

A Preface to America's Culture War: The 'Battle' of Merrymount

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Many people believe that America's culture war began in the 1960s with the emergence of the sexual revolution, the New Left and the counterculture. Others with a more extended view of history might take it back to the explosion of hedonism that characterized the "Roaring Twenties" or even the late 19th century with the rise of Darwinism and the secularization of American education. Some are aware that the Revolutionary generation was rent not only by great political debates but also by contrasting views of what kind of nation America should be socially, economically and religiously. But in fact the origin of America's culture war predates all of that and extends back virtually to the very beginning, within a few years of the founding of Plymouth colony.

In the Beginning...

From the outset America was founded by colonists who came for at least five identifiable reasons: (1)religious liberty; (2)political freedom; (3)personal ambitions – i.e., primarily social and economic advancement; (4)adventure; and (5)libertine hedonism. Most of these factors, of course, are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and many settlers were motivated by a combination of factors even if one was paramount.

When the first comprehensive histories of America were written in the first half of the 19th century, historians tended to emphasize the first and second factors – the religious and the political – while many 20th century historians, influenced by left-wing historicism and cultural Marxism, shifted the primary focus to the socio-economic factors. In both cases, the fourth factor – the element of personal adventure – was given only cursory attention (in fact, despite the ongoing lure of the frontier for many generations, the adventure motive was almost always a secondary factor), and neither gave the fifth factor much consideration.

But looking back from our contemporary perspective, the hedonistic element appears more significant – especially when contrasted with the

religious impulse that was a primary motivation behind the founding of some of the earliest colonies such as Plymouth in 1620 and Massachusetts Bay in 1628-29. In the case of Plymouth, no sooner had the weary Separatists (or "Pilgrims") endured the bleak ravages of their first few years in North America than they encountered another group of hearty English colonists who settled a few miles up the Massachusetts coast at Mount Wollaston (later renamed Merrymount). However, in contrast to the devout and sober Separatists, the Merrymounters had a different agenda, and in fact the two groups represented two incompatible worldviews: the Puritan vision for a sacralistic Christian society – a city of God set on a hill as a lighthouse to the nations – versus a vision of America as a secular utopia – a city of man established by libertarian humanists with few laws and rules regulating individual freedom and personal behavior. One vision conceived of the New World as an opportunity to build a New Jerusalem while the other sought to construct a New Babylon, and the confrontation that ensued between these two communities of settlers was in effect the first battle in America's ongoing culture war.

Thomas Morton and Mount Wollaston

Only four years after the founding of Plymouth colony in 1620 by a small band of Separatists, a strict and exclusive group of radical Puritans, **Thomas Morton** (1576-1647) led a party of thirty indentured young men to Massachusetts to establish a different kind of colony. Morton was a lawyer, a writer, a social reformer and a free spirit who personified the values and morals of pre-Puritan Merrie Olde England. Although born into a conservative High Anglican family, he became involved in the morally lax libertine culture of Elizabethan England while studying law in London. But Morton was not necessarily a venal man, and early on in his legal career he was an advocate for poor dispossessed farmers who were victims of the enclosure movement of the early 1600s. With interest in North American colonization running high in the early 1620s, Morton became involved with **Ferdinando Gorges**, the governor of Plymouth (England), who was an associate of **Sir Walter Raleigh** and a sponsor of overseas colonization.

In 1622 Morton accompanied an exploration expedition to the coast of New England where he visited the newly established Plymouth colony. Morton was intrigued by the prospects of colonization, but he considered the Separatists to be insufferably self-righteous prigs. Upon returning home, he helped organize a colonial trading enterprise sponsored by Gorges and other investors with a vision for planting a colony based on liberal humanistic values. Over the next year he recruited thirty young men to join him in his venture as indentured servants, and in 1624 he and his party founded **Mount Wollaston** colony in Massachusetts, just 20 miles north of Plymouth.

Immediately, Morton and his associates began farming and trading for furs and other provisions on land given to them by the local Algonquins. Morton admired the natives' culture, and he envisioned that his colony would live in peace and even intermarry with them. He was fascinated by their primitive animism and uninhibited cultural customs (particularly their sexual mores), and considered them "more civilized and humanitarian" than his fellow Englishmen down the coast at Plymouth. However, despite his multi-cultural tendencies, Morton was a typically ethnocentric Englishman of his day. He encouraged the natives to give up hunting and gathering and establish settled farming

communities, and although he was at best only a nominal "Christian" (virtually all Englishmen – like virtually all Europeans – identified themselves as Christians at this time in history), Morton sought to convert them to his liberal brand of Anglicanism.

From the outset there were tensions between the settlers at Mount Wollaston and Plymouth. The Separatists considered Morton to be a virtual heathen, an impious drunkard, a hedonistic antinomian, and an irresponsible troublemaker who promoted immoral sexual relations between his young men and local Algonquin girls. Even more alarming were rumors that he was trading guns to the local natives, whom the Separatists viewed as potentially hostile. (In fact, they did turn hostile a few years later.)

For Morton's part, he was openly scornful of the Separatists for their exclusive religious beliefs and legalistic moral codes. He ridiculed and mocked their leaders such as the diminutive military commander, Miles Standish, whom he derisively referred to as "Captain Shrimp." Relations between the communities grew all the more tense over the next couple of years as young men began defecting from Plymouth to Mount Wollaston, drawn by the lax laws and libertine spirit that Morton promoted. Since the success (and even the survival) of both colonies depended upon a growing population, the emigration from Plymouth was particularly serious even though the Separatists dismissed the defectors as "scum."

The Maypole of Merrymount

The social and cultural contrast between Plymouth and Mount Wollaston couldn't have been more pronounced, and Morton sought to capitalize on the difference early in 1628 by renaming his colony "Merrymount." Furthermore, he announced a special May Day celebration in which he organized a pagan Greek-style festival to reward his hardworking comrades. A shrewd promoter, he invited local natives to the celebration, including plenty of nubile young females, which scandalized the Pilgrims of Plymouth. Even more provocatively, he ordered the erection of an 80-foot Maypole.

In Plymouth, Governor **William Bradford** condemned the Maypole as a pagan idol and compared the Merrymount festivities to a Roman bacchanalia. As Bradford later noted in his memoirs, "They... set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting

Indian women for their consorts, dancing and frisking together... and worse practices.” (Note: Some modern historians have charged that the Plymouth colony felt more threatened by their rivals' threat to their trade monopoly than by the Merrymounters' heathenism and hedonism, but this probably reflects the modern tendency to downplay the significance of religious and moral factors. The contemporary accounts by Bradford, Morton and others indicate otherwise.)

Seeing their New Jerusalem threatened by this influx of pagan Babylonians, the Separatists took pre-emptive action. Captain Standish and a special ops force marched through the night, catching the unsuspecting Merrymounters totally by surprise, and managed to capture Morton without firing a shot. Binding him in chains, they brought him to Plymouth on charges of “supplying guns to the Indians” – but not before they also chopped down the Maypole of Merrymount. Later, Morton claimed that he had surrendered peaceably to avoid bloodshed, but Bradford contended that the Merrymounters were simply too drunk to fight.



Back in Plymouth, Bradford was reluctant to execute Morton because of his political connections in London, so they put him in stocks, gave him a mock trial, and marooned him on a deserted island until a ship could carry him back to England. According to Morton's account, he would have starved to death had some local natives not smuggled him some food, and he eventually escaped and found his own way back to England.

Merrymount colony managed to survive for another year despite increasing opposition from its Puritan neighbors, who grew exponentially with the founding of Massachusetts Bay colony in 1628-29. At this time, Puritans began referring to the Merrymount/Mount Wollaston colony as “**Mount Dagon**” (a reference to the evil Canaanite god of the sea), and in the winter of 1629 the Puritans of New Salem under **John Endecott** raided the colony's food supplies. By the following spring most of the colony's inhabitants had scattered, and its buildings were destroyed a year or so after that.

Meanwhile, the irrepressible Morton actually returned to Massachusetts in 1629 and was promptly arrested, tried and banished. Back in England he waged a propaganda war against the Puritans and sued the Massachusetts Bay Company which sponsored their colonial ventures. In the end, the court of public opinion supported Morton, who portrayed himself as a victim of Puritan intolerance whose civil liberties had been unjustly violated. Skillfully exploiting his political connections in the court of King Charles I, he managed to have Parliament revoke the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1635. Then in 1637 he published *The New English Canaan*, a defense of native rights and a scathing attack on the Separatists and Puritans of New England. In his work, he described the erection of the Maypole at Merrymount and the culture war that it ignited:

The inhabitants of Merrymount... did devise amongst themselves to have... Revels, and merriment after the olde English custom... & therefore brewed barrells of excellent beer, & provided a case of bottles to be spent, with other good cheer, for all comers of that day. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drums, guns, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Savages, that came thither of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80 foot long, was reared up, and a pair of buckshorns [antlers] nailed to it... where it stood as a fair sea mark for directions, how to find out the way to mind Hos of Ma-re Mount.” [*The New English Canaan*, Book III, Chapter 4]

When the English Civil War erupted in 1642, Morton, a staunch Royalist, found himself on the losing side of the conflict. Once again, he crossed the Atlantic and sought refuge in New England. But when he disembarked, he was promptly arrested as a Royalist “agitator,” charged with

sedition and conspiracy regarding the revocation of the colony's charter, and thrown into a dank dungeon for the winter. After suffering for several months in prison, his health broke and he was granted clemency. Cut off from supporters in England, Morton withered away and died a couple of years later in Maine.

Plymouth and Merrymount in Retrospect

Interestingly, the history of Mount Wollaston didn't end with the burning of its buildings and the scattering of its inhabitants in the late 1620s. In fact, for the next 150 years the area around the former community continued to be associated with freethinkers and rebels. In 1636 the radical feminist **Anne Hutchinson** briefly settled there with her family after she was expelled from the Puritan commonwealth in Boston for holding antinomian and heretical views. In the mid-1600s the Mount Wollaston area was renamed Braintree and then later Quincy, and in the early 1700s the grandfather of **John Adams** bought the old Mount Wollaston farm. John inherited the farm and lived there most of his life, and in the mid-1700s another notable American revolutionary, **John Hancock**, was born in Quincy. In 1934 the WPA erected a 1½-mile-long wall around the Mount Wollaston Cemetery dedicated to the memory of Thomas Morton, and in recent years Wiccans and other neopagans have periodically descended upon the area to celebrate the story of Merrymount in honor of America's pagan heritage.

Two hundred years after the death of Morton, novelist **Nathaniel Hawthorne** wrote an imaginative story about the culture clash between the Puritans of Plymouth and the libertines of Merrymount entitled "The May-Pole of Merry Mount." In keeping with the times, Hawthorne's account depicted Morton and his followers as merry revelers and innocent victims of Puritan bigotry, intolerance and self-righteousness. Historical realities are rarely so simple, and one suspects that there was more to the story than the partisan views we get either from Hawthorne's tale or the contemporary accounts of Morton, Bradford or John Winthrop.

However, one thing is clear: from the beginning America was beset by a culture war that represented two contrasting visions of what kind of society and culture New England should be. The early colonies were

founded and settled by a diverse assortment of visionaries and refugees motivated by a variety of factors. Some hoped to see New England become a model Christian society governed by Biblical principles of law and morality, while others saw it as a refuge from the religious and moral restraints of the old country.

A century-and-a-half later, the Founding Fathers sought an innovative compromise between the popular Enlightenment ideals of their day and traditional Biblical/Christian values. In the process, they established republican-style representative government, maximized individual civil liberties, and disestablished the Christian religion while correspondingly acknowledging and promoting the nation's Christian heritage. While creating a national government that was religiously neutral, they did not establish a secular government that was hostile or even indifferent to the Christian faith.

For several generations the compromise more or less worked because the Christian religious heritage and values kept the more secular and libertarian Enlightenment ideals in check. But with the accelerated pace of modernistic change in the 20th century and the increased secularization of American society and culture, the fissure separating these two contrasting worldviews widened until it opened up into a major chasm in the 1960s. Today we see the effects of this rift in every aspect of American life, and it is the major reason why so many of our political, social, moral and even economic problems seem so unsolvable. Two broad camps, representing irreconcilable worldviews, assess our problems and offer contrasting solutions. In a culture in which one side advocates Biblically based values while the other promotes a relativistic and secular humanistic agenda, the areas of mutual agreement and commonality continue to shrink. As radio talk show host Dennis Prager has noted, "America will be united only when one [of these worldviews] prevails over the other."

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