

Painting Elder William Brewster

(1566 - 1644)

Spiritual Leader and Counselor of the Plymouth Pilgrims

by Ruth Major**



Since the 400th Anniversary of the of the *Mayflower* voyage will be celebrated in 2020, I decided to commemorate the occasion by painting a portrait of the pilgrim whom I felt was most instrumental to the survival of the colony. I am a descendant of John Alden and his wife, Priscilla Mullins, and of John Howland and his wife, Elizabeth Tilley. Together with some of their family members, they numbered ten of the hundred and two *Mayflower* passengers and ship's cooper and furniture maker, John Alden. I also descend from many late comers who arrived in the 1630's with Governor Winthrop including Thomas Dudley, Dr. William Gaeger and his wife, Hannah, and two of Edward Winslow's brothers, Kenelm and Josiah. I decided that although each immigrant ancestor made great sacrifices and contributions, my focus had to remain on

the Mayflower passengers, and those who survived the disastrous first winter would be considered for a portrait.

Last May, when I decided to undertake this portrait venture, I had just survived a life altering head on collision in the Highlands of Scotland in which my hand and wrist were broken off by an air bag. Thoughts of survival and spiritual matters were foremost on my mind. I started thinking about who would have bolstered Priscilla Alden's spirits after her mother, father and younger brother Joseph died of the sickness to which half of the *Mayflower* passengers succumbed that first winter of 1620-21. Then I considered our ancestor Elizabeth Tilley, then only 13 years old, after she lost her aunt, uncle, father and mother, being left a child alone in the wilderness and at the mercy of others. I wondered, "Who comforted Elizabeth and helped her cope with the loss of all her family members whom she had sailed to the New World in the company of?"

When it came down to survival of that *Mayflower* group of about fifty brave souls who were still alive but struggling in the Spring of 1621, one man stood apart from other leaders, William Brewster. I knew little about him, but considering the fact that he, as spiritual advisor to the pilgrims, had nursed, prayed with and buried each of those men, women and children who died the first winter, as well as comforted, guided, and encouraged those who survived, I knew in my heart that it was William Brewster whom I would paint. It was he who was most instrumental in the emotional survival of the Separatists and other Mayflower passengers who overcame the illnesses and hardship of the first months, either while living on the damp, crowded ship or on land while building the palisaded fort, homes and meeting house. Dispelling fear, disappointment, grief and discouragement was no doubt a constant challenge for Elder Brewster, but I have learned that his faith was strong, and his commitment to the people was steadfast from Scrooby to Boston in England, from Amsterdam to Leiden in Holland, and for twenty-four years in the "wilderness" of Plymouth and later Duxbury. William Brewster was the sole continuous spiritual leader to the pilgrims, and the only long-term pastor for nearly the first decade in Plymouth until Ralph Smith arrived in 1629. Elder William Brewster continued his spiritual work and mission, day in and day out, for over thirty-six years.

Before I could paint William Brewster, I had to envision him, and that meant learning as much as I could from experts who have studied him. Being a visual learner, I went on-line and watched videos on topics related to him, and I started with an informative 2015 presentation by the *General Society of Mayflower Descendants* entitled, "What Do We Know About William Brewster?" The GSMD Silver Books Project, directed by Judith Swan, was featuring the work of Barbara Lambert Merrick, author of Volume 24, *William Brewster and His Descendants*, edited by Scott Andrew Bartley. Barbara's presentation is excellent and provides a wonderful overview of William Brewster's life and years of service to his Separatist followers. Barbara mentioned Sue Allan's work, so I decided to watch her video next. "Rebel Separatist's Drama," covers the life and work of William Brewster in England and in Holland. As Historian for Scrooby Manor, Sue provides an insider's view of life at the home where William Brewster grew up and spent some of his early adult life. Sue Allan is mesmerizing to listen to and is the author of, *William Brewster, the Making of A Pilgrim*.

No one knows what William Brewster actually looked like. I inquired of several authorities and all assured me that there are no known paintings, drawings, engravings or other images of William Brewster. However, I learned there are several words that describe Elder Brewster well, and these are given to us directly from a man who knew and loved William Brewster for many years. William Bradford wrote fondly of his longtime friend in his History Of Plymouth Plantation, 1606-1646, and this critical information was brought to my attention by Sue Allan and her colleague, Mayflower Historian Caleb Johnson, of mayflowerhistory.com, who has collaborated on several of my paintings and who is transcribing the Brewster journals. Of Brewster's appearance, Sue wrote, "We do not know what our pilgrim (William Brewster) looked like in life, but when talking about him after his death, in mere words, William Bradford, indelibly paints for us a most enduring and thoughtful portrait of the man so obviously respected and loved."

I decided to read and study Bradford's description of William Brewster, who died in Plymouth about April 18, 1644, at the age of 88. I made a list of words and phrases Bradford used to describe his friend, and determined that I would paint Elder Brewster as he may have looked in his mid-seventies, in 1635, about a decade before his death.

William Bradford wrote of Elder Brewster's Personal Abilities. "He was qualified above many; he was wise and discrete and well spoken, having a grave and deliberate utterance, of a very cheerful spirit, very sociable and pleasant amongst his friends, of an humble and modest mind, of peaceable disposition, undervaluing himself and his own abilities, and sometimes over valuing others; inoffensive and innocent in his life and conversation, which gained him the love of those without, as well as those within; yet he would tell them plainly of their faults and evils, both publicly and privately, but in such a manner as was usually well taken from him. He was tender hearted, and compassionate of such as were in misery... And none did more offend or displease him than such as would hastily and proudly carry and lift up themselves, being rise from nothing, and having little else in them to commend them but a few fine clothes, or a little riches more than the others."

Bradford wrote of Elder Brewster's Teaching and Ministering. "In teaching, he was very moving and stirring of affections, also very plain and distinct on what he taught: by which means he became more and more profitable to the hearers. He had a singular and good gift in prayer, both public and private... He always thought it were better for ministers to pray oftener, and divide their prayers, then be long and tedious in the same, except upon solemn and special occasions... His reason was, that the heart and spirits all, especially the weak, could hardly continue and stand bent so long towards God...without flagging and falling off... He would labor with his hands in the fields as long as he was able; yet when the church had no other minister, he taught twice every Sabbath, and that both powerfully and profitably, to the great contentment of the hearers, and their comfortable edification; Yea, many were brought to God by his ministry. He did more in this behalf in a year, then many do in all their lives." (William Bradford's History Of Plymouth Plantation, Davis, 1923, pp. 378-380) These comments as well as others found in the same source allowed me to visualize William Brewster, and I kept them all

in mind while painting, as I find that this helps me greatly, especially when I paint a person's expression. Hoping to make the portrait as authentic as possible, I wrote to Sue Allan, and she offered suggestions that I eagerly followed up on. When inquiring about what William Brewster would have worn to a service, Sue suggested that I take a look at the inventory attached to Elder Brewster's will, found at Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth. This source provided an actual reference for the black hat, black suit and cape that I painted William wearing. Since Separatists believed in simplicity and not adorning themselves with fancy embellishments, I painted a plain white collar, and a pair of gloves also mentioned in his inventory. The Bible Elder Brewster carries close to his heart was painted from a 17th Century Dutch Bible, and is meant to reflect the twelve years Brewster lived and ministered to the pilgrims while in Holland. (Bradford, p. 378) As I began to envision the portrait, I repeatedly sketched William Brewster near a window, similar to one I have seen in the oldest part of the Jabez Howland House in Plymouth, with beautiful diamond panes or "quarrels." I imagined Elder Brewster standing inside his son Love's Duxbury home, beside a beautiful window with the light illuminating his face. I "saw" him contemplating what he would say to those who would gather to hear his prayer service. Then I began to question. I was not certain whether homes in Duxbury had the diamond paned windows as early as 1635, and decided to go to plymotharch.com to research the archaeological work done in Duxbury. I looked up online reports written by archaeologist, Craig Chartier, Director, whom I collaborated with while working on a painting of the John Howland Homestead in 1650. I found one of Craig's online reports which includes data concerning the site of the original Alden House, taken from work that was done in the 1960's. I was surprised and thrilled to find that pieces of the flat diamond-shaped window glass had been found and dated to about 1632. (DUX-HA-3) I contacted Craig to find out what colors the quarrels were, and he said that during the 2012 Brewster House excavation, (Report of June, 2013), 2,512 pieces of the flat glass were found, "which ranged from pale aqua to olive green." I knew that what I envisioned was at the very least, historically accurate. This is a primary concern for me, as I strive to paint historical portraits and scenes as accurately as possible, and this work requires hours of research before I even start to draw and paint. By the time I do start, it seems as if the painting or portrait virtually paints itself and develops before my eyes. I hope I have captured William Brewster's spirit, if not his actual likeness. Historian Caleb Johnson included an image of this portrait in his September, 2017 presentation to the Elder William Brewster Society. I hope to find a suitable place where the portrait can be permanently exhibited and where William Brewster may be honored and celebrated. William Bradford wrote, "...he (William Brewster) continued many years, doing the best good will he could, and walking according to the light he saw..." (Bradford, p. 377) Ruth Whitney Major, rf.major@comcast.net Vineyard Haven, MA

***** Ruth Whitney Major is a former high school teacher, writer and fine artist who paints in several genres, but especially likes to develop historical portraits and scenes. She also enjoys working on genealogy with her daughter, Paris, and writing articles about their ancestors. Ruth lives on Martha's Vineyard with her twin goats, Beta fish, and half-wild cat named Nyko.***