

The Billingtons

“The Billingtons were not the kind of next-door neighbors you wanted in any century.”
(Boston Globe)

John Billington was born in England about 1582. In 1603, he married a woman named Elinor Lockwood and had two sons: John, who was born in 1604 and Francis, who was born about 1606. The Billington family lived in Lincolnshire. (Brooks)

In the summer of 1620, businessmen from London began recruiting families and individuals to help colonize northern Virginia. Billington decided to take the men up on their offer. The only catch was that the passage to America came with a price:

“In exchange for their passage, shipboard provisions, and a share of the profits, Billington signed a contract that bound himself, his wife, and their two sons to labor on behalf of the colony until 1627.

For the duration of their partnership with the investors, the Billingtons and their fellow colonists would work six days per week for ‘the Company.’ All profits from ‘trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing, or any other means’ would remain in the common stock; even the houses and gardens were to be included in the assets to be divided after seven years.

Some people considered the terms ‘fitter for thieves and bond slaves than honest men,’ but the prospect of a better life was sufficient inducement for the Billingtons to cast their lot with other hard-pressed families headed for America.” (Brooks, HistoryOfMassachusetts-org)

According to the book American Murder, Billington and his family began causing problems while aboard the Mayflower:

Billington, his wife Ellen, and their sons Francis and John the younger were aboard when the Mayflower dropped anchor at Provincetown harbor. Straightaway, the Billingtons started causing trouble.

Even before the newly arrived immigrants could move on to Plymouth Rock, Francis almost sank the ship when he fired a gun near an uncovered barrel of gunpowder and set fire to a cabin.

The Pilgrims had arrived in the area in December, 1620, on board the Mayflower. There were about one hundred of them altogether.

Most had come primarily for religious reasons. Some - collectively called the “Saints” – were Separatists who decided that the only way they could be true to their conscience was to leave the established church and secretly worship.

These Separatists thought the English church too corrupt for salvage.

Another group of these early settlers was called the “Strangers,” a diverse number of people who did not share the radical Protestant views. Their primary motivation for resettlement was economic, not religious.

They had been haphazardly selected in England by the sponsors of the trip to fill up the ship and insure a profitable voyage.

There is even some evidence to suggest that a few Catholics had come aboard as part of the “Stranger” group. Many more Anglicans or Church of England adherents were on board. One such person was a well-to-do Anglican named John Billington.

While all of the “Strangers” were seen as a threat, it was John Billington and his family who were singled out as responsible for some tensions on the Mayflower crossing the Atlantic. Of note,

1. The ship was small causing considerable crowding. The Billingtons, however, had sufficient wealth to live in a private cabin angering the cramped and crabby anti-Catholic Pilgrims.
2. When the ship was taken off course Billington was a member of a group threatening mutiny.
3. While off shore expeditions set out to explore possible settlement areas in the New World one of the Billington children accidentally set off a small explosive charge almost destroying the ship.
4. During one of these expeditions when her husband was gone, the wife of William Bradford mysteriously fell over board and drowned. It was never clear whether this was suicide or an accident. While the Billingtons were not directly responsible, Bradford blamed the mischievous and inattentive behavior of the Billington boys for the incident.
5. Due to illness and death at sea, by the time the Pilgrims landed the “Saints” were beginning to be outnumbered by the “Strangers.” Upon landing there were 32 “Saints” and 51 “Strangers.” (History of Criminal Justice, Illinois State University)

John Billington

Billington and his family miraculously all survived the first harsh winter in Massachusetts which claimed the lives of so many who had boarded the ship in Plymouth on September 16, 1620. He was even one of the 41 'true' Pilgrims who signed the Mayflower Compact.

Billington was not known to the Pilgrim Separatists. However, the Billingtons became well-known as the troublemakers of the group, and Billington subsequently became the first person to commit a crime in America in 1621 when he refused to obey military orders.

“The first offence, since our arrival, is of John Billington, who came on board at London ; and is, this month convented before the whole Company, for his contempt to the Captain's lawful command.

For which, he is adjudged to have his neck and heels tied together : but upon humbling himself, and craving pardon ; and it being the first offence ; he is forgiven.” (Prince)

He was regularly involved in disputes and civil disobedience, and was accused of secretly supporting local dissenters who were sending political letters back to England, written to undermine the colony. (Mayflower400UK-org)

Francis Billington

The Mayflower was still riding at anchor off the tip of Cape Cod, when Francis was accused of nearly blowing the sturdy three-master sky high. (Mulligan, Daily News) As related in Mourt’s Relations,

The 5th day [of December, 1620], we, through God's mercy, escaped a great danger by the foolishness of a boy, one Francis of Billington's sons, who, in his father's absence, had got gunpowder and had shot a piece or two, and made squibs [pellets] ...

... and there being a fowling-piece charged in his father's cabin, shot her off in the cabin there being a little barrel of powder half full, scattered in and about the cabin, the fire being within four feed of the bed between the decks, and many flints and iron things about the cabin, and many people about the fire, and yet, by God's mercy, no harm done. (Mourt's Relation)

Later, in reckless disregard for his or the Colony's safety, Francis went exploring. Finding 'Billington Sea' is part of his legacy, today, as noted in Bradford,

This day [January 8, 1621], Francis Billington, having the week before seen from the top of a tree on a high hill a great sea as he thought, went with one of the master's mates to see it.

They went three miles and then came to a great water, divided into two great lakes, the bigger of them five or six miles in circuit, and in it an isle of a cable length square, the other three miles in compass; in their estimation they are fine fresh water, full of fish, and fowl.

A brook issues from it; it will be an excellent help for us in time. They found seven or eight Indian houses, but not lately inhabited. When they saw the houses they were in some fear, for they were but two persons and one piece. (Bradford)

The larger of the lakes was named "Billington Sea". (Daily News)

John Billington Jr – Lost and Found

There were children on the Mayflower — Oceanus Hopkins who was born at sea, Peregrine White who gave his first baby-cry soon after the Mayflower reached the New World, Francis Billington who almost blew up the Mayflower while trying to make fireworks, and John Billington.

John was a mischievous youngster, and so lively that the Pilgrim Fathers had to keep a stern eye upon him. That night when John did not come home, the Plymouth folk were worried. As Bradford notes,

About the later end of this month [July 1621], one John Billington lost him selfe in the woods, and wandered up and downe some 5 days, living on berries and what he could find.

At length he light on an Indean plantation, 20 mils south of this place, called Manamet, they conveid him further of, to Nawsett, among those peopl that had before set upon the English when they were costing, whilst the ship lay at the Cape, as is before noted.

Governor Bradford sent a party to look for him. They scoured the woods about, but there was no John.

Five days went by.

And John had not returned when a message came from the friendly Indian, King Massasoit, saying that the Nausets had the lad. The Nauset Indians were the same fierce savages who had attacked the Pilgrims at The Place of the First Encounter.

A shallop was launched and victualed; and the next morning ten of the Pilgrims, with Tisquantum, their Indian interpreter, set sail for Nauset.

It was a dangerous trip. At first the day was calm and bright, then came on a storm of wind with thunder and lightning, that lashed the little ship; while a waterspout almost broke over her.

“But God be praised!” says the Pilgrim Chronicle, which tells about the lost boy, “God be praised ! it dured not long, and we put in that night for harbour at a place called Cummaquid, where we had some hope to find the boy.”

But they did n't find him there. “The Nausets have got him,” said the friendly Cummaquid Indians, when they came down the next morning to catch lobsters. And they invited the Pilgrims to come ashore and eat with them. So six of them landed, hoping to learn something more about John.

Iyanough, the handsome young Cummaquid Chief, welcomed them heartily. He made a feast of venison and maize cakes. And after they had eaten, he offered to go with them to help rescue John.

So the Pilgrims put out to sea again, taking Iyanough and two of his braves. They made the best speed possible, for they were anxious to find what had happened to the boy.

By this time the sun was setting, but Iyanough had not returned with news of John. This made the Pilgrims all the more anxious.

After sunset, they saw a long train of Nauset Indians come winding down to the beach. At their head, walked their haughty Chief Aspinet.

He drew near to the edge of the beach. Some of his warriors stood guard with their bows and arrows ready to shoot. The others laid down their weapons and followed Aspinet into the water.

They began to wade out toward the shallop. And whom should the Pilgrims see sitting on the shoulders of a big Indian, but John himself, covered with strings of beads!

He had been visiting in the Nauset village, where his new friend the big Indian had feasted and entertained him in his wigwam.

And while the Indian was giving John over to the Pilgrims, Aspinet announced that he and his people wished to make peace with the white men.

So the Pilgrims made peace with him, and presented him with a strong English knife.

They gave another one to the big Indian in return for his kindness to John. Aspinet and his warriors then went back friendly and satisfied, to their village.

So the lost boy was found. (Good Stories)



Elinor Billington

The mother did not seem to redeem the reputation of husband and sons; traditionally she was called “the scold.” She later married Gregory Armstrong. She had various controversies in court with her son and others.

In 1636, she was accused of slander by “Deacon” John Doane, she had charged him with unfairness in mowing her pasture lot, - and she was sentenced to a fine of five pounds and “to sit in the stocks and be publickly whipt.”

Her second husband died in 1650 and she lived several years longer, occupying a “tenement” granted to her in her son's house at North Plymouth. (Marple)

Back to John Sr ...

In 1626, the colonists assumed full ownership of the plantation after a period of negotiation with the investors who were disgruntled because they had received very little profit from the project. The land and cattle were divided up among them but for Billington, it wasn't quite what he was expecting.

Billington received the smallest per capita allotment in the colony, despite the fact that he was one of the first settlers of the colony. He received a house in the center of Plymouth, 63 acres of land, a share in the plantation's livestock and rights in future distribution.

Billington didn't have much of a social status in the colony either. He was not a member of the church, he had been excluded from all public office due to his bad reputation with Governor Bradford and he lacked the resources necessary to become one of the colony's Undertakers, which were men who took on financial liability for the colony and controlled its trade with England. As a result of all this, Billington was frustrated and angry.

To make matters worse, sometime between 1627 and 1630, Billington's son, John, died just before he turned 25 years old. The cause of death is unknown but Richard Warren also died in 1628 which indicates there may have been an illness in the Warren household.

Around the same time, Billington became involved in a dispute with his neighbor John Newcomen.

John Newcomen, a seventeen year old “Saint,” had made a practice of hunting in the woods. Of course, as the colony matured private property rights became more important, a concept that seemed to allude young Newcomen.

The owner of the land frequently visited by Newcomen was John Billington.

Newcomen was constantly warned away from his poaching by Billington and others of the community, but such threats and advice went unheeded. Several accounts, particularly those of Bradford and his family, stated that Billington and Newcomen were enemies.

Newcomen was seen as young, impetuous and careless by these friendlier accounts but he was not seen as a crook. (History of Criminal Justice)

It is not known what the dispute was about but the after effects lingered until 1630 when Billington happened upon Newcomen in a field and shot him dead, according to William Hubbard's book A General History of New England:

"So when this wilderness began first to be peopled by the English where there was but one poor town, another Cain was found therein, who maliciously slew his neighbor in the field, as he accidentally met him, as he himself was going to shoot deer.

The poor fellow perceiving the intent of this Billington, his mortal enemy, sheltered himself behind trees as well as he could for a while; but the other, not being so ill a marksman as to miss his aim, made a shot at them, and struck him on the shoulder, with which he died soon after.

The murderer expected that either for want of power to execute for capital offenses, or for want of people to increase the plantation, he should have his life spared; but justice otherwise determined."

According to the book The Human Tradition in the Atlantic World, the murder was the result of Billington's frustration after years of struggling to prosper in the colony. The book states that after the death of his son, Billington was angry about his bad fortune and was frustrated about a new wave of incoming colonists that would only increase their hardships:

"Not long after that personal tragedy, John Billington learned that Plymouth would soon receive a new wave of impoverished Separatists from Holland.

Not only would there be additional competition for arable pasture land and timber, but the established colonists would be expected to support these newcomers for up to eighteen months until they could become self-sufficient.

The burden fell heavy on the plantation and exacerbated tensions that simmer just below the surface.

Men like Billington were powerless to stem the tide of dissenters from Leiden. His land holdings were modest, his options were limited, his oldest son was dead, and just as he was starting to reap the benefits of his long labors, the colony was saddled with indigent Calvinists who years earlier had shunned the hazards of initial settlement.

To add insult to injury, servants began to arrive from England to work for the colony's privileged undertakers. After years of strife and frustration, John Billington reached a breaking point.

As the decade drew to a close, his frustration and anger got the best of him, and he 'waylaid a young man, one John Newcomen, about a former quarrel and shot him.'"

Massachusetts Governor William Bradford wrote an account of Billington's trial and hanging in his journal Of Plymouth Plantation, and stated that he sought the advice of the nearby Massachusetts Bay Colony on the matter:

This year [1630] Billinton the elder (one that came over with the first) was arraigned, and both by grand and petie jurie found guilty of willfull murder, by plaine and notorious evidence.

And was for the same accordingly executed.

This, as it was the first execution amongst them, so was it a matter of great sadness unto them.

They used all due means about his trial, and tooke the advice of Mr. Winthrop and other the ablest gentle-men in the [Bay] of the Massachsets, that were then new-ly come over, who concurred with them that he ought to dye, and the land to be purged from blood.

He and some of his had been often punished fir miscariages before, being one of the profanest families amongst them.

They came from London, and I know not by what friend shuffled into their company. His facte, was, that he way-laid a yong-man, on John New-comin, (about a former quarrel,) and shote him with a gune, wherof he dyed.

John Billington was hanged in September of 1630. Billington's burial location is unknown, although he was probably buried on his property as per social custom at the time. (Brooks)

Information here is from Bradford; Mourt's Relation; History of Criminal Justice, Illinois State University; Daily Press, Newport News, VA; Mayflower400UK-org; HistoryOfMassachusetts-org, Brooks; American Murder: Criminals, Crimes and the Media, Mike Mayo; The Women Who Came in the Mayflower, Marple

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