

# **DAMARISCOVE: FIRST MAYPOLE CELEBRATION IN AMERICA**

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Damariscove's legacy includes what appears to be the first American celebration of May Day, in May of 1622. The Boothbay Region can proclaim America's first maypole dance, 381 years ago today, on Damariscove Island.

This maypole tradition traces its roots from at least as early as the 1300s, when the maypole was mentioned by Chaucer and others. The maypole served as the center of the village dancing in the annual celebration of spring and fertility. The British generally embraced these celebrations. There were exceptions when Puritans curtailed maypole celebrations during the Protestant reign of Edward VI (1547-53) and when Parliament banned maypoles in 1652 during the Puritan Protectorate under Cromwell. This ban only lasted a few years, until the Restoration of the monarchy in 1661 when the British erected the maypole at the Strand in London.

Thomas Weston, a British merchant, in early 1622 sent from London seven passengers and some letters in his fishing ship, *Sparrow*, headed for the Plymouth Colony, founded just two years earlier. The *Sparrow* made landfall too far north, in the spring of 1622, at Damariscove Island ("wanting a pilot"). Phinehas Pratt, a member of the *Sparrow's* crew, related the story of the lively Damariscove fishermen in May of 1622, in his own words and seventeenth-century spelling: "The men yt belong to ye ship, ther fishing, had newly set up a may pole and weare very mery."

Thomas Morton and William Bradford shed more light on the mode and meaning of Damariscove's May Day festivities. Maypole celebrations at this time were controversial in parts of seventeenth-century America. The most famous, or infamous, maypole celebration occurred five years after the "very mery" Damariscove fishermen: in 1627, at Merry Mount (sometimes "Mare-Mount"), now Quincy, MA. The controversial lawyer, trader, and free-spirit Thomas Morton boasted about how he and the other English residents of Merry Mount brewed a barrel of excellent beer, displayed drums and guns, and with the help of the Native Americans erected the maypole, an 80-foot-long pine tree. They nailed a poem to the maypole, and the first lines were as follows: Drink and be merry, merry, merry boys; let all your delight be in hymens joys." Morton defended this paean to merriment as a "harmless mirth made by young men" seeking wives.

The usually mild-mannered William Bradford, Governor of the Plymouth Colony, was outraged and chastised Merry Mount's "great licenciousness" and "dissolute life." Governor Bradford called Morton "the lord of misrule" over a "school of Atheism". He also assailed Morton's erecting the maypole and the Merry Mount men's "dancing and frisking together" with Indian women. He called these men "madd Bachinalians" for their abuse of alcohol and "worse

practices.” Bradford failed to mention that Plymouth was losing inhabitants and commerce to Merry Mount. The Plymouth colonists jailed Morton (for the first of at least three imprisonments), exiled him to England (for the first of two such exiles), cut down the infamous maypole, burned Morton’s house, and changed the name of the town. Two centuries later, in 1836, Nathaniel Hawthorne immortalized and glorified Merry Mount’s part and demonized the Puritans’ role in his tale, *The May-Pole of Merry Mount*.

The merry fishermen of Damariscove had the advantage of distance over the independent Merry Mount neighbors of Plymouth. More importantly, Damariscove, unlike Merry Mount, did not threaten Plymouth’s community and commerce. Indeed, Damariscove’s furnishing of fish to the Plymouth colonists kept them in good standing for many decades, even after the Puritan expansion enveloped Damariscove in the 1670s. We are fortunate to have the contemporaneous accounts of Phineas Pratt, Thomas Morton, and William Bradford, who give us a peek at the maypole celebrations and the vibrant and volatile colonial life at Damariscove, which resembled the community of Merry Mount far more than Plymouth. No Puritans ever threatened Damariscove’s maypoles. And what happened to the exiled Thomas Morton? He lived his last years in Maine.