Commemorating the Pilgrim Quadricentennial
1620–2020

In 2020 we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the *Mayflower* in New England in 1620, in four host nations — the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and the Wampanoag Nation. Beyond this commemoration, the Pilgrim story has, of course, long captured the imagination of the world and the attention of generations of historians and genealogists.

The New England Historic Genealogical Society is proud to have played an early and longstanding leadership role in presenting and promulgating Pilgrim history and genealogy. From documenting the history of Separatism and the passage of individuals from England to The Netherlands and thence to the New World — to publishing the origins and biographies of the passengers and crew of the *Mayflower*, we have, for almost two centuries, examined this topic from many angles and often in minute detail. In this larger context we see the dawning of the Great Migration to New England, the influx of more 20,000 English men, women, and children to these shores over the following twenty years, and, in the *Mayflower Compact*, we recognize a document of pivotal influence upon American democratic ideals. However, our coverage of these topics has not always told the full story. Today, we work closely with members of the Wampanoag Nation to provide them with ample opportunities to tell — in their own words and in their own ways — the history of the indigenous people of this region and the often devastating impact of European settlement upon their tribe and its people, history, and traditions. Our mission to educate, inspire, and connect people through history and genealogy would not be fulfilled truthfully if we conveyed just one perspective and not the other.

For the frontispiece of the October 1847 inaugural issue of the *Register* — the flagship journal of the founding genealogical society in America — the Reverend William Cogswell, the *Register’s* first editor, selected an engraving of “The Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth 11th Dec. 1620” by the American landscape artist George Loring Brown (1814–1893). Before even seeing that first issue’s table of contents, readers would encounter Brown’s wintery depiction of the famous arrival as told from a mid-nineteenth century viewpoint: a band of Pilgrims is seen establishing a camp upon the hill of a craggy shoreline while the *Mayflower* is anchored offshore in the distance. At center, an Englishman beckons his fellow passengers to come upward from the beach just as several men disembark from a skiff and others amble forward with provisions. At left, one of the arrival party gathers twigs and branches from the ground to replenish a fire where a steaming cauldron hangs at the encampment. His head appears to have to turned sharply as if he has just sensed a potentially ominous presence — an Indian warrior clutching a long spear and crouching behind an outcropping of rocks. This image, with its iconography subject to new interpretation today, launched our organization’s long association with the *Mayflower* story. In the following pages of that first issue other Pilgrim fare was offered, including Dr. Nathaniel Bradstreet Shurtleff’s list of the passen-
gers of the *Mayflower* as well as a transcription of a 1656 inventory of Captain Myles Standish’s books. From these modest beginnings, our considerable toils in *Mayflower* history and genealogy began.

Our scholarly work on this subject continued unabated and, at the time of the Pilgrim Tercentenary in 1920, our Society offered a Pilgrim membership, a category embraced by our constituents once again.

Today, in addition to museum exhibitions of Wampanoag and Pilgrim history at our Back Bay headquarters in Boston, we continue groundbreaking research into the families of the Pilgrims in both the *Register* and *Mayflower Descendant* (now published by the Society in partnership with the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants), in several new books, and through educational programs. In April 2020, we were scheduled to host the “2020 Gala” in Boston with an honored guest, the former UK Prime Minister Sir John Major, KG. Regrettably, that event was postponed until 2021, at least, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and resulting mandatory quarantines. Nonetheless, our work continues with a stream of new Quadricentennial books, including *The Mayflower Migration*, by Robert Charles Anderson, and a special 400th anniversary edition of William Bradford’s *Of Plimoth Plantation*, edited by Kenneth P. Minkema, Francis J. Bremer, and Jeremy D. Bangs, with a foreword by Paula Peters of the Wampanoag Nation.

In closing, it has been my honor for some time to be personally engaged in 400th anniversary commemorative planning. I have, for several years, been asked to recite William Bradford’s “One Small Candle” passage at the annual Illuminate Thanksgiving ceremonies in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and, in seventeenth-century attire made for me by Plimoth Plantation, lead a candlelit procession from the First Church down Leyden Street to the waterfront. Most recently, I was appointed Vice Chairman of the Plymouth 400th Anniversary State Commission by Massachusetts Governor Charles D. Baker, and in this role I have worked with innumerable institutions, associations, legislators, and the public. In these activities and others, I am especially proud to convey knowledge of the unrivaled work of this great institution in advancing the study of American family and local history. As our beloved Society marks its own 175th anniversary this year, allow me to thank my many extraordinary colleagues and generous patrons, and the many women and men who came before us, for their unstinting dedication to exploring and sharing the great American story for the benefit of present and future generations.

D. Brenton Simons
President & CEO

D. Brenton Simons was appointed President & CEO of New England Historic Genealogical Society in 2005 and has been a member of the Society’s staff since 1993. A descendant of Governor William Bradford (three times over), John Howland, John Tilley, and Richard Warren, he is Vice Chairman of the Plymouth 400th Anniversary State Commission, a trustee of Plymouth 400, and a member of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants.