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Where Did Captain Martin Pring Anchor in New England?

By

Richard F. Whalen

In 1603 Captain Martin Pring and his men sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and spent almost two months on shore in Massachusetts. Pring's narrative provides colorful anecdotes about the Indians, their singing and cavorting and even their reaction to Pring's two mastiffs, Fool and Gallant.¹ But where did Pring anchor? The earliest commentators put him at Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard. A nineteenth century historian moved him to Plymouth, seventeen years before the Pilgrims settled there. The evidence of more recent investigators, however, makes it almost certain that he was at the tip of Cape Cod, specifically at Pamet Harbor in Truro, just south of Provincetown.

Subject as he was to periodic relocation and also to being bracketed in history by the more famous Gosnold and Champlain, Martin Pring has been eclipsed by them both. Bartholomew Gosnold, who preceded him by one year, was the first to leave a detailed record of explorations in New

¹ Martin Pring, *A Voyage... for the Discoverie of the North Part of Virginia* (i.e. New England) *Under the Command of Me Martin Pring*, first printed in *Purchas His Pilgrims*, (London, 1625), IV 1647-57. The most recent reprint, with extensive and valuable commentary, is in *The English New England Voyages 1602-1608* by David B. and Alison M. Quinn (London, 1983). The actual authorship of the 2,800-word narrative is not unequivocal; most of it is written in the third person. Quinn and Quinn conclude that the narrative, based on Pring's log, was heavily edited and condensed for publication, pp. 53-5, 214 n. 2.

England.² He named Cape Cod and tried to start a trading post in the Elizabeth Islands off the southwest end of the cape, near Woods Hole. Two years after Pring arrived, Samuel de Champlain, whose account of New England was the most comprehensive up to that time,³ visited Plymouth. He mapped the harbor and then spent several weeks at the southeast end of Cape Cod in the area of Chatham, where he skirmished with the Indians. The narratives left by Gosnold and Champlain, while raising some questions about their whereabouts, are generally quite clear about it. In contrast, Pring's narrative requires careful analysis to match his observations to the geography. His eclipse is probably due in no small part to the conflicting claims of historians who argued over where he anchored for seven weeks in the summer of 1603.

The earliest site proposed for Pring's anchorage was Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard. The historian Jeremy Belknap (1744-98) seems to have accepted Edgartown mainly on the word of two local correspondents. Belknap cites them in a long footnote to his short section on Pring in *American Biography*.⁴ Peleg Coffin, who belonged to a prominent family on neighboring Nantucket, wrote to Belknap in the 1700s that only Edgartown's harbor was "winding or landlocked", as described by Pring. The Rev. Joseph Thaxter, longtime minister of Edgartown, wrote to Belknap in 1797 that he had consulted unnamed others more knowledgeable than himself and that the course Pring took would bring him to Edgartown. Pring described Edgartown as being surrounded by "hills and sassafras." As it happens, none of the three mentions that Pring gives the latitude for his anchorage as 41-25N, which is indeed that of Edgartown. Perhaps they thought it too obvious for comment.

Belknap discusses the location of Pring's anchorage only in his footnote, not in his text. He relied on his two correspondents and made

² Gabriel Archer, *The Relation of Captain Gosnold's Voyage to the North Part of Virginia in Purchas His Pilgrims* (London: 1625); and John Breerton, *A Brief and True Relation of the Discovery of the North Part of Virginia... by Captain Bartholomew Gosnold* (London, 1602). Quinn and Quinn (1983) reprint both accounts of Gosnold's voyage.

³ *Voyages of Samuel de Champlain 1604-08*, ed. by W. L. Grant. (New York, 1907), chap. 8.

⁴ Jeremy Belknap, *American Biography*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1798), 2:128-29.

only one observation of his own. In the same footnote, he “suggests” that the difference in water depths between Pring’s account and contemporary soundings could be accounted for by shifting shoals observed in the area. Belknap’s footnote designation of Edgartown as Pring’s anchorage went unquestioned for most of the nineteenth century.

In 1878 B. F. De Costa challenged Belknap and the conventional view in no uncertain terms. De Costa, a minister, magazine editor, and author, wrote in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* that “Martha’s Vineyard does not meet a single condition” described in Pring’s account.⁵ He took Belknap to task, writing that “if Belknap had made an examination in person, he would never have fixed upon Edgartown” on Martha’s Vineyard. Pring described deep water, a river and a hill, says De Costa, adding, “Now at Edgartown there is no deep water, no slightly hill and no river.” He is also quite sure, perhaps most tellingly, that if Pring were on an island he would have said so in his narrative. “The view of Belknap,” De Costa firmly states, “which has been copied by writers down to the present time, rests simply on nothing.”

De Costa was equally determined to relocate Pring to Plymouth. His reading of Pring’s account led him to decide that its details “conclusively settle the question and indicate the harbors of Plymouth and Duxbury as the scene of Pring’s visit in 1603”. De Costa cites the bay at Plymouth, its harbor “winding in compass like a snail” (Pring’s words), the soundings, the Jones River, the high land around the harbor, and the remains of a brush burn set by the Indians when Pring was there -- all corresponding, so De Costa argues, to comments in Pring’s narrative. As for the latitude of Pring’s anchorage, 41.25N, he says -- perhaps correctly -- that “like most of the calculations at that period it was about half a degree out of the way.”⁶ Plymouth is at the forty-second degree of latitude, as is Truro. De Costa’s arguments prevailed for about seventy-five years.

⁵ B. F. De Costa, “Gosnold and Pring, 1602-3” in *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 33 (January 1878), pp. 76-80.

⁶ De Costa, p. 79. See also Quinn and Quinn, who note that Pring was “considerably at fault” when he stipulated a latitude of 43N for some islands off Maine. They state that “20’ or 30’ would be a normal limit of inaccuracy,” p. 216 n. 7.

Next to examine the evidence were two very different men, who, as it happens, were thinking independently along the same lines. The Rev. Warner F. Gookin of Martha's Vineyard, who died in 1952, left a paper critiquing De Costa. A decade later, David B. Quinn, a British professor of history, came across Gookin's unpublished paper at Edgartown. He published the paper and his own commentary in the *New England Quarterly* in 1967. The retired minister, who was a local historian, and the history professor who specialized in voyages of discovery had come to the same conclusion. Belknap and De Costa were both wrong. Pring was probably describing the tip of Cape Cod curving on itself like a snail shell and the tidal harbor at the mouth of the Pamet River in Truro. Only by a great stretch of imagination can Plymouth Harbor be seen to resemble the curve of a snail shell.

Captain Martin Pring (1580-1626) was only twenty-three years old when he commanded a pair of ships sailing to New England to find sassafras. The larger of the two ships, the *Speedwell*, was a fifty-ton vessel that was about one-third the size of the *Mayflower*. His other ship, the *Discoverer*, was just half the size of her sister ship. They were fitted out in Bristol, and they left the British Isles from the small port of Milford Haven. Pring had forty-three men on the two ships, which were provisioned for eight months. He brought along the two mastiffs as guard dogs. Their first landfall in New England was on the Maine coast, probably around Penobscot Bay. Finding no sassafras, they headed southwest and arrived in Cape Cod Bay in early June.

The conclusion that Pamet Harbor in Truro was probably the site of Martin Pring's summer camp in 1603 is based primarily on four arguments: First is the fact that Pring's narrative best describes the Provincetown/Truro area, not Plymouth and certainly not Edgartown, despite the reference to its latitude. Second, Pring's name for his anchorage appeared later on a map. Third, Pring's comment about a river is apt for Truro but ambiguous for Plymouth. Finally, the "baricado" that he built sounds very much like the "palisado" found by the Pilgrims seventeen years later at the mouth of the Pamet River in Truro.⁷

⁷ [William Bradford and Edward Winslow?] *A Relation ... of the English Plantation Settled at Plymouth* (London, 1622), afterwards known as *Mourt's Relation*, reprinted as *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, ed. Dwight B. Heath. (Bedford, MA, 1963), p. 22.

In his posthumously published paper, Gookin lays out his reasons for Provincetown/Truro as the location of Pring's anchorage and explorations instead of Plymouth.⁸ At the outset, he agrees with De Costa on one point: Pring did not go south of Cape Cod to Martha's Vineyard. Pring says that upon leaving the Maine coast he entered a "great gulf" and "sailed over and came to anchor on the south side," that is, the south side of the great gulf.⁹ This gulf, known now as Massachusetts Bay, is embraced by Cape Cod on the south.

Gookin differs with De Costa on all other points in his analysis of Pring's narrative. Pring describes a "haven winding in compass like the shell of a snail," which Gookin notes is a most graphic description of how the tip of Cape Cod curves around on itself. Pring's soundings fit Provincetown Harbor much better than Plymouth. Pring mentions going up a river, but neither Champlain nor the Pilgrims remark upon a prominent river at Plymouth. A brush fire that Pring saw (and De Costa cited) would have been overgrown during the seventeen years that passed before the Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth. Pring's description fits the tip of Cape Cod.

Secondly, a map that appeared after Pring's voyage links his anchorage directly to the tip of Cape Cod. The so-called Velasco map of 1610 labels Cape Cod's tip as "Whitsuns hed" with "Whitsuns Bay" behind it.¹⁰ Pring describes his anchorage as "a certain bay, which we called Whitson Bay." John Whitson was a leading merchant and mayor of Bristol, Pring's hometown and port of embarkation.¹¹

The third argument for Pring's being at Pamet Harbor is his report that "passing up a river, we saw certain cottages together, abandoned by the savages, and not far off we beheld their gardens and one among the

⁸ Warner F. Gookin and David B. Quinn, "Martin Pring at Provincetown in 1603?", in *The New England Quarterly*, XL (March 1967), pp. 79-91.

⁹ Pring in Quinn and Quinn, p. 219.

¹⁰ Quinn and Quinn print the pertinent portion of the Velasco map of 1610 in Appendix III:520-3, along with a description of its history.

¹¹ On his map in *A Description of New England* (London, 1616) Captain John Smith gives Provincetown Harbor the name Milford Haven. In what might be a coincidence, Milford Haven was Pring's last stop before leaving Britain on his way to New England.

rest of an acre of ground."¹² Gookin opines: "How aptly this compares with the description by the Pilgrims of the Pamet River at what is now Truro."¹³ The Pamet was, and still is, a prominent, tidal river running from Cape Cod Bay to within a few hundred yards of the Atlantic Ocean. The Pilgrims immediately spotted it from their anchorage in Provincetown Harbor and determined to explore it. Their shallop went several miles up the river, and they camped overnight on its north shore.¹⁴

In contrast, early mentions of a river at Plymouth Harbor are at best ambiguous. Champlain explored Plymouth Harbor three years after Pring's expedition. Champlain drew a rough sketch map that suggests a river or two. But in his narrative he discounts it: "I made also an examination of the river but saw only an arm of water extending a short distance inland, where the land is only in part cleared up. Running into this is merely a brook not deep enough for boats except at high tide."¹⁵

The Pilgrims, quick to spot the Pamet River when they arrived in Provincetown Harbor, did not find a river when they arrived in Plymouth Harbor. In fact, they reported in their journal entry for their first day on the mainland that "we found not any navigable river, but four or five small running brooks of very sweet fresh water that all run into the sea." The next day they did find "a very pleasant river; at full sea a bark of thirty tons may go up, but at low water scarce our shallop could pass."¹⁶ This passage may have been describing a short estuary, not a prominent river. There is nothing about a river at Plymouth Harbor in William Bradford's summary description, written years later, of the Pilgrims' arrival there; in *Of Plymouth Plantation* he describes only "little running brooks."¹⁷

¹² Pring in Quinn and Quinn, p. 223.

¹³ Gookin and Quinn, p. 86.

¹⁴ *Mourt's Relation*, pp. 19, 25.

¹⁵ Champlain, pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ *Mourt's Relation*, p. 40.

¹⁷ Bradford, p. 79.

The evidence for a prominent river at Plymouth Harbor in the early 1600s is ambiguous at best. Bradford saw no reason to mention a river in *Of Plymouth Plantation*; Champlain concluded that he was seeing “only an arm of water.” The Pamet River, a prominent landmark for the Pilgrims, which they went up, was probably the river that Pring had gone up seventeen years earlier.

Finally, Pring’s presence at Pamet Harbor in Truro is supported by his baricado, or fort. He stated that upon going ashore “we thought it convenient to make a small baricado to keep diligent watch” while the men worked in the woods. His “small baricado” sounds very much like the ruins that the Pilgrims found seventeen years later. The Pilgrims reported in *Mourt’s Relation*:

We found the remainder of an old fort, or palisado, which, as we conceived, had been made by some Christians. This was also hard by that place which we thought had been a river, unto which we went and found it so to be, dividing itself into two arms by a high bank. (The river was the Pamet.)¹⁸

David B. Quinn concludes in his *New England Quarterly* article that “it is well within the bounds of possibility” that Pring’s baricado was what the Pilgrims found.¹⁹ In their 1983 book, *The English New England Voyages 1602-1608*, Quinn and his partner, Alison M. Quinn, were somewhat more positive. The palisado the Pilgrims found:

is tentatively identified with the “old Fort or Palizis [sic]” which H.M. Dexter worked out to have been near the mouth of the Pamet River (probably at this time accessible to *Speedwell*, and probably on Corn Hill (just over 100 feet)... There were, of course, opportunities for

¹⁸ *Mourt’s Relation*, p. 22.

¹⁹ Gookin and Quinn, p. 90.

other traders to have established similar protective enclosures between 1604 and, say, 1616.²⁰

Quinn and Quinn are properly cautious but do not suggest what those "opportunities for other traders" might have been. The only record of Europeans having been in the Provincetown/Truro area in those years is a mention by the mariner Thomas Dermer in a letter. Dermer said in 1619 that he had rescued two Frenchmen from a shipwreck "at the northeast of Cape Cod."²¹ William Bradford also writes about the wreck of a French ship on Cape Cod about 1617, probably the same one; but he says the Indians stalked the survivors and killed all but three or four, whom they enslaved. He does not link the survivors to the old fort or palisado he and the Pilgrims found at Truro.²²

Neither the Pilgrims nor Champlain mentioned an old fort or stockade at Plymouth, even though both of them provided considerable topographical detail. The omission by the Pilgrims is notable since they had noted one at the mouth of the Pamet River just a month before. Champlain had anchored in Plymouth Harbor and traded with the Indians just two years after Pring went home. He drew a sketch map of the area, showing Indian dwellings and cornfields. He said nothing, however, about any Europeans preceding him -- no mention of Pring's extended visit, his sassafras harvest, his baricado or his encounters with the Indians. Pring very probably had not been in Plymouth Harbor before him.

When all the evidence is assembled it seems not just probable but almost certain that the "old fort or palisado" found by the Pilgrims at Pamet Harbor was none other than Pring's "small baricado." There are no records of any other traders who might have built one in Truro in those intervening years, as Quinn and Quinn conjecture. No palisado was found at Plymouth. Pring built a baricado and went up a river near a bay or

²⁰ For an even more definite passing reference see Quinn and Quinn, p. 219 n. 6, and p. 522. Also see H. Roger King, *Cape Cod and Plymouth Colony in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1994), pp. 4 and 17 n. 15.

²¹ Thomas Dermer, "Letter to a Friend, 1619," in G.P. Winship, *Sailors' Narratives of Voyages Along the New England Coast 1524-1624* (Boston, 1905), p. 249.

²² William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. by Francis Murphy (New York, 1981), p. 92

“haven winding in compass like the shell of a snail.” The Pilgrims found the ruins of a palisado hard by the mouth of the Pamet River, not far from Provincetown Harbor, which is encompassed by land curving around on itself like a snail shell. All the evidence suggests most strongly that Pring’s seven-week sojourn occurred at the mouth of the Pamet River.

If Pring’s account is short on sober specifics about where he was (perhaps deliberately for competitive reasons), it is generous and entertaining about what he thought of the Indians. His men and the Indians no doubt eyed each other warily, but given the potential for a culture clash they got along remarkably well for seven weeks.

Their cultures, of course, were radically dissimilar. The Indians lived simply and in harmony with nature but had no wheels for transportation, no beasts of burden, no metal for knives and tools, no written language to preserve and communicate knowledge. To the Englishmen, they appeared to be uncivilized savages. The Indians probably saw Pring’s men as friendly enough but also intent on exploiting nature and defending their beachhead. The white, bearded men came in enormous ships with sails and carried guns with awesome, booming firepower. The Indians probably felt harassed by these invaders and plunderers of sassafras. Who could know how long they might stay, or where they kept their women? Despite the potential dangers, the Indians were openly curious.

Pring had regular contacts with the Indians for seven weeks, and most of his narrative is devoted to them and to their appearance, clothing, hairstyle, behavior, weapons, and canoes. He also described the flora and fauna of their fields and forests, and their fish. The Indians came, he states, in groups of ten, twenty, forty and sixty, once about a hundred and twenty, and at Pring’s departure about two hundred by his count, outnumbering Pring’s men by almost five to one. They seem to have been almost all men. Despite being greatly outnumbered, Pring was quite hospitable. He invited the Indians to dine on meals of peas and beans, perhaps more than once. On their own, he notes, the Indians ate mostly fish, but he doesn’t say that his men tried the Indian’s cooking.

During one of the Indian visits a young Englishman played the cithern “in whose homely music,” Pring says, “they took great delight.” Twenty of the Indians formed a circle around the musician and danced to the music “using many savage gestures, singing Io, Io, Ia, Ia, Io.” The first Indian to break out of the ring would be set upon by the others in

what sounds like a friendly free-for-all. They liked the music and dancing so much they gave the cithern player many gifts, including tobacco, pipes, snake and deerskins.

Pring used his two mastiffs to intimidate the Indians in a way that sounds half-playful, half-cruel. Fool could carry a half pike, a sizable spear, in his mouth. "And when we would be rid of the savages' company," says Pring, "we would let loose the mastiffs and suddenly with outcries they would flee away."

Most of the time, Pring's men were harvesting sassafras trees, roots and all. Sassafras was one of the main objectives of their voyage; it was considered "a plant of sovereign virtue for the French pox," that is, syphilis. They took home two shiploads of sassafras, so much that they may have glutted the market and caused the price for it to crash. When they were not cutting sassafras, the men planted and tended their garden. They planted it as an experiment to see if English seeds would grow in the New World. They sowed wheat, barley, oats, peas and various other vegetables. The garden was a success, says Pring, "giving testimony of the goodness of the climate and the soil." The English vegetable garden was probably the first in the New World, although the men did not remain for the harvest.

Pring admired the Indians' stature, "somewhat taller than our ordinary people, strong, swift, well-proportioned, and," he adds abruptly, "given to treachery, as in the end we perceived." He also admired their bows and arrows. Their arrows were made of

a fine light wood very smooth and round with three long and deep black feathers of some eagle, vulture or kite, as closely fastened with some binding matter as any fletcher of ours can glue them on.

He found their canoes amazingly strong and light in weight. He measured a canoe, examined it closely and gave a precise description:

Seventeen-foot long and four-foot broad, made of the bark of the birch tree, far exceeding in bigness those of England [wherries], it was sowed together with strong and tough oziers or twigs, and the seams covered over with rosin or turpentine little inferior in sweetness to

frankincense, as we made trial by burning a little thereof on the coals at sundry times after our coming home. It was also open like a wherry [an English rowboat ferry] and sharp at both ends, saving that the beak was a little bending roundly upward. And though it carried nine men standing upright, yet it weighed not at the most above sixty pounds in weight, a thing most incredible in regard of the largeness and capacity thereof.

Pring so admired their canoes that he carried one back to England (not mentioning how he acquired it). The lightweight birchbark canoe was probably the first of its kind to be seen in England.

Toward the end of their stay came the encounter that Pring attributes to the Indians' deceit or "treachery." Pring had sent the smaller *Discoverer*, loaded with sassafras, back to England to satisfy his financial backers early and probably to assure himself an enthusiastic welcome. As the tale is told, what happened during a mid-day siesta was really more farce than conflict:

After their departure we so bestirred ourselves that our ship also had gotten in her lading [cargo of sassafras], during which time there fell out this accident. On a day about noon tide while our men which used to cut down sassafras in the woods were asleep, as they used to do for two hours in the heat of the day, there came down about seven score savages armed with their bows and arrows, and environed our house or barricado, wherein were four of our men alone with their muskets to keep sentinel, whom they [the Indians] sought to have come down to them, which they utterly refused and stood upon their guard. Our Master [Pring] likewise being very careful and circumspect, having not past two with him in the ship, put the same in the best defense that he could lest they should have invaded the same, and [he] caused a piece of great ordnance to be shot off to give terror to the Indians and warning to our men which were fast asleep in the woods. At the noise of which piece they were a little awaked and began a little to call for Fool and Gallant,

their great and fearful mastiffs, and full quietly laid themselves down again, but being quickened up eftsoons again with a second shot they rowsed up themselves, betook them to their weapons and with their mastiffs, great Fool with a half pike in his mouth, drew down to their ship, whom, when the Indians beheld afar off with the mastiff which they most feared, in dissembling manner they turned all to a jest and sport and departed away in a friendly manner.

Such was the extent of the "treachery" that Pring encountered. Despite the length of Pring's visit and the presence of large numbers of Indians, relations between the two were unmarred by bloodshed. Pring's men fired no shots in anger; the Indians shot no arrows at them.

A separate account supports the view that Pring was on good terms with the Indians. Captain John Smith, in his *General History of Virginia* (1624), provides a 200-word report of Pring's voyage based on information from Robert Salterne, who was with Pring. The report stated that Pring and his men were "kindly used by the natives that came to them in troops of tens, twenties, and thirties, and sometimes more."²³

Captain Martin Pring went on to become a famous mariner and colonist whose accomplishments won him an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Six months after his return from North America, he sailed to Guiana, in South America, and two years later he was back in North America on an expedition. He evidently wrote an excellent report of that voyage. Sir Ferdinando Gorges, the renowned promoter of expeditions, wrote that Pring produced "the most exact discovery of that coast [in Virginia] that ever came to my hands since, and indeed he was the best able to perform it of any I met withal to this present."²⁴ Historians of New England can only wish that Pring had been as exact about his first anchorage in New England.

During the next dozen years he commanded ships sailing to the Far East. He may have made his last trip to North America in 1626. He is

²³ In Quinn and Quinn, p. 229.

²⁴ *Dictionary of National Biography*.

believed to have died in Bristol that year at the age of forty-six. His epitaph on a monument to him in St. Stephen's Church states with some hyperbole that

his powerful, skillful travails reached as far
As from the Arctic to the Antarctic star.²⁵

New Englanders might prefer to remember him simply as the youthful sea captain who spent the summer of 1603 at the mouth of the Pamet on outer Cape Cod, seventeen years before the Pilgrims arrived there.

²⁵ James H. Pring, *Captain Martin Pring, the Last of the Elizabethan Seamen* (London, 1888), p. iii.