

The Pilgrim Who Fell Overboard Off the Mayflower

“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 ... Mr. John Carver, Katherine his wife, Desire Minter, and two manservants, John Howland, Roger Wilder.” (Bradford)

The son of Margaret and Henry Howland, John Howland was born in Fenstanton, a parish and village located on the Cambridgeshire border, sometime in the 1590s.

He had two brothers, Henry and Arthur, who later emigrated from England to Marshfield, Massachusetts. Although his brothers were both Quakers, John himself held to the original faith of the Separatist Pilgrims.

John Howland is called a “manservant” in William Bradford's passenger list, suggesting he was an apprentice in 1620. Apprentices (servants) were almost always under 25 years old.

The following account describes that John Howland fell overboard during the crossing of the Mayflower to Plymouth (from Bradford):

After they had enjoyed fair winds and weather for a season, they were encountered many times with cross winds, and met with many fierce storms, with which the ship was shroudly shaken, and her upper works made very leaky ...

... and one of the main beams in the mid ships was bowed and cracked, which put them in some fear that the ship could not be able to perform the voyage.

So some of the chief of the company, perceiving the mariners to fear the sufficiency of the ship, as appeared by their mutterings, they entered into serious consultation with the master and other officers of the ship, to consider in time of the danger; and rather to return then to cast themselves into a desperate and inevitable peril.

And truly there was great distraction and difference of opinion among the mariners themselves; fain would they do what could be done for their wages sake, (being now half the seas over,) and on the other hand they were loath to hazard their lives too desperately.

But in examining of all opinions, the master and others affirmed they knew the ship to be strong and firm under water; and for the buckling of the main beam, there was a great iron screw the passengers brought out of Holland, which would raise the beam into his place ...

... the which being done, the carpenter and master affirmed that with a post put under it, set firm in the lower deck, and other-ways bound, he would make it sufficient.

And as for the decks and upper works they would caulk them as well as they could, and though with the working of the ship they would not long keep staunch, yet there would otherwise be no great danger, if they did not overpress her with sails. So they committed themselves to the will of God, and resolved to proceed.

In sundry of these storms the winds were so fierce and the seas so high, as they could not bear a knot of sail, but were forced to hull for divers days together.

And in one of them, as they thus lay at hull in a mighty storm, a lusty young man called John Howland, coming upon some occasion above the gratings was, with a seele of the ship, thrown into the sea ...



... but it pleased God that he caught hold of the topsail halyards which hung overboard and ran out at length.

Yet he held his hold (though he was sundry fathoms under water) till he was hauled up by the same rope to the brim of the water, and then with boat hook and other means got into the ship again and his life saved.

And though he was something ill with it, yet he lived many years after and became a profitable member both in church and commonwealth. (Bradford)

Although he had arrived on the Mayflower as a servant to the Carver family, Howland was a young man determined to make his mark in the new world, arriving as neither a “saint” as the Pilgrims termed themselves, nor a “stranger” as those passengers recruited by the Mayflower’s Merchant Adventurers were called. The arduous voyage very nearly ended his life as he was thrown overboard in turbulent seas, but managed to grab a topsail halyard that was trailing in the water and was hauled back aboard safely.

The following timeline is primarily from a listing from Howland descendant's website Miner Descent:

1620 – John was in the “First Encounter” with the Indians at Great Meadow Creek, three days before the landing of the Pilgrims.

This story appears both in Mourt's Relation, published in London in 1622, and (in a condensed version) in William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation.

Wednesday, the sixth of December [1620]. It was resolved our discoverers should set forth ... So ten of our men were appointed who were of themselves willing to undertake it, to wit, Captain Standish, Master Carver, William Bradford, Edward Winslow, John Tilley, Edward Tilley, John Howland, and three of London, Richard Warren, Stephen Hopkins, and Edward Doten, and two of our seamen, John Alderton, and Thomas English.

Of the ship's company there went two of the master's mates, Master Clarke and Master Coppin, the master gunner, and three sailors ... (Mourt's)

... the 6th of December [1620] they sent out their shallop again with ten of their principal men and some seamen, upon further discovery, intending to circulate that deep bay of Cape Cod.

The weather was very cold and it froze so hard as the spray of the sea lighting on their coats, they were as if they had been glazed. Yet that night betimes they got down into the bottom of the bay, and as they drew near the shore they saw some ten or twelve Indians very busy about something.

They landed about a league or two from them ... they made themselves a barricado with logs and boughs as well as they could in the time, and set out their sentinel and betook them to rest, and saw the smoke of the fire the savages made that night.

When morning was come they divided their company, some to coast along the shore in the boat, and the rest marched through the woods to see the land, if any fit place might be for their dwelling. They came also to the place where they saw the Indians the night before, and found they had been cutting up a great fish like a grampus ...

So they ranged up and down all that day, but found no people, nor any place they liked. When the sun grew low, they hasted out of the woods to meet with their shallop ... of which they were very glad, for they had not seen each other all that day since the morning.

So they made them a barricado as usually they did every night, with logs, stakes and thick pine boughs, the height of a man, leaving it open to leeward, partly to shelter them from the cold and wind (making their fire in the middle and lying round about it) and partly to defend them from any sudden assaults of the savages, if they should surround them; so being very weary, they betook them to rest.

But about midnight they heard a hideous and great cry, and their sentinel called “Arm! arm!” So they bestirred them and stood to their arms and shot off a couple of muskets,

and then the noise ceased. They concluded it was a company of wolves or such like wild beasts, for one of the seamen told them he had often heard such noise in Newfoundland.

So they rested till about five of the clock in the morning; for the tide, and their purpose to go from thence, made them be stirring betimes. So after prayer they prepared for breakfast, and it being day dawning it was thought best to be carrying things down to the boat ...

But presently, all on the sudden, they heard a great and strange cry, which they knew to be the same voices they heard in the night, though they varied their notes; and one of their company being abroad came running in and cried, "Men, Indians! Indians!"

And withal, their arrows came flying amongst them.

Their men ran with all speed to recover their arms, as by the good providence of God they did. In the meantime, of those that were there ready, two muskets were discharged at them, and two more stood ready in the entrance of their rendezvous but were commanded not to shoot till they could take full aim at them. And the other two charged again with all speed, for there were only four had arms there, and defended the barricado, which was first assaulted.

The cry of the Indians was dreadful, especially when they saw their men run out of the rendezvous toward the shallop to recover their arms, the Indians wheeling about upon them. But some running out with coats of mail on, and cutlasses in their hands, they soon got their arms and let fly amongst them and quickly stopped their violence ...

Thus it pleased God to vanquish their enemies and give them deliverance; and by his special providence so to dispose that not any one of them were either hurt or hit, though their arrows came close by them and on every side [of] them; and sundry of their coats, which hung up in the barricado, were shot through and through.

Afterwards they gave God solemn thanks and praise for their deliverance, and gathered up a bundle of their arrows and sent them into England afterward by the master of the ship, and called that place the First Encounter. (Bradford)



1623 – John and Elizabeth Tilley were married, when Elizabeth was not quite 16 years of age. Elizabeth was also a passenger on the Mayflower, travelling with her parents, John and Joan Tilley). Elizabeth Tilley was born Aug 30, 1607 in Henlow, Bedfordshire, England.

Elizabeth’s parents had died the first winter and she had become the foster daughter of Governor Carver and his wife who were childless.

In 1623, Howland married Elizabeth Tilley by then a young woman, (ten years Howland’s junior). The had 10 Children:

- Desire, b. say 1624; m. by 1644 John Gorham (eldest known child b. Plymouth 2 April 1644).
- John, b. Plymouth 24 February 1626[/7]; m. Plymouth 26 October 1651 Mary Lee.
- Hope, b. say 1629; m. by 1647 John Chipman (eldest known child b. Plymouth 24 June 1647).
- Elizabeth, b. say 1631; m. (1) Plymouth 13 September 1649 Ephraim Hicks, son of Robert Hicks; m. (2) Plymouth 10 July 1651 John Dickerson.
- Lydia, b. say 1633; m. by about 1655 James Brown, son of John Brown {1635, Plymouth}.
- Hannah, b. say 1637; m. Swansea 6 July 1661 Jonathan Bosworth, son of Jonathan Bosworth {1633, Cambridge}.
- Joseph, b. say 1640; m. Plymouth 7 December 1664 Elizabeth Southworth, daughter of Thomas Southworth.
- Jabez, b. about 1644 (deposed on 19 July 1680 aged 36 years); m. by 1669 Bethiah Thatcher, daughter of Anthony Thatcher (eldest known child b. Plymouth 15 November 1669).
- Ruth, b. say 1646; m. Plymouth 17 November 1664 Thomas Cushman [PCR 8:25], son of Thomas Cushman.
- Isaac, b. Plymouth 15 November 1649; m. by 1677 Elizabeth Vaughn, daughter of George Vaughn.



1624 - By this time he had prospered enough to also bring his brothers Arthur and Henry to the colony as well, solidly establishing the Howland family in the New World.

1625 - Howland joined with Edward Winslow exploring the Kennebec River, looking for possible trading sites and natural resources that the colony could exploit. The year after that he was asked to participate in buying out the businessmen who had bankrolled the settlement of Plymouth

("Merchant Adventurers" was the term used at the time) so the colony could pursue its own goals without the pressure to remit profits back to England. The amount totaled £1,800 to relinquish their claims on the land, and the group also assumed the colony's debts of £2,400 more. In return the group, known as undertakers had a monopoly on the colony's trade for six years.

1626 – A group of colonists assumed the debt owed to the Merchant Adventurers of London who had backed the Pilgrims financially. To pay off the loan, a monopoly over the Colony's trade was given William Bradford, Isaac Allerton and Myles Standish, who chose Howland as one of their partners. (Howland had enough money (probably thanks to an inheritance via his wife) to help buy out the original joint-stock funders with the others.)

That year, Isaac Allerton negotiated a patent that granted Plymouth the exclusive right to trade with the Indians and to establish a trading station on the Kennebec River. In 1627 Governor Bradford placed John Howland in charge and a brisk trade developed there with the Indians. John's family may have spent time with him in Maine, and some of his children may have been born there.

1627 – In the division of Cattle agreement, John Howland acquired twenty acres for each member of his household. In addition, the colonists were organized in "companies" of thirteen members each. The livestock of the colony was divided equally among the companies. Listed in John's "company" were John and Elizabeth and their two children, John and Priscilla Alden and their two children, and five unattached men.

1628 - Howland was elevated to the post of Assistant Governor.

In 1628 a trading station was built at Cushnoc (now called Augusta) on the east side of the Kennebec River. A year later, a permanent log-house was built, and Howland, then Assistant Governor, was asked to manage the trading station.

For approximately seven years John Howland was in charge of the station. It is not known if Elizabeth and their family of three children lived at the station permanently or for short periods of time. During the time that John operated the station Elizabeth gave birth to three more children, but it is not known whether she gave birth while she was living at the trading station or in Plymouth.

The trading station in Cushnoc was very successful. The Pilgrims traded corn and manufactured goods with the Indians for beaver, otter and other furs. The proceeds of this trade enabled the Undertakers to settle their debts with the Merchant Adventurers. .

1633 – Howland, then thirty-four, was admitted as a freeman of Plymouth. For nearly forty years, John Howland was actively involved in the governance of Plymouth through elected or appointed positions, viz.

- one of the seven Plymouth Assistant Governors—1632-35, 1638-39;
- one of the four Plymouth Deputies to the General Court for nearly thirty years—1641, 1645, 1647-56, 1658, 1659, 1661-68, 1670;
- one of the five selectmen of Plymouth—1665-66;
- one of the Plymouth Assessors—1641, 1644, 1647-51;
- committee on fur trading—1659;
- surveyor of highways—1650.

1634 – In command of Kennebec Trading Post in Maine. John Howland and John Alden were the magistrates in authority there.

In 1637 John received forty acres of land, and in 1639 he was given a choice of additional land for himself or his heirs around Yarmouth, Dartmouth and Rehoboth. John and Elizabeth became major landholders in Plymouth and the surrounding towns.

Part of the land he chose was in Yarmouth, which he gave to his son John and daughters Desire and Hope and their respective families.

In 1639 John purchased land and a house in Rocky Nook, where he spent the rest of his life. Also living in Rocky Nook were Thomas Cushman Sr. and Mary Allerton and their family.



Howland Homestead at Rocky Nook (from article by Ruth Major)

By 1643 a colony in Piscataqua at the mouth of the Kennebec River under the control of London investors, agents of Lord Say and Seal and Lord Brooke, attempted to trade with Indians on the Kennebec River. Howland and men from Plymouth told the Piscataqua men under the command of John

Hocking to leave since they were trespassing and the patent granted Plymouth exclusive trading rights.

After the ill-fated Little James was sent back to England in 1625 with its hold full of trade goods, the colonists were left with the two shallops that the boat builder had built the previous year.

One of the shallops was used in an attempt to generate revenue for the colony. They laid a little deck over the midships section to protect a cargo of corn, and Edward Winslow, among others, used it for a successful trading voyage to the Kennebec.

Even with the little deck on the shallop, the colonists felt they ran a great hazard in traveling such a long way in basically an open boat. They realized the need for a larger vessel to safely continue trading in Maine.

But as the boat builder had died the previous year, it was left to a house carpenter, who had worked with the boat builder, to attempt to modify one of their shallops. The house carpenter “took one of the biggest of their shallops and sawed her in the middle, and so built her up and laid a deck on her.” This vessel, Bradford reports, provided good service to the colony for seven years.

One April day John Howland found John Hocking riding at anchor within the area claimed by Plymouth. Hocking was from the nearby Piscataqua Plantation.

Howland went up to him in their “barke” and asked Hocking to weigh anchors and depart. Apparently Hocking used some strong language and the two exchanged some words not recorded, but the result of the conversation was that Hocking would not leave and Howland would not let him stay.

Howland then sent three of his men—John Irish, Thomas Savory and William Rennoles [son of our ancestor William Reynolds] — to cut the cables of Hocking’s boat. They severed one but the strong current prevented them from cutting the other cable so Howland called them back and ordered Moses Talbott to go with them.

The four men were able to maneuver their canoe to the other cable, but Hocking was waiting on deck armed with a carbine and a pistol in his hand. He aimed first at Savory and then as the canoe swished about he put his gun almost to Talbott’s head.

Seeing this, Howland called to Hocking not to shoot his man but to “take himself as his mark.” Saying his men were only doing what he had ordered them to do. If any wrong was being done it was he that did it, Howland shouted. Howland called again for Hocking to aim at him.

Hocking, however, would not even look at Howland and shortly afterwards Hocking shot Talbott in the head and then took up his pistol intending to shoot another of Howland’s men.

Bradford continues the story in his history of Plymouth: Howland’s men were angered and naturally feared for their lives so one of the fellows in the canoe raised his musket and shot Hocking “who fell down dead and never spake word.”

The surviving poachers must have skedaddled for home where they soon wrote to the bigwigs in England but failed to tell the whole truth including the fact that Hocking had killed a Plymouth man first. The lords “were much offended” and must have made known their anger.

The Hocking affair did have severe international implications. Colonists feared that King Charles might use it as an excuse for sending over a royal governor to rule all New England. This was a real threat for early in 1634 the king had created a Commission for Regulating Plantations with power to legislate in both civil and religious matters and even to revoke charters.

Not long after the killings Plymouth sent a ship into the territory of Massachusetts Bay and authorities there quickly seized John Alden who was aboard the ship. Alden was imprisoned although he had no direct part in the Kennebec tragedy. When Alden was jailed Plymouth was quite obviously upset for Massachusetts Bay had no jurisdiction over the Kennebec area or over citizens of Plymouth.

This was not of their business. Plymouth dispatched Capt. Myles Standish to Boston to present letters explaining the situation and Gov. Thomas Dudley quickly freed Alden, and after a later court hearing all blame was laid to Hocking. The matter was settled.

1652, 1659, 1661-1668 and 1670 – John served as Deputy in the Plymouth General Court,

1672 – John Howland died February 23, 1672 in the Plymouth home of his son.

The bond of administration of John Howland’s estate is dated March 5, 1672, and bears the signatures of Elizabeth (Tilley) Howland, who was the executrix of her late husband’s will, and of two of her sons-in-law, John Chipman and John Gorham, who became her sureties. It also bears signatures of Lt. Ephraim Morton and William Crow, the two witnesses.

John was “with honour interred” on Burial Hill. This was accorded only to the leaders of the Colony, and meant that a squad of soldiers fired a volley over his grave.

He is described in the records as a “godly man and an ardent professor in the ways of Christ.”



The obituary for John Howland is a part of the Plymouth Colony Records.

“The 23th of February Mr. John Howland Senir of the Towne of Plymouth Deceased...Hee lived until hee attained about eighty yeares in the world...and was the last man that was left of those that Came over in the shipp Called the May Flower, that lived in Plymouth hee was with honor Intered att the Towne of Plymout on the 25th of February 1672.”

Last Will and Testament of John Howland 1672

Know all men to whom these presents shall Come That I John howland senir of the Towne of New Plymouth in the Collonie of New Plymouth in New England in America, this twenty ninth Day of May one thousand six hundred seaventy and two being of whole mind, and in Good and pfect memory and Remembrance praised be God; being now Grown aged; haveing many Infeirmities of body upon mee; and not Knowing how soon God will call mee out of this world, Doe make and ordaine these presents to be my Testament Containing herein my last Will in manor and forme following;

Imp I Will and bequeath my body to the Dust and my soule to God that Gave it in hopes of a Joyfull Resurrection unto Glory; and as Concerning my temporall estate, I Dispose thereof as followeth;

Item I Doe give and bequeath unto John howland my eldest sonne besides what lands I have alreddy given him, all my Right and Interest To that one hundred acres of land graunted mee by the Court lying on the eastern side of Tauton River; between Teticutt and Taunton bounds and all the appurtenances and priviledges Therunto belonging, T belonge to him and his heirs and assignes for ever; and if that Tract should faile, then to have all my Right title and Interest by and in that Last Court graunt to mee in any other place, To belonge to him his heires and assignes for ever;

Item I give and bequeath unto my son Jabez howland all those my upland and Meadow That I now possesse at Satuckett and Paomett, and places adjacent, with all the appurtenances and priviledges, belonging therunto, and all my right title and Interest therin, To belonge to him his heires and assignes for ever,

Item I Give and bequeath unto my son Jabez howland all that my one peece of land that I have lying on the southsyde of the Mill brooke, in the Towne of Plymouth aforesaid; be it more or lesse; and is on the Northsyde of a feild that is now Gyles Rickards senir To belonge to the said Jabez his heirs and assignes for ever;

Item I give and bequeath unto Isacke howland my youngest sonne all those my uplands and meddows Devided and undivided with all the appurtenances and priviliged unto them belonging, lying and being in the Towne of Middlebery, and in a tract of Land Called the Majors Purchase near Namassakett Ponds; which I have bought and purchased of William White of Marshfeild in the Collonie of New Plymouth; which may or shall appeer by any Deed or writings Together with the aformentioned prticulares To belonge to the said Isacke his heirs and assignes for ever;

Item I give and bequeath unto my said son Isacke howland the one halfe of my twelve acree lott of Meddow That I now have att Winnatucsett River within the Towne of

Plymouth aforsaid To belonge to him and said Isacke howland his heires and assignes for ever,

Item I Will and bequeath unto my Deare and loveing wife Elizabeth howland the use and benefitt of my now Dwelling house in Rockey nooke in the Township of Plymouth aforsaid, with the outhousing lands, That is uplands uplands [sic] and meddow lands and all appurtenances and priviledges therunto belonging in the Towne of Plymouth and all other Lands housing and meddowes that I have in the said Towne of Plymouth excepting what meddow and upland I have before given To my sonnes Jabez and Isacke howland During her naturall life to Injoy make use of and Improve for her benefitt and Comfort;

Item I give and bequeath unto my son Joseph howland after the Decease of my loveing wife Elizabeth howland my aforsaid Dwelling house att Rockey nooke together with all the outhousing uplands and Medowes appurtenances and priviledges belonging therunto; and all other housing uplands and meddowes appurtenances and priviledges That I have within the aforsaid Towne of New Plymouth excepting what lands and meadowes I have before Given To my two sonnes Jabez and Isacke; To belong to him the said Joseph howland To him and his heires and assignes for ever;

Item I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Desire Gorum twenty shillings

Item I give and bequeath To my Daughter hope Chipman twenty shillings

Item I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Elizabeth Dickenson twenty shillings

Item I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Lydia Browne twenty shillings

Item I give & bequeath to my Daughter hannah Bosworth twenty shillings

Item I give and bequeath unto my Daughter Ruth Cushman twenty shillings

Item I give to my Grandchild Elizabeth howland The Daughter of my son John howland twenty shillings

Item my will is That these legacies Given to my Daughters, be payed by my exequitrix in such species as shee thinketh meet;

Item I will and bequeath unto my loveing wife Elizabeth howland, my Debts and legacies being first payed my whole estate: vis: lands houses goods Chattles; or any thing else that belongeth or appertaineth unto mee, undisposed of be it either in Plymouth Duxburrow or Middlbery or any other place whatsoever; I Doe freely and absolutly give and bequeath it all to my Deare and loveing wife Elizabeth howland whom I Doe by these prsents, make ordaine and Constitute to be the sole exequitrix of this my Last will and Testament to see the same truly and faithfully prformed according to the tenour therof; In witness whereof I the said John howland senir have heerunto sett my hand and seale the aforsaid twenty ninth Day of May, one thousand six hundred seaventy and two 1672

Signed and sealed in the prsence of Samuel ffuller John Howland

William Crow And a seale

ca. 1675 – The Rocky Nook Farm house burned to the ground. Elizabeth makes her home with Jabez' family.

1680/81 – Jabez sells the Plymouth house. Elizabeth signed the deed and moved to Swansea to live with her daughter, Lydia Brown.

1687 – Elizabeth Tilley Howland died and was buried in the Brown Family plot.

John Howland is widely believed to have the greatest number of American descendants of any of the original passengers of the 1620 Mayflower that founded Plymouth Colony.



Information here is primarily from Of Plimoth Plantation, Bradford; Pilgrim Hall Museum; MinerDescent; <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/education/who-were-the-pilgrims/2020/february/john-howland/>; The Pilgrim John Howland Society; American Ancestors;

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the *Mayflower*, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young