

This is the address given by Club Historian Jim Baker on Forefathers Day 2006:

Do You Know Why You Are Here Tonight?

I would like to begin tonight with that question. Do you know why you are here?

On a superficial level, you're here because you are members of this exclusive and august sodality and it is the occasion of the annual meeting. You have come out of duty, for fellowship and to enjoy good food and drink; not necessarily in that order. Yet, important as those inducements are, there is more to this occasion than the usual fraternal camaraderie. For much of the year, the attraction of companionship, interlarded with the social lubricants of tobacco, drink and comforting comestibles, is sufficient impetus for gathering in this venerable clubhouse each Friday night.

Tonight, however, there is something more to reflect on, something intangible and transcendent, which imbues this gathering with a spirit rare in our harried modern age; the appeal of our Plymouth heritage. We meet tonight in observation of the anniversary instituted by this Club and honored by generations of our predecessors. We are here to unite the past and the present and add by our attendance upon tradition, yet another link in the chain of Forefathers' Days that connects us with the very foundations of this nation's symbolic conception almost four centuries ago.

There is a time for everything under the sun, and unabashed sobriety—or if you will, pomposity—has its time and place now, if only for a fleeting moment. This is Plymouth's night. Not just the Town of Plymouth, but the entire Old Colony of New Plymouth, which had its birth in the fabled landing of the Forefathers on that granite cornerstone of our community we saluted this morning with a cannon's roars and huzzas in a December's cold dawning. Learned men have argued for years whether the Landing actually occurred in the manner we have been led to believe, and whether the famous rock is anything more than an arbitrary mnemonic of an imaginary climax in the seamless series of events that began years before in the north of England. No

matter—the symbolism and sentiments are honest even if the history is debatable. All tribes, communities and nations have etiological myths in which origins lost in the shadows of the past are given form and substance through narrative and ritual. The Landing of the Pilgrims is our very own tale of Romulus and Remus, our legend of Brut fleeing Troy, our story of Abraham, while Forefathers' Day—NOT Thanksgiving—is our hallowed rite of honor and remembrance.

Paraphrasing Judith Martin ("Miss Manners"), we need to remember that "rituals identify us with our community, with our history, with our traditions, with our families, with our countries, with our cultures." We are not just indistinguishable ants that can be picked up and put down on any old cultural anthill. The Forefathers' Day celebration is part of what we are as citizens of the Old Colony. Although the narrative—the story—of the Forefathers or Pilgrims is central to our appreciation of our shared heritage, the story alone is not enough. We need to understand and value what lies behind the outer tale, the true significance of what we celebrate tonight.

The Pilgrim Story has been widely represented in art and literature, and latter-day pilgrims have been attracted to Plymouth since the 1690s, when Samuel Sewell made a conscious pilgrimage to the site of the Forefathers, to see where it all took place. Many have been disappointed. When they looked down at Plymouth Rock, all they saw was a modest potato-shaped boulder, rather the worse for wear, and hardly an awesome sight. They had been told that this rock was so culturally vital that not only had it been enshrined in a granite temple but also generations of Americans from across the country and foreigners from around the world have made the effort to come and gaze upon it. Yet they saw nothing. It was not enormous, it didn't glow with an unearthly radiance nor did it get up and do a little dance. It was just sat there, and they said, "Is that IT?" and turned away in sorrow or disgust to buy some fried clams or see the animated and

entertaining history provided by Plimoth Plantation.

They had failed to prepare for their audience with the Rock, and therefore got nothing out of it. They were expecting something perceptibly awe-inspiring and visually overwhelming, in accord with the expectations they had from having the importance of the Pilgrims and their Rock drummed into their little skulls in third grade. Like many people, they mistook the “accidents” for the “essence”, the tangible icon for the intangible significance with which it has been invested. The knowledge that is absolutely necessary for the appreciation of what the Rock stands for, rather than what it is, is the heritage we celebrate tonight. The ritual of Forefathers’ Day, first enacted by the original Old Colony Club in 1769, has communicated the meaning behind the story of the Forefathers, and served as a vehicle for transmitting it across the centuries and throughout the nation. As one of the very first historical commemorations to take place in colonial America, Forefathers’ Day took a studied look back to the origins of Plymouth Colony just as events began to sweep British North America into a maelstrom of revolution.

For a century and a half following the 1620 landing, the Plymouth colonists were not recognized as anything more than the first small wave in the great deluge of New England’s Puritan emigration. They were honored by New England historians such as Nathaniel Morton, Cotton Mather and Thomas Prince for their role in establishing the Puritan commonwealth, but the anniversary of their arrival in 1720 passed unobserved. The first effort at commemoration did not occur until the young men of the Old Colony Club instituted Old Colony Day – subsequently Forefathers’ Day – as the anniversary of the date when the exploratory expedition from the *Mayflower* first set foot on the shore of Plymouth harbor. By a tradition dating to 1741, the mainland landing had taken place on or near the singular boulder on the Plymouth waterfront on December 11, 1620, Old Style. The Plymouth clubmen were not interested in the landing at the tip of Cape Cod on

November 11, or the landing on Clark’s Island in Plymouth harbor on December 8. They chose their familiar boulder as the marker for this memory. As the old Julian calendar had been discarded in favor of the Gregorian model only seventeen years earlier, the clubmen “adjusted” the anniversary by the same eleven days that had been added to the calendar in 1752. This made the anniversary December 22, which became the established date for “Forefathers’ Day.”¹

In 1774, the rock identified with the Forefathers’ landing was levered from its bed, and, the upper half splitting off, that was dragged up to the Town Square and placed at the foot of a liberty pole. Thus began the process by which the humble Plymouth colonists became the symbolic founders of New England, and by extension the new United States as well. Their voluntary separation from the Old World to establish a new Christian commonwealth in America independent of any Royal assistance was seized on as historical sanction for the American separation from England, and their high ideals and simple way of life extolled as a model for all Americans. In contrast to the sordid history of early Virginia or the authoritarian nature of Massachusetts Bay, the Plymouth story was refreshingly virtuous and unexceptionable. The Pilgrim Fathers were anachronistically credited with Enlightenment values such as tolerance, a love of liberty, public education and a reverence for law in addition to their deep religious faith. The Plymouth Forefathers were the ideal candidates to be the 18th-century Founding Fathers’ own “founding fathers.” Also, it didn’t hurt that New England had a virtual monopoly on interpreting American history at the time, and had little competition in

¹ December 22 was in fact a miscalculation, although this was not recognized until 1850. While it had taken eleven days to adjust the date in 1752, it only required 10 days for a date in 1620. In 1870, the Pilgrim Society in Plymouth adopted the revision and has celebrated Forefathers’ Day on December 21 ever since. The Old Colony Club, on the other hand, continues to observe the traditional December 22 date.

promoting its own forebears as the true founders of the nation.

Rather than celebrating the 1630 arrival of their own forefathers, Massachusetts Bay chose to honor the virtuous Plymouth colonists, adopting our Forefathers' Day for themselves. In 1805, the New England Society of New York introduced the Yankee holiday there, and in 1819, a similar society was founded in Plymouth's old southern trading partner, Charleston, SC (where Forefathers' Day was celebrated even during the Civil War, and is still observed today). Subsequently, a succession of New England Societies were founded wherever expatriate Yankees came to settle or roam, across the nation and abroad, and for each, December 22 was their annual celebration of origins.

The memory of the Plymouth Forefathers grew in public stature following independence until they became, in Rev. Gomes felicitous phrase, little more than an example of "aggregate virtue." Massachusetts Federalists who had enthusiastically adopted the December 22 holiday assigned the name "Pilgrim Fathers" to them in 1798, perhaps because the Plymouth colonists could only be the symbolic rather than the literal progenitors of the larger colony. The Pilgrims' most important mythic act, the climactic 1620 landing, became the symbolic moment of conception for the nation that was born in 1776. It was the landing therefore, together with related elements such as the flight from England, the *Mayflower* voyage and the terrible first winter, that dominated the literary and artistic representations of the Pilgrim Fathers in the early years of the Republic.

Back in Plymouth, the political emotions that preceded the Revolution tore apart the original Old Colony Club. Patriotic members such as President Isaac Lothrop (a founder of the Plymouth Committee of Correspondence) and Alexander Scammell quit, leaving the rump of the membership in the hands of Tories such as Pelham Winslow, Edward (Neddie) Winslow (who accompanied the British troops to Lexington and Concord), or John Watson, who prudently sat out the war on Clark's

Island after the others had fled to Canada. The Club's last Forefathers' Day was celebrated privately in 1774, whereupon it was disbanded. However, the Town of Plymouth then took up the responsibility of observing the holiday, which it did with sermons, dinners with numerous toasts to the honored forebears and allies such as Massasoit, and balls (except for a hiatus between 1781 and 1792) before the Pilgrim Society was founded in 1820. An all-male organization from its founding to the 20th century, the Pilgrim Society was thought of by many as the successor to the Old Colony Club. Its second president was old John Watson, the last surviving member of the original Club.

Each December 22 was celebrated with much pomp and circumstance (unless it fell on a Saturday or Sunday—Saturday evening being sacred to the Sabbath—when it was moved to another date), whether in Plymouth, Boston, New York, Charleston, New Orleans, Detroit &c., &c. Sermons and orations were delivered to insure that the true meaning of the day was not forgotten, huge Victorian dinners consumed, but only in Plymouth were there also balls for the ladies, a uniquely gender-inclusive custom remarked upon by visitors. A very interesting account of such a ball in 1838 can be found in the English author J. S. Buckingham's *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*. (London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1841. Vol III, p. 530-536)

"Having been invited to attend the annual celebration of the Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth. We left New Bedford on the morning of Friday, the 21st of December [1838], with some agreeable friends, who engaged an extra-stage for the purpose..."

The anniversary of the Landing of the Pilgrims falling this year on a Saturday, and Saturday evening being revered in many parts of New England as the commencement of the Sabbath, it was thought proper that the public ball, which usually closes the proceedings of the anniversary day, should on this occasion be given on the night preceding. The ball was to be given in the

building called 'Pilgrim Hall;' the tickets of admission were three dollars each, including refreshments; and the hours of dancing were limited from seven in the evening till three in the morning... The number assembled was about 400 persons, more than half of whom we were told were residents of Plymouth, and the other half were strangers from Boston, Providence, New Bedford and the surrounding towns...

The dances, which were all previously fixed on, and announced in a printed code of regulations for the evening, distributed with every ticket, consisted of country-dances, called here, more accurately than with us in England, 'contra-dances,' cotillions, Spanish dances and quadrilles. The visitors were as miscellaneous as those at the President's levee in Washington, or the military levee at Salem..., for this is almost the only public entertainment in Plymouth throughout the year, every person that can save up the requisite sum of three dollars, and who feel no scruples of a religious nature as to joining in such entertainments, make a point of attending the annual ball. There was a great mixture, therefore, of classes, and consequently a great variety of tastes in dress, and of general carriage and manners... Some of the younger ladies were among the most beautiful that we had yet seen in America; three or four were exquisitely lovely, and, as specimens of feminine beauty, could hardly be surpassed, I think, in any country in the globe...

We remained at the ball till near midnight, when the spirit of the dance was in no means abated. And some of the younger members of our party continued until three in the morning. The next day was devoted to the remaining business of the celebration, which took place in the following order. At ten o'clock there was a parade of a military company called the Standish Guards, consisting of about 50 men, well-dressed, armed and drilled. To these it was intended to present a new stand of colours, and for this purpose a platform was erected in front of one of the houses in Court Square, on which, after the music of an excellent band,

a young lady, of about 18, ascended, accompanied by her father. Her dress was a cloth riding-habit, with velvet cap surmounted by a plume of ostrich feathers, and a long white blond veil, hanging gracefully on one side of her face. She delivered a short but appropriate address to the captain of the company, on presenting him the colours of the corps. The captain replied in a much more ambitious strain; his oration, which had been evidently penned and committed to memory, was of the most inflated style, filled with lofty and sonorous words, and full of heroism, devotion, wounds and death...

After the presentation of the colours, we repaired to the Pilgrim Hall--of which a more detailed description will be given later on—and the members of the Pilgrim Society there, forming themselves into a line, and being joined by all the strangers and most of the resident heads of families in the town, marched to the music of the band, in a long procession, to the principle church, a fine gothic building recently erected by the Unitarians. Here we heard the oration delivered by the Rev. Dr. Robbins. It was a grave, sensible, and well-arranged discourse, chiefly historical, but happily blended with moral reflections suggested by the event commemorated, and the associations of the time and place. In the course of the service an ode was sung by the choir and audience, to the air of 'God save the King,' which tune has been long since adopted and used in this country for devotional hymns, under the name 'America'."

Most of these events have vanished into history with little or no trace, as ours tonight certainly shall, but we should be proud to be carrying on the ancient tradition and passing the torch to our future members with no thought of glory for ourselves. Yet from time to time, history disgorges long-forgotten evidence of the common past. Roger Randall, whose whole-hearted curiosity and fascination with the material culture of the past occasions him to keep a sharp eye out for things of local interest, came across at the Plymouth

Antiquarian Society a previously unknown document listing the attendees and bill of fare at one of those forgotten Forefathers' Days, which was observed on Monday, December 23, 1816. In 1816 the sermon was preached on December 22 by Rev. Ezra. S. Goodwin of Sandwich, which that year fell on a Sunday; but on Monday "a large and respectable number of citizens and strangers, partook of an excellent dinner," at which "appropriate toasts and occasional songs added to the pleasure of the festival;" and "A splendid Ball in the evening graced with beauty and elegance of a brilliant collection of the 'Daughters of peerless Dames,' concluded the celebration." (*Columbian Centinel* 12/28/1816).

Looking over the names of the 55 attendees of the dinner, I saw it included the cream of Plymouth society at the time. The event was sufficiently organized as to have a president (Judge Joshua Thomas, who was the first president of the Pilgrim Society) and two vice presidents (William Davis, president of the Plymouth Bank and later vice president of the Pilgrim Society, and Henry Warren, son of Gen. James and Mercy Otis Warren), and perhaps a secretary (William Spooner), giving the impression that even before the Pilgrim Society was formally founded, the nucleus of such an organization was already in existence. Other significant guests included Rev. Kendall of First Parish Church, Rev. Goodwin, Doctors Spooner, Haywood, Thacher and Boutelle (and the mesmerist Benjamin Crandon), General Nathaniel Goodwin, Major Thomas, Plymouth historian Samuel Davis, John Watson and Benjamin Marston Watson, schoolmaster William Reed, a number of "Esquires" such as John Bartlett and Zabdiel Sampson, and guests including Dr. Sturtevant of Middeboro, Ezra Weston of Duxbury and several Boston men.

The bill of fare is of interest as well. It included two hams (30 lbs.), three tongues, three roast beefs (18 lbs.), three corned beefs (12 lbs.), boiled pork (6 lbs.), four turkeys (33 lbs.), six chickens (10 lbs.), and six gallons of "sauquetash" as well as unidentified vegetables and "gravies" (sauces), cheese, and

pickles, with a note to the effect that "There was a plenty of every thing except Sauquetash" to which someone had added in pencil, "– enough but none left." They also consumed 3 ½ gallons of sherry and a half-gallon of brandy (probably in a punch) and hard cider as well. There does not appear to have been a dessert course, but perhaps this deficiency was made up at the evening ball that followed the mid-day dinner. Over a hundred pounds of meat plus the six gallons of succotash and assorted extras certainly was sufficient for this group, which in numbers, pretty well matches our own Forefathers' Day dinner attendance. We have evidently sadly degenerated from the heights of consumptive ability exhibited by our predecessors!

The Old Colony Club was revived in 1875 and once again took up the responsibility of sustaining the tradition of Forefathers' Day. Even though the Pilgrim Society had shifted the date of its observation of the holiday to December 21 (after arguing about it for 20 years), the Club retained its own traditional date, and has done so ever since. Throughout most of the year, the Old Colony Club shelves the subject of history and relaxes in the knowledge that Club activities are "utterly without socially redeeming merit" as Rev. Gomes has fondly observed. Although once a year, for a brief moment or two, we need to reflect on the serious and compelling heritage that we carry to the future, the rest of the time our sybaritic society fulfills an equally rare and vital role in the earnest, compulsive and increasingly regimented society in which we live. We do not toil like Kiwanis neither do we spin like Rotarians. From both the political Left and Right today come thundering commandments to work like slaves, eschew all indulgence in thought and deed, panic over each and every puffed-up "crisis," regiment our lives in pursuit of "HEALTH" and ingest as much mass produced "entertainment" and insipid "culture" as we can, to the bursting point. Our modern puritans abhor tobacco, liquor, rich foods, sedentary leisure, masculine society, conversation uncensored in respect to the hypersensibility of the politically-

enlightened, and of course, off-color jokes! To which we answer with a resounding “piffle!”

When we were young, we were amused by the foibles of Victorian propriety and hypocrisy, but now we live with equally humorless social engineering that, even if we disavow it, we realize how dangerous it is to offend the vigilant tyrants of cultural opinion. Men’s clubs have long been refuges from this sort of thing (which is among the reasons there were so many of them in Victorian times), and the Old Colony Club proudly carries on the tradition of providing an oasis of privacy where we can lower our guard and relax in like-minded company among “clubbable” men.

But let us also guard and maintain our more serious values by each and everyone familiarizing himself with what our Pilgrim and Plymouth inheritance means and why, amid social homogenization and globalization, it should be preserved. Another threat to our values and traditions is “...that particular set of Anglo-Saxon attitudes, amounting to universal guilt and embarrassment, with which modern cultural decorum requires us to confront the past.” (Jonathan Keates, TLS, 7/24/98). We must cleave to accuracy and honesty in history, recognizing that many comfortable assumptions about the past were untrue, or at least, heavily biased in favor of the WASP view of the world. There is a lot more to the past than any one historical focus can reveal, and opinions may honestly differ, depending on whether one identifies with the winning or losing side in past conflicts. That said, we must not let the liberal guilt Mr. Keates alludes to undermine our respect for the Pilgrims, who in the greater scheme of human events were a singularly honorable and respectable example of forebears, as forebears go. I for one would not want to live as they did nor govern my life by their particular set of beliefs and standards, yet for their time and the culture that shaped them, they were exceptional in their honesty, charity, forbearance, industriousness and pragmatism. We may regret the fate of the Native peoples

without demonizing the Pilgrims or exalting the Indians. The truth is sufficient.

So go tonight with the Forefathers’ spirit in mind, but next time we meet, be ready to challenge the forces of anti-pleasure with our usual irredeemable Old Colony Club behavior. The sermon is done, the oration complete, and I close in the immortal words of Jonathan Miller:

**I most royally shall now to bed,
To sleep off all the nonsense I've just said**

'So That's The Way You Like It' *Beyond The Fringe*, 1960

Plymouth December 23, 1816. The following Gentlemen at Mrs. Nicoleson's dined together in honour of "the Landing of the "Fathers"

President

Judge Thomas

Vice Presidents

W^m Davis Esq^r }
Henry Warren Esq^r

Rev^d Jas Kendall
Rev^d E. S. Goodwin
D^r. Spooner
B. Hayward Esqr
D^r. Haywood
Maj J^s Thomas
Gen^l Goodwin
D^r Thacher
H. Spooner Esq^r
Sam^l. Davis
Cap^t. Atwood
John Paty
Cap^t Roberts
Jo^s Bartlett Esq^r
John Watson
B M Watson
D^r Boutelle
Ch^s Jackson
Sch^d Shaw J^r
Benj^m. Crandone

Jn. B Thomas Esq^r
W^m Thomas
W^m Davis J^r
H W Davis Esq^r.
Ezra Harlow
Ezra Finney
W^m Bartlett
W^m Goodwin J^r.
John Virgin
Z Sampson Esq^r.
Jn^o Sampson
Josiah Robbins
Tho^s Russell
Ja^s Spooner
Jon^a Cushing
J LeBaron J^r.
Jo^s Avery
W^m Reed Schoolmaster
W S Russell
P. W. Warren
Abr^m Jackson
Ge^o. Hammatt
D.B. Jackson
W^m Spooner Secty

Doc^t. Sturtevant Middleboro
Ezra Weston – Duxbury
Cap^t. Howe – Boston
Mr. Washburn – Do.
Miles W White – Do.
M^r. W Davis – Do.

Bill of Fare

Ham		
Tongue		
Corn ^d Beef		
Turkeys	}	Cold
Chickens		
Roast Beef		
Sauquetash		
Vegetables	}	Hot
Gravies		—suckatash
Good Brandy		
“ Sherry Wine		
“ Cider		
“ Cheese		
“ Pickles		
55 whole		
2 Hams – 30 lbs		
3 Tongues –		
3 Beef Roast ^d – 18		
3 Do – Salt – 12		
1 Pork Boil ^d – 6		
4 Turkeys – 33		
6 Chickens – 10		
6 galls Sauquetash		
3 ½ Gall ^s wine		
½ Gall ^s Brandy		

NB. There was a plenty of every thing except Sauquetash – enough but none left