



Marguerite Mullaney

Nantasket Beach, Massachusetts, May

“shift for ourselves in a forlorn place in this wilderness”

Surviving the First Year of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1630-1631 Memoir of Roger Clap, ca. 1680s, excerpts

Roger Clap [Clapp] arrived in New England in May 1630 at age 21, having overcome his father's opposition to his emigration. In his seventies he began his memoir to tell his children of "God's remarkable providences . . . in bringing me to this land." A devout man, he interprets the lack of food for his body as part of God's providing food for the soul, in this case the souls of the Puritans as they created their religious haven.

I thought good, my dear children, to leave with you some account of God's remarkable providences to me, in bringing me into this land and placing me here among his dear servants and in his house, who I am most unworthy of the least of his mercies. The Scripture requireth us to tell God's wondrous works to our children, that they may tell them to their children, that God may have glory throughout all ages. Amen. . . .

I was born in England, in Sallcom, in Devonshire, in the year of our Lord 1609. My father was a man fearing God, and in good esteem among God's faithful servants. His outward estate was not great, I think not above £80 per annum.¹ We were five brethren (of which I was the youngest) and two sisters. God was graciously pleased to breathe by his holy spirit (I hope) in all our hearts, if in mine; which I am not altogether without hopes of. Four of us brethren lived at home. I did desire my dear father (my dear mother being dead) that I might live abroad [outside the country]; which he consented to. . . .

. . . So God brought me out of Plymouth [England] the 20th of March in the year 1629-30, and landed me in health at Nantasket on the 30th of May, 1630, I being then about the age of twenty-one years. Blessed be God that brought me here! . . .

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¹ I.e., his property and monetary worth were not great, I think not above 80 pounds a year. [English currency]

When we came to Nantasket, Capt. Squeb, who was captain of that great ship of four hundred tons, would not bring us into Charles river,² as he was bound to do, but put us ashore and our goods on Nantasket Point, and left us to shift for ourselves in a forlorn place in this wilderness. But, as it pleased God, we got a boat of some old planters [farmers] and laded her with goods; and some able men, well armed, went in her unto Charlestown, where we found some wigwams and one house; and in the house there was a man which had a boiled bass [fish] but no bread, that we see. But we did eat of his bass, and then went up Charles river until the river grew narrow and shallow, and there we landed our goods with much labor and toil, the bank being steep; and night coming on, we were informed that there were hard by us three hundred Indians.

One Englishman that could speak the Indian language (an old planter) went to them and advised them not to come near us in the night, and they hearkened to his counsel [took his advice] and came not. I myself was one of the sentinels [guards] that first night. Our captain was a Low Country³ soldier, one Mr. Southcot, a brave soldier. In the morning, some of the Indians came and stood at a distance off, looking at us, but came not near us. But when they had been a while in view, some of them came and held out a great bass towards us; so we sent a man with a biscuit and changed [traded] the cake for the bass. Afterwards, they supplied us with bass, exchanging a bass for a biscuit cake, and were very friendly unto us.

Oh, dear children! forget not what care God had over his dear servants, to watch over us and protect us in our weak beginnings. Capt. Squeb turned ashore us and our goods, like a merciless man; but God, even our merciful God, took pity on us, so that we were supplied first with a boat, and then caused many Indians (some hundreds) to be ruled by the advice of one man, not to come near us. Alas, had they come upon us, how soon might they have destroyed us! I think we were not above ten in number. But God caused the Indians to help us with fish at very cheap rates. We had not been there many days (although by our diligence we had got up a kind of shelter to save our goods in) but we had order to come away from that place, which was about Watertown, unto a place called Mattapan, now Dorchester, because there was



Roger Clap's birthplace in Salcombe Regis, England, 2005 photograph



Roger Clap built his house on Willow Court, one of the first streets in the 1630 Dorchester settlement, photo published in the Dorchester Day program, 7 June 1913

² See map, p. 4.

³ Low Country: coastal region of northwestern Europe, including present-day Belgium and Holland.

a neck of land fit to keep our cattle on. So we removed and came to Mattapan. The Indians there also were kind unto us.

...

Not long after came our renowned and blessed Governor [John Winthrop] and divers [several] of his Assistants with him. Their ships came into Charles river, and many passengers landed at Charlestown, many of whom died the winter following. Governor Winthrop purposed to set down his station about Cambridge, or somewhere on the river; but viewing the place, liked that plain neck that was called then Blackstone's Neck, now Boston. But in the meantime, before they could build at Boston, they lived many of them in tents and wigwams at Charlestown, their meeting-place [church] being abroad [a distance away] under a tree, where I have heard Mr. Wilson and Mr. Phillips preach many a good sermon.

Now coming into this country, I found it a vacant wilderness, in respect of English. There were indeed some English at Plymouth and Salem, and some few at Charlestown, who were very destitute when we came ashore; and planting time being past, shortly after provision [food and supplies] was not to be had for money. I wrote to my friends, namely to my dear father, to send me some provision; which accordingly he did, and also gave order to one of his neighbors to supply me with what I needed (he being a seaman), who coming hither, supplied me with divers things. But before this supply came, yea, and after too (that being spent, and the then unsubdued wilderness yielding little food) many a time if I could have filled my belly, though with mean victuals [coarse unappetizing food], it would have been sweet unto me. Fish was a good help unto me and others. Bread was so very scarce that sometimes I thought the very crusts of my father's table would have been very sweet unto me. And when I could have meal and water and salt boiled together, it was so good, who could wish better?

In our beginning many were in great straits [dire hardship] for want of provision for themselves and their little ones. Oh the hunger that many suffered, and saw no hope in an eye of reason to be supplied, only by clams and mussels and fish. We did quickly build boats, and some went a fishing. But bread was with many a very scarce thing, and flesh [animal meat] of all kind as scarce. And in those days, in our straits, though I cannot say God sent a raven to feed us, as he did the prophet Elijah, yet this I can say, to the praise of God's glory, that he sent not only poor ravenous Indians, which came with their baskets of corn on their backs to trade with us (which was a good supply unto many) but also sent ships from Holland and from Ireland with provisions, and Indian corn from Virginia, to supply the wants⁴ of his dear servants in this wilderness, both for food and raiment [clothing]. And when people's wants were great, not only in one town but in divers towns, such was the godly wisdom, care, and prudence (not selfishness, but self-denial) of our Governor Winthrop and his Assistants, that when a ship came laden with provisions, they did order that the whole cargo should be bought for a general stock; and so accordingly it was, and distribution was made to every town, and to every person in each town, as every man had need. Thus God was pleased to care for his people in times of straits, and to fill his servants with food and

Edward Johnson, an eyewitness, gives a graphic description of the scarcity of provisions among the first colonists. "In the absence of bread, they feasted themselves with fish. The women once a day, as the tide gave way, resorted to the mussel and clam banks (which are a fish as big as horse-mussels), where they daily gathered their families' food. Quoth one, 'My husband hath travelled as far as Plymouth (which is near forty miles) and hath with great toil brought a little corn home with him, and before that is spent, the Lord will assuredly provide.' Quoth the other, 'Our last peck of meal is now in the oven at home a baking, and many of our godly neighbours have quite spent all, and we owe one loaf of that little we have.' Then spake a third, 'My husband hath ventured himself among the Indians for corn and can get none, as also our honored Governor hath distributed his so far, that a day or two more will put an end to his store, and all the rest. . . .' And as they were encouraging one another, they lift up their eyes and saw two ships coming in, and presently this news came to their ears, that they were come from Ireland, full of victuals [food]."

Footnote in *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay from 1623 to 1636*, ed. Alexander Young, 1846, citing the Massachusetts Historical Collection journal, xiii, 125.

⁴ See Young's footnote in box, above right.

