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How the Survivors of the Mayflower Voyage Embraced and Raised Orphaned Children

Life in the seventeenth century was difficult for all; hunger, disease, and death were all too close to the hearts of the common people in that day. Those who decided to flee England did it knowing the ocean journey would be arduous and that life in the New World would be difficult. While the death of half of the members of the Plymouth colony had a significant impact on the survivors, I do not think it changed their fundamental concept of family. There were many reasons for this: life expectancy at that time was short, mortality was high, the putting out of children was common, and non-nuclear family structures were not unusual.

The average life expectancy in 1620 England was approximately 40 years. Death at a young age was much more common then and the loss of a child was experienced much more frequently. My ancestor Constance Hopkins, daughter of Steven Hopkins, had already experienced the death of her mother, when she was 7, before she and her family sailed for Plymouth. Her older sister Elizabeth appears to have died before the sailing as well (Johnson 165). During the sail over, death came with the fatality of William Butten. Once the Mayflower was moored off Cape Cod, the death toll started to rise. One passenger died in November, followed by six in December and then 26 more by the end of February. Colds leading to pneumonia and scurvy are what are believed to have killed so many (Johnson 85).

When the passengers were finally able to explore the area of Cape Cod, the evidence of a previous epidemic was all around them: empty houses and even the human remains of

an Indian village that had once inhabited the area were littered on the ground (Deetz 57). Of the eighteen married women who made the journey over, only four survived to the first Thanksgiving, including Hopkins' second wife, Elizabeth. Hopkins' youngest children Demaris and baby Oceanus also perished during the first winter. (Johnson 105). While this was heartbreaking, all of those in the new world had seen loss before, and so they responded to it as they had back in England.

The practice of "putting out" children - sending children to live with a relative or another member of the community as apprentice or servant - was common. In William Bradford's Mayflower Passenger list, four families travelled over with children that had been "put out" to them. Some times the arrangement was made merely for instructional purposes, but in cases of orphaned children, they were put out to live with relatives or with neighboring families who could support them (Demos 120). For example, John Hooke traveled on the Mayflower as a teen servant to Isaac Allerton; his parents, who lived in London, put him out when he was twelve, so he could learn how to be a tailor (Johnson 159). The family at the time was considered a vocational institute, a school, a church, house of correction, and a welfare institution (Demos 183-184). These roles the family took on would shape a child for the future. A stable family life was important to the community to assure that communal life continued to run smoothly. In cases of children who either no longer had parents or whose parents could not provide for them, this practice was in everyone's best interest so these children could thrive and contribute to the common good. Steven Hopkins' three older children had been 'put out' with an aunt and uncle, for almost two years, while they awaited his return from Jamestown after their mother died (Johnson 165). After the travelers arrived in Plymouth, the custom of putting out continued. (Deetz

116) The rapid death of so many passengers made this practice even more important, not only so that surviving children could be taken care of, but also so the children would learn from the families and be able to fill the many empty adult roles and help around the colony.

While we may think of the Mayflower passengers having traditional mother-father-child families, actually the opposite was true (Deetz 56). After the Mayflower voyage and the harsh winter, only seven teenaged girls were still alive in the colony, four of which had been orphaned (Johnson 106). The many deaths required the remaining girls to assume many of the traditional wife and mother roles around the colony until they were old enough to be married. There were also cases of unmarried men living with families while their homes were being built. Nicholas Snow was a friend of Steven and Elizabeth Hopkins from back in London; he came over on a later voyage aboard the *Anne*. He lived in the Hopkins' house, along with another man, William Palmer and his wife, until the men's homes were ready (Johnson 120). Later on, the Indian, Squanto, was housed with the Hopkins' family and he would have been a non-traditional addition to the family indeed!

Even with the chance of survival low and risk of failure high, the passengers aboard the Mayflower risked it all to start a new life in the New World. And while there were a lot of changes in the daily lives of the people in the colony, the overall concept of family was unaltered. Due to high mortality rates and the practice of putting out children overall non-traditional family structures were common. Yet, these practices had also occurred back in England. So even with the extreme changes that occurred with their migration, they clung to established practices that bettered the family and the community.

Citations

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