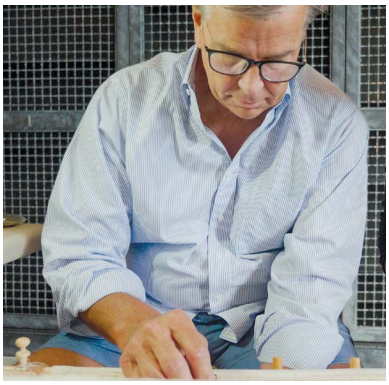
# The Plymouth Tapestry

by Cheryl Christian



*One gentleman takes a turn at stitching on the Plymouth Tapestry.*

*Elizabeth Creeden works on a drawing for the first panel.*

*Denise De More proposed the Plymouth Tapestry.*

We drove up to an old home, part of it dating to the seventeenth century, in Plymouth, Massachusetts. "This is where the artwork for the tapestry is being created," stated Dr. Donna Curtin, Executive Director of Pilgrim Hall Museum, home of the earliest signed American sampler, stitched by Loara Standish, daughter of Myles Standish, c. 1640. In 2016, the museum embarked on a voyage to commemorate in stitch the four hundredth anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing in North America in 1620. The Plymouth Tapestry will unfold over the next three years, with the intent that it be completed in 2021. The public will be invited to stitch on it. It's fitting that the Plymouth Tapestry should have its beginnings in such a period-appropriate home, the home of Elizabeth Creeden, a gifted needlework designer and the owner of the former Sampler Needlework shop in Plymouth.

Curtin and Creeden credit the tapestry's inception to Denise De More, a needlework enthusiast, collector of samplers, founder of the Mayflower Sampler Guild, member of the board of trustees for the Pilgrim Society, and sponsor of the Pilgrim Hall's eminently successful exhibition, *Wrought by Hand*. For several years, people have been looking forward to the gala celebration, making plans and proposals. De More launched the idea for the project when she approached Curtin, saying, "I think we should do a needlework project in commemoration of the four-hundredth anniversary project. I have been thinking about the Bayeux Tapestry. Why can't we do a tapestry about Plymouth's history?"

Thus began the conversations between Curtin and De More. At first, they were very excited and thought about depicting four hundred years of Plymouth history. They developed some narratives and plans about what to include, but then decided the scope was too great.

*Elizabeth Creeden stitches on the first panel.*

One way to develop such a project was to consider what is the longest, the biggest, and make the biggest ever. They decided against the enormity of such a project as well. Instead of size, they focused on the narrative they wanted to tell, a narrative centered on what people think about most when considering the Plymouth story.

"We wanted to look at the Pilgrim story, but we wanted to look at it in new ways," Curtin said, "through artistry, and through a narrative that was inclusive of the English colonial perspective, but also of the Native Wampanoag people." Curtin and De More needed an illustrator and decided on Creeden, a local needlework artist and designer. A group of local experts came together, including Linda Coombs, a Wampanoag educator and member of the Aquinnah Wampanoag tribe, and Jim Baker, a local historian descended from passengers on the *Mayflower*, former director of research at Plimoth Plantation and curator of the Alden House Historic Site in Duxbury, Massachusetts. They work closely with Curtin, herself a historian, and Creeden, the project artist, who takes the historical material that the team discusses and creates the visual narrative.

The project has taken over Creeden's house. Upstairs, Creeden has an area where she begins sketches for the panels. Rolls of panels are seemingly everywhere—to be unfurled across a large work surface or rolled up and carefully stored on a bed, where her grandson would normally sleep when visiting. Downstairs, a frame with the first panel in stages of preliminary stitching rests on supports and takes up one room.

The team has envisioned twenty panels, six of which have been drawn by Creeden at the time of this writing. Each panel will be six feet in length and match the height of the Bayeux Tapestry. "We want to be balanced," Curtin stated. "There are times when the story of the Pilgrims is going to be the centerpiece; there are times when the Wampanoag are going to be the centerpiece."

The committee discusses the research and distills a lot of information. Then for each panel, Creeden reads for a week, develops ideas for a second week, and spends time making preliminary drawings the third week. The committee gathers around the preliminary drawings, recommends changes, and approves them. After Creeden

*A young girl stitches on the tapestry with the help of Janice Card, right.*

*Two men stitch on the tapestry during one of the first public opportunities to do so.*

*Drawing transferred to canvas, with photo references for Henry VIII*

Photo by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

Photo by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

*Panel 2 laced to frame, ready for stitching. The panel includes, at right, a map of the indigenous peoples of the northeast coast of the Americas.*

*Detail of the lacing through the cording*

Photo by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

*Embroiderers working on the tapestry at the Winterthur Conference in October 2018*

makes the changes, she transfers the drawings to a roll of paper the actual size of the panel. The approved panel is then taken to a local designer of historic wallpaper, David Berman of Trustworth Studios. He has volunteered to print the designs on Belgian linen supplied by Access Commodities. The first results were accurate—with variation of only one thread from beginning to end across the six feet. "A miracle," Creeden commented.

Once the linen is printed, it is backed with cotton batiste. The basting of the batiste to each panel can take one person five and a half hours, so Creeden has help from Janice Card. The linen is then framed up with cording, as recommended by Lamora Haidar of Access Commodities, and laced with a linen thread that can take the strain and has held tight since the initial lacing.

The hardwood for the frames was donated, and a local carpenter, Karl Lekberg, volunteered to create the frames for the project. The eight-foot collapsible frames rest on supports secured with pegs. Since the frames will need to be transported from time to time, they were constructed to fit into the back of a minivan with the seats down.

"It's the first time I've stitched like this," Creeden stated. "The linen is telling me how to stitch. It is not fine, tight embroidery. It's using simple stitches so other people can work on it. You can easily stitch through the two fabric layers. It goes smoothly."

To date six panels have been created. So far, they have been developed in chronological order of the events to be depicted. The team is currently determining which six will be done next. They know roughly the context of each panel. A future panel will focus on the Pilgrims' twelve years in Holland. The twentieth will conclude with the first Thanksgiving.

The project will continue well into 2021. "Historically, a lot of the things we associate with Pilgrims did not happen in 1620," Curtin stated. "They arrive in November 1620, but they are barely making it. Most of the story takes place

in 1621." While many panels will be ready for the gala celebration in 2020, the story will continue to unfold. They are working to have the last panel, the Thanksgiving panel, completed by fall 2021. They may need to work that panel before others.

"That's a tremendously challenging panel because there are many different views about Thanksgiving both from the Native perspective and the English perspective," Curtin stated. "But we do have a wonderful period description. We go back to the primary sources, and that's the inspiration." Ninety native men accompanied Massasoit. There were some fifty-one settlers present. The plan is to picture them all, even if some are represented only by heads in the background.

The first panel, a Wampanoag panel, starts with their mythology. "We did that for a very specific reason," Curtin explained.

> *One thing is we want this to be accurate and historically substantive. But we realize we are telling two different stories and two very different kinds of traditions and ways of passing on knowledge. With the English side, it's all about written records and documentation. We can go back four hundred years to the founding of the original colony. There are published materials and manuscripts, colony records, personal records, and Bradford's manuscript. But on the Native side, we don't have those types of documents. The documents we do have are through the lens of the colonists looking at Native culture. It's wonderful to have an Aquinnah Wampanoag tribal member sitting at the table with us, and she said, "You know our history isn't the same. We don't look at it in the same way. We have an oral history that's gone on for thousands of years; we share stories of our people. So, our story actually begins thousands and thousands of years ago with our creation." So, we said, "Hey, perfect. Let's start with the Wampanoag origin myth." These origins, legends, and stories really define their culture, and they are very specific to this region.*

Words run across the top of this first panel: "When Manit created man and woman from a stone and disliking the first creation made a second couple out of white pine, who became ancestors of all mankind." The panel depicts Manit and then segues into the village of Patuxet, a village of perhaps two thousand people which had thrived until just before the Pilgrims arrived. The

*The edge of Panel 1 laced to the frame and the frame pegged together*

*Corner of Panel 1 with a section of Wampanoag village, and threads laid out for stitching*

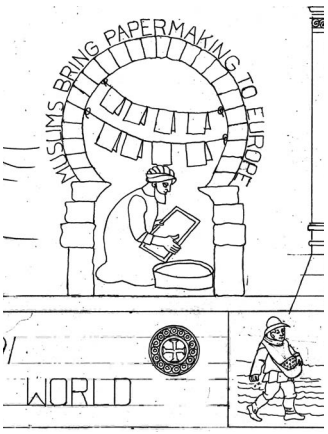
*Corner of Panel 1, with second couple created and crow flying overhead. Stitched and inked words at bottom read "Crow brought them at first a Graine of Corn."*

Photo by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

"... this history has to start with the Wampanoag and their long association with the land ..."

*Detail of stitching of wetus and hide on drying frame, Panel 1*

*Detail of the wetus in Panel 1*




*A detail of the rendering for Panel 3, wording reading "Muslims bring papermaking to Europe"*

Photos on this page by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

Pilgrims found it empty because disease had decimated the native population.

The elements depicted are based on Native artifacts and designs. "These are all original creations by Creeden, so we are not copying or appropriating any native tribe," Curtin asserted. "These are reflections of the culture created by a non-Native artist."

Creeden commented that making the switch to drawing in a native style was difficult. "I had been drawing European for years, and I had to switch. And I've caught myself many, many times, saying, 'Oh no, that is European.' So, I have had to change to a more geometric form."

The panel illustrates the wetus, the Wampanoag summer housing covered with mats and open at the top for smoke to escape. It features dugouts, drying racks for hides and cook pots based on an actual artifact. Jim Baker provided Creeden with information on plants and animals of the seventeenth century. The fish, the tortoise, the foods they had eaten.

The second panel also features the Wampanoag and their connection to the land. "We want to make it clear that this history has to start with the understanding that this is the home of the Wampanoag and their long association with the land, going back to the myth and legend," Curtain asserted. The focus in the second panel is on the Wampanoag beliefs on how the land was created.

The script on the second panel reads, "In former times Moshup the giant created the cape and the islands, making his home in the headlands of the Aquinnah. He broiled whales for his meals. The smoke from his pipe made fog, and when he emptied his pipe in the ocean, he made Nantucket." A map of Nantucket is included as well as the stitched names of the local tribes that existed at that time.

Creeden felt it important to give some context for the Pilgrim history as had been done for the Wampanoag history in their earlier tradition. The third panel grounds the development of the Separatist community in European history when the intellectual climate brought about a personal contact with the Bible in English. The panel begins with the last Crusade when paper money and the gold

standard were introduced to Europe as every country needed money to fund their ships. Creeden added a scene with the Muslims bringing paper-making to Europe. "We're looking at what happened between Islam and Christianity in this formative period, the rise to power of the Catholic church, and then the break away from it," Curtin commented. Creeden added, "and how the church held Europe together for a while. You can see we'll be coming out of the Dark Ages with the sun coming out of the clouds, but there will be all clouds at the top."

The unfolding panel shows the rise of the monasteries, where the tradition of scholarship was created, and reveals how this system fed into the intellectual changes that revolutionized all of Europe with the rise of Protestantism. With a new monetary system, banks rose and then the universities. The universities taught law, medicine, and religion, and each discipline is represented by male figures. These highly educated university academicians started the Protestant religion.

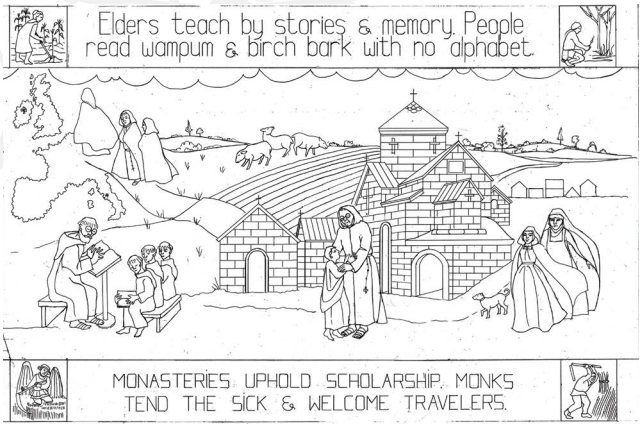
Curtin elaborated,

> *They are engaging with the Bible through the vulgar language. It's not Latin any more. They share all kinds of information. New conversations are taking place about how religion should be organized and what the relationship is between church and state. This leads to ideas considered treasonous, and people are sacrificing their lives. This directly influenced the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth. Bradford talks about some of these individuals. They read publications by John Calvin. They understood the martyrdom of these early protestant thinkers.*

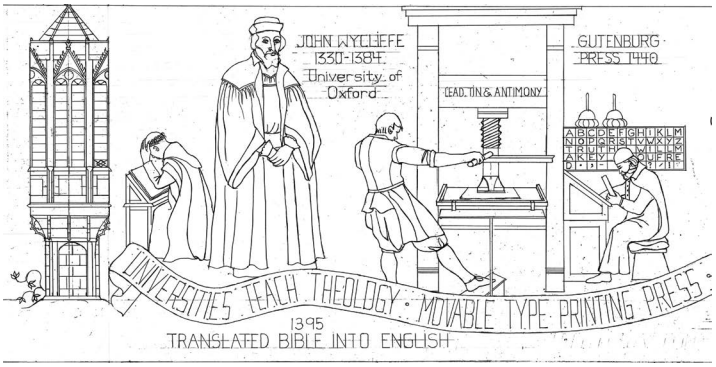
Many Pilgrims experienced persecution in their own lives so they were especially sensitive to the delicacy of their situation.

The panel also references the crossings of Europeans to the Americas, and the founding of colonies in Roanoke, Jamestown, and St. Augustine.

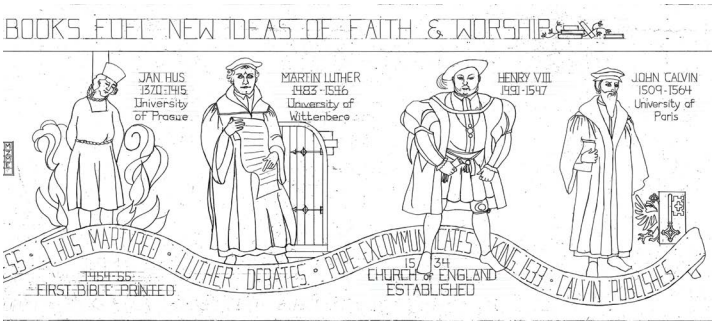
The panel is mindful of the Wampanoag. "We always want to have a conversation between the two stories, the two cultures," Curtin explained. "Just as the Bayeux tapestry has different narratives in the center of the panel and at the top and bottom, so we are going to have a conversation within the top and bottom borders to reference some things that are happening simultaneously in the cultures." With a much longer history for the Wampanoag, and no specific dates, the conversation will have a broader sweep in this panel. While depicting the



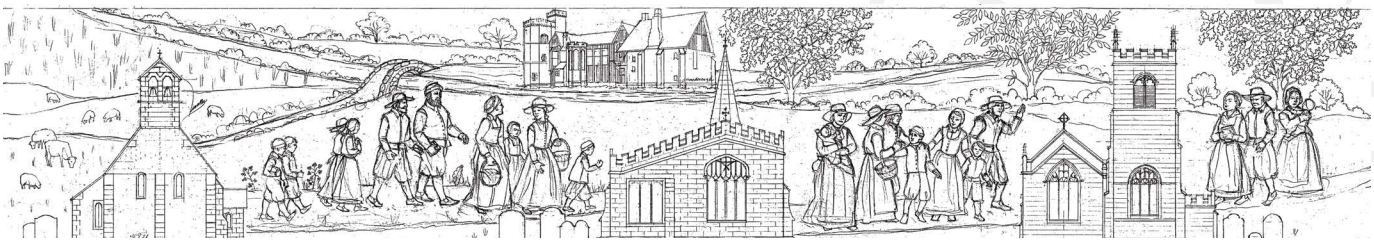

*Drawing of monasteries for Panel 3. Monks are also depicted in the bottom border. In the top border, paralleling the theme in the center of the panel, are Wampanoag at work.*




*Drawing for portion of Panel 4 showing John Wycliffe, a printing press, and the words "1395 Translated Bible into English"*




*Drawing for portion of Panel 4 showing martyr Jan Hus, Martin Luther, Henry VIII, John Calvin, and the unifying theme, "Books fuel new ideas of faith and worship."*



*Drawing of Panel 6, showing William Bradford at far left with Bible and William Brewster as boys walking to meeting*

*Wamapanoag way finder designed by Elizabeth Creeden*

## "It's a revolutionary moment . . ."

Pilgrim Hall is creating the Plymouth Tapestry, and would welcome funding. Send your contributions to Pilgrim Hall Museum, 75 Court Street, Plymouth, Massachusetts 02360 and designate The Plymouth Tapestry or visit http://www.pilgrimhall.org/plymouth-tapestry-project.htm.

For previous *Needle Arts* articles on epic needlework tapestries, visit egausa.org /needlearts.

rise of the monasteries in the center of the panel, Creeden shows in the border how the Wampanoag are creating story in memory. Recent scholarship on the indigenous reveals various ways of communicating through birch bark writing and wampum beadwork.

The sixth panel, an all English panel, shows the rise of Separatism and how it affected the particular congregations in the England. "As a boy, Bradford is reading the Bible in his own native English. Other families become part of this really exciting movement to rediscover scripture in this personal way that didn't exist for them before without the mediation of the hierarchy, the official state church and the bishop. It's a revolutionary moment, an intellectual experience as well as a faith experience. We would not be telling the Plymouth story if William Bradford as boy did not get that English Bible," Curtin states. Pilgrim Hall owns that very Bible.

The panel shows the congregation, men, women, and children, walking together as a group to a church. It depicts the architecture in villages of Austerfield, Bradford's home, and Scrooby, William Brewster's home, as well as the nearby congregations in Babworth and Gainsborough, another important center for Separatist worship. "We want to make as many connections as possible, for while we're celebrating the four hundredth anniversary here, the United Kingdom is also observing this event," Curtin said. "This connects us to Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, and to other places as well. I'm excited about making these connections through this embroidery."

On September 1, to celebrate the 194th anniversary of Pilgrim Hall Museum, the oldest continually operating public museum in the United States, the tapestry project was introduced to the public in Plymouth and attendees took stitches on the first panel. In October the team took three panels, a Wampanoag panel, an English panel, and a context panel, to the biennial conference in embroidery at Winterthur for attendees to stitch on. The tapestry project will officially launch with workshops, programs, and a schedule for stitching early in 2019. De More is heavily involved with funding, locating needleworkers, and scheduling stitching sessions.

In addition to drawing the panels, Creeden determines what stitches and threads will be used. She provides directions and enough stitches in an area to set up other people to stitch. They hold practice sessions to determine the level of skill each stitcher has. The group also has some gifted stitchers who are heavily involved.

Materials are precious. They have a bolt of linen they hope will carry them through the project, so they are careful about using it. They stitch with Soie d'Alger, wool, pearl cotton, and Trebizond. Creeden has also used gimp and even leather taken from a gardening glove to represent the hides the Wampanoag

dried on frames.

When Haidar and Creeden looked at the designs in the museum, they cut out papers and pinned them on a wall. Haidar offered advice, including the recommendation that the crows and people be made larger in the first panel. "Since then, I haven't had any trouble. She just made my eyes open up," Creeden said. Others, including Barbara Jackson and Kathy Neal, have contacted her offering help. "It's like a little team of embroiderers," she commented. "A set of technical advisers in the embroidery community," Curtin said.

"This project isn't done by one person; it's many people working," Creeden said. "There's Janice Card, who comes in two days a week. She and I work out stitches and tackle different parts."

Curtin anticipates having a core of regular volunteers who become part of the project. Many people have contacted them. The real engagement with the project will start in 2019 when they have panels continuously in production while Creeden is working on the designs. Drawing resumed in November for the next six panels.

A Facebook page has been launched. "This is a serious commitment and an investment for the museum in trying to see the project through a multi-year process." Curtin said. "When it's finished, I can visualize people gaining some meaning from it. Every single element of this has something behind it. I can't wait to see how people engage with it."

They have yet to think about the display, but the fabric is beautiful, and backing will help stabilize the display.

To further engage people with the tapestry, Pilgrim Hall will be offering kits based on the Plymouth Tapestry. Access Commodities will prepare them. The first two are simple motifs based on decorative elements: the Wampanoag way finder and the Pilgrim compass rose, directional symbols for cartography.

As we left the house, a house now with additional historic importance, we reflected on the impact of their work. The Plymouth Tapestry will make history visible and accessible for many, from children to adults, for people of all backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities. Viewers will bring a range of interpretations, seeing something different from one another, and see the tapestry in different ways each time they view it. Told from a broader, more inclusive perspective, it will truly be a story of the Americas. ■

**STITCHES**

Planning stitches has its own share of stories. Creeden noted, "I forgot one of the stitches, and found it again in Jacqueline Enthoven's *The Stitches of Creative Embroidery*. It's called French filling. As a child, I used to call this the little mouse stitch because of a French nursery rhyme. 'The little mouse goes up and up. The little mouse comes down and down.' The outline stitch goes up, followed by the running stitch going down. I had forgot that I had got this out of this book. I was thinking I invented it! And then I came back and read the book, and I was fascinated. The little mouse stitch. I wonder if I can call it that?"

Donna Curtin and I agreed wholeheartedly that she could.

Photo by Hawk Visuals, courtesy of Pilgrim Hall Museum

*Crow from Panel 1*