

The Pilgrims' Experience

Reading Focus

Why did the Pilgrims want to leave England?

What was the Mayflower Compact, and why was it important?

What was life like in Plymouth?

Key Terms

Puritans

sect

Separatists

Pilgrims

immigrants

Mayflower Compact

ENGLAND'S KING JAMES I held a conference in 1604 to meet with Protestant leaders. They wanted to reform the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church. As these leaders presented their complaints, which were critical of the power held by Anglican bishops, the king grew increasingly restless. Finally, he interrupted one of the reformers and began shouting furiously, "While I am in England I will have bishops to govern the Church." As for those who continued to demand reform, James declared, "I will make them conform themselves [become Anglicans] or I will harry [drive] them out of this land."



King James I

★ Puritans and Pilgrims

Religious tension in England remained high after the Protestant Reformation. A Protestant group called the **Puritans** wanted to reform, or purify, the Church of England. Puritans believed that the Church of England had kept too many Catholic traditions. The Puritans also thought that the leaders of the Church of England, such as bishops and priests, had too much power over church members. Puritan leaders argued that the Bible was the most reliable source of authority within the church.

The most extreme **sect**, or religious group, of Puritans wanted to separate from the Church of England entirely rather than simply reform it. These **Separatists** developed their own churches and cut all ties with the Church of England. English authorities responded by persecuting Separatists.

One Separatist sect that faced such treatment became known as the **Pilgrims**. Eventually, the Pilgrims decided to escape this persecution. In 1607 the Pilgrims left England and moved to the Netherlands, becoming **immigrants**—people who

have left the country of their birth to live in another country. Dutch officials welcomed the Pilgrims and allowed them to practice their religion freely.

★ The Founding of Plymouth

The Pilgrims were glad to be able to practice their faith. They were displeased, however, that their children were learning the Dutch language and culture and forgetting their English traditions. The Pilgrims were also unhappy that they were mostly limited to unskilled work in the Netherlands.

These issues motivated the Pilgrims to move from the Netherlands to America. They established a joint-stock company with some merchants and returned to England to apply for permission to settle in Virginia. Before setting out on their journey, the Pilgrims received a letter from their spiritual leader, Reverend John Robinson. Unable to join the colonists, Robinson advised them about the need to stand together:

“You are many of you strangers, as to the persons, so to the infirmities [weaknesses] one of another, . . . which does require at your hands much wisdom and charity for the . . . preventing of incident [accidental] offenses.”

On September 16, 1620, the ship *Mayflower* left England with more than 100 men, women, and children as passengers. Not all of these colonists were Pilgrims, but Pilgrim leaders such as William Bradford were in command of the expedition. The Pilgrims also hired Captain Miles Standish to help organize the defense of their colony.



Henry Bacon's painting *Landing of the Pilgrims*

Detail, Courtesy of the Pilgrim Society, Plymouth, Massachusetts

After two months of rough ocean travel, the Pilgrims sighted land. Soon they realized that they were far north of the current boundaries of Virginia. This put them outside the lands of their English charter. Knowing that they would not be under the authority of the Virginia colonial government, the Pilgrims decided to create and write down the basic laws and social rules that would govern their colony. On November 21, 1620, the 41 male passengers on the *Mayflower* signed this legal contract, which they called the **Mayflower Compact**. In it they agreed to create “such just and equal laws, . . . as shall be thought most meet [fitting] and convenient for the general good of the colony.” The Mayflower Compact represented one of the first efforts at self-government in the English colonies.

The Pilgrims chose to land along the shore at Plymouth Rock in present-day Massachusetts. Bradford wrote that once ashore, “They [the Pilgrims] fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean.” The *Mayflower* stayed with the colonists until April while they struggled through the winter to build the Plymouth settlement. Exhausted from their journey, nearly half the Pilgrims died during this first winter from sickness and the freezing weather.



William Bradford

★ Pilgrims and American Indians

European fishing boats had already visited the area around Plymouth before the arrival of the Pilgrims. These Europeans had brought new diseases to the region that had killed most of the local American Indians, such as the Pawtuxet.

Samoset and Squanto

For some time the Pilgrims met no Indians, coming across only a few deserted Indian villages and abandoned cornfields. The Pilgrims used these empty fields in the spring to plant the next year's crop. Then, according to Bradford, in March 1621 an American Indian walked boldly into the colonists' settlement and "spoke to them in broken English, which they could well understand, but marveled at it." This Indian was Samoset, who was from a Pemaquid tribe that lived in the area. He had learned some English from the crews of fishing boats. Samoset gave the Pilgrims useful information about the peoples and places surrounding Plymouth, and he later introduced them to a Pawtuxet Indian named Squanto.

Squanto had been kidnapped by English explorers in 1615 and sold in Spain as a slave. He escaped from his captors and made his way to England, finally returning to North America. He gradually found his way back to his homeland in 1619, only to discover that everyone in his tribe had died from disease while he was gone.

Squanto was not only fluent in English but also willing to help the colonists. According to one observer, he showed the settlers

“how to set [plant] their corn, where to take [catch] fish, . . . and was also their pilot [guide] to unknown places.”

From Squanto the Pilgrims also learned how to fertilize the soil on their farms with fish remains. In addition, Squanto helped the Pilgrims establish peaceful relations with Massasoit, the chief of the local Wampanoag Indians. This peaceful relationship helped the Pilgrims in their early years of settlement.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS



The Mayflower Compact

On November 21, 1620, the Pilgrim leaders aboard the Mayflower drafted a basic plan of government, the first such document created in the colonies. This excerpt from the Mayflower Compact describes the principles of the Pilgrim colony's government.

“We whose names are underwritten, [written below] . . . having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, . . . a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia, do by these presents [this document] solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one of another, covenant [promise] and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic [group organized for government] for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid [mentioned above]; and by virtue [authority] hereof, to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances [regulations], acts . . . as shall be thought most meet [fitting] and convenient for the general good of the colony unto which we promise all due . . . obedience.”

Understanding Primary Sources

1. Who had the signers of the document promised to serve?
2. Why do you think the colonists felt the need to establish a government?



The Granger Collection, New York

Squanto showed the Pilgrims how to plant and grow corn in New England.

Thanksgiving

The peaceful relationship with the Wampanoag allowed the Pilgrims to grow and harvest their first crops in safety. When harvest time arrived, William Bradford recalled that the Pilgrims began

“to fit up their houses and dwellings against winter, being all well recovered in health and strength and had all things in good plenty.”

To celebrate their harvest, the Pilgrims invited Chief Massasoit and 90 other Wampanoag guests to what became known as the first Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims killed wild turkeys for the occasion, and the Wampanoag contributed venison. For three days the two groups feasted with each other. This event marked the Pilgrims' surviving their first year in the new colony.

★ The Pilgrim Community

Although the Pilgrims overcame many misfortunes, their small settlement continued to struggle. However, they trusted that hard work and a strong religious community would help them survive.

Trade

The Pilgrims had hoped to earn a living by fishing and fur trading. Few of the settlers had any fishing or hunting experience, however. Some colonists participated in a fishing trade with American Indians. The Pilgrims were also able to trade extra corn with the Abenaki Indians for beaver furs. However, most Pilgrims became farmers.

Back in England, the non-Pilgrim merchants who had invested in the Plymouth Colony were unhappy with its slow economic growth. They sold their shares of land to the Pilgrim leaders in 1626. The Pilgrims then distributed this land evenly among the original families who had founded the colony.

The Importance of Family

More than 20 years passed before the Pilgrims raised enough money from fishing and fur trading to pay off the money they had borrowed to buy their lands. However, the Pilgrims were more successful in establishing a strong community than in making a profit.

Unlike in Virginia, families were common in the Pilgrim settlement.

After the first difficult winter during which so many Pilgrims died, colonists quickly adopted orphaned children and raised them as family members. Pilgrim families educated their children and trained their indentured servants. Families also served as the centers of religious faith, health care, and community well-being.



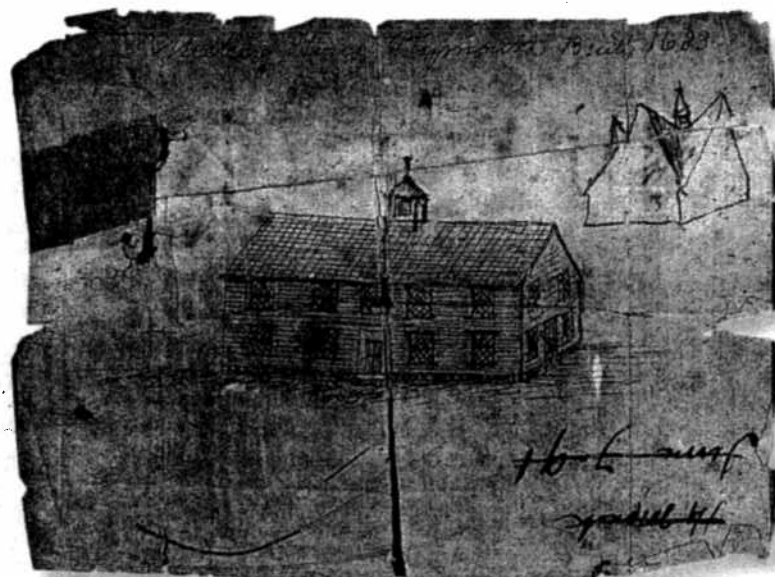
A wild turkey



A Pilgrim boy's leather shoes

Peabody & Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

All family members participated in the work required for survival during this time. Women generally cooked, spun and wove wool, sewed clothing, made soap and butter, carried water, dried fruit, and cared for livestock. Men spent most of their time repairing tools, working in the fields, chopping wood, and building and maintaining shelters for people and animals. Most Pilgrims hoped to have large families, partly because children were greatly needed to help with this work.



Courtesy of the Pilgrim Society, Plymouth, Massachusetts

The Pilgrims built a new meetinghouse in Plymouth Colony in 1683, adding glass windows and a church bell.

Pilgrim Women

In Plymouth, women had more legal rights than they did in England, where they were not allowed to make contracts, bring lawsuits, or own property. Pilgrim women had the right to sign contracts and to bring some cases before local courts. Widows could also own property. A widow typically received one third of her family's land and belongings. In addition, married and widowed women gained licenses to run inns and sell liquor.

Occasionally, local courts recognized the business contributions of women to the community.

Widow Naomi Silvester received a large share of her husband's estate because the court considered her "a frugal [thrifty] and laborious [hard-working] woman in the providing of the said estate." Widow Elizabeth Warren's business talent convinced colonial officials to appoint her as a purchaser for the colony in place of her late husband. The hard work of Silvester, Warren, and other women helped the Plymouth Colony to survive the difficult times during its founding.

SECTION 2 REVIEW

Identify and explain the significance of the following:

- Puritans
- sect
- Separatists
- Pilgrims
- immigrants
- William Bradford
- Mayflower Compact
- Squanto

Reading for Content Understanding

- 1 Main Idea** Why did the Pilgrims move from England to the Netherlands? Why did they then decide to move to America?
- 2 Main Idea** How were the Pilgrims able to survive their first years in Plymouth,

and what was the colony like once it was more established?

- 3 Cultural Diversity** What kind of relationship did the Pilgrims have with the American Indians near Plymouth?
- 4 Writing Persuading** Imagine that you were one of the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth on the *Mayflower*. Write a letter to someone back in England describing the Mayflower Compact and explaining why your group felt that it was necessary.
- 5 Critical Thinking Making Comparisons** How were the experiences of the Pilgrims similar to those of the first Jamestown settlers?