

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

A place at Plymouth

By [Tom Berg](#) | Orange County Register

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DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION: Patty Wilson helps her nephew, Mitchie Wilson, 6, of Costa Mesa celebrate Compact Day.

The search has led across country – to a cemetery of weathered slate headstones. Marcia Maloney pokes among them, looking for a name.

Maloney, 62, of Tustin has done her homework. She's pored over books, land records, even a transaction dividing cattle among 17th-century settlers. But she's hit a snag – what genealogists call a "brick wall" – trying to prove her direct lineage to Mayflower passenger Richard Warren.

So she's come to Reading, Vt., followed the town historian's directions and, in essence, now hopes the dead can speak.

Understand that Maloney has nothing to prove to anyone. She's already demonstrated direct lines to two other Mayflower passengers and sits as governor of the Orange County Colony of Mayflower Descendants. But once you start tracing your roots, she warns, there's no turning back.

Not when you learn your great-great-grandfather was a Civil War surgeon who presided over the secret midnight burial of John Wilkes Booth. Not when you learn your seven-time great-grandaunt testified in the Salem witch trials. Not when you learn your five-time great-grandfather fought in the American Revolution's opening salvo – at age 54.

"You start getting to know these people because they're part of you," she says. "It's my own history. It's my blood and my genes. And it runs through the founding of this country."

Suddenly it's there. The headstone for her five-time great-grandmother Mary Holmes, who died of spotted fever in 1813. Maloney falls to her hands and knees and implores the dead, "Who is your father?"

Alas, there is no answer. Not today.

What Maloney does next, however, charts new ground in the Mayflower Society. It will, in fact, open the door for hundreds of other descendants of the founders of this country.

GRANDMA WILLARD

This didn't start as an obsession. It started with a trip to the eye doctor – an avid genealogist who knew Maloney was from New Hampshire – or, as she says, "New Hampshah." He urged her to join the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

"I don't have any Mayflower ancestors," Maloney said.

"You'd be surprised," the good doctor replied.

And so the hook was set, six years ago.

Maloney pulled out a couple of family genealogy books her sister had given her. She bought some computer software to plug in names, dates and who-married-whom. And she joined the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

Soon she was at its Boston library with homemade charts asking, "What do you think?"

A noted research scholar began turning pages and comparing notes, then announced that if she was a descendant of one more name, it would lead to the Mayflower.

He read the name: Autentia Caroline Poland.

"Oh, my God!" Maloney said. "That's Grandma Willard – my grandmother's grandmother."

AS REAL AS I AM

These are the moments genealogists live for – moments of discovery and connection.

Fellow researchers have been known to stand and cheer when some exuberant searcher blurts out, I found him!

"The heart palpitates, and you feel this adrenaline pump that's just unbelievable," says Mayflower descendant and researcher Judy Swan of Huntington Beach.

Swan traced one ancestor, Elizabeth Hudson Henson, from handwritten Civil War pension records of Henson's husband in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

“He was a cook in the war, and she followed the camp,” Swan says. “When he went off to battle, she’d do the cooking. At the time, she had two babies. Can you imagine?”

While the Internet has revitalized genealogy, it can’t replace tracking vital records, microfilm and even old newspapers at libraries, archives and the massive Family History Library in Salt Lake City.

The reward is not one of snobbery, but of history.

“I grew up in a small town in Maine,” says Bob Spidell, 73, of San Clemente, whose roots run back to seven Mayflower passengers. “I came from a low-income family and can look back on a very long line of peasants, farmers, woodsmen – nobody of any rank or prestige. I guess I just felt real proud that my ancestors were among the first people to settle this country.”

Erica Hahn’s journey began simply by using Google to search for her grandfather’s name. Now she’s traced her roots to nine Mayflower passengers.

“Genealogy is almost a spiritual path for me,” says Hahn, 60, of Huntington Beach. “These people become so real to me, and they are real – as real as I am. And they lived in their time as I do in mine.”

NO IDEA

This is a special week for people like Hahn, Spidell and Maloney. They celebrate not only Thanksgiving but Compact Day, in commemoration of the compact Pilgrims signed 386 years ago this week.

Based on democratic principles, it is sometimes called America’s first Constitution.

“I’ll never think of it again as just Turkey Day and football,” Maloney says. “It’s more like remembering a beloved grandparent. I think about how they survived that first winter.”

Only half of the Mayflower’s 102 Pilgrims did survive that first winter in Massachusetts. They celebrated the next year’s harvest, establishing the tradition known as Thanksgiving.

Tomorrow about 27,000 Americans will celebrate the day, knowing their forebears started this country. More interesting, perhaps, is the number who don’t know they are Mayflower descendents.

Many believe it exceeds 30 million.

DON’T LOSE THEM

By now, Maloney was planning family vacations around cemeteries. Watching DVDs such as “The Ricker Compilation of Vital Records of Early Connecticut.” And typing genealogical notes into her PalmPilot

Still, she couldn’t trace one Mayflower line of ancestors past Mary Holmes, buried in Vermont in 1813. Not until Maloney came upon something called a genealogy cluster, a cluster of brothers and sisters, all of whom settled on a remote Vermont hillside.

No documents existed linking Mary Holmes to her father – the usual Mayflower Society requirement.

But Maloney could link Mary Holmes to those brothers, known descendants of Mayflower passenger Richard Warren.

The Mayflower Society accepted her application – without a birth certificate for Mary Holmes – opening a new “line” for hundreds to tap into.

Now Maloney is working on a line that dates back to eighth-century Europe while e-mailing nephews and nieces about someone much more recent.

“My mother died,” she says. “And I don’t want her descendants to forget what a good person she was – a lovely person with a beautiful voice.”

Suddenly it’s clear why she does this.

“So you don’t lose them,” she says. “Keeping their memories alive keeps them alive.”



June Lazich and Marcia Maloney

Charting your past

Resources to get you started on a family tree:

Genealogy Websites

- www.ancestry.com (free access at some libraries)
- www.familysearch.org
- www.usgenweb.org
- www.themayflowersociety.com
- www.heritagequestonline.com (library access required)

Genealogy libraries offering access and classes

- LDS church family history centers: www.familysearch.org/Eng/Library/FHC/frameset_fhc.asp
- Huntington Beach Central Library: www.hbpl.org/collections_genealogy.htm
- National Archives, Laguna Niguel: www.archives.gov/pacific/laguna/