

PROVINCETOWN ARTS

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You Belong Here

PROVINCETOWN'S LOVE AFFAIR WITH LAWLESSNESS AND FREEDOM

By Mary Bergman

PROVINCETOWN HAS BEEN INHABITED by many different kinds of pilgrims and pirates, all varieties of saints and strangers strolling along the back shore or stumbling home along Commercial Street in the four hundred years since the *Mayflower* arrived on our shores. From the Pamet Indians, who hunted in Provincetown but lived in more bountiful Truro, to the Portuguese fishermen and the artists who came to paint them, to the LGBT community looking for liberation, Provincetown has “belonged” to many groups over the years, often at the same time.

Perhaps the most famous visitors were some of the earliest, the Pilgrims. In November of 1620, the 102 passengers on the *Mayflower* landed in Provincetown and stayed just five weeks, long enough to wash their clothes, raid corn from the Pamet Indians, and walk through the massive sand dunes. Local residents balk at vacationers declaring themselves townies after spending one week a year packed into a time-share on Beach Point, yet they hold tight to the story of these Pilgrims for dear life, despite their short stay—five weeks out of the last 20,696—that amounted to little more than a layover. For generations of Provincetown children, the very tip of Cape Cod, known as Land’s End, was the birthplace of America as we know it (or used to know it, for it has become nearly unrecognizable in the last two years) and became integral to the town’s identity. As a child growing up in Provincetown, I remember my teachers stressing the fact that the Pilgrims first landed *here* and *not* at Plymouth. When my teachers talked about the Pilgrims, and Provincetown’s role in the colonization of the New World, I can remember them beaming with pride. The women who taught my classes, with the same textbooks their parents used, had spent their whole lives here, and *this* is what they wanted everyone to remember.

The romanticization of Provincetown’s past continues to impact the way it is sold and consumed today. In *Provincetown: From Pilgrim Landing to Gay Resort* (New York University Press, 2007), Karen Christel Krahulik writes that the Pilgrims and pirates, two early visitors who didn’t spend much time in town, had a major impact on the town’s identity. The narrative of the *Mayflower*—the Compact, the Separatists “saints” coming ashore for their first washing day in the New



World—worked to establish Provincetown as a safe harbor, a place that cares for those fleeing persecution. However, Provincetown also gained the reputation of a “lawless oasis” where anything goes, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the arrival of smugglers and pirates, such as Samuel “Black Sam” Bellamy sailing in on the *Whydah*, and with the appearance of rum-runners during the days of Prohibition, such as Manuel “Manny” Zora on his vessel the *Sea Fox*.

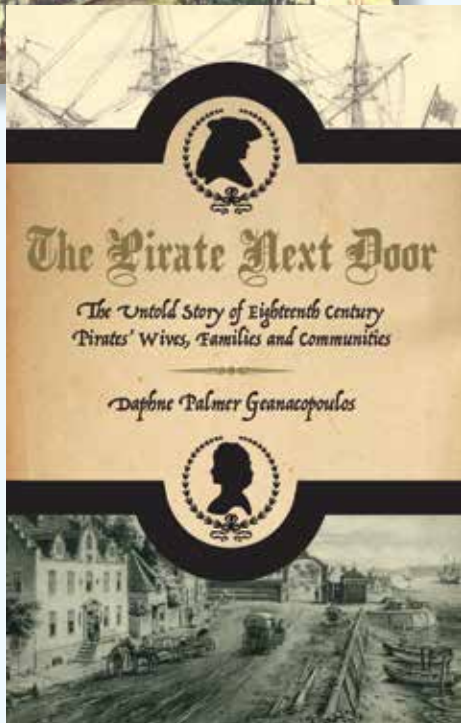
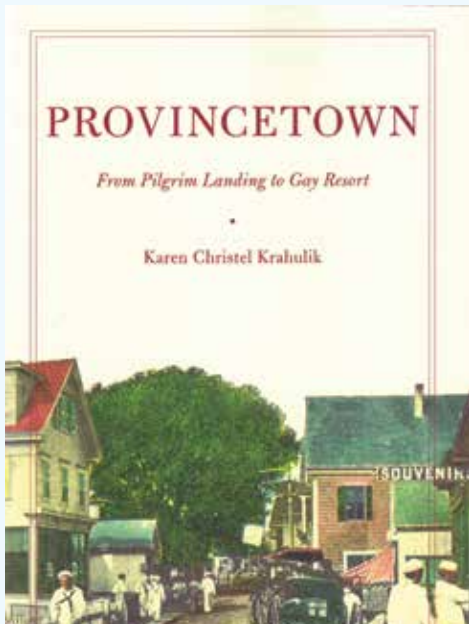
The unique geography of Provincetown has worked in shaping these two parallel narratives. Provincetown’s bayside, with its natural deep-water harbor and protection from Long Point, is a true safe harbor. According to local legend, the harbor not only sheltered the Pilgrims for five weeks, it was also a layover for Thorvald Eiriksson centuries before, when the Viking needed a place to repair the keel of his ship. The harbor is home to the town’s fishing fleet, now dwindling. Filled with ships captained mostly by Portuguese immigrants from the Azores, the working harborfront is a visual embodiment of the sea’s bounty. Every June, in a show of pageantry that rivals any drag show, the Blessing of the Fleet is a full-



blown Catholic pride parade that culminates with the bishop blessing boats from huge schooners to Eddie Ritter’s orange dory. The famous “Cape light” attracted artists in the late 1800s, when Charles Hawthorne founded the Cape Cod School of Art and the Provincetown artists’ colony came into being. In the decades that followed, an influx of artists and writers brought cutting-edge art and an increase in tourism—not to mention the influence of their bohemian lifestyles. Some sought even further refuge in the dunes.

Provincetown’s back shore—the great Outer Beach and the shacks that dot the dunes—recalls the town’s love affair with lawlessness and freedom. Even the Pilgrims marveled at the dunes: “sand hills, much like the downs of Holland, but much better.” Beautiful as they were, the giant dunes signaled to the Pilgrims how barren and sterile the land was. The Pilgrims wanted a place where their new society would not be like the scrubby pines—twisted and stunted by the wind. The seeds of their utopia would not be sown in the sands of the place the Puritans, witnessing the excesses of the carousing seafarers, dubbed “Helltown.”

We see the dunes reappear as a character in the stories of the pirate Sam Bellamy and his adventures on the *Whydah*. Daphne Palmer Geanacopoulos explores a previously untold history of eighteenth-century pirates in *The Pirate Next Door: The Untold Story of Eighteenth Century Pirates’ Wives, Families and Communities* (Carolina Academic Press, 2017). Bellamy, according to census records, hung out in Provincetown in 1715, two years before the *Whydah* and old Black Sam would both end up wrecked on the shoals five hundred feet from Eastham’s Outer Beach. (The *Whydah* was recovered in 1984, and



the recent discovery of a bone near the wreck has brought speculation that Sam's body has been found at last.) Local lore says Bellamy was trying to reunite with his love, Maria Hallett, who'd been exiled to a shack in the dunes, then called "Lucifer Land," after it was discovered that the unmarried Hallett was pregnant.

While portrayed in popular culture as "unemployed deepwater sailors from the lowest rungs of society," pirates were often considered to be heroes by those in their home ports. Some pirates acted more like Robin Hood types, bolstering the emerging economy in the New World by bringing gold and silver coins stolen from captured ships. Many of our Cape Cod communities were undoubtedly better off because of piracy.

These days, while Provincetown's sense of diversity persists, an argument has also been made for a community in decline. In December 2015, the *New York Times* painted a stark portrait of an empty town in winter, with only 2,800

ghostly souls left to haunt Commercial Street and the vacant beaches. Where did everyone go? *OutBuzz* and *VICE* have both featured articles in the last two years decreeing that straight people have ruined Provincetown. Many agree that the high price of real estate has pushed everyone who isn't a millionaire—gay or straight—further and further from the tip of the Cape.

There is no question that Provincetown, like the rest of the world, is different now than it was in the '70s or '80s (although, interestingly enough, the year-round population in 1970 was also a decidedly low 2,900—did people panic then, too?). There are those who see these changes as a major loss, the death of a town they once knew and will never experience in the same way again. But Provincetown has never been preserved in amber, has always had to reinvent herself to survive at the edge of the world.

Now, as we approach the four-hundredth anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing, Provincetown is yet again striving to re-brand. Last summer, the Provincetown Visitor Services Board hired a New York graphic designer to create a logo and new slogan for the town. "You belong here" was unanimously adopted by the ten-member board. But those three little words began inflaming passions everywhere, from *Provincetown Banner* editorials to the Provincetown Community Space online group, to those who gathered by the "meat rack" benches and big blue chair in front of Town Hall. Some complained that the phrase was too tame for our "Wild West of the East" (hat tip to Norman Mailer), others were angered that the board had brought in a hired gun from the big city instead of soliciting input from the town's world-renowned creative community. Still, the biggest sticking point came from the last word—*you*.

Who, exactly, belongs in Provincetown?

Or, perhaps more importantly, is anybody who truly belongs here still left?

In the introduction to her book, Karen Christel Kraulik encapsulates the town's identity: "Provincetown's history reveals a larger story about community, citizenship, and leisure. It is a story that illuminates American hopes and dreams. . . . As Katherine Dos Passos implied in her 1936 travelogue *Down Cape Cod*, the history of Provincetown is like 'the history of the United States in little.'" Perhaps, like America itself, Provincetown is a community essentially built upon tenets of freedom and belonging, not exclusion. Something for us to celebrate as we approach our anniversary. ❏

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