

How William Pynchon Blazed the Bay Path

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by Elbridge S. Brooks, 1899*

About the time that William Bradford was a small boy at his English home in Austerfield, while John Winthrop was a small boy at his English home in Groton, there was another small boy in a big manor in the pleasant hamlet of Springfield in the county of Essex, forty miles or so from London. His name was William Pynchon, and he was destined to play a part with those other boys, when they had all grown to manhood, in the making of Massachusetts.

William Pynchon's family were people of consequence in that section of England. The boy was well educated, for the times; he was sent to college at Cambridge, and later became an enterprising business man who liked to interest himself in great enterprises.

Such an enterprise, he believed, was to be found in the colonization scheme of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and as he was one of those who stood out sturdily against the selfishness of obstinate King Charles, he joined himself to the Puritan party, although he himself was a warden of the established church of England.

He became interested in Governor Winthrop's enterprise, and came across the sea with that excellent man in one of the four ships that led the exodus to Massachusetts Bay. He was one of the men to whom the king granted the charter for colonization and governing; and when the Massachusetts Bay people were settled in their new home in and about Boston, William Pynchon built his house in Roxbury, and, because of his integrity and business ability, was made treasurer of the colony.

But the men of the Massachusetts Bay colony were not all such great-hearted men as John Winthrop. Some of them were hard and stern, like Dudley, who succeeded Winthrop as governor, or bigoted but brave, like Endicott who cut the cross from the flag of England, because he considered it a "symbol of idolatry." These men, and others like them, wished to have things in their church so peculiarly their own way that they made it very uncomfortable for those who disagreed with them.

William Pynchon differed from them, both as to method and manner. Things did not exactly suit him, and as he looked off toward the forest-fringed Milton hills or toward the distant Wachusetts ridges, he thought of the freer life in the west, beyond those hilly barriers, and longed to try it, if others would join with him.

In his trade with the Indians for beaver skins and furs, he had learned of the fair and fertile lands that lay along the broad Connecticut River, and he felt that opportunities for successful business and for more agreeable home life were to be found in those wide green valleys through which the great river ran southward to Long Island Sound.

So one day in the year 1635 he set out with two Indian traders on a sort of prospecting tour, and was so well pleased with what he saw in the Connecticut valley that when he

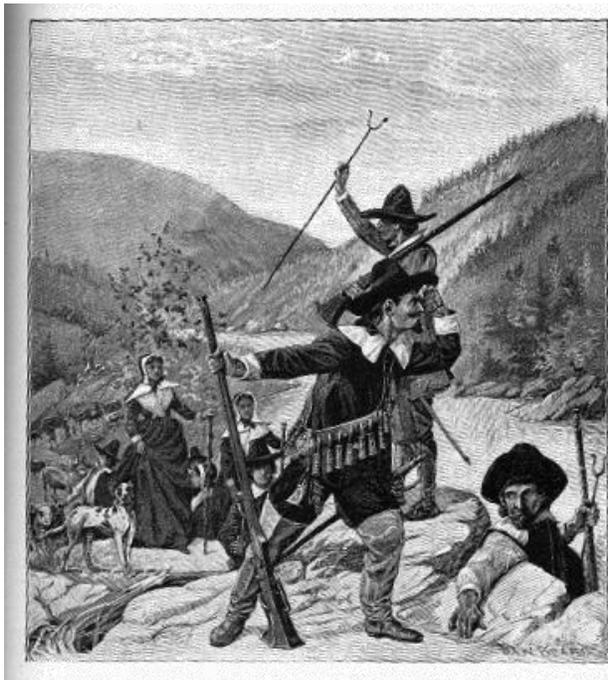
returned to Boston he prevailed upon the company to grant him leave to lead a new colony into the western lands.

By that time the Bay colony had grown considerably. New people kept coming across the sea to join it, and an increasing number of settlements dotted the curving shore of the big bay, or ran just a few miles inland.

William Pynchon's scheme was considered a most daring one, for nobody knew just what were the risks and dangers of the "far west" along the unknown Connecticut. The company did not like the idea of weakening their own holdings by new ventures, but they finally gave William Pynchon "permission to withdraw;" and in the spring of 1636 he set out, with his own family and other Roxbury people, to follow the Indian trail, and blaze a path through the wilderness to the desired lands along the Connecticut River.

The trail led southwesterly, through where are now the towns of Framingham and Hopkinton and Grafton, to Woodstock, across the Connecticut line; then, turning, it ran northwesterly to where today Springfield sits upon the banks of the fast-flowing Connecticut.

Governor Winthrop had just launched and fitted from the stocks on his bit "Ten Hill Farm," in the present city of Somerville, on the *Mystic*, the first ship ever built in New England. He called it the *Blessing of the Bay*, and the *Blessing's* earliest voyage was to sail with the household goods of William Pynchon's colonists around Cape Cod into Long Island Sound, and up the Connecticut to the settling point at the mouth of the Agawam.



But the colonists themselves went by the Bay Path,— that Indian trail through the Massachusetts forests which William Pynchon blazed out for them and for civilization. It was a bold and hazardous thing to do. The way was long; it was beset with dangers and perils, the unknown ones seeming the worst of all.

But William Pynchon was a brave-hearted man. Day by day he led the way along the winding path from the bay, with that sturdy determination that marks the Englishman, and that unfaltering faith in God's direction that inspired the Puritan.

Day by day that little band of a dozen families followed their wise, strong, hopeful leader. The old people or the invalids rode in the horse litter; the rest went on foot or on horseback. Their droves of

swine and cattle were driven on before them. And so, with confidence in their leader and hope in the future, they pushed their way through the wilderness in the changeable days of a New England May, seeking their new home.

We catch a glimpse of those pioneers of Massachusetts civilization as we read their story. Preceded by an armed outpost, who cleared the path and kept a watchful eye for the dreaded beasts of the forest and still more dreaded Indians, they were a picturesque cavalcade in their sober Puritan tints,--the green-jerkined guides and fighting men, the primly dressed, hooded women, the demure but wondering children, and the tall, grave figure of the indomitable leader in his long great boots, allowed only to those worth a thousand dollars or over.

He cared for his people well. Escaping all dangers, meeting the Indians in friendly fashion, without loss of life or property by attack or raid, the pioneers followed the Woodstock trail, and then, turning, struck through the forest to the northwest, and on the 14th of May, 1636, reached their destination after eighteen days of travel. There they found shelter in the big log hut which had been built to receive them on the "house meadow," near the mouth of the Agawam, just below the present city of Springfield.

Home-building soon began. A church was established, planting grounds and house lots were apportioned, lands were bought from the Indian owners, and the home life of the settlement began.

William Pynchon was a wise director. He was judge in disputes, adviser in worry or trouble, officiating minister until one could be secured and settled, farmer, ~ builder, boatman, hunter, magistrate, and business man, --for he kept in view his main purpose, to carry on a far-reaching and profitable trade with the Indians.

His dealings with these "Sons of the forest" were just and wise. He was faithful to his promises, a true friend and good neighbor, and the safety of the settlement was largely due to his honorable and upright conduct toward the red owners of the soil.

Other families soon joined his settlement at the mouth of the Agawam. To the little hamlet was at last given the name of William Pynchon's boyhood home in the English county of Essex, for it was called Springfield.

This was the beginning of English life in central and western Massachusetts. Other settlements sprang up, and Hadley and Westfield and Deerfield. The Bay Path, shortened into a more direct route between the Connecticut and Boston, became the regular highway for western travel, dotted with scattered hamlets, until at last the whole Connecticut valley was brought into touch with the Bay, and finally joined to it in government.

But William Pynchon, as is often the case with promoters and organizers of great enterprises, came at last into disfavor with those whom he had favored. He would not subscribe to certain forms and doctrines laid down by the strict Puritans of Boston; he

even wrote a book which they deemed wrong and harmful in its religious teachings, and they took the brave treasurer of the colony so sternly to task that at last, disheartened and discouraged, he turned his back on his forest home, and returned to England, never again to see the growing and prospering colony which his ability had organized, his wisdom planted, and his courage protected.

Certain of his descendants, however, notably his eldest son, remained with the colony, growing with its growth, so that in Springfield and the region roundabout the name of Pynchon--which Hawthorne, too, has immortalized--is remembered and honored as that of the founder and first developer of that fertile and prosperous section of Massachusetts along the Bay Path, from Worcester to the Berkshires.