



Let the celebration begin! Patriots, Pilgrims & the Old Colony Club

by Peggy M. Baker, Director & Librarian
Pilgrim Society & Pilgrim Hall Museum

Between 1765 and 1775, the allegiance and self-identity of the American colonists radically changed. In an amazingly short period of time, previously loyal English citizens became armed rebels refusing to acknowledge the sovereignty of the crown.

These were years of turbulence and confusion. The choices to be made were not clear or simple. As the possibility of an armed conflict loomed, Americans became more and more clearly divided in their choices and the "sides" became more distinct and eventually hostile.

Even communities as small and tightly-knit as Plymouth were torn apart. The division within the town is clearly illustrated in the records of Plymouth's Old Colony Club, records preserved in the Archives of the Pilgrim Society at Pilgrim Hall Museum.

The Old Colony Club was founded in January 1769 to provide a place for a small group of Plymouth's better educated and more cosmopolitan young men to congregate (separate from the taverns) "to increase not only the pleasure and happiness of the respective members, but also will conduce to their edification and instruction." There were seven founding members: Elkanah Cushman, Isaac Lothrop (club president), Thomas Lothrop, John Thomas, John Watson, Edward Winslow Junior and Pelham Winslow. Four were Harvard graduates. Two were attorneys, one a customs officer, four were young men of business. Five additional members were elected subsequently: Captain Samuel Adams, Oakes Angier, Thomas Mayhew Junior, Alexander Scammell and Cornelius White. This new group included two more Harvard graduates and, in addition to another lawyer and another man of business, added two sea captains and a schoolteacher to the membership.

The first major event in the short history of the Old Colony Club was the decision to celebrate what we now call Forefathers Day, the anniversary of the day the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. The Old Colony Club was the first organization to celebrate the landing of the Pilgrims. On December 22, 1769, the members gathered in the morning to discharge a cannon. After a midday dinner (which included succotash), they marched to their meeting hall where they were joined by a number of male guests. A series of toasts was offered, beginning with praise for the Pilgrims and proceeding to political commentary. The toasts clearly indicate that the Club was united both in its firm displeasure with the "burdens and oppressions" being suffered by the Colonies at the hands of Parliament, and in the desire for a peaceful solution and a "speedy and lasting union between Great Britain and her Colonies."

Col. George Watson	Mr. John Russell
Col. James Warren	Mr. Edward Clarke
James Hovey Esq.	Mr. Alexander Scammel
Thomas Mayhew Esq.	Mr. Peleg Wadsworth
William Watson Esq.	Mr. Tho. South. Howland
Capt. Gideon White	
Capt. Elkanah Watson	
Capt. Thomas Davis	
Doctor Nath. Lothrop	

In addition to the seven founding members, the following guests have their names listed in the Old Colony Club records as present at the first celebration of Forefathers Day on December 22, 1769: Colonel George Watson, Colonel James Warren, James Hovey Esquire, Thomas Mayhew Esquire, William Watson Esquire, Captain Gideon White, Captain Elkanah Watson, Captain Thomas Davis, Doctor Nathaniel Lothrop, Mr. John Russell, Mr. Edward Clarke, Mr. Alexander Scammel (later a member), Mr. Peleg Wadsworth and Mr. Thomas Southworth Howland.

During the next several years, the citizens of Plymouth became increasingly polarized as "Patriot" and "Loyalist" factions formed, with the Patriots in the ascendancy. The Club, however, continued to meet in seeming good fellowship. Forefathers Day celebrations, organized by the Old Colony Club and with the leading citizens of Plymouth involved in the planning and invited as guests, continued.

In 1773, however, the fellowship was broken.

It is not exactly clear when or how the divisions within the Club, based on political lines, became insurmountable. Members present at the March 1773 meeting included adherents of both sides of the political debate. No minutes exist for the next 8 months. By November of 1773, the Patriots were no longer found at the Club; the only members in attendance were those with Loyalist sympathies.

Early in 1773, a decision had been reached, with the advice and consent of the leading citizens of Plymouth, to commemorate Forefathers Day with a sermon by The Rev. Charles Turner of Duxbury. In November, the Club received a letter from three members of the Plymouth Committee of Correspondence (the leaders of the Patriots) "informing this Club of the determination of the said Committee of Correspondence relative to the celebration of the next 22nd of December and to request that the Club would join with and conform thereto."

The Loyalist members of the Old Colony Club who were then in attendance responded that, while the Club had never sought to dominate the celebration, it should have been consulted before anyone else made alternate plans. They also noted that the Committee of Correspondence was meddling with an event that was not under its jurisdiction, that the majority of members of the Committee had attended the January planning meeting and had approved the intentions of the Old Colony Club, and concluded that:

your plan and proceedings, without advising with or consulting the other gentlemen of the town or the Club, appears to us so great an invasion of the liberties and privileges of the gentlemen of the town of Plymouth and the Old Colony Club that we cannot approve or comply with the same.

The Forefathers Day sermon by Rev. Turner was delivered as planned, on December 22, 1773. Yearly celebrations of Forefathers Day continued to be held until 1780. These later celebrations were sponsored by the town, however. There is no record that the Old Colony Club met after December 22, 1773.

We know the outcome for the American colonies in the years that followed 1773. Tensions continued to grow, armed conflict erupted in 1775 and America fought for 8 long years before finally establishing its independence.

What was the outcome for the 12 young men of the Old Colony Club?

- **Captain Samuel Adams** had died at sea, near Haiti, in 1773, before the time of decision; his political leanings are not known.
- **Oakes Angier**, although a strong proponent of law, order and upholding the establishment, became an outspoken Patriot.
- **Elkanah Cushman** remained Loyal, leaving Plymouth for British-held Boston and later emigrating to Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- **Isaac Lothrop**, Patriot and member of Plymouth's Committee of Correspondence, was elected to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress.
- **Thomas Lothrop**, Isaac's brother, was also a staunch Patriot.
- **Thomas Mayhew Junior** became a lieutenant in the militia and served with the Patriot forces that forced the English out of Boston.
- **Alexander Scammell** rose to adjutant-general in the Continental Army and was killed after leading a special corps of elite New England troops at the Battle of Yorktown.
- **John Thomas** remained noncommittal as long as possible, but his Loyalist sympathies finally led him to move to British Nova Scotia around 1780.
- **John Watson**, although known to be a Loyalist at heart, took the oath of allegiance to the Patriot cause and remained quietly in Plymouth.
- **Cornelius White** joined the British and was lost at sea in 1779 while ferrying supplies from Halifax to British-held New York.
- **Edward Winslow Junior** helped lead the British to Lexington. After serving as muster master general of all Provincial (Loyalist) forces in North America, he emigrated to Nova Scotia.
- **Pelham Winslow**, Loyalist, took refuge in Boston and then evacuated first to Halifax and, later, New York, where he enlisted in the English army. He died bitter, destitute and alone in New York in 1783. After the war, his widow and two daughters returned to Plymouth.

After 1780, the celebration of Forefathers Day in Plymouth went into abeyance. When the tradition was revived by the town in 1794, only two Old Colony Club men, Isaac Lothrop and John Watson, were alive and in Plymouth. Twenty-five years later, in 1819, a new society was formed "to commemorate the landing of the Fathers in the town of Plymouth." The first name considered for the new society was the "Old Colony Pilgrim Society," acknowledging its predecessor Old Colony Club. The name finally chosen, however, was simply the "Pilgrim Society." John Watson, the "quiet Loyalist" and the last surviving Plymouth member of the Old Colony Club, was elected Vice-President of the Pilgrim Society and presided over the first celebration of Forefathers Day held by the Society

on December 22, 1820.

In a gesture to repair the political rift that had led to the demise of the original Old Colony Club, the Trustees of the Pilgrim Society voted on December 12, 1820, to offer honorary membership in the Pilgrim Society to Loyalist John Thomas, Esquire, Liverpool [Nova Scotia] because of he was "formerly [a] member of the Old Colony Club of 1769."

Today both organizations exist and honor the Pilgrims. The Pilgrim Society was formed in 1820 and continues today; it also continues to commemorate Forefathers Day - but not on December 22! In the later 19th century, rectifying an early calendar error, the date of the actual landing of the Pilgrims was determined to be December 21 and the Pilgrim Society changed the date of its celebration accordingly (although when the date falls on a Sunday, the celebration is held on December 20). Membership in the Pilgrim Society is not based on lineage, the Society welcomes all who wish the Pilgrim story to be preserved and commemorated.

The Old Colony Club, resurrected in 1875, remains a private men's club. It commemorates Forefathers Day on December 22, as did the original Old Colony Club (although when the date falls on a Sunday, the celebration is held on December 23). The public is welcome at the Club's yearly December 22 Forefathers Day sunrise cannon volley on Plymouth's Coles Hill