

**THE OLD COLONY
TOWN, AND
OTHER SKETCHES**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649131907

The Old Colony town, and other sketches by William Root Bliss

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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WILLIAM ROOT BLISS

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BY

WILLIAM ROOT BLISS

AUTHOR OF COLONIAL TIMES ON
BUZZARD'S BAY



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
The Riverside Press, Cambridge
1893



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THE OLD COLONY TOWN



THE OLD COLONY TOWN

COMING up from Buzzard's Bay through the woods, I get my first view of the spires of Plymouth from the top of a hill. The town lies on a sloping plain between the sea and a range of pine-covered hills, which, beginning behind it, extend about thirty miles in a southeasterly direction and end on the Atlantic Ocean.

It is easy to discover that the thing which the town lacks is a steady harbor; one that will stay at home all day and not go away at night. Whenever the tide runs out, the harbor runs out also, leaving in its place broad, oozy flats which offer good pickings to plover, whose flying cry is a startling note among the sounds of a summer night. Through the ooze wind narrow channels of shallow water to the sea. By the deepest of these the distance is about eight miles from the Gurnet Lights, at the entrance of the

harbor, to Plymouth Rock. If the Rock could attract the sea as it attracts sight-seers, the Old Colony Town would have a respectable harbor, and might call itself the pleasantest for situation of any town on the coast of Massachusetts.

Every day in summer a steamboat comes from Boston, and pours ashore a multitude of men, women, and children, who pass by the hackmen in waiting, and rush to the Rock. A steamboat made the same voyages more than half a century ago; but it brought no pilgrims. Now they constitute a daily show, which serves to entertain the loungers who are sitting atop of Cole's Hill watching the modern pilgrims as they hasten to their shrine. They walk around the Rock; they put their hands on it; they gaze at it; they spell aloud the inscription, "1620;" they step across it; they stand still on it and make good resolutions; and I have seen respectable-looking men and women meet on it, and kiss each other.

It is difficult to explain this fetichism, which besets not only the multitudes coming by sea, but those also who come in railroad trains from distant parts of the country.

Plymouth Rock, elevated into the protection of iron pickets and gates, sheltered from sun and rain by a granite canopy, has become to strangers and wayfarers a curiosity as extraordinary as a mermaid or a flying horse would be.

Looking eastward from the Rock, you see a long sand spit stretching out from the south shore. It keeps the sea swells from rolling over the harbor when the harbor is in. It was once covered with trees; and a town-meeting of the year 1702, considering "the great damage likely to accrew the harbour by cutting down the pine trees at the beach," did order "that henceforth Noe pine trees shall be felled on forfeiture of 5 shillings pr tree & that Noe man shall set aney fire on sd beach on forfeiture of 5 shillings per time." Now there is not a tree on it. People go there for fish dinners and picnics, and to set fires for clambakes. A little steamboat named "Mary Chilton" carries sight-seers to the beach; an electric car named "Mary Chilton" carries them through the streets; and Chiltonville is a little village near by. The Chilton name is an incantation in the Old Colony Town.

I asked a deck-hand, as we were steaming to the beach for a dinner, "Who is Mary Chilton? Does she own this steamboat?" He did not know; he had been aboard only two months. I went up to the pilot-house, and, leaning into the window, I asked the captain: "Who is Mary Chilton?" He gave me a quizzical look. "She was the first woman," said he, "that landed on the Rock." "Is that true?" I replied. "Did they land on the Rock? The mate of the *Mayflower* was a seaman; don't you think he ran his boat right on the sand? Then the passengers jumped out, and he hauled her up. Just as you would do it if you had pulled a boat to Plymouth Beach. You would n't lay her alongside a rock to rub her paint off?" The captain looked straight at me, and said: "Where did you get your information?"

That is a question which should be put to all writers who, through the media of romance and tradition, have been weaving fables into the history of the Old Colony Town.

Up to the year 1741, this famous Rock, which is now the magnet of the town, rested