

## **The Pilgrims in Stained Glass Windows of The First Parish Church**

*by: Donna Petrangelo (August 2011)*

When the cornerstone of the National Memorial Pilgrim Church was laid in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on June 29, 1896, Pilgrim Society President Arthur Lord proclaimed:

“To this generation, came the duty and the opportunity to erect upon the ruins of the old church, a memorial, simple yet enduring, to the religious life of its founders, the last and best of the great memorials to the Pilgrims at Plymouth . . . Long may it stand, sustaining, elevating, and inspiring the life and thought of this community, its portals ever open to the ‘new light yet to come.’”<sup>1</sup>

When Arthur Lord referred to this fifth meetinghouse at the base of Burial Hill as “the last . . . great memorial to the Pilgrims,” he certainly had not envisioned the creation of Plimoth Plantation or the generous gift of Mayflower II to the town of Plymouth. However, while new jewels have been added to Plymouth’s historical crown since the late 1800s, First Parish is still one of the most significant.

Lord, like many of his generation throughout New England, clearly was aware of the historical roots of First Parish. As the plaque on the front of the present First Parish states, this was where “the church of Scrooby, Leyden, and the Mayflower had gathered on this hillside in 1620.”

While the fort constructed in 1622 atop Burial Hill also served as a place of worship during the Pilgrims’ early years in Plymouth, by 1648 sufficient manpower, health, and resources had allowed the settlers to construct their first simple meetinghouse on common land at the base of Burial Hill. Due to the toll taken by the elements and the settlers’ need for a larger place of worship, this original meetinghouse was replaced by a new structure in 1681, followed by the third meetinghouse in 1744, and a fourth in 1831, all on substantially the same site.<sup>2</sup> This fourth meetinghouse served the congregation and the community until November 22, 1892, when it burned to the ground shortly before its scheduled rededication.<sup>3</sup>

Soon after this great loss, the congregation initiated plans for a new meetinghouse that would, “through the visions and foresight of its builders and through the constancy and continuing faith of the old organization, enshrine the values and faith that have made our nation great.”<sup>4</sup> Such vision became reality thanks to many generous donors throughout America, and the National Memorial Pilgrim Church was completed in 1897 and dedicated on December 21, 1899.

While the Pilgrim story is partially conveyed through First Parish’s Norman architecture and the stone plaques that pay homage to the former ministers and church elders such as William Brewster, the values and vision of the early settlers are most vividly depicted through the magnificent Tiffany stained glass windows, many of which were gifts from Mayflower descendants.

The twelve narthex windows that line the stairs leading to First Parish’s sanctuary were designed by Tiffany’s Edward Peck Sperry, one of the most well-known opalescent glass artists of the period, and donated by Mayflower descendant Mrs. Caleb Brewster Hackley of New York.<sup>5</sup> Two windows contain the names of the forty-one signers of the Mayflower Compact, while six windows depict allegorical figures identified as Courage, Peace, Justice, Faith, Truth, and Light. The remaining four windows illustrate significant aspects of the Pilgrim epic and are given individual titles.

It is no surprise to see the window entitled *The Landing in Plymouth*, which portrays what has become perhaps the most famous “step” in American history, thanks to the words of ninety-five-year-old Thomas Faunce in 1741. Faunce claimed that his father, who had come over on the *Anne* in 1623, had been told by one of the “original party of settlers” that what we have come to know as Plymouth Rock ““had received the footsteps of our fathers on their first arrival.””<sup>6</sup>

The panel entitled *The Treaty with Massasoit* celebrates the fifty-four years of peace maintained between the settlers and the Wampanoags, until it was shattered during King Philip’s War, which Nathaniel Philbrick describes as “more than twice as bloody as the American Civil War and at least seven times more lethal than the American Revolution.”<sup>7</sup>

The remaining two windows depict less well-known events in the Pilgrim story, but the values represented by each reveal why these events were chosen. *The Destruction of the Pilgrim Press* depicts the smashing of William Brewster’s press in Leiden, following his printing of pamphlets that were critical of King James.<sup>8</sup> George N. Marshall, former First Parish minister, notes in his essay “The Historical Pilgrim Church and the Modern Witness” that “the Pilgrim faith forecast a number of freedoms which all Americans have come to cherish, and some freedoms not yet fully realized . . . [The Pilgrims] gained freedom and exemplified it at a time when for most people freedom was the idle dream of scholars.”<sup>9</sup>

The final of the twelve narthex windows, *Bradford’s Rebuke to Oldham and Lyford*, depicts the “first trial by jury in the Western hemisphere,” which took place in 1624. George N. Marshall views this event as highly significant because “although [Oldham and Lyford] had plotted against the government founded upon the Mayflower Compact, Governor Bradford did not arbitrarily proceed against them, but summoned all free-men of the colony to hear the case and pass judgment. Such an act in a small and insignificant colony, struggling to establish itself, is ample proof that the rights of the individual were respected. It was further proof that the Pilgrims were willing to trust to the democratic method of procedure – willing to risk the stability of their enterprise before the bar of public opinion. Their faith in freedom was practiced.”<sup>10</sup>

The sanctuary’s three front windows, *John Robinson Blessing the Pilgrims on Their Departure from Delftshaven*, depict the Separatists’ minister with outstretch arms extended to those Pilgrims who, in the left window, kneel on board the *Speedwell* previous to their departure. The window on the right conveys the sorrow and anguish experienced by those of the congregation who chose to remain in Holland. Inscribed on a front wall of the sanctuary are Robinson’s words, “The Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word,” reflecting the Separatists’ beliefs in “continuing revelation at a time when everywhere one found truth prescribed by the past. The Pilgrims never closed the door.”<sup>11</sup>

The sanctuary’s center chancel window, *Signing of the Compact*, was a gift from the New York Society of Mayflower Descendants. Designed by Edward Peck Sperry and executed by Tiffany Studios, the window depicts five dark-clad, contemplative, and reverent Pilgrims who stand in the hold of the Mayflower, poised to sign what would become one of the most significant documents in American history. A *New York Times* article from February 27, 1897, identifies the figures as Bradford, Brewster, Winslow, Carver, and Standish, and the woman seated at the table as Mrs. White.<sup>12</sup> (In *Tiffany Windows*, however, Alastair Duncan identifies the female figure as Mrs. Carver.)<sup>13</sup>

The left and right chancel windows, *Civil Liberty* and *Religious Liberty*, were executed by Church Glass and Decorating Company and, according to Marshall and Arthur B. Whitney, the designer was Edward Peck Sperry.<sup>14</sup> Given to First Parish by the New England Society of

Brooklyn, New York, the windows were presented on December 21, 1902, during the celebration of Forefathers' Day and accepted by Pilgrim Society president Arthur Lord.<sup>15</sup>

A *Boston Daily Globe* article from December 22, 1902, provides a detailed description of both windows: The soldier who represents *Civil Liberty* "is a soldier only in order to protect the liberty he personifies, for his sword is sheathed, never to be drawn except to defend the right, a liberty based upon the compact of the Mayflower, found in the open book resting upon the knee of the soldier." In the right-hand window, a minister representing religious liberty "holds in one hand the scroll of the moral law, which his arm rests upon that foundation of truth, the Holy Scriptures, and his right hand is raised in exhortation and benediction, as he announces the fundamental principles of religious liberty."<sup>16</sup> Consultant Julie Sloan believes that "the specificity of the description suggests that it was provided to the newspaper either by the window designer or by the donors, who may have dictated the symbolism to the designer."<sup>17</sup>

The grouping of the three central windows is captured by the words of George N. Marshall, who argues that "the Pilgrim tradition is the basis of our democratic culture in America. The *Mayflower* Compact was the original American instrument of democratic government. The town-meeting concept was established by the Pilgrim Fathers, as was the annual election of officers. They sought to establish religious freedom and safeguard it with civil liberty."<sup>18</sup>

For more than one hundred years, First Parish's stone and glass have preserved and proclaimed the values and beliefs of the Pilgrims, but presently portions of the building's façade and some of the Tiffany windows are in dire need of restoration. Structurally, some of the larger windows have become weakened by the deterioration of the lead and soldered joints and by the incorrect reattachment of support bars during a previous restoration effort. In addition, some improper cleaning procedures and attempts to repair cracks have negatively impacted the paint on some the multi-layered opalescent glass. In order to maintain the historical integrity the Meetinghouse and these great works of art, it is essential that highly skilled experts undertake their restoration.

In 1893, the editor of *The New England Magazine*, Edwin D. Mead, proclaimed that First Parish, "the church of the *Mayflower* congregation and of Elder Brewster, the church of Bradford and Carver and Winslow, the church of the pioneers sent out into the New England Wilderness by John Robinson . . . was the first purely democratic church in modern times, which means that it was the first purely democratic church in history."<sup>19</sup> Mead called the congregation of First Parish "the trustee of the great Pilgrim tradition; and its high office is to act with the public to keep sacred memories fresh and give them power."<sup>20</sup>

Having embraced its role as steward of the National Memorial Pilgrim Church, the First Parish congregation is reaching out nationwide for help in restoring and preserving this jewel in our nation's heritage. Those individuals who wish to help in this huge endeavor will find more information on our website at [www.restorefirstparishplymouth.org](http://www.restorefirstparishplymouth.org).

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Lord, quoted by John Cuckson, *A Brief History of the First Church in Plymouth, from 1606 to 1901* (Boston: George H. Ellis, Co., 1902), 107-8.

<sup>2</sup> Cuckson, *A Brief History*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur B. Whitney and George N. Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Julie L. Sloan, "Stained Glass Window Condition Analysis, First Parish Church, Plymouth, MA" (May 15, 2008), 7.

<sup>6</sup> James Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz, *The Times of Their Lives* (New York: W. H. Freeman and Co., 2000), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower* (New York: Viking, 2006), xv.

<sup>8</sup> Philbrick, *The Mayflower*, 18.

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<sup>9</sup> George N. Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church and the Modern Witness," in *The Church of the Pilgrim Fathers*, ed. George N. Marshall (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), 82.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-3.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Sloan, "Stained Glass," 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 96.

<sup>15</sup> "Pilgrim Fathers Honored," *New York Times* (December 22, 1902), 6.

<sup>16</sup> "Two Handsome Windows," *The Boston Daily Globe* (December 22, 1902), 12.

<sup>17</sup> Sloan, "Stained Glass," 6.

<sup>18</sup> Marshall, "The Historical Pilgrim Church," xvii.

<sup>19</sup> Edwin D. Mead, quoted by Whitney and Marshall, "The National Memorial Pilgrim Church," 87.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.