

FLIGHT
of the
WASP

ALSO BY MICHAEL GROSS

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Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women

FLIGHT
of the
WASP

THE RISE, FALL, *and* FUTURE *of*
AMERICA'S ORIGINAL RULING CLASS

MICHAEL GROSS



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*For Christine Mortimer Biddle, Stephen Demorest,
Barbara Hodes, Robert Winthrop Kean III,
and Mary Michele Rutherford
And in memory of
Katherine Mortimer Blaine
and
Judith and Samuel Peabody*

When we are planning for posterity, we ought to
remember that virtue is not hereditary.

—THOMAS PAINE, *COMMON SENSE* (1776)



INTRODUCTION

Two generations ago, my family came to New York from the Jewish ghettos of eastern Europe, almost certainly fleeing prejudice, violence, and oppression rather than seeking liberal democracy. My parents were born in America in the early twentieth century. Theirs was not the America of this book.

In ancient Rome, society was divided between elite patricians and common plebeians—and beneath both, current and former slaves. France had its three estates, the clergy, the hereditary nobility, and common people. American society was supposed to be different. We didn't have classes; no one was better than anyone else—so I was taught at school. But for most of our history, we have had a patriciate, an aristocracy, a hereditary oligarchic upper class.

Where I grew up, in a suburb on Long Island, it was quite possible to be oblivious to the existence of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who first colonized that island, as well as the surrounding region from Virginia to Maine, and then initiated the American national experiment. I know that as a child I lacked any consciousness of America's original upper class. Rockville Centre was mostly white, but neither Anglo-Saxon nor Protestant. In school, where I learned about America's founding Pilgrims and Puritans and assumed their strict sects were long defunct, my white classmates seemed to me to be half Roman Catholic (the town was the seat of a diocese), half Jewish. If there were any members of what would later be known as Our Crowd, the wealthy German Jewish families who were the financial, if not quite social, equals of the WASP elite, in our little town, I didn't know about them.

Rich Jews lived a few towns away, and I vividly recall visiting one such family to frolic in their in-ground pool—luxury!—but though we had to drive through patrician towns like Old Westbury en route to that oasis, we never stopped in any of them or discussed who lived down the long driveways and past the sweeping lawns visible from the road. On the rare occasions when I ventured farther afield to visit Long Island’s old-money North Shore, it was to attend bar and bat mitzvahs at new-money country clubs. I’d never heard of their WASP counterparts, Piping Rock or Seawanhaka—or heard Locust Valley lockjaw. I don’t even know if I’d met a WASP before I went to college (Vassar, class of 1974), and even then I looked down on their campus representatives as khaki-clad, Weejuns-wearing, beer-chugging throwbacks of no consequence or relevance to my life in what already seemed more diverse, multicultural times.

I would later learn that one of my best friends at Vassar was a full-fledged member of the WASP elite whose family had sailed from old to New Amsterdam aboard the *Spotted Cow* in 1663. But we bonded over LSD, Little Feat, and the New York Dolls, not Sea Breezes or his Huguenot bloodlines. After college, I made a number of friends who came from colonial American families, and the more I saw of them, the more I thought they were trying to crawl out of the rubble of a collapsed culture, not understanding that their mothers and fathers, acutely aware of a changing world, if not quite accepting it, had purposely gone to ground in the hope of protecting and retaining the (as it turned out not inconsiderable) privileges WASPs had accumulated, while their children tried somehow to assimilate into the by then much broader and vital population that had overflowed their parents’ world. We were a lot more fun.

Though none of these (to me) exotics indulged in braggadocio—indeed, they exuded practiced nonchalance and seemed more embarrassed than chuffed by their heritage—this book was inspired by them. As hints of their notable families’ stories emerged, an anthropological curiosity was piqued, and in the mid-1980s, as the rich had a revival under Ronald Reagan, I took my first tentative journalistic steps into the society they came from—and came to see that reports of the death of old money were exaggerated. I wrote several books that peripherally examined this phenomenon, including *740 Park*,

about a New York City cooperative apartment house that was an establishment redoubt, and *Rogues' Gallery*, the story of the financial backers of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and discovered that while WASPs hadn't given up the ghost, many of them would have preferred that the rest of us think they had.

Quite the contrary; with stubborn persistence and a surprising knack for adaptation, they've survived, even if they no longer prosper in comparison with hedge fund, infotainment, and tech money. Turns out they got a piece of that, once they sold their Park Avenue apartments, Palm Beach mansions, Adirondack camps, and shingled Atlantic cottages to the newly enriched. So they still sat near, if not at, the top of America's socioeconomic pyramid in summer 2019 as I began writing this book. But that imposing edifice was under attack from both ends of the political spectrum.

That reckoning, inevitable perhaps, indispensable for sure, is ongoing, and it is my hope that this warts-and-all look at those who designed, erected, and guarded the pyramid will contribute in some small way to an understanding of the complex legacy of American WASPs, their huge accomplishments, and their egregious lapses, from slavery and genocide to deadly exceptionalism. To be glib, it is my belief that a clear-eyed portrait of those currently seen as the perpetrators of great wrongs might help us reach even-handed conclusions about the past and better face the future. For we would all benefit if the traits WASPs idealized, like humility, responsibility, simple civility, and lack of pretension, which seem endangered in the world today, were revived and again revered.



The story of the WASPs is, for better and for worse, the story of America. The star-crossed settlers who came to Jamestown in 1607 were WASPs. The Pilgrims who landed off Massachusetts in 1620 were WASPs. The buyers of the first American slaves at Port Comfort near Jamestown in 1619 were WASPs, as was George Washington, and every president until 1961. Many of the brave men and women who supported the abolition of slavery before the Civil War were members of the northern WASP elite. The industrialists and financiers who built and ran America, men like Cornelius Vanderbilt, J. Pierpont Morgan,

and Henry Ford, and the lawyers who protected them? WASPs. Until the third decade of the twentieth century, just about every person with power and influence in the United States was a WASP—or else a convert. Into the 1980s, the upwardly mobile wanted to wear the same clothes, go to the same schools, join their clubs, and move on up to their exclusive neighborhoods.

That can't be said anymore. The Anglo-American elite has drifted from American centrality to the periphery. States have been run by Jewish and Catholic governors throughout American history, beginning with Thomas Dongan, who was appointed governor of the Duke of York's Province of New York in 1683. The first Catholic governor of one of the United States was Thomas Sim Lee, who took over the Maryland statehouse in 1779 and returned in 1792. David Emanuel, a Jew, became the acting governor of Georgia in 1801. Edward Salomon was appointed governor of Washington Territory in 1870. Washington Bartlett, elected governor of California in 1887, was born Jewish but converted to Christianity before taking office. Simon Bamberger was elected the head of Utah in 1896.

Since 1961, we've had both non-Protestant and nonwhite presidents. But WASPs persist. The Episcopalian forty-first president, George H. W. Bush (Andover, Yale, Skull and Bones, CIA), appointed his fellow religionists James Baker (The Hill School, Princeton) as his secretary of state and David Souter (Harvard, Rhodes scholar, Harvard Law) as his first choice for the traditionally all-WASP Supreme Court, and later added Clarence Thomas (College of the Holy Cross, Yale Law) to that court. Thomas was born a Catholic but married an Episcopalian, and both he and his wife attend a charismatic Virginia Episcopal church.¹ Still, from 2010, when Justice John Paul Stevens retired and was replaced by Elena Kagan, until 2017, that illustrious bench was filled exclusively with Catholics and Jews.² When the WASP Neil Gorsuch (Georgetown Prep, Columbia, Harvard Law) was elevated to the high court that year, he was the WASP exception.

Congress is also a counterexample to the relentless advance of WASP diminishment. In 1965, the House of Representatives included 54 Episcopalians, 69 Methodists, and 56 Presbyterians. In 2021, those numbers had dropped to 23 Episcopalians, 31 Methodists, and 15 Presbyterians. There were 15 Episcopalian senators in 1965 (vs. 7 in

2021), 22 Methodists (vs. 7 in 2021), and 11 Presbyterians in both 1965 and 2021.³ However, in 2021, the 117th Congress was still 55.4 percent Protestant, compared to only 43 percent of American adults. And Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists were all overrepresented when compared to their numbers in the general population.*

As late as 1916, the baseline economic power of mainline Protestants persisted, as demonstrated by the value of property and parsonages owned by Protestant religious groups. They owned real estate worth \$1.177 billion versus \$441 million for Catholics, \$185 million for Black Protestants, \$151 million for evangelicals, and \$31 million for Jews. Of the mainline Protestant denominations, northern Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians held the most property, with over \$100 million each. Jewish congregations were slightly richer; each Jewish congregation member's individual share was valued at \$87, but the per capita wealth of individual mainline Protestants was only slightly less at \$76, while conservative Protestants lagged far behind at \$28. In urban areas, the same trend held true, with per capita wealth the highest among Jews, mainline Protestants lagging only slightly, and others well in the rear. At the time, census data indicated how many recent immigrants were part of those religious cohorts, because as many as 96 percent of American Jews were still worshipping in a foreign language, as opposed to 49 percent of Catholics, 17 percent of conservative Protestants, and only 10 percent of mainline Protestants.⁴ But by the early twentieth century, the prescient could see that the forces of immigration would soon threaten WASP hegemony.

Statisticians measure status and social mobility through three socioeconomic indicators (or SEIs): income, wealth, and education. The earnings of contemporary white evangelical Protestants are 73 percent less than those of mainline Protestants, who hold twice as many bachelor's degrees as conservative Protestants. Conservatives,

* Congress in 2021 was 29.8 percent Catholic (against 20 percent of the adult population) and 6.2 percent Jewish (while only 2 percent of U.S. adults identified as Jews). Of the Protestants, 66 identified as Baptist, 35 as Methodist, 26 as Anglican/Episcopal, 24 as Presbyterian, 22 as Lutheran, 13 as members of other sects, and 108 as nondenominational or unspecified, according to the Pew Research Center's study "Faith on the Hill: The Religious Composition of the 117th Congress."

in turn, have earned a quarter as many bachelor's degrees as white Jews. So it's not surprising that between 1990 and 2016, according to the General Social Survey conducted by NORC, a nonpartisan research organization at the University of Chicago, white Jews, particularly members of the more liberal Reform denomination of Judaism, had the highest mean income and mean SEI scores (which rank prestigious occupations by the education they require and the earnings they generate) among Americans. Among mainstream Protestant denominations, Episcopalians and Quakers rank highest in mean income, with Congregationalists and Presbyterians close behind them. And those four denominations also have the highest SEI scores among all Protestants. Conservative Protestants score considerably lower by both measures.

Americans with more education, income, and professional prestige "are 50 percent more likely to be Mainline Protestant than Evangelical Protestant or Catholic," according to one analysis of this data, which concludes that despite their declines relative to the entire American population, and particularly Jews, Unitarians, and educated American Hindus, today's mainline Protestants still have considerable socioeconomic advantages.⁵

Another study of the Protestant establishment, comparing the religious affiliation of people listed in the 1930 and 1992 editions of *Who's Who in America*, found that despite some slippage in their position—and the marked rise of a Jewish and Catholic elite after World War II—Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists remained "overrepresented among both cultural and power elites."

In 1930, the three primary mainline Protestant sects still accounted for 53.5 percent of all listed bankers, businessmen, politicians, judges, lawyers, military officers, educators, scientists, doctors, engineers, social workers, religious figures, and cultural leaders such as editors, authors, artists, and actors. That majority shrank to 35.1 percent in 1992, although Episcopalians were more likely to have hung on in the upper tiers of society, and were even more prominent in 1992 than in 1930, rising from about 6 percent of the elite to just over 7 percent, with a notable presence in the realms of business and public policy.

In those sixty years, the overall representation of Episcopalians in *Who's Who* shrank from 21.94 to 18.04 percent, Presbyterians from 20.32 to 13.91 percent, and Congregationalists from 11.29 to 3.19 percent, the last an almost 72 percent drop. The number of those with no religious affiliation listed rose from almost 44 percent to 65.66 percent.⁶ In contrast, Jews were more prominent despite being underrepresented in all but cultural occupations, rising from 1.31 percent of all those listed in *Who's Who* to 12.32 percent, and Catholics rose from 4.45 percent to 23.12 percent.

Those figures do not, however, reflect the waning importance of religious identification among younger Americans, another indicator of the decline of America's traditional ruling class. In 2020, 70 percent of Americans identified as Christian whether they were actively religious or not (vs. 1 percent as Jews), 42 percent as white (i.e., non-Hispanic Caucasian) Christians, and 16 percent as white mainline Protestants. Between 2006 and 2020, the percentage of the American population identifying as conservative Protestants dropped from 23 to 14 percent. Large numbers of white Christians, particularly younger ones, have stopped identifying as such. Between 1986 and 2020, the number of white Christians aged eighteen to twenty-nine who identify as religiously unaffiliated has risen from 10 to 36 percent.⁷ If many American Protestants feel themselves under siege today, it is, at least statistically, understandable in a society steadily abandoning regular religious worship.



Diversity is refreshing, an unequivocal good. It has come as a belated and forced antidote to WASP hegemony, to WASP culture's advocacy of slavery, the genocide of the American Indian, white privilege, tribal exclusion, accumulation, isolationism, nativism, inequality, racism, sexism, austerity, cruelty, and prejudice. The WASPs ruled America as aristocrats. But there's something else. Their rule also promoted an American ideal. WASPs have certainly pushed back against the increasing inclusion of "others," be they Catholics, Jews, Muslims, people of color, or women. But honor, duty, tradition, leadership, modesty, restraint, stoicism, service, moral authority, courage, grace, noblesse

oblige, and cultivation were still given lip service within (and even outside) the WASP milieu—even if sometimes in the breach.

At its best, WASP culture was authoritative, not authoritarian. From the C-suite to Washington, D.C., its better qualities are deeply missed. In that context, the forty-fifth president, Donald Trump (New York Military Academy, Fordham, Wharton), descended from a German Protestant who came to America in 1885 and a Presbyterian by birth, represented the clan's nadir—a repudiation of the tattered remains of WASP virtue. His successor was a man defined by decency, America's second Catholic president, Joe Biden (University of Delaware, Syracuse Law). Nonetheless, a selfish, narcissistic, tribal, atomized nation might still look to WASPs for a restorative example of America's civic conscience: its rectitude, chivalry, sense of moral duty, collective purpose, and community.



The decline into irrelevance of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, first posited by WASPs, has been a generally accepted trope since 1960, when Cleveland Amory (Milton Academy, Harvard) published *Who Killed Society?* In the final pages of *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America*, E. Digby Baltzell (St. Paul's School, University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, Harvard) described his 1964 classic as “an attempt to analyze the decline of authority in America,” an authority personified by the WASP elite, who “may still be deferred to and envied” but were “no longer honored in the land.”⁸

A few years later, outright mockery superseded serious inspection. *WASP, Where Is Thy Sting?* was the title of a 1977 book by the WASP humorist Florence King. In 1980, the Jewish humorist Lisa Birnbach's bestselling *The Official Preppy Handbook* (“Look, Muffy, a book for us”) turned what some thought tragedy into farce. The people that invented America had become a joke.

In 1992, Joseph W. Alsop, the late political columnist and, by his own description, a “minor member of this now-vanished group,” attempted to fine tune, and narrow, the definition of the living-dead WASPs in his memoir, *I've Seen the Best of It*. Alsop proposed the primacy of a smaller and highly self-conscious subset of the species, which he called the WASP Ascendancy. Defined by “the right kind of

origin and the right kind of name,” it was led by both colonial families and those with fortunes made “just a little further down the line, like the Astors.” It was, he wrote, “an inner group that was recognizable as a group . . . that was, on average, substantially richer and enjoyed substantially more leverage than other Americans.” These WASPs served as role models to others “who were on their way up in the world.” Typically Episcopalian, they were “highly recognizable” by, in Alsop’s own order of precedence, their “fairly extreme but regional New England/New York accent,” odd pronunciation (*tomahatoes*), and use of “the earliest English name for anything” (WASPs had curtains, not drapes, and died rather than passed); their ownership of family summer homes, “large rural tribal dwellings” that smelled of beeswax and fresh-cut flowers; a strict dress code; a “high tolerance for eccentricity”; a snobbishness based primarily in lineage; a tendency toward conservatism and even intolerance; and “a certain provincialism and an all-too-common hostility to the intellectual life.”⁹ They were still America’s elite, its haves, solid, established, decorous, and enviable, as opposed to its have-nots and the vast throng of in-betweens, who either didn’t care about their place in the national hierarchy or were still engaged in striving accumulation.

If that was the opinion of a member of the clan, it’s no wonder that WASP-bashing remains a mass-market bromide. The *National Review*’s Richard Brookhiser, a German Catholic, began his 1991 book *The Way of the WASP* recounting how the campaign that elected his former boss George H. W. Bush president in 1988 set off a wave of WASP abuse, and he concluded that we now live in “the post-WASP world.”¹⁰ In his review of that book in the *New York Times*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, who would shortly discover his own hidden Jewish roots, stated flatly, “A WASP renaissance is not going to happen.”¹¹ In 2000, David Brooks observed that WASP culture, once “so powerful” and now “so dated,” had been “crushed” by a new, highly educated meritocracy.¹²

Obituaries of America’s former ruling class, whether melancholy or celebratory, stay evergreen in this century. In 2014, *Politico* published “The Death of the WASP,” an essay premised on the notion that “the New England WASP has all but disappeared from its natural habitats—gone, almost, from the region’s 12 Senate seats, van-

ished from its six governor's mansions." Rhode Island senator Sheldon Whitehouse (St. Paul's, Yale, Virginia Law) was cited as the exception that proved the rule of "extinction . . . retreat . . . departure."¹³ And in spring 2019, in "A Farewell to the WASPs," Rich Lowry, the editor of the *National Review*, used a memorial service for Barbara Bush (Rye Country Day School, Smith), wife of the aforementioned forty-first president and mother of the forty-third, as his news hook, declaring, "The days of the WASP power brokers are gone."¹⁴



WASPs dominated America for its first 350 years, but the ruling class wasn't the monolith many imagine they were and George Washington hoped they would be. The predecessors of Alsop's WASP Ascendancy led the American Revolution and wrote the Constitution, but by the time Thomas Jefferson was elected the third president in 1800, WASP cohesion had fractured, the urban-centered Federalist Party that had formed around Alexander Hamilton was failing, and the agrarian Democrats who supported Jefferson were rising, supported by the South and the West.

That didn't mean Alsop's top WASPs abandoned power, even as they were slowly edged out of national political leadership in the late twentieth century; in the Industrial Revolution, after the Civil War, they pulled the levers of law and finance, and "retained a strong grip not so much on industry itself, but on the banking and financial system on which industry depended for credit." Then, Alsop continued, corruption led to an inevitable downfall due to their "grossly self-mismanagement of the nation's credit structure in the 1920s." Though WASPs still won elections and stalked the corridors of power throughout his lifetime, and the powerful columnist, a relative of Theodore Roosevelt, began his career during the WASP Franklin Roosevelt's presidency and died just after the WASP George H. W. Bush was inaugurated, Alsop ultimately came to believe that "the whole view of the world, and of history, the personal culture and the private manners that produced these men, have all gone by the board."¹⁵

But there are many ways of looking at the American WASP, and they are *not* merely the wealthy, powerful members of the Episcopal Church who formed Alsop's inner circle. The Protestant Reforma-

tion churches that were their cradle encompass both mainline churches, which emphasized ceremony, rich vestments, rituals, sacraments, and clerical authority, and so-called conservative churches, which, ironically, took a freer, less structured, more evangelical approach to worship, focusing on the congregation more than the clergy. While the first families of America came from both traditions—the Anglicans of Virginia, for example, representing the most mainstream of churches, and the Puritans of Massachusetts, taking a more conservative approach—their religious differences would fade into the background by the time of our Revolution, and be overshadowed by socioeconomic distinctions.

Strictly speaking, WASPs were descended from the Germanic peoples who settled the British Isles; they usually worshipped either as members of the Church of England or as Presbyterians. But though Dutch and English colonists were, in the main, America's first families, to reflect the national reality its founding WASPs should be defined more broadly. As noted, they included those Puritan and, later, Congregationalist first families of Massachusetts; the Separatist Pilgrims of the Plymouth Colony;* the so-called New Puritans of Rhode Island and Connecticut; the English-born Anglicans of Virginia and Maryland; Swedish Lutherans, who became the first Scandinavians to settle in America when they established New Sweden in 1638 after landing near what is now Wilmington, Delaware; Dutch Reformed church-goers who dominated Nieuw Amsterdam; the French Protestants known as Huguenots and their French-speaking Belgian counterparts, Calvinist Walloons, who fled religious suppression, first in the Netherlands and England and then in several American colonies; and the Quakers of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Many of those colonists, who dominated social and political life in early America, would ultimately join the Episcopal Church, a new, American religion formed in large part as a political repudiation of the unacceptably royalist Anglican Church.†

* The Puritans hoped to change the English church, while the Pilgrims chose to leave it. Instead, in 1692, the Pilgrims joined the Puritan-led Massachusetts Bay Colony when it absorbed their Plymouth Colony.

† Those who didn't become Episcopalian typically wound up as Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or Unitarians.

But there were also the Methodists (who split from the Anglican Church in 1784), Lutherans, and Baptists. Unlike the mainstream WASPs of northwest European origin, many of these more conservative WASPs came to the Western Hemisphere somewhat later, often from the borderlands between Scotland and England, from Ireland, and from Germany, and were more likely to head to what were then backwoods on the American frontier than its more settled, sophisticated, and urbanized eastern coast. They and the agrarians of the original southern colonies, particularly Virginia, dominated the country's politics, if not its social and financial life, through the first half of the nineteenth century.



Curiously, despite the social role that religion played in planting and propagating the American aristocracy, religiosity has tended to have an inverse relationship with class. From the American Revolution onward, established upper-class Americans chose to worship at churches that were less fundamentalist in philosophy and more tolerant in practice, albeit often derided as rigid, miserly, and emotionless, or simply despised by more religious and recently arrived Americans.

Episcopalians claimed the highest social rank, although their political power ebbed and flowed, as in the early nineteenth century, when the rise of the seventh president, the populist Andrew Jackson, diminished their standing for a generation. Though a Democrat like the patrician Thomas Jefferson and his three successors, two from Virginia and one from Massachusetts, the Scots-Irish Jackson, who lived in Tennessee, was the first frontier president, elected by, and primarily representing the interests of, the poor but rising conservative WASP population of the young nation's agrarian interior.

As America developed, entry to the WASP patriciate grew easier. Merchants and professionals, soldiers, and other public officials were able to edge into the elite, and even industrial plutocrats, initially disdained as crass new-money arrivistes, would eventually be absorbed and accepted into the American aristocracy, though sometimes a conversion was deemed advisable. The financier J. P. Morgan, for instance, would convert from Congregationalist (now called the United Church of Christ) to Episcopalian in 1861.

And so conservative Protestants, even those disdained as “vulgar interlopers” in the early days of their accumulation of wealth, were eventually co-opted, refined, and incorporated, often through the intermarriage of new money with old. By the late nineteenth century, a relatively stable, homogeneous elite had emerged, blending America’s original landed aristocracy with the powerhouses of the industrial plutocracy. For example, members of the Livingstons, a land-grant family and in many ways the ur-Americans, had married not just equivalent Beekmans, Jays, Bayards, and Van Rensselaers but also the nouveau riche Astors. Vanderbilts merged with the *Mayflowe*-descended Whitneys and the Dutch-English Morris clans. Theirs was a very rich yet very small world—even as it inched open its doors.

Ostracism was as important as assimilation, however. While some new-money arrivistes were welcomed into the upper class—sometimes called the *bon ton*, or just the *ton*, a pretentious adaptation of the French phrase for well-mannered folk first used in Regency-era England—others, especially more recent immigrants, particularly Jews and Catholics from eastern and southern Europe and Ireland, were not. “Urban patriciates that maintain hegemony over a long period neutralize the challenge of new men by either co-option or effective exclusion,” Frederic Cople Jaher wrote in his 1973 essay “Style and Status: High Society in Late Nineteenth Century New York.”¹⁶

Eventually, though, the doors of elite society opened to almost everyone as WASP hegemony gave way, after World War II, to the world I grew up in, one characterized by an increasing, if highly imperfect, acceptance of American diversity. By 1960, the country had its first non-WASP president, the Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy. But though his election—thirty-two years after Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for that office, lost in a landslide to Herbert Hoover—appeared to some as the end of old-stock dominance, Kennedy had been raised to honor the ideals, manners, moral authority and standards (and, yes, sexual hypocrisy), sense of duty, and desire to lead that characterized the WASP oligarchs. Kennedy was ethnic, but also a symbol of how an inclusive aristocracy replenishes itself, absorbing and even embracing those willing to learn and adapt to its ways.

But it is no surprise that the demise of the WASP was first proposed at the moment of Kennedy’s triumph. E. Digby Baltzell even

predicted that their noblesse oblige would fall out of fashion. While WASPs would still have some social status, he worried that their inevitable loss of functional power to rising new economic elites was causing them to reject the rejuvenation of assimilation and instead retreat from a socially useful aristocracy into a closed caste defined solely by bloodlines.* That would leave upper-crust society adrift in a world where no one would have the same economic, political, and social power because, he wrote, rising new groups can never duplicate “accidents of ancestry.”¹⁷ Baltzell wondered if WASPs would lose their leadership or share it, and predicted they would land in between, retaining some privilege, as in fact they did.

In an update to *The Protestant Establishment* published in 1976, after the Black Power, women’s liberation, and radical student movements, and after the debacles of the Vietnam War and Watergate caused a general loss of faith in American institutions, Baltzell would sound considerably bleaker. “What remains of the Protestant establishment has been watered down beyond recognition,” he lamented. “No authority or conventions of decency exist. . . . When class authority declines, money talks, echoing in a moral vacuum.” Money and the sort of superficial charisma that seduces the media had “steadily replaced class authority as the principal characteristic for leadership in our atomized society,” Baltzell concluded.¹⁸ His perspicacity has been repeatedly affirmed in the decades since. Donald Trump was Exhibit A of the phenomenon.

As Baltzell feared in 1976, the WASP elite promptly degenerated into what he had derided as a caste, a closed class that no longer sought out new blood or provided leadership; in the process, the vulnerability of the American establishment was exposed. Increasingly isolated by the flow of history and their own predilections, WASPs did become irrelevant, culturally, politically, and practically. If they didn’t quite disappear from the American narrative, they were reduced to an aside, a footnote—albeit a vital one—to the central plot line. Trump’s disdain for the WASP Bush dynasty was Exhibit B.

* “I personally think the key element is ‘Anglo Saxon,’ and an imagined connection to the early settlements in Massachusetts,” said the late writer Michael M. Thomas, whose mother’s family came to Plymouth in 1623 aboard the *Anne*, the second Pilgrim ship. “Another quality that sets us apart is a regard, tantamount to a fixation, with the past: our past. Where we came from, who our people were.”

By the 1970s, it could be (and was) said that those traditionally on the lower rungs of society—Blacks, Hispanics, and even the disparate group collectively (if sometimes unfairly) disparaged as white trash and, later, deplorables—had more cultural clout than the fruit of the American aristocracy. Simultaneously, traditional notions of upward mobility were challenged by a revival of fundamentalist religions, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim, stressing differences, not similarities. Into the Reagan eighties, WASP forms might still be aped, but by the millennium, most Americans would simply ignore the source, if they recognized it at all.

And so it came to pass that the WASPs abdicated, retreated, found themselves priced out and bought out of their exclusive enclaves; their clubs and institutions made increasingly irrelevant; their once all-powerful culture more often regarded as an anachronism—and, many felt, deservedly so. And yet they remain a force in America's present as well as its past.



I seek to look back, not in anger, envy, or mourning, but with a fresh eye, curiosity, and some well-tempered admiration, at a handful of totemic WASP families who made America what it is, for both good and ill. The book introduces each family through an individual member who was a quintessential figure in his era; I say “his” because WASPs who were generally recognized as leaders well into the twentieth century were uniformly male, and like most other Americans, ruled by the ingrained sexism behind the cliché that a woman's place was in the home. This by no means suggests that male primacy was right or just, but merely recognizes what was. In each case, I place those individuals within a family context, with many women playing notable roles, and then step back to look at those families over the more than four hundred years of their life in America, digging up the roots of their family trees and following their branches as they spread and intertwined through marriage, interpersonal relationships and business mergers.

In the colonial era, the focus is on Governor William Bradford, leader of the Plymouth Colony. Gouverneur Morris, the New Yorker most responsible for the writing of the U.S. Constitution, and John Randolph, a plantation owner, slaveholder, and politician from

Virginia, represent the years just before and after the American Revolution. Lewis Cass, who governed the Michigan Territory, guided the Jackson administration policy known as Indian removal, and once ran for president, and Nicholas Biddle, the Philadelphia gentleman and polymath who ran the Bank of the United States, open a window on the young American nation at the start of the nineteenth century. Henry Sanford, a businessman from Connecticut who created America's first spy network as Abraham Lincoln's envoy to Belgium and then laid the groundwork for Florida's tourism and citrus industries, illuminates the Civil War era. George Peabody, who founded the firm that became today's JPMorgan Chase and is sometimes called the founder of modern philanthropy, and William Collins Whitney, a descendent of Governor Bradford, cabinet secretary, businessman, and member of the Four Hundred, along with a cast of similarly wealthy or well-born swells like Winthrop or Lewis Rutherford, dance the story through the Gilded Age. Fairfield Osborn, the railroad heir who ran the American Museum of Natural History for decades, reveals that players who emerged from the Progressive Era weren't necessarily forward-thinkers. And Michael Butler, the paper products and aviation heir who produced the Broadway hit musical *Hair* in the 1960s, shows how WASPs tried (and often failed) to adapt as the world changed around them at the end of the twentieth century. A final chapter focuses on members of most of their families in recent times, to demonstrate the wide range of contemporary WASP experience, from drug addiction to engagement in the most pressing challenges of the world today.

They, their antecedents, and their descendants are the protagonists in this crucial slice of the story of the creation of a nation and a national ethos, as well as the shame and stain left by the practice of slavery, the oppression of Native Americans, and systemic racism, intolerance, and misogyny. By looking at some key WASP figures, I hope to illuminate at least a few corners of their and America's transformations in the four hundred years since the *Mayflower*'s arrival.

Part One



FAITH

1609–1750

William Bradford

1

William Bradford was long considered America's earliest tribal chief. The founder and governor of Plymouth, Massachusetts, the fourth permanent European settlement on the North American continent,* and the first chronicler of its history, he gave the name "Pilgrims" to the group of travelers who had instigated the 1620 transatlantic voyage of the square-rigged ninety-foot-long sailing ship called the *Mayflower*. It has captured American imaginations for centuries. Though the Pilgrims were free men and women, "a group of English emigrants more socially insignificant" than the *Mayflower* passengers "could hardly be imagined; time and sentiment alone have given them the luster they possess," the historian Dixon Wecter observed.¹

Bradford led the first white Anglo-Saxon Protestants to take up significant residence on the North American continent. Still on the *Mayflower*, the free male passengers onboard (indentured servants, who had agreed to a term of unpaid labor in exchange for passage, food, clothes, and shelter, were not involved) drafted a legal statement, and the "noble document" they signed, known as the Mayflower Compact, became "one of the basic charters of American liberty," anticipating

* The first was St. Augustine, Florida, founded by Spain in 1565, followed by the English at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, and French Quebec in 1608. Though the Netherlands claimed the Hudson River Valley in 1609, on the arrival of explorer Henry Hudson, the Dutch didn't establish a successful settlement until 1624.

key elements of both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.²

In an 1802 speech commemorating the landing at Plymouth, the future sixth president, John Quincy Adams, would call the Mayflower Compact “the first example in modern times of a social compact or system of government instituted by voluntary agreement, conformably to the laws of nature, by men of equal rights, and about to establish their community in a new country.”³

Prideful self-promotion factored into the persistent importance given to the Pilgrims, although they were neither the first American WASPs nor the founders of a particularly important community. There is argument whether the first Thanksgiving feast was actually held in Plymouth, but over the centuries, the legend of the holiday first proclaimed by George Washington in 1789, and legally sanctioned by Congress in 1870, has called the town its birthplace.

In 1894, American ancestor worship was given formal structure by the first Society of Mayflower Descendants, formed in New York by seven lineal descendants of *Mayflower* passengers. Three years later, a national descendants’ society was born at a meeting at Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth, the headquarters of the Pilgrim Society, itself conjured up by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on the two hundredth anniversary of the ship’s arrival, “to perpetuate the memory of the virtues, the enterprize, and unparalleled sufferings” of Plymouth’s original band of 102 colonists. Most, but not all, of them were religious dissenters and had sailed from Southampton, England, in September 1620.

One died at sea and four more between the *Mayflower*’s November 11 arrival in what would become Provincetown Harbor, off Cape Cod, and its final destination twenty-six miles southwest. One of those was William Bradford’s wife, Dorothy, who is thought to have fallen into a depression and jumped overboard, perhaps because she and her husband had left their three-year-old son John behind, perhaps because Cape Cod looked frighteningly desolate and inhospitable. Either way, on December 7, her body was spotted floating beside the ship; she was dead at twenty-three.

Today, the Mayflower Society keeps its documentation confidential, but anyone searching for descendants of William Bradford (or

his fellow passengers) will have an easy time finding lists of the most famous ones.* Bradford is said to be descended through his son with Dorothy, and through three more children with his second wife, Alice, to William Rehnquist, a chief justice of the Supreme Court; Senator Adlai Stevenson III; four state governors; and a wide range of notables including lexicographer Noah Webster, Civil War general George McClellan, the artists Frederick E. Church and Charles Dana Gibson; Kodak film inventor George Eastman, Dr. Benjamin Spock, chef Julia Child; novelists Ambrose Bierce and Thomas Pynchon, the former *New York Times* publisher Arthur Ochs “Pinch” Sulzberger Jr., *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner, and the movie stars Sally Field, Clint Eastwood, John Lithgow, and Christopher Reeve.† Bradford’s less notable descendants were considerably more numerous (a 1951 book covering only six generations lists 11,272 of them), and a few had an impact on contemporary America nearly as significant as, and perhaps more relevant to modern times, than the Pilgrim leader’s.

His natural reticence would probably have kept William Bradford from expressing pride in the way his blood still flows through American veins. Certainly, he was proud of his and his fellow Pilgrims’ American progress, but in the pages of *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647*, Bradford’s history of those times, he refers to himself rarely, and only in the third person. That said, he was, as the scholar Samuel Eliot Morison notes in his introduction to one version of that book, which he edited, “the man who made the major decisions [and] exercised more plenary authority than any governor of an English colony in his day, with the possible exception of Sir William Berkeley in Virginia.”⁴

The Pilgrims’ original destination wasn’t Cape Cod or Plymouth but the same as that of the slaves who had preceded them: Virginia, or rather, the northern border of the Virginia Colony, which was set by England’s King James I in the Charter of 1606 at latitude 41°N,

* For the sake of easier reading, distinctions will not always be made in this text between lineal (direct) descendants, collateral relations (side branches—sisters and brothers, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, etc.), and affinal relations (through marriage), although those connections will be spelled out when appropriate.

† A few of those claims are questionable, apparently.