

# Plymouth experience has special meaning

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Plymouth Rock, for a long time in my mind, was a Gibraltar-like crag. The brave and hearty Pilgrims, their perilous trans-Atlantic journey behind them, celebrated their first harvest with a feast and giving of thanks to the Creator — all, I thought, in the shadow of the Rock, symbol of the founding of America.

Therefore, when I actually saw Plymouth Rock some years ago, I couldn't have been more surprised: It was a boulder no bigger than an average kitchen table, a common ordinary boulder that might have been found on any beach. It was sitting atop a patch of neatly raked sand, beneath a protecting portico of granite and surrounded by an iron fence. The rock, I was told, was on the very spot it had been when the Pilgrims had stepped onto it from the Mayflower on Dec. 21, 1620.

I was in Plymouth, Mass., playing the part of a Pilgrim in a film for public television called "The Peach Gang." It was shot almost entirely on the Plimouth Plantation (and that is the original spelling) — which has been recreated by dedicated people-pilgrims near the waterfront of Plymouth Bay, 32 miles southeast of Boston.

The film was about an early settler, Arthur Peach, who during a night of drunken revelry had killed a Narraganset Indian. The aftermath of that action involved a series of difficult negotiations between the Pilgrim leaders and Narraganset chief (played by the late Chief Dan George), and led to the

trial and hanging — of Arthur Peach. It was America's first civil rights case.

My Pilgrim part in the film was minor. As Gov. Bradford, Miles Standish and John Alden led Peach and his men, bound, up the main street of Plimouth Plantation, they passed three people in the stocks — two men and one woman. I was the woman, head and hands protruding from holes in the timber frame, offered up for public ridicule.

Most of the time I was involved in the production of the film, helping out with Pilgrim costumes, casting Mashpee Indian children in the parts needed for the Indian Village scene, setting up shots in the Plimouth Plantation settlement.

It was a privilege to be involved with people who cared so deeply for the Pilgrim tradition, such that they would live and speak in the manner of the early settlers almost every waking moment of their days. In the short time I wore the Pilgrim dress of the women — the heavy skirt and the traditional white cap — I knew that a full time commitment to the re-enactment of those days was no light matter.

Plimouth Plantation itself consists of 14 thatched, wattle-and-daub houses poorly heated by smoky fireplaces, but which in the 1670s were warmed by the spirit of America.

Pigs, goats and sheep milled around the main street, which was a gentle dirt slope that coursed through the middle of the settlement. Men in knee britches and hose tended gardens next the houses, and the women made soap and candles, and swept their houses with brooms they had made themselves from twigs of nearby trees.

In my spare time I also looked into the Pilgrim Hall museum to see John Alden's Bible and Miles Standish's sword. I went aboard the replica of the Mayflower, berthed in Plymouth Harbor, and wondered at the conditions which the Pilgrims had withstood during their difficult sail. To see and feel the dark crude interior of that ship convinced me deeply of the faith they must have had.

But Plymouth Rock — the small boulder which was not at all what I expected it to be — I learned something entirely new from that: I learned that symbols can becloud their meaning if the importance is placed on the symbols themselves. And so I realized that my Thanksgiving was not in the boulder called Plymouth Rock. Nor was it in a turkey or cranberries or in being with a lot of other people around a table. Those things are nice but the real Thanksgiving, as I could now see it, was within — a pebble of gratitude in the heart for any freedom, any blessing, no matter how big or how small.