

A Colonial “Living History” Museum Addresses Colonialism: Plimoth Plantation in the 21st Century¹

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Abstract: This case examines Plimoth Plantation, a living history museum founded in 1947 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The museum is a major destination for tourists who are interested in the colonial history of New England. 25 years after it was founded, the museum decided to broaden its focus. In 1971 curators began to revise its displays to include the history of Native American peoples of the region whom the Pilgrim settlers met when they arrived. This case examines how a colonial museum has tried to depict 17th century Native people in ways that are responsive to the concerns of modern Native people. It asks how a colonial museum can do justice to the activities and experiences of both English colonists and 17th century Native peoples in its efforts to sustain broad appeal to the public that it serves.

Colonial History at Plimoth Plantation

Plimoth Plantation, founded in 1947, is a non-profit museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts devoted to documenting and teaching early 17th century New England history.² The museum’s signal exhibits are living history recreations of the original settlement of Plymouth Colony, established in 1620 by the “Pilgrims,” the most radical of the English Protestants. The Pilgrims had broken with the Church of England and immigrated to North America to avoid religious persecution. They called themselves “Separatists” in order to distinguish their own faith from that of more accommodationist Protestant denominations.³

The museum’s founder, Boston financier Harry Hornblower II, was fascinated with the Pilgrim story and archeology. He opened the first colonial exhibit, a house, on the Plymouth waterfront in 1949, followed by a meetinghouse in 1953. In 1957 the exhibit moved to its current site, which is part of the Hornblower family’s summer estate.

Since then the museum has constructed several unique attractions. The Mayflower II, an authentic replica of the 1609 original, was built in 1957 and sits in Plymouth Harbor open to the public. The English Village followed in 1959. In 1992 a Craft Center was added where visitors can learn about colonial foods and manufactures (such as pottery and woodwork). Barns with livestock were established in 1994, and since 2013 a working grist mill grinds flour which is

1 Copyright 2018 The Evergreen State College. Teaching notes are available at the website <http://nativecases.evergreen.edu>

2. See the Plimoth Plantation website here: <https://www.plimoth.org/>.

3 For more information about the Pilgrims, see this page on the History Channel’s website: <https://www.history.com/topics/pilgrims>.

used to bake bread. The bread is for sale along with other hand-crafted items produced in the Craft Center by artisans who use 17th century methods. Visiting groups can enjoy authentic period foods prepared in the museum's conference facilities. (Over two thousand people attend its Thanksgiving feast each year.) They can browse in seven different shops, attend films in the museum's theater, and participate in short courses (topics include bee-keeping) and a winter farmer's market. The museum has special programming for school groups, homeschoolers, and interns. It offers genealogical information about approximately 160 original residents of Plymouth Colony so descendants can trace their family trees. Plimoth Plantation is supported by grants, volunteers, donations, memberships, patron admissions fees, and its board.



Fig. 1. The English Village at Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth, MA.



Fig. 2 The working grist mill at Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth, MA.

Living history museums have a unique structure. Like other museums they house artifacts, hands-on displays, and interpretive narratives. But they also employ actors to impersonate historic figures and everyday people who lived through the events documented by the museum. Other living history museums include Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia,⁴ and Pioneer Village⁵ and Old Sturbridge Village⁶ in Massachusetts. Guests of Plimoth Plantation can actually speak with staff in period costumes who interact with the public as particular colonial characters.

In Plimoth's English Village, important leaders such as John Winthrop and William Bradford can be found in their thatched-roof, one-room, fire-heated homes. They sit at their rough-hewn desks and write in their journals with quill pens dipped in ink. The actors have been carefully trained and educated about the history, experiences, personalities, folkways, and writings of the specific persons whom they portray. Museum-goers can sit down with these actors and look them in the eye. They can have conversations and ask questions. The actors never break character and even invite guests to participate in activities with them, such as attending a daily spiritual meeting. Everyday "colonists" greet the public, too: a woman taking

4 For the museum's website, go to <http://www.history.org/>.

5 For the museum's website, go to <http://www.pioneervillagesalem.org/>.

6 For the museum's website, go to <https://www.osv.org/>.

care of her kitchen garden, another washing clothes in a wooden bucket, a farmer tending to his tools before the planting season begins. When patrons visit the Mayflower II and climb down the narrow stairs below the deck of the ship and into the hold, they are likely to encounter a crew member who will tell what it was like to sail 3,500 miles across the sea to the New World.

The idea behind this kind of museum is to create what feels like a direct encounter with history, almost as if one has entered a time machine. Visitors can bear witness to the Pilgrim story: see, hear, touch, and even taste it. They can observe how the colonists talked with one another, organized their lives, and expressed their religious world views. Rather than think of, say, John Winthrop as a dry, dusty, and abstract person represented only in books, paintings, and his own flowery prose, at Plimoth Plantation he becomes a breathing, thinking person with emotions in his voice who moves around the room and walks out into the village to commune with the neighbors. Attendees learn about Winthrop's values, the limits of his knowledge, and the fabric of his experience. The actors don't *tell* how these figures think; they *show* it by pretending to *be* them.

This approach to historical education and understanding has a great deal of appeal to the general public. It brings a palpable sense of immediacy to how everyday life was experienced hundreds of years ago, and to the events in which people participated and which shaped the early history of North America. This kind of encounter with history can be more accessible than history books are. It is dynamic, participatory, tactile, and memorable. Plimoth Plantation is one of the most popular museums in Massachusetts; according to its 2014 annual report, over 340,000 people visited, over 1.5 million logged onto its website, and its annual budget exceeded \$23 million.⁷

Establishing the Wampanoag Homesite

Plimoth Plantation founder Harry Hornblower II was deeply interested in the interactions between the colonists and the Native peoples of the region, and always intended to include Native history in the museum's holdings. In 1959 during the same period when the English Village was established, anthropologist James Deetz was hired to design and install an exhibit that would introduce Native history to the story that the museum was already telling. Shortly thereafter it opened with a single wigwam situated near the English Village.⁸ At that time no Native people were employed by the museum.

This lack of a Native presence began to change in the early 1970s, very likely influenced by the founding in 1968 of the American Indian Movement (AIM), an American Indian advocacy group. AIM was initially formed to address American Indian sovereignty, treaty issues, spirituality, and leadership, while simultaneously addressing incidents of police harassment and

⁷ The 2014 Annual Report can be found here:

https://issuu.com/plimothplantation/docs/digitalversion_annualreport2014_pli.

⁸ For more information on the origins of the Homesite, see this Backgrounder Document produced in 2013: https://www.plimoth.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg-images/Backgrounder_Homesite2013.pdf.

racism against Native Americans who were forced to move away from reservations and tribal culture by Indian Termination Policies. AIM's paramount objective was to create "real economic independence for the Indians." But the organization did much more than that. AIM showed Americans that Native peoples were still alive and, as with other marginalized groups, suffered from discrimination and wanted their civil (and sovereign) rights recognized and protected. For example, in 1970 during ceremonies on Thanksgiving Day to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock, AIM seized a replica of the *Mayflower* in Boston Harbor. In 1971, members occupied Mount Rushmore because it had been created on a sacred Lakota site in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Also in 1971, AIM began to highlight and protest problems with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), which administered programs and land trusts for Native Americans. The group briefly occupied BIA headquarters in Washington, D.C. In 1972, activists marched across country on the "Trail of Broken Treaties" and occupied the BIA for several days. During the occupation AIM publicized a 20-point list detailing its qualms with federal treaties and promises. Like their contemporaries in the civil rights and antiwar movements, AIM used the press and media to convey its message. Rather than rely on traditional lobbying efforts, AIM spoke directly to the American public. Its leaders looked for opportunities to gain exposure, and in turn news outlets sought out AIM spokespersons for interviews.

In addition to challenging political and economic discrimination, AIM's efforts had cultural effects as well. They articulated the fact that the settlement of North America and the creation of the United States caused great harm to 17th century people who were indigenous to North America, and that generations of Native people continued to suffer the effects. Until the early 1970s, the version of colonial history represented at Plimoth Plantation was almost silent about Native history, and of course did not include these stories of harm. All these developments influenced the museum's future as the effects of AIM began to inform narratives about colonial history.⁹

While AIM's activism was going on, Plimoth Plantation became eager to offer a richer and more diverse, balanced, and accurate portrait of 17th century life during the colonial era.¹⁰ The idea was to create a complex and culturally sensitive representation of what life was like in New England 400 years ago. In 1971, the museum inaugurated a Wampanoag Indigenous Program to represent the history of Native peoples of the region: the Patuxet, Pocasset, Nauset, Mashpee, and other Wampanoag groups. For years it was only a minor side attraction, but change was in the air. Information to further develop the site was gathered from oral tradition handed down among the Wampanoag people and from early historical writing about Plymouth

9 On the American Indian Movement, see Bruce E. Johnson, *Encyclopedia of the American Indian Movement* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2013); Dick Bancroft, *We Are Still Here: A Photographic History of the American Indian Movement* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2013); and the Wikipedia entry at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Indian_Movement.

10 Here is a video recording of the Wampanoag Homesite filmed by staff at Plimoth Plantation 2009: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3ENexOKrmQ>.

Colony. In 1973 when the Wampanoag Homesite was founded, the first American Indian trustees were elected to Plimoth's board.¹¹

These efforts have been ongoing ever since. In 1992 a Native retail shop opened in the Visitor Center. In 1996 the museum hosted its first Patuxet Strawberry Thanksgiving, a daylong celebration based on Wampanoag traditions, and two years later it held a Wampanoag history conference which included panels of Native and non-Native speakers. In 2000 the museum began to invite Native people to participate in the annual reenactment of the 1621 harvest feast. Two years later an exhibit was mounted that explored the history and mythology of the American Thanksgiving holiday, which began in 1789 as a harvest festival at George Washington's behest and became a federal holiday in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln declared a national day of "Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens."¹² By 2003, the museum had a new policy that required that all programming or ads filmed on the museum's grounds must cover both the English Village and the Wampanoag Homesite, and for all film and media collaborators to represent the museum biculturally. And in 2005, the museum's Board adopted the goal of becoming fully bicultural by end of 2008.¹³

The geographical placement and design of the Wampanoag Homesite also sends a message about the history that museum aims to represent. The Homesite is the first living history exhibit that guests encounter when they arrive. In fact, visitors *must* walk through it in order to get to the other exhibits, in a sense metaphorically recreating the historical fact that Native peoples were in North America first. The Homesite is located on an archeological area where Wampanoag artifacts dating back 8,000 years have been found. Now fully developed, the site is designed in the same spirit as the English Village: to create a close encounter for visitors by employing historical reenactors. Members of local New England tribes are hired to dress and act as 17th century Wampanoag people and to demonstrate how their ancestors lived day to day and interacted with the settlers.¹⁴

It turns out, however, that creating living history exhibits about colonial-era Native life presents different challenges than the ones that produced the English Village. Those differences highlight assumptions, stereotypes, and ideas endemic to American culture which are both

11 For more background information on the origins of the Homesite, see this Backgrounder Document produced in 2013: https://www.plimoth.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg-images/Backgrounder_Homesite2013.pdf.

12 See Priscilla Frank, "[Christie's Is Selling The Proclamation That Established Thanksgiving, Signed By George Washington](#)," *Huffington Post*, November 28, 2013; "[Proclamation of Thanksgiving \(October 3, 1863\)](#)," Abraham Lincoln Online; and "[President Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Day Proclamation of October 3, 1863 \(Presidential Proclamation 106\)](#)," National Archives and Records Administration (United States).

13 See Susan Milton, "Plimoth seeks to tell 'whole story'", in the *Cape Cod Times*, June 24, 2007, at <http://www.capecodtimes.com/article/20070624/news/706240324>; and the museum's explanation of its bicultural commitment at <https://www.plimoth.org/about/who-we-are/presenting-story-two-cultures>

14 Most, but not all, of the actors are Mashpee Wampanoag people, the local tribe that won acknowledgement from the federal government in 2007.

intentionally and unwittingly built into the museum's design. These differences become salient when visitors encounter the exhibits.



Fig. 3 Native man and Pilgrim man, Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth, MA.

Fig. 4 Cooking at the Wampanoag Homesite, Plimoth Plantation, Plymouth, MA.

Museum Design and Cultural Encounters

Plimoth Plantation is designed to create an immersive experience. Because the actors who represent the Pilgrims never break character in front of the public, visitors enjoy the illusion of encountering 17th century people who are embedded in their own lives and times. These characters are, in a sense, frozen in a long-ago moment when the colony was new. In contrast, the re-enactors in the Wampanoag Homesite speak as modern people while wearing traditional clothing and performing traditional activities such as cooking, weaving, making pottery, playing games, planting, weeding, and harvesting. In their dress and actions—on the outside—they play the roles of 17th century Native peoples. But when they interact with the public—revealing what's on the inside—they neither speak their ancestral language nor embody the ideas of 17th century Wampanoag. They use modern English and speak as modern museum docents. They perform tasks that replicate the appearance of their ancestors and simultaneously interpret themselves while doing so. They may be “acting” too, as the colonial figures are, but they are not acting like Native peoples from the 17th century. Ironically, at Plimoth Plantation the colonial actors are frozen in time, which is common stereotype associated with Native peoples, while the Native re-enactors get to be modern and traditional simultaneously.

There are also some similarities in how the museum's design depends on modern ideas but represents cultural differences associated with Native and non-Native identities. The English Village exhibit encourages non-native American museum-goers to identify with the colonists, or

at least to see their own immigrant history as bearing a family resemblance to that of the Separatists. The colonial actors are not, nor do they need to be, descendants of the original settlers at Plymouth in order to achieve this end. Likewise, the Native staff hired to represent the Wampanoag are not all descended from the Wampanoag people. Native visitors can identify with 17th century Native life without reference to specifics of family or tribe. In both cases, the museum is flexible about specific lineages in order to serve modern notions of cultural identity.

These modern notions also inform the museum's gift shops. The shops catalogue their wares by means of 19 different categories ("Books," "Home & Garden," "Kids Corner," "Thanksgiving & Seasonal," etc.). They sell colonial clothing, hats, and knitting kits so that visitors can make or own colonial outfits. One of the 19 categories is designated "Native" and offers a wide array of dream catchers, jewelry, books, stuffed animals, and inspirational images and sayings on T-shirts, mugs, and banners. But it does not include Native costumes or the wide array of other categories of items represented in the gift shops as a whole.¹⁵ Clearly the meaning of identification and representation through gift shop items is different for the ethnic groups illustrated by the museum and portrayed by the living history employees. Here is where the student of colonial and Native history can see that the same pressures both caused English settlement *and* displaced the Native people of the region. This history of displacement is not explicitly depicted by the museum, but it is built into every aspect of the museum's design which is a continuing consequence of both settlement and displacement. These pressures are still discernable in how the two groups are represented at the museum.

These differences can come to the surface and surprise visitors who find themselves encountering history through the lens of the museum. Plimoth Plantation is of great interest to patriotic Americans who are deeply moved by the origin stories of religious liberty, courageous travel across the ocean, settlement, and Thanksgiving associated with colonial American history. It is also a popular attraction for families and school groups in the Boston area. While the museum's staff, and especially its living history actors, are well-educated about the historical and cultural facts of Pilgrim and Wampanoag life, museum-goers from all walks of life possess varying degrees of knowledge about 17th century history, the history of the Pilgrims, and the effects of colonialism on Native Americans. This lack of understanding can cause problems in the museum's everyday operations.

For example, the museum's website asks people not to come in period dress, but of course every visitor does not spend quality time on the website before arriving. Some show up in what they think of as traditional "Indian" costumes. This has offended some Native staff who work at the Wampanoag Homesite. In one incident relayed to the author by museum staff, an 8-year-old boy arrived wearing a "leather" vest made from a brown paper bag decorated with paint. When he saw a Native re-enactor in deerskin clothing, he exclaimed that he was "dressed like an Indian." One of the Native staff was offended and berated the boy much to the distress of everyone involved, especially the boy's parents.¹⁶

¹⁵ To browse the museum shop, go here: <https://www.plimoth.com/>.

¹⁶ Author interview with museum staff at Plimoth Plantation, March 2016.

The museum subsequently attempted to anticipate and prevent incidents like this one. Training was provided to prepare Native staff to respond as public educators when these unanticipated cultural trespasses take place, and to meet offensive speech and actions dispassionately. Prospective guests find this introduction on the museum's website, which attempts to explain how the colonial actors differ from the Native ones, even though all of them are dressed in traditional clothing and are performing traditional tasks:

Unlike the people you'll meet in the 17th-Century English Village, the staff in the Wampanoag Homesite are not role players. They are all Native People—either Wampanoag or from other Native Nations—and they will be dressed in historically accurate clothing, mostly made of deerskin. They speak from a modern perspective about Wampanoag history and culture. They are happy to see you and will invite you inside a *wetu*, or tell you what they are growing in the garden, or show you how to play hubbub, an ancient tribal game still enjoyed by many Wampanoag today. The staff in the Wampanoag Homesite are very proud of their Native heritage, and knowledgeable of the traditions, stories, technology, pastimes, music and dance of the people who have lived in this region for more than 10,000 years. Ask lots of questions! You may be surprised what you will learn.

For people who may never have learned about Native peoples beyond the stereotypes, this can be unusual and challenging information. In order to further prepare visitors for what they will see at the museum, the website offers “Frequently Asked Questions” (FAQ) about the Wampanoag Homesite. The FAQ assumes this lack of knowledge and anticipates questions that non-Natives often ask contemporary Native people. Rather than simply dismiss or attempt to shut down such questions as offensive, the museum invites and welcomes them—indeed, it asks them itself—in service of educating the public.

The list of questions is below. Note that the first nine are strictly informational or factual; questions 10-14 anticipate and address offensive ignorance, suggesting that museum staff know that a certain degree of prejudice is unavoidable and is in fact integral to the curiosity of some portion of the public. These last five questions embody the assumption that, unlike any other cultural group or ethnicity, Native people somehow may have stayed static across the centuries (again, even though the Native re-enactors *appear* “traditional” while speaking as modern people to the public).

1. What will I see at the Wampanoag Homesite?
2. Who will I meet at the Wampanoag Homesite?
3. How long does it take to visit the Wampanoag Homesite?
4. What does the word “Wampanoag” mean?

5. Where did the Wampanoag live in the 1600s?
6. Who was Massasoit?
7. Did the English and Wampanoag celebrate the “First Thanksgiving”?
8. How do you know about the Wampanoag People of the 17th century?
9. How many Wampanoag lived in this area in the 1600s?
10. How many Wampanoag are there today? Where do they live?
11. Do Wampanoag still speak their traditional language?
12. Are you a “real Indian”?
13. Do you live in tepees?
14. What are some ways to speak with a Native interpreter?

These Frequently Asked Questions illustrate different forms of ignorance that are part of what draws the public to the Wampanoag Homesite. They also show that Plimoth Plantation embodies aims that can reach in contradictory directions. Visitors can have a unique and immediate sense of an encounter with the past by means of the actors in the English Village. But the encounter with Native peoples in the Wampanoag Village tests that history, which the museum was founded to celebrate and teach. While Plimoth Plantation is a large, creative, and well-appointed museum that engulfs visitors in a matchless intellectual and sensory experience, it has limitations that it has not decided to address. It does not explicitly take on the consequences of settlement and colonialism for the generations of Native people who followed the Native people personified in the Wampanoag Village, some of whom are, in fact, those very re-enactors. Those consequences shape the dynamic between the colonial and Native histories represented at the museum.

Essentially, the museum commemorates and celebrates what many Native peoples consider to be the regrettable and even unforgivable world-making facts of European colonialism. This contradiction is illustrated by the museum’s “Plimoth and Pawtuxet Ancestors” page on its website. (Pawtuxet is the traditional name for the village that became Plimoth Colony.) Whereas the Plimoth ancestors are thoroughly documented and detailed information about them is available to the public, information about Pawtuxet ancestors is kept private. The explanation for this difference reads as follows:

The genealogies of Wampanoag people are privately held for a number of reasons. It is a common occurrence for Wampanoag people, or for Native people in general, to get comments from other people that they (the others) also have Native blood. While this may indeed be the case, it is quickly obvious whether or not these others were brought up in or around the Native community they are claiming. Being a Native person is more than having a certain blood quantum. It is belonging to (in this case) a Wampanoag family that is part of the Wampanoag community. It is being part of that Wampanoag family as they continue traditional ways, and being part of the Wampanoag community that strives to maintain culture, lands and community in the face of today's world. All of this gives a certain life experience, perspective and world view. If another person has the knowledge of having Native blood only, or has not lived in the Native community for even a couple of generations, then they do not have the experience of living as a Native person. This can cause a lot of confusion as to who is Native and who is not, or who can be brought onto a tribal roll or who cannot. Also, there are still too many times when people think that the Wampanoag have all died out; or that the Wampanoag person standing before them is either just "playing Indian" or is actually 400 years old. Children, especially, can have a lot of confusion around the concept that Wampanoag still exist and are alive today. The confusion comes from very ingrained and stereotypical thinking that "Indians" are only things of the past. We often have to explain that we exist today because we have parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great grandparents, and so on, just like anyone else. Where does such ingrained and stereotypical thinking come from? What purpose does it serve? Who does it serve?

These last three questions dip a toe into the waters of contemporary critique. They gently suggest that Native people know full well that they are stereotyped. They are accustomed to encountering ignorant people who assume that it's fair game to ask Native people to explain themselves. The rest of the paragraph above suggests that whereas the descendants of the Pilgrims identify as such because of a continuous bloodline, viable claims to Native identity depend mostly on experience. Although Native peoples are not "only things of the past," the past is still the primary identifier for contemporary Native identity because of reference to traditions drawn from continuous Native practice across generations. This manner of cultural production reflects how, in the modern world, practices and bloodline compete with each other as evidence of true Native identity, and how identity itself is determined by quite different markers that stand as evidence of stability and continuity across generations.

Plimoth Plantation both serves and depends on visitors who are interested in 17th century history, and also tries to challenge some of the romanticism of the past which draws many of those visitors to learn about colonial and pre-industrial subjects. Time will tell how far the museum will go to reconcile its own history and aims with the political and identity concerns of contemporary Native peoples, some of whom work there and on whom the museum itself now depends in order to maintain its exhibits.

Picture Credits

Fig. 1 <https://business.yarmouthcapecod.com/list/member/plimoth-plantation-inc-plymouth-247#map#map>

Fig. 2 <https://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/plimoth-grist-mill>

Fig. 3 <https://www.plimoth.org/about/who-we-are/presenting-story-two-cultures>

Fig. 4 <https://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/whats-dinner>