

Mary Chilton's Leap of Faith

Submitted by Andrea Hoskins

One of my first discoveries on Ancestry.com was that my great-grandfather's Stewart line took me back to the Mayflower. This was totally unexpected. At that point, I didn't know that I had multiple family lines that would take me back to the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony. When I found that my ancestor Susanna Winslow of Boston was the daughter of Mary Chilton, and that Mary had arrived on the Mayflower, I wanted to learn all I could about Mary. I didn't expect to see her depicted in a number of images of the Pilgrims coming ashore.



MARY CHILTON'S LEAP.



The Landing of the Pilgrims painted by Henry A. Bacon in 1877.

Mary was one of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower. She began the voyage with her father and mother. But by the time Mary climbed in the small craft that would take her to the new shore, both of her parents were dead from illness, and Mary was an orphan at 13 years of age.

The family members were Separatists and had lived in Leiden, Holland, for several years. Mary's father was James Chilton, a tailor originally from Kent. At 64, James was the oldest of the pilgrims. You can find his signature is on the "Mayflower Compact"

which was signed aboard ship on November 11, 1620. He succumbed to fever in December while still on the Mayflower. Her mother died from "the first infection" shortly thereafter. Mary was the youngest of their ten children and the only one to sail with her parents.

I have done quite a bit of reading since I saw the first mention of Mary stepping off the boat, to become the first European woman to set foot on the Plymouth shore.

While there are numerous reports that say "according to family legend," others report Mary's momentous leap as fact. I have read enough to accept the story as almost certainly true.

I discovered that Mary's granddaughter, Ann Winslow, at age 92, dictated her "Memorials of my Progenitors" to her grandson, Winslow Taylor, in 1769. The following is a quote from that manuscript:

Mary Chilton was the first European female that landed on the North American shore; she came over with her father & mother and other adventurers to this new settlement. One thing worthy of notice is that her curiosity of being first on the American Strand, prompted her, like a young heroine, to leap out of the boat and wade ashore.

In “Mary Chilton’s Title to Celebrity” by Charles T. Libby (Boston, 1926) the author envisions the moment of her arrival:

Men had been ashore at different points, and encountered sundry adventures. At length they were making preparations for the women and children to land, whose eager faces watched the approaching minute. That minute grew nearer and nearer – to go ashore. There was quick breathing, shiftings of position, standing room in the first row was at a premium. The fractions of a second until the stern voice of male authority should relax and indicate -Now! . . .this was no time for ceremony. . . Somebody, the one tugging hardest at the leash, did get ashore first. It has never been said that this was anybody but Mary Chilton.

Historically accurate or not, this image certainly represents the resolve of this band of pilgrims. This young girl who has finally been released from the ship on which she has spent the last 100 days and where she watched both of her parents die from illness, makes her way to the front of the small boat that is taking her to shore, and leaps off, with determination and faith, anxious to make contact with her new world.



18th century wood block illustration



Depiction of Mary Chilton and John Alden, coming ashore

(If you are interested, “Mary Chilton’s Title to Celebrity” by Charles T. Libby (Boston, 1926) is available on [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com))

Something to think about – I had no sooner finished writing this brief story than I found myself asking if I could tell Mary’s story without acknowledging what we now know to be the impact of the European settlers on the indigenous people whose land these Puritans were claiming as their own. We have had centuries of history that give us a very different perspective from Mary and her fellow passengers. And, yet, my aim was to tell the story of my orphaned ancestor’s arrival and the images I have found of her. So, after much consideration, I left the story as I had originally written it. But I do want to encourage all of us to think about this dilemma – how should our knowledge of the bigger picture influence how we share our family stories?