

STEPHEN HOPKINS (1581-1644)

Historians generally agree that when the *Mayflower* arrived at Cape Cod in November 1620, Stephen Hopkins was among the most important and most interesting early colonial leaders. Much of the interest in him comes from the wide divergence of opinion on just what his importance was. Some have highlighted his role as New England's first free spirit or America's first true democrat and applauded his struggle against rigid other-worldly Puritanism. Others either downplay his importance (some don't consider him a "true Pilgrim" at all) or lament his failure to support the sincere, honest, hard-working, God-fearing, self-sacrificing virtues that Americans have always associated with the *Mayflower*, with early Plymouth, and with the first founding of modern democratic government.

Surely it's important that aboard the *Mayflower*, Hopkins was the only passenger returning to what William Bradford called "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Yet his fellow passengers must have been most impressed not merely by his experience at Jamestown, but by his having survived the famous shipwreck of the *Sea-Venture* at Bermuda in 1609. One of our two sources about the arrival at Cape Cod, mentions Hopkins as a leader of "the discoveries." After the first Governor John Carver and the military leader Cpt. Myles Standish, Hopkins' name is prominent; and in June of 1621 he was one of two "ambassadors" chosen by the second governor, William Bradford, to bring gifts to the Pokanoket "king," Massasoit, and to reaffirm the treaty made earlier in the spring.

Most of Plymouth's early leaders had been exiled in Holland. They were members of a covenanted or separatist congregation outlawed in England and renowned in modern times as the "Pilgrim Church." Hopkins, however, was perhaps the most notable early colonist who had not come from Holland and who "stood something off" (Bradford's phrase) from the Plymouth Church. During the 1620s, he evidently stayed out of the bitter disputes that led to abrupt departures by several discontented members of the Church of England, two of whom were actually banished. Freedom of religion was not an early Plymouth policy.

In the 1630s, while honored by election to the Governor's Council, Hopkins also opened a raucous tavern or "public house" that outraged some of his more godly neighbors. Then in 1636 he got into a brawl with a much younger man resulting in a double disgrace when the case went to court. The jury found him entirely responsible and required him to pay not only forty shillings (£2) in damages to his antagonist, but also a larger fine (perhaps because he violated his elected office?) of "five pounds sterling to our sov. Lord the King, whose peace he had broken, which he ought after a special manner to have kept." In the following years, he lost all respect as a community leader, and became a chronic troublemaker, repeatedly called to court and often fined for offenses involving strong drink, rowdiness, Sabbath-breaking, and selling everything from a looking glass to "strong water, wine, beer, and nutmeg at excessive rates."

Increasingly at odds with his Plymouth neighbors, Hopkins began selling off property in the original colonial town in the late 1630s. He and his two older children moved out to Cape Cod, where he bought land and one house and built another that he willed to his elder son Giles. After his death in 1644 Giles and Constance, his eldest daughter, and her husband Nicholas Snow all raised their children on Cape Cod. Hopkins willed his Plymouth house to Caleb, his younger son, who died unmarried at sea. His two younger daughters both married men who came from Holland, remaining in Plymouth to raise families in the town their father helped to found, but later left—if not *persona non grata*, then at least somewhat under a cloud..

SOURCES ON STEPHEN HOPKINS

PRIMARY SOURCES

William Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. "Standard" edition by Samuel Eliot Morison (Knopf, 1952); recent edition, expanded and corrected by Caleb Johnson (Xlibris, 2006).

Caleb Johnson's website (<http://www.mayflowerhistory.com>) offers a wide range of internet links and primary and secondary resources on line for students and teachers of Plymouth's early history.

Mourt's Relation. Originally published in London in 1622; "standard" modern edition by Dwight B. Heath (1963; Applewood, 1986); it is also included in Caleb Johnson's recent edition of Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

William Strachey. "A True Reportory of the Wracke and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight . . .," originally published in full in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625); rpt. In Caleb Johnson's *Here Shall I Die Ashore* (Xlibris, 2007).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Clapp, Patricia. *Constance: A Story of Early Plymouth*, (1968; rpt. HarperTrophy, 1991). Fiction aimed at a young, female audience.

Hodges, Margaret. *Hopkins of the Mayflower* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972). Highly speculative.

Johnson, Caleb. *Here Shall I Die Ashore: Stephen Hopkins, Bermuda Castaway, Jamestown Survivor and Mayflower Pilgrim* (Xlibris, 2007). The most thorough and up-to-date biography, generally well-researched and well-documented, though speculative on such matters as personal relationship with Squanto and Pocahontas.

Kolb, Avery. "The Tempest." *American Heritage* 34(3): 26-35. April/May, 1983. Interesting example in a "serious" publication of unsupported speculation about Hopkins as a more democratic proto-American than his fellow Pilgrims.

Moore, Peter. "*The Tempest* and the Bermuda Shipwreck of 1609," *Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter*, (Summer, 1996). Argues that Shakespeare was not influenced by Bermuda story.

Willison, George F. *Saints and Strangers* (Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945). This well-researched but inconsistently documented Book-of-the-Month-Club selection was the major mid-20th-century reappraisal (and critique) of the conventionally idealized Victorian "Pilgrim." Willison singled Hopkins out as "more democratically inclined than any of the prominent Pilgrims" (p. 141).