

Plymouth Colony

1620

On December 22, 1620, the *Mayflower*, carrying 102 passengers and bound for Virginia but blown off course, dropped anchor in what became known as Plymouth Bay; it had previously made landfall on November 11 near what is now Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod. The landing site, which the passengers named Plymouth after their port of embarkation in England, was that of an abandoned Indian village whose inhabitants had been wiped out by an epidemic.

Of the original 107 passengers who sailed from England, five died: one at sea and four more while the ship was at anchor off Cape Cod. Among the four was Dorothy Bradford, wife of Plymouth Governor William Bradford, who fell or possibly jumped overboard.

Who were these emigrants? Some reputable sources estimate that 35 of them were Calvinist Separatists from the Church of England (as distinguished from the Puritans, who wanted to reform the Church of England). These Separatists, eventually known as Pilgrims, had previously lived in religious exile in the Netherlands, which they left on August 1, 1620, to join the *Mayflower* at Plymouth. They embarked from Delfshaven, then a separate port and now a suburb of Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Here, as written by Nathaniel Morton, the longtime Secretary of Plymouth Colony, is a description of that departure:

"When they came to Delfs-Haven they found the ship and all things ready, and such of their friends as could not come with them followed after them, and sundry came from Amsterdam to see them shipt, and to take their leaves of them. One night was spent with little sleep with the most, but with friendly entertainment and Christian discourse, and other real expressions of true Christian love.

The next day they went on board, and their friends with them, where truly doleful was the sight of that sad and mournful parting, to hear what sighs and sobs and prayers did sound amongst them; what tears did gush from every eye, and pithy speeches pierced each other's heart, that sundry of the Dutch strangers that stood on the Key as spectators could not refrain from tears. But the tide (which stays for no man) calling them away, that were thus loath to depart, their Reverend Pastor, falling down on his knees, and they all with him, with watery cheeks commended them with the most fervent prayers unto the Lord and His blessing; and then with mutual embraces and many tears they took their leaves one of another, which proved to be the last leave to many of them.

The remainder of the passengers were so-called "Strangers" (non-Separatists paying their own way) placed aboard by the Merchant Adventurers who financed the voyage, and the wives, servants, and children of both parties. There were often strained relations between the two groups, not helped by a rough and stormy 66 day voyage across the Atlantic.

Morton continues his account, describing their emotions upon arrival:

Being now passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before them in expectations, they had now no friends to welcome them, no inns to entertain or refresh them, no houses, or much less towns, to repair unto to seek for succour; and for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of the country know them to be sharp and violent, subject to cruel and fierce storms,

dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search unknown coasts. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts and wilde men? for which way soever they turned their eyes (save upward to Heaven) they could have but little solace or content in respect of any outward object.

*If they looked behind them, there was a mighty ocean which they had passed, and was now as a main bar or gulph to separate them from all the civil parts of the world."*¹

Realizing that their Virginia charter was no longer valid and that they needed a legal structure for governance, 41 male passengers, both Strangers and Pilgrims, signed the Mayflower Compact before they disembarked. This short document created mutually agreed-upon laws for the good governance of their new colony.

The first Native American they met was Samoset, a Wampanoag lord "of seemly carriage," who walked into Plymouth wearing only a breech cloth and carrying a bow and two arrows, one symbolically headed and the other unheaded. To their astonishment, he greeted the Pilgrims in English: "Welcome Englishmen!", and asked for a beer, having learned English from British fishermen. He introduced the Pilgrims to Squanto, or Tisquantum, the last of the Patuxets, who spoke even better English, having previously been captured and enslaved. eventually freed, lived in London, and was presented to the King.

Squanto became the liaison between the Pilgrims and Wampanoags. He showed them how to plant and fertilize corn, saving the colony from complete starvation. Even so, almost half of the original 102 passengers who landed died of disease, starvation, or stress during the first winter. In November 1621, the Pilgrims and Indians did indeed celebrate the harvest jointly with a feast which became the basis for Thanksgiving.

Plymouth Colony survived largely on subsistence agriculture and fishing, plus the income from a fur trading post in the District of Maine, but it never turned a great profit for its Merchant Adventurers. Nonetheless, it attracted subsequent emigrants and grew to include several neighboring towns.

Plymouth remained largely populated by Separatists, unlike the subsequent Puritan Boston-oriented Massachusetts Bay Colony (See 1630 Massachusetts Bay Colony article). As the years passed, Plymouth became known as "The Old Colony", conducting itself with humility and maintaining better relations with the Indians than did the expansionist Bay Colony. Even after it was eventually absorbed into the Bay Colony in 1691, it struggled to exert a moderating influence on the larger Bay Colony.

¹ Nathaniel Morton's *New England's Memorial*, considered the first comprehensive history of Plymouth Colony, was published at Cambridge in 1669 and is widely considered the first book of history published in what is now the United States.