

**IMMATERIAL  
MONUMENT**

for

**THOMAS  
MORTON**

attempted

**THREE  
TIMES**

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Ed  
Halter

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2015

I.

ca. 1630-1650.

William Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*

“After this they fell to great licenciousnes, and led a dissolute life, powering out them selves into all profanenenes. And Morton became lord of misrule, and maintained (as it were) a schoole of Athisme. And after they had gott some good into their hands, and gott much by trading with y<sup>e</sup> Indeans, they spent it as vainly, in quaffing & drinking both wine & strong waters in great exsess, and, as some reported, 10<sup>li</sup>. worth in a morning. They also set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing aboute it many days togeather, inviting the Indean women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking together, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practises. As if they had anew revived & celebrated the feasts of y<sup>e</sup> Roman Goddes Flora, or ye beasly practises of y<sup>e</sup> madd Bacchinalians. Morton likewise (to shew his poetrie) compose sundry rimes & verses, tending to lasciviousness, and others to y<sup>e</sup> detraction & scandall of some persons, which he affixed to this idle or idoll May-polle. They chainged also the name of their place, and in stead of calling it Mounte Wollaston, they call it Merie-mounte, as if this joylity would have lasted ever.”

1637

Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan*

“The Inhabitants of Pasonagesst, (having translated the name of their habitation from that ancient Salvage name to Ma-re Mount, and being resolved to have the new name confirmed for a memorial to after ages,) did devise amongst themselves to have it performed in a solemne manner, with Revels and merriment after the old English custome; [they] prepared to sett up a Maypole upon the festivall day of Philip and Iacob, and therefore brewed a barrelll of excellent beare and provided a case of bottles, to be spent, with other good cheare, for all commers of that day. And because they would have it in a compleat forme, they had prepared a song fitting to the time and present occasion. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drumes, gunnes, pistols and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Salvages, that came thether of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80. foote longe was reared up, with a peare of buckshorns nayle one somewhat neare unto the top of it: where it stood, as a faire sea marke for directions how to finde out the way to mine Hoste of Ma-re Mount.”

1835

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”

“There is an admirable foundation for a philosophic romance in the curious history of the early settlement of Mount Wollaston, or Merry Mount. In the slight sketch here attempted, the facts, recorded on the grave pages of our New England annalists, have wrought themselves, almost spontaneously, into a sort of allegory.”

1849

John Lothrop Motley, *Merry-Mount: a Romance of the Massachusetts Colony*

“The crepuscular period which immediately preceded the rise of the Massachusetts Colony, possesses more of the elements of romance than any subsequent epoch. After the arrival of Winthrop with the charter, the history of the province is as clear as day-light ; but during the few previous years there are several characters flitting like phantoms through the chronicles of the time, about whose life and personal adventures, either at home or in the wilderness, but little is known.”

1879

William S. Patee, M.D., *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy, with a Sketch of Randolph and Holbrook*

"In 1634 [Thomas Morton] published a book, called, 'New England Canaan.' This book is a queer specimen of literature. In turning over its pages, you will see that it abounds in nick-names; such as Capt. Shrimp, for Capt. Standish; Capt. Littleworth, for Endicott; Dr. Nobby, for Fuller, &c."

1884

Samuel Adams Drake, *New England Legends and Folk Lore*

"Morton was, however, a man of education and ability,—which by no means proves that he was not all the Pilgrims allege him to have been,—an unprincipled adventurer. Taking his 'New English Canaan' as the index of his character, one reads at every few lines some evidence of his strong predilection for a life of indolence and pleasure. His idea was to establish an Arcadia, with the natives as his vassals. He restored the Old-English holiday customs, which the Puritans considered idolatrous, and which they prohibited amongst themselves. He rechristened his plantation of Mount Wollaston by the name of Merry Mount, with the old May-Day ceremonies of wine, wassail, and the dance around the May-pole, to celebrate the change. He composed riddles in verse addressed to his followers that show an equal familiarity with classical lore and with the debased manners of the court wits and rhymsters of the day. He furnished the Indians with firearms to hunt for him, which they soon learned to use against their masters."

1894

Alice Morse Earle, *Customs and Fashions in Old New England*

"A few rather sickly and benumbed attempts were made in bleak New England to celebrate in old English fashion the first of May. A May-pole was erected in Charlestown in 1687, and was promptly cut down. The most unbounded observance of the day was held at Merry Mount (now the town of Quincy) in 1628 by roistering Morton and his gay crew."

1896

Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *Three Episodes in Massachusetts History*

"Incongruous and laughable, the situation had its dramatic features also. It was not a vulgar modern instance of the frontier dance-hall under the eaves of a conventicle. There was a certain distance and grandeur and dignity about it,—a majesty of solitude, a futurity of empire. On the one hand, the sombre religious settlement; on the other, the noisy trading-post, — two germs of civilized life in that immeasurable wilderness, unbroken, save at Merrymount and Plymouth, from the Penobscot to the Hudson. Yet that wilderness, though immeasurable to them, was not large enough for both."

1906

Daniel Munro Wilson, *Quincy, Old Braintree, and Merry-Mount: An Illustrated Sketch*

"Scandalous, this entire episode,—very scandalous! almost as bad as the debauches of some present sons of the Puritans! But what resident of Quincy would have it buried in oblivion? It savors of romance, it has a touch of the picturesque, it anticipates the free *camraderie* of the Western cowboy, it distinguishes us in story."

1921

James Truslow Adams, *The Founding of New England*

“Thomas Morton, of Cliffords Inn, Gent., whose literary portrait has come down to us in the somewhat unreliable form of an appreciation by himself, supplemented by sundry exceedingly unflattering sketches by his enemies, now proceeded to take control of the situation in a manner entirely satisfactory to himself, the rest of the stranded Quincy band, and, it was darkly rumored, the less virtuous of the Indian squaws...When echoes of Morton’s mad songs died for the last time among the pines of Quincy, rigid conformity to the Puritanical code of manners and morals had won its second victory.”

1925

William Carlos Williams, “The May-Pole at Merry Mount,” *In the American Grain*

“It was unfair of Morton—seeing how the Indians valued guns and liquor—to use them for barter when the other settlers were not permitted to do so. This was the practical side of the desire to rid the colony of this man. But since the whites were armed with guns and had liquor, was it in the eyes of history wrong for Morton to use them for his trade? Another side of Puritan disgust with this brazen fellow was the moral one of his consorting with the Indian girls. It was upon this count, not the first, that they chose finally to attack him.”

1930

Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony*

“One of these small trading groups deserves more than passing notice, since it provided the first strange interlude played in the neighborhood of Quincy. Thomas Morton, a gay gentleman with an eye for trade, author of the most entertaining book on early Massachusetts, gathered a knot of boon companions on Mount Wollaston, which he renamed, in conscious punning, Ma-re Mount; and well he lived up to its usual pronunciation. Morton was quick to improve the sporting possibilities of the neighborhood, which Captain Smith had observed. When not engaged in dickering with Indians whom he had previously well primed with lusty liquor, or playing ‘mine Host of Ma-re Mount’ with ‘claret sparklinge neate,’ he roamed the forest with dog and gun, or sailed about the bay, fishing and shooting water-fowl. White men and Indians alike found good cheer at Merrymount. Young squaws were particularly welcome, and young Pilgrims probably found an occasional surreptitious visit to Merrymount as stimulating, and ultimately as exhausting, as their descendants do a trip to New York.”

1937

The Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration,  
*Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People*

“Now Thomas Morton, a companion of Captain Wollaston, set up a rival trading colony near-by at what is now Wollaston, in Quincy. The staid Pilgrims were duly horrified by the ‘Merrymount’ revels, but Morton flourished in his wickedness like the green bay tree. He sold rum and guns; and with these to be got in exchange for their furs, the Indians practically refused to take any amount of the Plymouth wampum and trinkets. At last, however, Miles Standish proceeded to Merrymount, seized Morton prisoner, and deported him to England.”

1945

George F. Willison, *Saints and Sinners: The Story of the Mayflower and the Plymouth Colony*

“To break with the past, Morton renamed the community. Fond of bad puns and showing off his Latin, he called it ‘Ma-re Mount,’ or Mountain by the Sea. The Pilgrims were not so wrong, however, in mistaking it for ‘Me-rie Mount.’

“The rechristening of the town was celebrated ‘in a solemn manner, with Revels and merriment after the old English custome.’ A straight thin pine eighty feet tall was felled, trimmed for use as a Maypole, and erected with a pair of antlers secured at the top to provide ‘a faire sea marke for directions how to finde out the way to mine Host of Ma-re Mount.’ A barrel of beer was brewed to be consumed ‘with all good cheare,’ and everybody in the

neighborhood was invited to attend—men and women, whites and Indians alike.

“Desiring to make the gala occasion ‘more fashionable,’ Morton composed two poems, tacking a copy of the longer on the Maypole for all to read—and understand, if they could.

Rise, Oedipus, and if thou canst, unfould  
What means Caribdis underneath the mould  
When Scilla solitary on the ground  
(Sitting in forme of Niobe) was found...

“The poem went on at great length in this manner. What it all meant, if anything, is a secret that died with its author. Even Morton admitted that it was ‘somewhat enigmatical,’ suggesting that the Pilgrims’ inability to understand it was one cause of their consuming rage against him. They were always bothering their heads about ‘things that were immaterial.’”

1963

Carl Andre, *Quincy Index*

“M. Manet. Mansion. Massachusetts. Maypole. Meadows.  
Merrymount. Merrymount. Montclair. Moon. Morton.  
Moswetusetts. Mount.”

1965

Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675*

“Historians who delight in censuring the drab morality of the Pilgrims and other Puritans have long found the Morton episode a choice example of moral bigotry... There is no doubt that the social behavior of the Morton colonists offended the Pilgrim Fathers. But the documentary record reveals that the Merrymount episode belongs not to the realm of moral quibbling, but of interracial diplomacy.”

1968

Leslie A. Fiedler and Arthur Zeiger, *O Brave New World: American Literature from 1600 to 1840*

“Yet Puritanism did not come alone or unchallenged to the New World, even in New England. Side by side with it, there was exported a Cavalier style of life, a blend of English countryside paganism and gentleman’s Christianity that managed to survive for a while in the South (in the shadows of slavery, alas, from the very first), but which was almost immediately driven out in the colder climate of the do-it-yourself North. The story of the defeat of Old World Paganism in the Massachusetts Bay Colony is told by William Bradford and Thomas Morton, antagonists in the struggle which ended with the destruction of Morton’s Utopia at Merrymount. Sometimes one wonders what would have happened if it had survived, this beatnick colony in the seventeenth century New England woods, presided over by university Bohemians—full of classical quotations, rum and devilry.”

## II.

Of America's origins, first there is the standard story, revived annually in the United States, upon occasion of the national holiday of Thanksgiving each autumn. The day marks the first harvest feast of the Pilgrim Fathers in Plymouth, Massachusetts, the earliest of the English colonies to prosper and survive to the present day. In the Thanksgiving myth, the Pilgrims are posed as hard-working, religious, determined—the spiritual ancestors, we'd like to think, of all Americans.

But there is another tale, told less frequently, that has shadowed this narrative since its beginnings. In 1625, just five years after the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock, a different colony was established a few miles up the coast. Originally christened Mount Wollaston, after its sea-captain founder, the plantation was renamed Merrymount by Thomas Morton, a lawyer and adventurer from the south-west of England, who took over its management following Captain Wollaston's departure; Morton's preferred spelling was "Ma-re Mount," a Latin pun based on his interpretation of the original Indian name, Pasonagessit, which he took to mean "by the sea."

Unlike his neighbors, Morton was impuritan; by all accounts a country gentleman type who loved hunting, theater, and falconry, Morton imagined he could create a "New English Canaan" in which all settlers would together prosper as equals. To this end, the men of Merrymount traded alcohol and firearms for furs with the local tribes, and famously erected a maypole—in keeping with old rural English customs—around which they drank liquor, sang bawdy songs, and danced with their Algonquian neighbors. Upon the maypole, Morton posted some lines of verse, "enigmatically composed" by himself; beginning with an invocation to Oedipus, his poem's convoluted string of classical allusions seems to propose some lusty pagan riddle. Knowing that another ship holding English women would not be forthcoming, Morton's men had sex with local natives, which led to at least one mixed-race child. The general sentiment of Morton's outpost, as he would later write, was to live "being void of care, which torments the lives of so many Christians."

The activities of Morton and his company threatened the nearby colonists of Plymouth, and so the Pilgrims sent a contingent of armed men, led by Captain Miles Standish, to shut Merrymount down in 1630. Some unfavorable accounts suggest Morton's men were simply too drunk to fight back when Standish's militia arrived. After officials ordered the Merrymount colony burned to the ground, Morton was exiled to an island off the New England coast, but eventually escaped to return to England, where he published a popular account of his adventures in the New World, *The New English Canaan*, making sure to include numerous barbs directed at the priggishness of the Plymouth brethren.

After the fall of Morton's brief experiment, the area around Mount Wollaston would become part of the settlement of Braintree, upon that town's incorporation in 1640. Following the American Revolution, the northern section of Braintree that included this zone was split off to form the city of Quincy, named after Colonel John Quincy, whose family kept an estate near Merrymount. Today, the name "Merrymount" is retained by a

residential neighborhood of Quincy situated around the hill where Morton's maypole once stood. A sketch of the hill itself features as the central motif the Quincy city seal.

There were other failed colonies in the English territories that would become the United States—most notoriously Roanoke, in present-day North Carolina, which disappeared in the 1580s leaving barely a trace. In Massachusetts, the Wessagusset colony directly to the south of Merrymount also floundered, to be re-established later as the current municipality of Weymouth. What distinguishes the Merrymount affair is that the settlement's end was chronicled by participants on either side of its demise; both Morton himself, in his *New English Canaan*, and in the diaries of William Bradford, captain of the Mayflower and governor of Plymouth colony.

Consequently, when the story of Plymouth colony had become, by the early 19th century, a myth of national origins for the United States, it was dogged by Morton's counter-narrative. Though allusions to Morton and Merrymount appear in early American novels such as Lydia Child's *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times* (1824) and Catharine Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), Nathaniel Hawthorne gave the May Pole incident its first extended literary treatment in 1835 with his short tale "The May-Pole of Merry-Mount." Hawthorne removes Morton from the story, but he paints a feverish picture of Merrymount's inhabitants, who, he writes, "imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure" to be enacted in the primeval forests of Massachusetts, in contradistinction to the "dismal wretches" of Plymouth.

A decade later, John Lothrop Motley published his historical novel *Merry-Mount, A Romance of the Massachusetts Colony* (1849), a fictionalized account, based on available records, but with admittedly liberal embellishments. A full two chapters are devoted to the "revels at Merrymount" themselves, which are described in lurid and extensive detail. In addition to the drunken dance around the maypole, Morton choreographs processions of "savage maidens" dolled up as English milkmaids and heated wrestling matches with near-naked Indian men. The entire affair culminates in what could only be described as an ecstatic orgy:

*[N]ow succeeded a general pell-mell, in which all parties, old and young, male and female, Saxon and savage, mingled in desperate and bewildering confusion, hugging, tumbling, knocking, thumping, tripping, twitching, pulling, leaping, dancing, singing, whooping and hallooing, as if they had all gone mad.*

Over the next century and a half, Morton remains a curious figure in colonial accounts, deployed as a libertine foil against the joyless Puritans, in the spirit of Hawthorne, or merely trotted out for some comic relief in what is otherwise a somewhat grim era in North American history. Again and again, he is positioned as a man of almost modern sensibilities who had the misfortune to have been born into an all-too-pious age. Poets seem particularly drawn to Morton—who was, after all, himself a poet. William Carlos Williams's collection of essays *In the American Grain* (1925) includes a defense of Morton; Stephen Vincent Benét celebrated "Tom Morton" in his poem *Miles Standish* (1933); Robert Lowell's

one-act play *Endicott and the Red Cross* (1964) compresses numerous events in Merrymount's short history into a single day; Quincy native Carl Andre mentions Morton in two poems written in 1963, *Quincy Index* and *America Drill*, the latter dedicated "in memory of Thomas Morton of Merry Mount 1625."

By the end of the twentieth century, some American wiccans and pagans have reclaimed Morton as one of their own. An eco-political pagan activist group called The Thomas Morton Alliance operated in Massachusetts into the 1990s; today, the website of the Wiccan Coven Idlewilde of Asheville, North Carolina celebrates Morton as a "pagan pilgrim" and "a pioneer of religious freedom." In more recent years, numerous groups have held their own revels in Merrymount on May Day, which have included traditional Native American musicians, costumed re-enactments of old English folk celebrations, and, naturally, a reconstructed maypole. On the website [Ancientlights.org](http://Ancientlights.org), you can watch clips of a 2002 event, shot on a wind-buffed camcorder. In the footage, a crew of rather sedate suburban adults are welcomed by a master of ceremonies in the character of Thomas Morton, sporting a buckskin coat, plumed Cavalier hat, and a pair of black Oakley sunglasses.

### III.

I was born in Quincy, and first heard the Merrymount story in high school. My family still lives in the area. On November 1, 2014, while visiting my hometown, I asked my mother to drive me through Merrymount, so I could try to see the site of Morton's colony. I knew I had been there as a child, but felt I should see it again. That day, a brutal nor'easter bore down upon the coast of Massachusetts, ripping whitecaps from the surface of the slate-grey ocean, and sending violent winds through the streets, causing the cold, thin rain to shoot sideways.

In the storm, we drove through the center of Quincy, past Mount Wollaston Cemetery, into the neighborhood of Merrymount. Our trip was rushed; she had to pick up my nieces from a birthday party in an hour. "This is all Merrymount," my mother kept saying, as we inched through what seemed to be just another residential neighborhood of Quincy, maybe a little bit more upscale than the others. Before we had left, I had searched the Internet quickly and fruitlessly for some indication of where a plaque or monument memorializing Morton or early Merrymount could be located. In my rush, I now only found houses and more houses, on streets emptied of people by the storm, which was already throwing large branches from trees into the roadways.

"All the Indian names," my mother remarked, maybe recalling that this was a notable feature of the neighborhood, while we passed roads named Algonquin, Narragansett, Wampatuck, and Chickatabot. A branch blocked our way at the corner of Squanto and Maypole Roads, the latter of which, at least, indicated that the neighborhood retained some memory of its past. Then, turning a corner, I noticed we were going uphill, and soon came near the side of a cliff. Between the houses that hogged the view, we could look out onto the roiling sea, glimpsing a vista that couldn't be too different from what Morton or Standish might have seen in their day. Morton had written that the maypole stood "as a fair sea mark," able to indicate directions to Merrymount; probably it had stood somewhere nearby, so it could have been seen by approaching ships.

Monuments, museums and gift shops clog the shores of Plymouth, clustering around the site where Plymouth Rock now lies; but here, old Merrymount is at best a phantom, made dim by the overwhelming and utterly unremarkable present. In Plymouth, the past is represented in stone and metal and painted signs; in Merrymount, I had to squint to even see it.

My family are relative newcomers to Quincy; on both sides, we can trace our ancestry back just a couple of generations before we encounter the horizon of immigration. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college since my great-grandfather's time: my family is composed of hairdressers and truck drivers, shipyard workers and laundry-clerks, security guards and machinists. We have very little material history, not much passed down from one generation to the next. I did not grow up believing that what I came from was worth preserving. The goal, rather, was to leave it behind.

Families in other social classes, those who have been closer to wealth and power, act otherwise. These families pass on diaries and correspondence, furniture and decorations, souvenirs from voyages of a hundred years ago. They pass down stories, attached to such objects. Their ancestors are the subjects of civic plaques, statues, illustrated book plates. I suppose it must be both an inspiration and a burden, to carry this physical history around, lugging it through time.

Such is the vanity of ancestral thinking. Lines of blood draw complex charts, as if to capture a family's essence within an occult diagram. Everyday objects, through their chronicled journeys through time, become imbued with a special power.

Like families, cities inherit their history, pass down their artifacts. Like families, cities also forget their history, setting aside secrets to be discovered later, or forgotten forever. As do nations, as do peoples.

But what is history anyway? And why do we need ancestors? Why do we conjure these specters—to worship or dispel them? Or perhaps it simply comforts us to know they lurk out there, in the afterlife of stored memories, like guardian spirits who may be invoked to answer the questions of the living.