



“AS WE SAY IN THE VILLAGE”

Gabe Norwood '18 preserves 17th-century history
as a first-person educator at Plimoth Plantation.

BY JANA F. BROWN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW CUNNINGHAM

There's a joke in the village, says Gabe Norwood '18, that the more ways a person can arrange letters to come up with different spellings of a word, the smarter they are considered to be.

That is why Plimoth Plantation (aka “the village”), where Norwood recently finished his first season as a historical interpreter, is spelled with an “i” rather than the “y” of its namesake town of Plymouth, Mass.

“Plimoth is the way Governor William Bradford spells it in the document,” explains Norwood, noting that spelling in general was not yet standardized in the 17th century. “It’s also a branding move to differentiate ourselves from the town.”

No matter what the spelling, over the last 12 months, Norwood has become immersed in the life of the original Massachusetts colony, circa 1627, seven years after *The Mayflower* landed in Plymouth Harbor. Though he does not consider himself an actor, Norwood nevertheless plays the role of Edward Doty, an Englishman turned Massachusetts settler. “I am a first-person living history educator,” Norwood says. In fact, Governor Bradford’s historical document, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, serves as the primary source of information about the colony for Norwood and other interpreters at Plimoth today.



Gabe Norwood '18 (left) and Shawn Gray '17 pose in traditional garb on the grounds of Franklin Pierce.

Doty, offers Norwood, was born in London in the Parish of St. Mary's around 1600. At the age of 20, when men of that era were expected to have found a livelihood, young Doty didn't have much to show for himself. With little to lose, Doty decided the New World was his best chance at prosperity, so he boarded *The Mayflower* as a servant to a man named Steven Hopkins. Four years after the ship's arrival in New England, Doty was granted 20 acres of land and eventually settled down in 1635 with his wife, Faith Clark. After working many years as a day laborer, he died in 1655.

It's now Norwood's job to bring Edward Doty back to life on a daily basis, preserving the history of the man and his era – a formative time for America, though a segment of history largely relegated to third grade lessons about the first Thanksgiving, construction paper buckle hats, and the revered (but mythical?) Plymouth Rock.

"Plymouth Rock is a complete fabrication," says Norwood. "There are many rocks in Plymouth, as we say in the village. There are all these things people don't know and we get to talk about them in character."

Norwood grew up in Belchertown, Mass., where he developed an early interest in history. Prior to joining the team at Plimoth Plantation, he engaged in Civil War reenactments for several years and served as an intern at Springfield Armory National Park while a student at Franklin Pierce. He majored in history and graduated from Pierce with a minor in public history. The idea of a career path in the latter appealed to Norwood because of the promise of making personal connections with those with whom he shares accounts of the past.

His initial experience in personal interpretation of the Civil War provided Norwood with valuable insight into what it's like to participate in and experience living history. Professor of History Mary Kelly identifies Norwood as a perfect example for students interested in careers in the field. She praises his high level of intellectual curiosity, his enthusiasm for history, and his desire to share it with others.

"The level of sophistication Gabe reached in his major and public history minor at FPU," says Kelly, "represents an ideal example of student achievement of our program goals. His depth of engagement in classes dovetailed admirably with a virtually seamless entry into public interpretation of historic sites and contexts."

Public history, adds Professor Melinda Jetté, helps those interested in the specialized academic area to connect formal study of the subject with self-directed learning. "It is also about providing people with links to not only their own local pasts, but also to larger questions that shape the world today," Jetté says.

What attracted him to his work at Plimoth Plantation, Norwood says, was exactly that opportunity to provide visitors with links to the past in a more personal way than is possible



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by sorting through books in search of historical facts. When he takes on the persona of Edward Doty, Norwood is able to connect with visitors on an emotional level, welcoming them into a world they have only read about.

To optimally prepare for that experience, Norwood and his cohorts have learned to remain in character five days a week, from February through early December, perpetually bound by the rules and norms of coastal Massachusetts in 1627. That includes maintaining the cadence of Elizabethan dialect and conforming to 17th-century behaviors. The repetition can feel like an Elizabethan version of *Groundhog Day*. Sometimes descendants of his alter ego, Doty, visit Plimoth Plantation, and Norwood finds himself challenged to engage them in only the facts that represent Doty's life as of 1627.

"It's always an interesting experience because there is no social protocol for approaching somebody in this context," he says. "It's like, 'Hey, I'm your 13th grandson.' I have to tell them I'm not even married yet, but I usually try to work them into my context."

What's different about venues of public history as opposed to museums is the chance for visitors to personalize their experiences. The way Norwood sees it, visitors to Plimoth Plantation are there for textural learning opportunities, ones they can touch and feel and sense and that include real people in a real town, recapturing a moment in time. Because they are visitors to his "home," Norwood is able to act as village host





Facing page:
(from left) Sean
McCarrick '17
Jacklyn Flaherty
'17, Gabe
Norwood '18, and
Shawn Gray '17
dressed in
character. This
page: A view
of some of the
structures at
Plimoth
Plantation.

and guide the conversation in a way that ensures his guests are learning through a first-person perspective.

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While it might seem that the greatest challenge would be getting into character, Norwood says it's actually the opposite. Once he finds a rhythm of telling stories as Edward Doty – about the duel he had over Constance Hopkins or his first winter in New England or why he is at religious odds with the Separatists – it can be jarring to realize in the moment that he is not actually living in the 17th century.

"If I'm in that state of mind, [being in character] is just a layer above my own personality," he says. "Once you get good at it, you can continue story after story without thinking. I'll find myself ranting and raving about how the Separatists are fools, for example."

Public history students such as Norwood, says Kelly, "embrace the more rarefied ability to present historical episodes and narratives in appealing ways to the public. Gabe's capacity to understand and articulate this quality is now reaping anticipated rewards in his career."

As much as he considers himself a teacher, Norwood says he also has learned a great deal from his immersion in the life of the Pilgrims. He has come to understand that their motivations and desires have been largely misrepresented in commonly imparted history. Most Americans are taught to believe that the Pilgrims fled England for the New World seeking religious freedom. It's a misnomer, Norwood asserts, because the Pilgrims were desperately seeking the basic needs

humans have pursued throughout history – a better life for themselves and their families.

"Many forget that people 400 years ago fled to a new country for economic reasons. There is almost no difference between refugees doing the same today," Norwood says. "The Pilgrims were poor in England, where the economy was stagnant, and poor in Holland, where they were strangers. It's just like any other refugee from any other country. Taking us 400 years into the past and trying to connect that idea to people shows us that humans haven't changed that much in their motivations and stories. If you are sympathetic for the Pilgrims, be sympathetic for those of our time seeking opportunity."

As Norwood and the other living history educators prepare for a 400th anniversary celebration of the Pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth, Mass. (The *Mayflower II* will make its return to Plymouth Harbor to commemorate the occasion), he is eager to share some little-known tidbits often oversimplified for the elementary-school curriculum that is the basis for most Americans' knowledge of the 1620 English settlers. First, the Pilgrims did not make their own goods. They did not live a 17th-century version of *Little House on the Prairie*, but instead relied on annual cargo shipments of supplies from England. The settlement at Plymouth was as much a business venture as it was about establishing a new way of life.

"People think the Pilgrims landed and made a town," says Norwood, "but, in truth, it was a complex financial venture with a patent to the land and a contract."

Second, the Pilgrims would never have referred to themselves as Pilgrims, but as English Christians. "Nobody would have called themselves a Pilgrim in 1627," he says.

Third, the first Thanksgiving with the Wampanoag Nation did not resemble modern-day renderings of the holiday. "The idea of Thanksgiving does exist for the English as a day of prayer and fasting, which is the opposite of our Thanksgiving. It was followed by two years of famine," Norwood explains.

Fourth, nobody – yes, nobody – in contemporary 17th-century Plimoth wears a buckle hat. It was simply "not a thing for the Pilgrims," Norwood, says, scoffing at the very idea.

According to Kelly, Norwood's work as an interpreter at Plimoth Plantation offers a rare window into a time when the worldview of the settlers was much different than life as we know it today. That opportunity to experience daily life from another time helps us make connections with our own worldviews. It can serve both as a welcome respite from the stressors of modern life and as a reminder of simpler times.

"Preserving history is the only way to correct the history," says Norwood. "We spend day after day correcting Americans; most people don't know the first thing of what the Pilgrims' lives were like. There is so much to learn from the Pilgrim experience that is completely missed. Schools only touch on it at an age at which you are unable to grasp historical truths versus historical myths. The best we can do at Plimoth Plantation is try to correct those teachings." P