebuke of the monarchy.



Scene #2

One Judge or a Trial by Jury? Bradford's Innovation in Justice

In addition to his role as a spiritual and political leader, Bradford was also the architect of Plymouth's legal system. Initially, Bradford served as Magistrate, acting as both judge and jury, a respected and wise figure whose judgment was trusted by the people. However, as Plymouth expanded, Bradford became concerned about the increasing reliance on his personal decisions. In 1623, he introduced trial by jury. Bradford wrote, "All criminal acts and also all matters of trespasses and debts between man and man should be tried by the verdict of 12 honest men, empowered by authority in the form of a jury upon their oaths."

Though this wasn't an original concept, Bradford's implementation of trial by jury was a bold move in the evolution of American justice. It was a sign of his trust in the people, in their ability to govern themselves. By establishing this system, Bradford effectively gave up some of his own power, demonstrating that true leadership is about empowering others. As historian Smith wrote, Bradford was, "... a new kind of magistrate—dignified in his role, but willing to roll up his sleeves and work alongside his people." His commitment to fairness set a standard for ethical business practices that influenced commerce in the 17th century.



CHAPTER 7

Initiative

Image: Look at This Picture - Then Look at Your Light
Norman Rockwell

Scene #1

Overcoming Daunting Obstacles – The Pilgrim’s Courageous Spirit

Bradford was keenly aware of the risks involved in immigrating to the New World. He acknowledged the many failed attempts to colonize, from the Norse to the French. But he also believed that despite the dangers, the difficulties were not insurmountable. Bradford’s words as the Mayflower prepared to depart for the New World are some of the most powerful in American history:

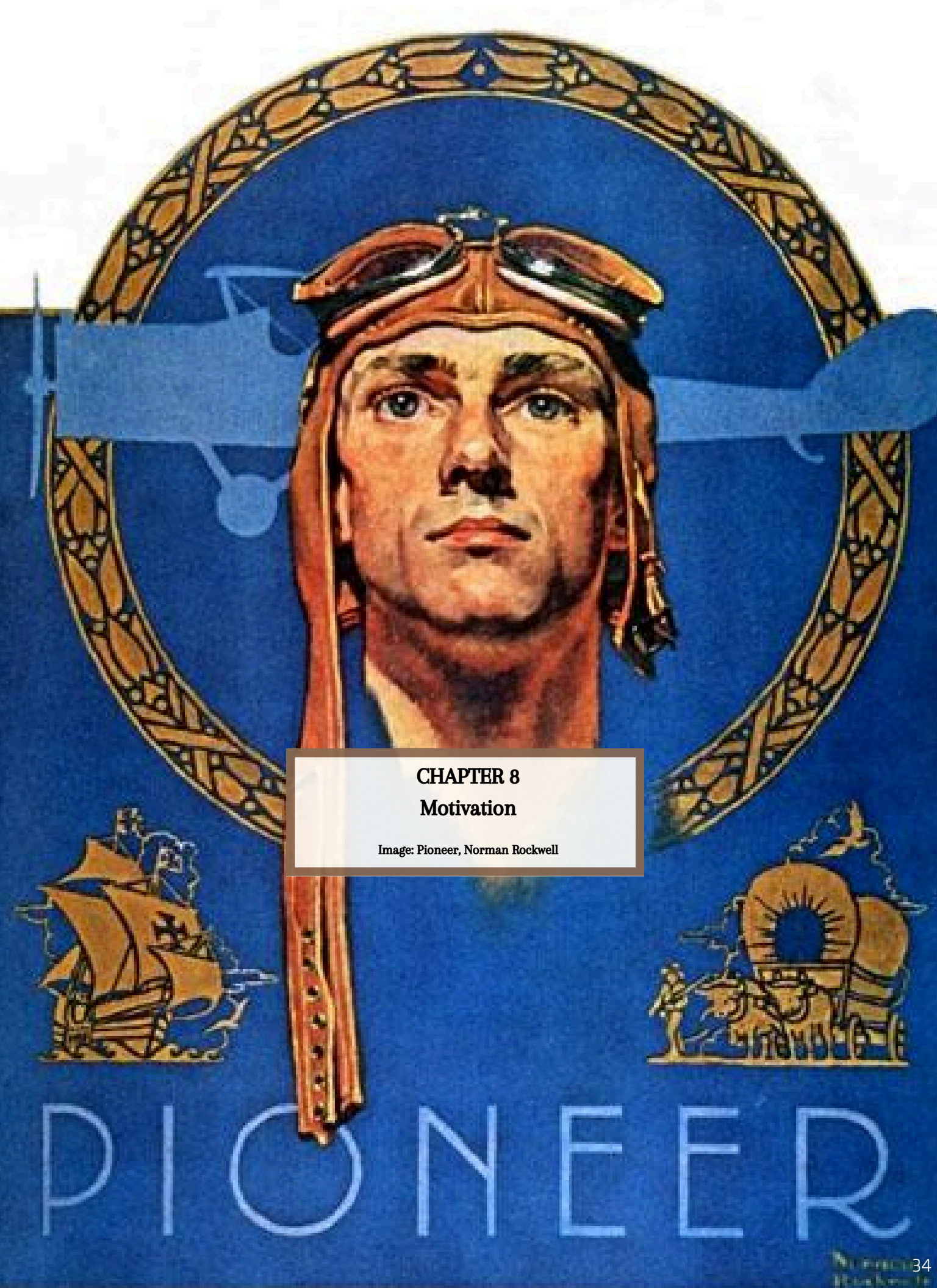
"...such attempts were not to be made and undertaken without good ground and reason; not rashly or lightly as many have done for curiosity or hope of gain... It was granted the dangers were great, but not desperate; the difficulties were many, but not invincible... Yea, though they might lose their lives in this action, yet they might have comfort in the same... for all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties and must be both enterprise(d) and overcome with answerable courages."

Scene #2

Taking the Helm – Leadership in the Face of Adversity

When the Pilgrims first arrived in the New World, they were dependent on trade to survive. The Mayflower was intended to carry people and supplies, while the Speedwell would carry cargo and fish for trade. However, the Speedwell developed a leak and was grounded, leaving the Pilgrims with just the Mayflower. To make matters worse, the harsh winter and a lack of supplies left the Pilgrims on the brink of starvation.

With the situation dire, Bradford took action. The financiers eventually sent a ship to Plymouth to be used for trading. Miles Standish was to captain the ship but became sick, and no one else had sailing skills. With Plymouth close to starvation, can you guess who took the helm? Yes, Bradford navigated it through treacherous waters to fulfill the mission of securing food and supplies. In doing so, he not only saved the colony from disaster but also lifted the spirits of the settlers. Bradford's resourcefulness and determination were a key factor in Plymouth's survival, and his willingness to take on challenges, no matter how daunting, became an enduring symbol of leadership in the face of adversity.



CHAPTER 8
Motivation

Image: Pioneer, Norman Rockwell

PIONEER

Scene #1

A Miserable Voyage Across the Atlantic

Sailing to the New World was no romantic escape—it was a brutal and dangerous ordeal. Bradford paints a grim picture:

"The weather was sharp and violent, subject to cruel and fierce storms. It was winter ... dangerous to travel to unknown places, with nothing but a desolate wilderness ahead, full of wild beasts and wild men."

For the Pilgrims, simply stepping aboard the Mayflower was an act of incredible courage. The years ahead would be filled with disease, near-starvation, mutiny, and legal challenges. Yet, Bradford's unwavering leadership kept the Pilgrims moving forward, even in the face of relentless hardship.

Bradford's motivation was contagious. His wife Dorothy died soon after they landed, but he did not dwell on grief. As snow began to fall and the Pilgrims faced the grueling task of survival, Bradford led with determination. He refused to succumb to despair.



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Scene #2

Thanksgiving: A Celebration of Gratitude and Unity

Barely a year into his first term as Governor, Bradford understood the importance of morale. Inspired by Dutch harvest celebrations, he adapted the tradition into what we now call "Thanksgiving." It wasn't simply a party to celebrate a successful harvest; it was an expression of gratitude to God, and a celebration of unity with the Native Americans. Bradford did not call it Thanksgiving—that title came later from Abraham Lincoln.

Bradford invited Chief Massasoit to join the Pilgrims for the feast, honoring the alliance between them. Massasoit accepted, bringing along 90 braves. Surprise! No problem—the braves hunted five deer to provide food, and the three-day feast featured not only food and drink but also military displays, athletic contests, and games. Kickball was played—the first version of football in the New World.

Bradford's leadership and unwavering integrity made him the moral center of Plymouth. He was re-elected time and again not because of political maneuvering but because of his deep commitment to honesty and to the principles of freedom, justice, and community. His decisions seemed to be guided by one simple question: What does God expect of us?



Conclusion: Bradford's End - A New Beginning

When Bradford passed, he was hailed as the father of Plymouth, a visionary who laid the foundations for a unique society. His ideals, rooted in faith, community, and individual liberty, became the bedrock of American values. Though Massachusetts absorbed Plymouth, Bradford's vision lived on in the democracy, separation of church and state, and inclusive relationships with Native Americans that defined Plymouth Colony.

Bradford didn't just establish a settlement; he set a precedent for a new kind of government—one grounded in democratic principles and the protection of individual rights. As historian Samuel Eliot Morison put it, "The Pilgrims established a community, and a government solidly founded on love of freedom and belief in progress."

Bradford's vision was an answer to the question: **What kind of society would God expect us to build?** He embraced a government that was minimal in its intrusion into daily life but strong in protecting the liberties and safety of its people. He encouraged personal responsibility while providing the framework for justice and order through laws, courts, and fair governance.

Bradford's vision was radical for its time, yet it resonated with the values that would become core to the United States. He understood that personal freedom must be balanced by the common good, and his leadership exemplified this delicate balance. His faith in democracy, the separation of church and state, and the importance of individual freedom laid the groundwork for the ideals that would shape a new nation.

When Bradford passed, the ideals he had worked so tirelessly to establish lived on. He could not have known how far-reaching his influence would be, but his vision became foundational for the emerging American identity. As historians note, while Massachusetts Bay Colony overshadowed Plymouth in size and power, it was Plymouth's values—those of democracy, religious freedom, free enterprise, trial by jury, and community—that would prove to be more enduring in shaping America's future.

Bradford's leadership is a model of moral clarity and integrity. He was never tempted by short-term gain or compromise. In his lifetime, he built a society that reflected his values of freedom, responsibility, and community. Through Bradford's bold, unwavering leadership, Plymouth became a beacon for the values that would eventually shape a nation—a nation built on liberty, faith, and the pursuit of justice.



**America's First Great Leader
Grandfather of America?**

In *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford concluded with ...

Thus, out of small beginnings greater things have been produced by His hand ... and as one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled has shone to many, in some sort to our whole nation.

- Governor William Bradford