



The Sparrow-Hawk: Plymouth's First Rescue Mission

An Unexpected Visit to the Pilgrims in 1626

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

By 1626, Plymouth Colony had survived its desperate infancy. The starving settlement of 1621 had become an established English community with experienced leaders, friendly relations with the Wampanoag, and enough stability to assist other English colonists in distress.

One of the best examples of this transformation occurred when a tiny English vessel called the *Sparrow-Hawk* was blown off course while sailing for Virginia. Thanks to Governor William Bradford's detailed account, we know almost exactly what happened. Unlike many colonial stories that survive only through later tradition, this one comes directly from an eyewitness who was there. It also provides a fascinating—and occasionally humorous—glimpse into everyday life in New England only six years after the *Mayflower* landed.

A Ship Loses Its Way

William Bradford begins his account in a style that almost reminds us of Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, written more than a century later:

"There was a ship, with many passengers in her and sundrie goods, bound for Virginia. They had lost them selves at sea..."

That unfortunate vessel was the *Sparrow-Hawk*, only twenty-nine feet long at the keel, about nine feet wide, and weighing roughly thirty-five tons. Calling such a tiny craft a "ship" might be generous, yet it somehow carried a crew of nine and twenty-five passengers along with all of their possessions across the North Atlantic.

Bradford quickly explained why things had gone so badly:

"...either by ye insufficiencie of ye maister, or his ilnes; for he was sick & lame of ye scurvie..."

Whether poor navigation or a captain weakened by scurvy was to blame, the little vessel had completely lost its bearings.

Running Out of Everything

Conditions aboard the *Sparrow-Hawk* had become desperate. Bradford wrote:

"...they had been 6 weeks at sea, and had no water, nor beere, nor any woode left, but had burnt up all their emptie caske..."

No water. No firewood. And perhaps worst of all for seventeenth-century English sailors—no beer.

That last detail may sound amusing today, but beer was actually safer to drink than stagnant water stored aboard wooden ships during long voyages. The *Mayflower* had also been running dangerously low on beer in 1620, one reason the Pilgrims had been anxious to find a place to settle before their supplies disappeared entirely.

Shipwreck on Cape Cod

Cold, hungry, exhausted, and hopelessly off course, the *Sparrow-Hawk* drifted dangerously close to the shoals of Cape Cod before running aground on a sandbar. Fortunately, the passengers managed to save most of their belongings.

Bradford recorded:

"...at low water they gatt out their goods on drie shore... and saved most of their things without any great loss; neither was ye ship much hurt, but shee might be mended, and made servisable againe."

Things could have been much worse. The ship appeared repairable, everyone had survived, and there seemed every reason to believe the voyage might eventually continue.

Friendly Faces

Soon afterward, several Native Americans approached the stranded Englishmen in canoes. Bradford recalled:

"...they saw some Indians come to them in canows, which made them stand upon their gard."

The nervous castaways naturally expected trouble. Instead, they received one of the greatest surprises imaginable.

"...they heard some of ye Indeans speake English unto them..."

These were friendly Wampanoag who had long been acquainted with Plymouth Colony. They even asked whether the newcomers were friends of Governor Bradford and offered to carry letters requesting assistance.

Only a few years earlier, the Pilgrims themselves had depended upon Native Americans for survival. Now those same Native allies were helping another group of stranded English settlers.

Governor Bradford to the Rescue

When Bradford received the message, he wasted little time. As he proudly recorded:

"...he caused a boate to be made ready... he went him selfe, & allso carried some trading comodities, to buy them corne of ye Indeans."

The governor personally sailed to Cape Cod carrying supplies while purchasing additional corn from local Native Americans to feed the stranded passengers. It was a generous act that demonstrated how far Plymouth Colony had progressed since its own desperate first winter.

Disaster Strikes Again

Unfortunately, the *Sparrow-Hawk's* troubles were not yet over. After temporary repairs had been completed, another violent coastal storm struck.

Bradford sadly reported:

"...by the violence of a great storme... she was put a shore, and so beatten and shaken as she was now wholly unfitte to goe to sea."

The little vessel had survived the Atlantic crossing only to be destroyed almost within sight of safety. The passengers had no choice but to abandon her permanently.

Waiting for a Ride

With their ship beyond repair, the passengers became temporary residents of Plymouth Colony while waiting for transportation to Virginia. They spent several months farming, trading, and

living among the Pilgrims until another English vessel finally carried them to their original destination.

Not every visitor, however, proved equally respectable.

A Puritan Scandal

Among the passengers was a prosperous gentleman named Mr. Fells, accompanied by several servants, many of them Irish. Bradford records that rumors soon began circulating about an unusually close relationship between Mr. Fells and one of his young maidservants.

After careful questioning, nothing could be proved, and both were merely warned and released. Then the young woman became obviously pregnant.

Mr. Fells promptly borrowed a small boat and attempted to flee. In seventeenth-century Massachusetts, however, there was nowhere to go. Unable to secure passage elsewhere, he was eventually forced to return and submit himself to the Plymouth authorities. Although his reputation never fully recovered, Bradford quietly packed him off with the other passengers when transportation to Virginia finally arrived.

Bradford later noted with some satisfaction that many members of the party eventually wrote back from Virginia expressing their gratitude for the kindness shown by Plymouth's citizens.

Rediscovering the *Sparrow-Hawk*

The story did not quite end there. In 1863, a violent Cape Cod storm uncovered the buried keel and ribs of the *Sparrow-Hawk*, preserved beneath the sand for more than two centuries. Archaeologists recovered the remains, and today they are preserved in Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Remarkably, they represent the only surviving physical remains of a seventeenth-century English merchant vessel, giving historians a rare opportunity to study the construction of the small ships that connected England with its American colonies.

From Rescued to Rescuers

The *Sparrow-Hawk* never reached Virginia, yet its brief visit tells us much about Plymouth Colony. Only six years after arriving hungry, sick, and uncertain of survival, the Pilgrims had become experienced colonists capable of rescuing fellow Englishmen, trading successfully with the Wampanoag, administering justice, and extending hospitality to strangers.

The colony that had once depended upon the generosity of others had matured into a community strong enough to help those who followed. Thanks to William Bradford's wonderfully detailed narrative—and the remarkable survival of the *Sparrow-Hawk's* timbers—we possess one of the most vivid, humorous, and thoroughly human snapshots of everyday life in early colonial New England.

