

# My Mayflower Connection

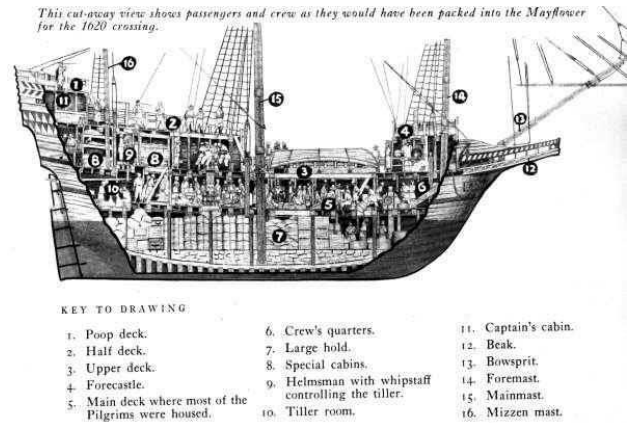
**If you have a few minutes, I would like to tell you about my 10th great-great, grandfather on my mama's side of the family ~ John Billington, Sr. and his family ... *Ken Savage***



I guess someone had to be first. And what is amazing to me is that it took ten years for someone to be nominated for prominence. Rumor says that John Billington was desperate to escape creditors when he left England in 1620. That would not have been unusual in a time when debt was a crime. Still only desperation or a hunger for religious freedom could drive a man to abandon the world he knew for the dangers of a distant, unknown shore. But of the voyagers who left England in the fall of 1620 on board the Mayflower, only forty were so called Puritans, seeking religious freedom. The majority, sixty-one men, women and children, were Anglicans and a few Catholics, and merely looking for a fresh start in life. John Billington was rumored to be a Catholic, but he was unusual only in that he was already middle aged, about 40 years, rather old for an adventurer. He brought with him a wife, Eleanor and their two young sons, John Jr. and Francis. And together their family began a great adventure they were not welcomed upon.

The voyage had been organized by a group who called (and saw) themselves as "The Saints". And they were not pleased to find the financial investors in their dream had betrayed them, leaving "The Saints" in a minority to "The Strangers", as they immediately began calling their shipmates. "The Saints" found themselves stuffed aboard a leaky ship, just 90 feet long by barely 24 feet wide, giving them 2,160 square feet of living space (a moderate sized two-bedroom house) for 102 passengers and a twenty-man crew. Instead of escaping the horrors of a multi-faith nation, "The Saints" found themselves imprisoned with one, dragging it along with

them. And they found the burden oppressive. After two and a half months of living hell on storm tossed seas they anchored at the edge of a sandy spit of land and faced with what they called a “mutiny.” “The Strangers” were not being landed where they had expected, on the established colony of Virginia, but far to the North in unprepared ground. “The Strangers” were suspicious that this had been the intention of “The Saints” all along. Just to get “The Strangers” to agree to work together in this new land “The Saints” were forced to compromise their faith, right on the edge of paradise, and sign a compact with “The Strangers”, pledging to “...combine ourselves into a civil Body Politic...” “The Saints” had thus been forced to create a civil government in this new land, and not the religious domain they had intended to establish. And one of the signatures bought by that accursed compromise had been that of John Billington.



As if in punishment for that compromise of their religious purity, only fifty-three souls survived that first winter. Amazingly, despite their apparent Godlessness, John Billington’s family of “Strangers” survived intact – including Eleanor, who became one of only five adult women in the entire colony to live to see the spring. The Billingtons all survived the first harsh winter of 1620-1621. They celebrated their first harvest with a feast with all, which would eventually be known as ‘Thanksgiving.’ The Billington clan had become a daily reminder that God’s Chosen were not always chosen. More evidence was to follow. In 1623, the second full year the colonists had been ashore, internal pressures forced the Governor, William Bradford (a Saint, of course) to divide all property amongst the survivors, one acre per family member, and thus the Billington clan received four acres of the best land, “...which come first over in the May flowers (spring)...on the South side of the brook to the Bay wards.” It was yet another reminder of the success of “The Strangers”, while so many of “The Saints” had died, and the insult was not to be forgotten. “The Saints” back in England had begun to drive down the value of the colonies' stock shares, the easier to buy them cheaply. And with each year they sent more “Saints” to cross the Atlantic, meaning to overwhelm “The Strangers” amongst them. Then in 1624, with the colony population now grown to over 180 people, two new arrivals in Plymouth Colony fed the growing tensions; the Reverend John Lyford and the followers of John Oldham were both nominally “Saints”. In fact, Lyford had been sent out as an official priest for the colony. But his willingness to conduct an Anglican baptism for the child of “Stranger” William Hilton offended the “Saints”. These chosen of God would not tolerate religious tolerance for anyone but themselves. And Governor Bradford became convinced that Lyford and Oldham were both secretly corresponding with the stockholders back in England, contradicting some of what the colony of Saints had been telling them. Bradford was able to intercept some of the letters and catch the dissenters off guard by challenging them without warning in a public hearing. Both

Lyford and Oldman were banished from the colony. There was also an attempt to charge John Billington with being a member of the "conspiracy", but Billington could claim he was being made a scapegoat, and since Billington was popular, (although it seems unclear how he could



have been so, given the descriptions of him that survive) and since Bradford had no hard evidence against him, "The Saints" were forced to bide their time, yet again. Time was on their side, however. The following year, 1626, James I of England died, and Charles I, a militantly devout Catholic, took the throne. England had taken the first steps that would lead to civil war, the rise of Oliver Cromwell and the beheading of the King. But in the short run the flow of "Saints" escaping from real oppression in England to Plymouth Colony, increased. John Billington still had allies in Plymouth, such as John Cannon and William Tench, but the pressures brought on by

the constant arrival of "Saints" drove both men to leave the colony by 1627. And in 1629 young John Billington Jr. died of illness, and the fifty-year-old John grew weary of the constant fighting for his families' rightful place in the colony society. By January of 1630 there were almost 300 citizens in Plymouth colony, the vast majority of whom were now, finally, "Saints". John Billington had become isolated.



In the late summer of 1630, a man's body was found in the woods near John Billington's property. The body was identified in Governor Bradford's correspondence only as "John New-come-er". No rationale for Billington having murdered the mysterious man was ever offered on the record. Instead surviving documents hint that the motive was the result of "an old argument between the two men". But this would seem to have been unlikely, given that he was, by every account, a literal "New-come-er". Despite this glaring omission, a Grand Jury was quickly convened and Billington was charged with shooting the man in the shoulder with a



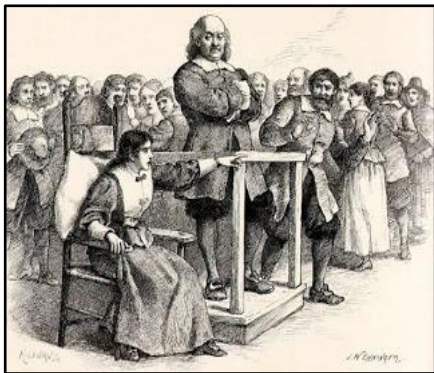
blunderbuss, thus causing his death. But since a blunderbuss was generally loaded with whatever material was handy, rocks or metal, and was used as a short range (and still highly inaccurate) shotgun, using it as a weapon for an assignation would have seemed doubtful in the extreme. But by this time there was little patience left in the colony for reason where John Billington was concerned. A trial jury wasted little time in finding him guilty of murder. And yet despite the singularity of this crime and punishment - Billington was the first Englishman in the colony charged with murder, and the first sentenced to be hanged for that crime - there is no record of any defense arguments offered on his behalf. "The Saints" had won their war against John Billington, and they would write his history. And yet despite this apparent lack of any

mitigation for the crime, Governor Bradford still sought the approval for the execution of this "Stranger" from his own fellow "Saints" in the younger, larger and more purely Saintly Massachusetts Bay Colony. Such approval was instantly supplied without any apparent consideration of the evidence given at trial.

On September 30, 1630, fifty-year-old John Billington was hanged according to the methods of the day: he was slowly dragged aloft and strangled by a rope noose. The drop that quickly broke the neck would not become standard in hanging for another two hundred years. Plymouth Colony was thus finally rid of its most troublesome "Stranger" in a congregation of "Saints". The only even mildly generous epitaph written for John Billington came from the poison pen of Thomas Morton, another man who had irritated "The Saints" in Plymouth Colony. "John Billington that was chocked at Plymouth after he had played the unhappy marksman...he was loved by many."



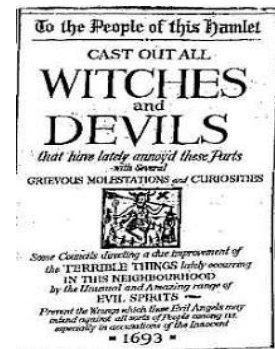
And that is a piece of information not even hinted at in the history written by "The Saints". But if true it would explain why they waited so long to move against John Billington. "...he was loved by many."



John Billington Sr. supported individual choice and freedom of speech despite the Bradford references to John being "contentious, unmanageable, and undesirable." Instead, John was the first rugged, American individualist who had the courage to speak out and say 'no' when he felt it was the right thing to do.

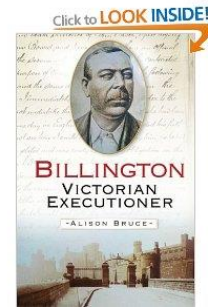
Billington's story demonstrates that we never should be too unjust or think poorly of an ancestor.

Sixty years later the "Saints" would have to clean house again in God's name, this time in the village of Salem. At that time what "The Saints" had done to John Billington was shown to have been but a dress rehearsal for their religious fanaticism and intolerance. (And in a piece of historical irony, the patriarch of one of the most famous families of English hangmen, from the mid 19th through the early 20th Centuries, would also be named John Billington.)



## Bonus Facts:

- The entire Billington family proved to be quite the handful for the Puritans. Billington's wife, Ellinor, was once confined to the stocks and whipped for slandering a Plymouth man. His older son, John, wandered off when he was 17, a year after the Mayflower landed, and disappeared for five days. He ran into some Native Americans and the residents of Plymouth ran off to "save" him, but he was handed over without any conflict and was unharmed. The younger son, Francis, got into a spot of trouble on the ship, when he shot a gun next to a barrel of gunpowder which resulted in a fire on the ship (thankfully, the barrel of gunpowder did not ignite, and no one was hurt). In addition, after his death, Billington's granddaughter was whipped after being found guilty of fornication at the age of 22 (admittedly, an extremely common crime in the colony).
- A warm-water pond near Plymouth known as the "Billington Sea" was named in honor of Francis. The legend goes that he climbed a tree, spotted water, and thought that he had found the Pacific Ocean...
- United States President James Garfield, Actor Richard Gere, Countess Mercy Lavinia Warren Bump (1841-1919), the wife of General Tom Thumb were all descendants of Billington along with about a million other Americans
- It is estimated that about 10 percent of "legal" Americans today can trace their ancestry back to the Mayflower.



I want to thank Kimit Muston, who originally wrote this article. This makes me feel a lot better now knowing if our family had descended from the first murder, plus be the first to be hung in the Americas it was ~ John Billington ~

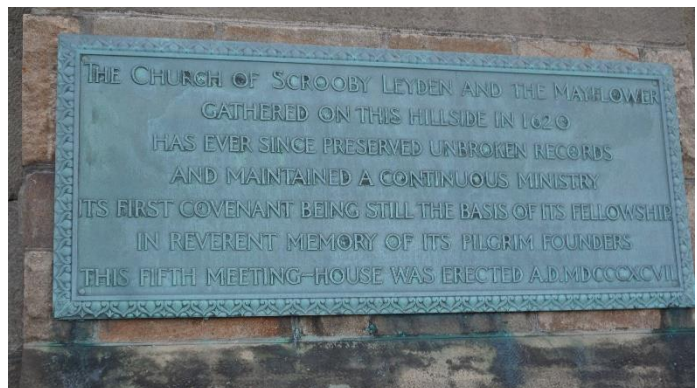
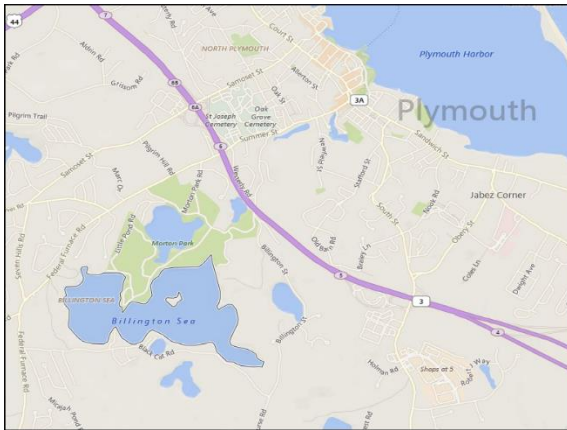
Ken Savage





# Plymouth Today

**Billington Sea:** Yes...there really is a **Billington Sea** (also **Billington's Sea**) is a 269-acre (1.09 km<sup>2</sup>) warm water pond located in [Plymouth, Massachusetts](#). [Morton Park](#) lies on the pond's northern shore. The pond is fed by groundwater and cranberry bog outlets. The average depth is seven feet and the maximum depth is 11 feet (3.4 m). The pond provides the headwaters to [Town Brook](#). Seymour Island is located in the center of the pond. Billington Sea was named after its discoverer, Francis Billington, one of the passengers on the [Mayflower](#).



**Billington Homesite: It is now a gift shop!**

