

LOVE & LEGEND: THE COURTSHIP OF MILES STANDISH

by Frances D. Leach

In *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow immortalized the legend of the love triangle between John Alden, Miles Standish, and Priscilla Mullins.

Longfellow, an Alden descendant, wove the narrative around an old family tradition. The earliest time the story appears in print is in Timothy Alden's *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes*, published in 1814.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) was a scholar, a Harvard professor, and a poet. His poems were immensely popular both at home and abroad. He provided the Victorians with poetry, drama and romance -- enabling them to escape the drab cities of the Industrial Revolution or the loneliness of the isolated farmhouse. Longfellow's vivid verbal imagery, wrapped in the gentle cadences of his verse, bring each scene to life. His narrative poems include *Evangeline* (1847), *Hiawatha* (1855), and *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858).

Generations of schoolchildren grew up with Longfellow's poetry. In *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, they discovered an exciting human dimension in the textbook story of the Pilgrims. It is evident that the poet had access to historical records, but he did not feel constrained to follow the literal course of events. For dramatic effect, he compressed several years of incidents into a very short time frame in 1621.



Longfellow used his imagination to flesh out the characters in his love triangle. Miles Standish appears as a swash-buckling hero, brave but inarticulate and somewhat peevish. Handsome young John Alden is torn between his devotion to the Captain and his love for the Pilgrim maiden. Priscilla, despite her domestic virtues, speaks her mind in the manner of a modern feminist. Longfellow could tell a romantic tale, and in so doing, he made the names of these three Pilgrims household words across the nation.

From Timothy Alden's *A Collection of American Epitaphs and Inscriptions with Occasional Notes* (New York : 1814) :

"It is well known, that, of the first company consisting of one hundred and one, about one half died in six months after landing, in consequence of the hardships they were called to encounter. Mrs. Rose Standish, consort of

Captain Standish, departed this life on the 29 of January 1621. This circumstance is mentioned as an introduction to the following anecdote, which has been carefully handed down by tradition.

"In a very short time after the decease of Mrs. Standish, the captain was led to think, that, if he could obtain Miss Priscilla Mullins, a daughter of Mr. William Mullins, the breach in his family would be happily repaired. He, therefore, according to the custom of those times, sent to ask Mr. Mullins' permission to visit his daughter. John Alden, the messenger, went and faithfully communicated the wishes of the captain. The old gentleman did not object, as he might have done, on account of the recency of Captain Standish's bereavement. He said it was perfectly agreeable to him, but the young lady must also be consulted. The damsel was then called into the room, and John Alden, who is said to have been a man of most excellent form with a fair and ruddy complexion, arose, and, in a very courteous and prepossessing manner, delivered his errand. Miss Mullins listened with respectful attention, and at last, after a considerable pause, fixing her eyes upon him, with an open and pleasant countenance, said, "prithee, John, why do you not speak for yourself?" He blushed, and bowed, and took his leave, but with a look, which indicated more, than his diffidence would permit him otherwise to express. However, he soon renewed his visit, and it was not long before their nuptials were celebrated in ample form. From then are descended all of the name, Alden, in the United States. What report he made to his constituent, after the first interview, tradition does not unfold; but it is said, how true the writer knows not, that the captain never forgave him to the day of his death."

The only facts known from the Records of Plymouth Colony and other primary source materials are:

Rose Standish (wife of Myles Standish) died January 29, 1621. William Mullins (father of Priscilla Mullins) died in February of 1621. Priscilla Mullins married John Alden, but we do not know the date or even the year of their marriage. It is probable that they were married before 1623. By 1627, John and Priscilla were not only married but the parents of two children. Miles Standish married Barbara Standish in 1623 or 1624. John Alden and Miles Standish were both among the founders of the town of Duxbury, across the bay from the original Plymouth settlement. Alexander Standish, the second child of seven born to Miles and Barbara, married Sarah Alden, the fourth child of ten born to John and Priscilla.