



WINDOW ON AMERICA'S PAST

The Alden Kindred of America, Inc. · Alden House Historic Site

This short history of the Alden property was written by Curator James W. Baker, and is a revised version of that published in *Alden House History: A Work in Progress* (Duxbury, 2006).

The events associated with the Mayflower voyage and the first year of settlement are well enough known to need no recapitulation here. The Mullins family was tragically struck by the “general sickness” that devastated the colony in the winter of 1620/21. William Mullins, his wife Alice, their son and their servant all died, leaving Priscilla an orphan. She married John Alden, whom Bradford describes as “being a hopful yong man was much desired, but left to his owne liking to go or stay when he came here, but he stayed and maryed here,” about 1622. Their marriage, immortalized in *The Courtship of Miles Standish* (1858) by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from an old family tradition, made them the most celebrated Pilgrim couple in history. They were assigned a house lot at the westerly end of the first street (now Town Square) where School Street is today in 1623 and several acres of farmland beyond what is now North Street. Their first home has been re-created at Plimoth Plantation as the second house on the left heading down the street from the Fort Meetinghouse. We may assume that the Aldens lived at the foot of the Fort (Burial) Hill until they moved permanently to their new property in what is now Duxbury around 1632. Their property in downtown Plymouth then reverted to the colony, as was true of any of the 1623 lots once their owners took up residence outside of Plymouth.

1627 Land Division and the Move to Blue Fish River

On 26 October 1626 a partnership of eight Plymouth leaders (including John Alden) and five London associates bought out the interests of the “merchant adventurers” (or venture capitalists) who had put up the funds to establish Plymouth colony. Having undertaken the debts of the colony onto themselves, the partners or “Undertakers” made an agreement with the other heads of households in Plymouth that they should be brought into the arrangement as “purchasers” or shareholders. The partners assumed a monopoly on trade with the Indians for six years, and the others agreed to each make an annual payment of three bushels of corn or six pounds of tobacco during that time. The Purchasers, as the combined group of 53 householders and London associates was known, then made the first permanent division of the assets of the colony. The original 1620 agreement between the colonists and the investors had stipulated that such a division would be made seven years after the Mayflower voyage. In May 1627, they divided the colony’s livestock into 12 lots of one milch cow and two she-goats each. Each lot was shared among 13 people—men, women and children.



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The following January (1627/28)¹, every individual was allotted a share of 20 acres of land, creating family farms capable of maintaining the population. These allotments were located along the shore of the harbor from Eel River on the south to Powder Point at the north. Each property had access to the harbor so supplies could be transported to and from the outlying farms by water at a time when there were neither roads nor draft animals. The Aldens received about 100 acres in this division; 20 acres each to John, Priscilla, Elizabeth and John, Jr., with an additional share perhaps for Joseph who was born about 1627. Their property, which was among those furthest north along the bay (only the lands of Philip Delano and George Soule were further away from Plymouth Village), was not theirs by choice. The location of the 1627/28 grants was made by drawing lots, after which the area was surveyed to account for the appropriate number of acres. The Aldens were fortunate in their assignment, for as historian Dorothy Wentworth observed:

The Alden land was good, some cleared upland where the Indians had planted, some woodland, and a long stretch of fresh and salt meadow where hay could be cut. There was a fresh water stream, and at least one spring. It was a good farm.²

We assume that John prepared the land for planting and began work on their new house in the spring of 1628, and that by 1629 or 1630 they were in seasonal residence on Blue Fish River and Houndsditch brook. For the first few years they had to return to Plymouth each week for the Sabbath, and spend the winters (when such travel became impractical) in their old house beneath Burial Hill. In 1632, the settlers at the northerly end of the harbor received permission to establish a separate parish and in 1637 that new parish became the town of Duxbury. The property the Aldens were given in 1627/28, with a few additions, is first described in the surviving records (the record of the 1627 division having been lost) January 1, 1637/38:

The bounds of the land of Mr. John Alden att Duxburrow, as it was layed forth by Gov. Bradford, Mr. Edward Winslow, Joshua Pratt, Edward Bangs, as followeth: from an old pine tree by the meddow, which meddow was afterward allotted unto mee, the said John Alden, and for the breadth of the said land butting upon and ranging along the said Blew Fish River to a burnt walnut stump; and from thence to a walnut tree ranging from the abovesaid stump west north west, which was sum tim after run by Joshua Prate and Phillip Delano, Senior, unto a white oake tree, standing a little within the bounds of Phillip Delanoes land, there being a stump or root of that tree still remaining, and from thence for the breadth att the head, up to Greens Harbour, old path; and on the southerly side of the land bounded ptly with my owne meadow and with the land of Experience Mitchell toward the upper end. (Plymouth Colony Records, I, p. 73)



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This survey is evidently based on the original 1627 division, even if some boundary markers had been damaged during the clearing of the area and the burning of brush and weeds. With a small parcel added the following September to bring the southerly bound in line with Houndsditch brook, the Alden farm assumed the dimensions it would retain until 1701. Eventually John's Duxbury acreage amounted to about 169 acres.

First Duxbury Home Construction

John and Priscilla Alden's second home—after the house in Plymouth—was located about 760 feet southeast [or perhaps further—see note below] of the present Alden House. There were the “ruins” of an old well visible on the property before 1840, but that location is now lost. This original site was well known and visited by interested people as early as the 18th century, such as Rev. Timothy Alden (to whom we are indebted for the earliest record of the “Courtship” story in 1814). A number of bricks, a halberd head and possibly other unrecorded artifacts were retrieved from the old Alden cellar hole in the 19th century. The site was first professionally excavated and documented by historical archaeologist Roland Wells Robbins in 1960.

Robbins' investigation revealed that this early house had a foundation that measured about 10 ½ by 38 feet; with a cellar hole about 6 ½ feet square and 7 ½ feet deep at the westerly end. Many bricks and fragments of brick, which presumably made up the chimney, were found scattered throughout the excavation but no indication of a chimney base was found. There was a small depression in about the middle of the foundation that may have been the location of the hearth. There are a number of long narrow foundations of this sort from the early years that have been found archaeologically, which Robbins cites:

The long narrow house, 38' by 10 ½', which was the first Alden house in Duxbury, was nearly 3 ⅔ times as long as it was wide. At Rocky Nook, just to the northerly side of the site of the John Howland house, there exists a long narrow stone foundation with measurements that are almost identical in size with the foundation for the first Alden house in Duxbury. And like the Alden foundation it runs east-west, and it appears as though a small root cellar exists within the site. John Jenny left Plymouth in 1628 and built his house here.

... Another interesting reference to the Pilgrims building long narrow buildings after they migrated from Plymouth to the outlying areas was revealed in the July, 1963 edition of “News from Pilgrim Hall,” the Pilgrim Society bulletin. The Pilgrim Society had recently acquired the artifacts and the original plan made by James Hall of Duxbury when he excavated the site of the Miles Standish home in Duxbury in 1856 and 1857. Miss Dorothy Merrick, Director of the Pilgrim Society, sent me the dimensions of the two foundations that were uncovered by Mr. Hall. It is believed that the first Standish house burned about



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1665, accounting for the second foundation at the site. One foundation was 60 ½' long and 16' wide, its length being 3 ¾ times its width. The other Standish foundation was 54' by 17', its length being 3-1/6 times its width.

When I presented my concern about the narrowness of the first home John Alden had in Duxbury to Mr. J. Paul Hudson, Museum Curator, Colonial National Historical Park, Jamestown, Virginia, he answered, "Don't worry too much about the house dimensions. One brick foundation excavated at Jamestown was 10 feet by 16 feet in size. Other foundations unearthed at Jamestown measured 10 ½' by 17'; 11 ½' by 21 ½'; and 11 ½' x 35'9"."³

In addition, the "RM" site excavated by Harry Hornblower on what is now the grounds of Plimoth Plantation (under the southwest corner of the modern bus parking lot) in 1941 and 1942 revealed a foundation whose "length, slightly more than sixty feet, matches exactly that of the Standish plan. It is impossible to determine the width with any precision, but it was probably between twelve and eighteen feet."⁴ This foundation had a small root cellar at one end, a central hearth, and another hearth at the opposite end. Despite this careful description, there have been some doubts about Robbins' conclusions.

1. The old English Julian calendar began the year on Lady Day (the Feast of the Annunciation), the 25th of March, so January was considered the 11th month, not the first. When they spoke of January 1627, it was in our reckoning, January 1628. Many writers, unaware of this, have stated that John built his first house in 1627, but that is highly unlikely, as it would have to be before the end of March, and the division actually occurred in 1628 from our modern perspective.

2. Dorothy Wentworth. *The Alden Family in the Alden House. Duxbury: The Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, 1980, p. 13.*

3. Roland Wells Robbins. *Pilgrim John Alden's Progress: Archaeological Excavations in Duxbury. Plymouth: The Pilgrim Society, 1969, pp. 48-49.*