

Mayflower Story

The Mayflower set sail on 16th September 1620 from Plymouth, UK, to voyage to America, known to English explorers at the time as the New World. But its history and story start long before that.

Its passengers were in search of a new life. They would go on to be known as the Pilgrims influencing the future of the United States of America in ways they could never have imagined.

This story isn't just about the Mayflower's passengers though. It's about the people who already lived in America such as the Wampanoag tribe and the enormous effect the arrival of these colonists would have on Native Americans and the land they had called home for centuries.

The Passengers

More than 30 million people, including many [celebrities](#), can trace their ancestry to the 102 [passengers](#) and approximately 30 crew aboard the Mayflower when it landed in Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts, in the harsh winter of 1620. On board were men, women and children from different walks of life across England and the city of Leiden, Holland.

A significant number were known as Separatists - people who mostly wanted to live free from the current Church of England, under the ruling of Henry VIII, which dictated all aspects of life and to dispute that rule was a path ending in prosecution. Others were on the ship anticipating the chance to build a better future, the opportunity of new land and the offer of freedom and adventure.

The passengers are often grouped into 'Saints' or 'Strangers' by historians, alluding to their motivations for the journey. It's likely that many 'Saints' were skilled tradesmen and many 'Strangers' had their own religious reasons for leaving 17th century England. One passenger, William Mullins, took 132 pairs of boots and shoes on board the Mayflower. Their origins can be traced across England and the Netherlands with more information [here](#).

Importantly, the Pilgrims were not the first to land in America, nor did they discover it. There were already established colonies at the time, not least Jamestown – founded in 1607.

But the Mayflower story is renowned for its themes of freedom and humanity – including the relationships first formed between the Native American Wampanoag tribe and the colonists and the first Thanksgiving.

The Separatist leaders

The leading religious Separatists who voyaged to America in 1620 mostly originated from an area where modern-day Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and Lincolnshire meet. Among the Separatists was William Brewster, who is believed to have founded a Separatist Church in his family home - the manor house at Scrooby.

Brewster strongly influenced William Bradford from Austerfield, a nearby South Yorkshire village. A similar group had long been growing in the nearby town of [Gainsborough](#) in Lincolnshire, drawing members from surrounding villages.

Escaping to Holland

As authorities intensified their crackdown on the Separatists, both groups fled for Holland – seen as a liberal nation where they could live peacefully.

One night in the autumn of 1607, they secretly met a boat on the edge of ‘The Wash’ at Scotia Creek, near [Boston](#) in Lincolnshire. But the captain of a ship betrayed them and local militia seized the group, their money and belongings. They were brought by boat back to Boston and held and tried at the Guildhall.

They were eventually freed and made a second, successful attempt at fleeing to Holland – this time from the coastal town of Immingham in Lincolnshire.

A new life in Leiden

They settled in the city of [Leiden](#) via Amsterdam - a city of free-thinkers, relative religious tolerance, and a long tradition of offering shelter to the dispossessed.

They built a life, living and working for 12 years. Eventually the time in a foreign land took its toll and they wanted to be completely free of limitations and build a better economic future.

With the looming threat of war with Spain, from 1617 they planned to leave and start again although more than half stayed and became fully integrated into Dutch life.

Planning the voyage to America

Virginia in America was an attractive destination because several colonies had already settled there. However, they also felt that they should not settle too near and end up with a similar environment to which they originally fled.

The Separatists worked with their counterparts in England to fund and organise the journey and negotiating with merchants in London. They also needed permission to land in Virginia and establish a colony.

A ship called the Speedwell would carry the Leiden group to America while the Mayflower would take passengers who weren't necessarily travelling for religious

reasons. The Mayflower would sail from the port of [Rotherhithe](#) in London, which was home to many of the crew including the Mayflower's [Captain Christopher Jones](#).

Leaving England

The Speedwell set sail from Holland on 22nd July 1620. The plan was to meet the Mayflower in [Southampton](#) - a thriving seaport offering all the commercial facilities to provision and equip for the long sea voyage.

When the ships met, the Speedwell needed repairs after developing a leak. On 15th August 1620, the two ships weighed anchor and set sail from Southampton but the Speedwell began to take on water again. They changed course for [Dartmouth](#), a port on the south coast of Devon to make good the damage.

The second attempt did not go as hoped either. When 300 miles clear of Land's End the Speedwell began leaking badly so the two boats turned about for [Plymouth](#).

One last stop

By this time, the cramped, damp and miserable passengers had already spent up to six weeks at sea and the Speedwell was declared unfit for the journey. Some of the Pilgrims dropped out and the remainder crowded onto the Mayflower which needed re-provisioning.

They left Plymouth on 16th September 1620, with up to 30 crew and 102 passengers on board. The names of the passengers and crew can be found [here](#).

Sailing the Atlantic

The Mayflower took 66 days to cross the Atlantic – a horrible crossing afflicted by treacherous winter Atlantic storms. One Stranger was swept overboard and one woman, Elizabeth Hopkins, gave birth to a baby boy, aptly named Oceanus.

The Pilgrims intended to land in Northern Virginia and the Hudson River (today New York). The Mayflower was almost right on target, missing the Hudson River by just a few degrees.

As they approached land, the crew spotted Cape Cod as the sun rose on November 9, 1620. The Pilgrims decided to head south, to the mouth of the Hudson River in New York, where they intended to make their plantation. As rough seas nearly shipwrecked the Mayflower, they decided to stay and explore Cape Cod and anchored in what is now Provincetown Harbor.

The Mayflower Compact

The colonists knew they had no right to settle in this land they had unintentionally arrived upon and decided to draw up a document that gave them some attempt at legal standing. Upon arrival the settlers drew up the Mayflower Compact. Signed by 41 men on board, it was an agreement to cooperate for the general good of the colony. They would deal with issues by voting, establish constitutional law and rule by the majority.

Watching from the west

The Pilgrims spent the next month and a half exploring Cape Cod, while most stayed on board the ship, deciding where they would build their plantation. Watching on were a small group of Native Americans for whom this area was already home. The new arrivals tried to follow them but got lost and stuck among some dense thickets.

The Pilgrims decided to change course and came across cleared land where corn had been grown and abandoned houses stood. They found buried corn, which they took back to the ship, intending to plant it and grow more corn, eventually returning what they had taken. They also found graves. This village they had stumbled upon was once called Patuxet but had since been deserted following the outbreak of disease.

This was a legacy of what the Native American people had already experienced from European colonists in the 17th century. The native inhabitants of the region around Plymouth Colony were the various groups of the Wampanoag people and other tribes, who had lived there for some 10,000 years before the Europeans arrived.

The Great Dying

Since the beginning of the 16th century, ships from England had been fishing and trading in North America waters. They would also bring Native Americans back to Europe – some as slaves. Some were taught English so they could become interpreters in future. In 1614, six years before the Pilgrims arrived, 27 natives were seized by a man called Thomas Hunt.

The majority came from Patuxet, the very abandoned village the Pilgrims would later find, and what is now modern-day Plymouth, Massachusetts. Hunt tried to sell the natives as slaves in Spain but one man, named Tisquantum (also known as Squanto), somehow made his way to England, learned English and became an interpreter in future trips to America. Eventually he found his way back to Patuxet, where tragically he found his family and village had been wiped out by disease brought by European settlers and explorers.

Between 1616 and 1619 a mysterious disease that would become known as the ‘Great Dying’ ravaged this region, before the Mayflower laid anchor in Cape Cod. In the winter of 1616-17 an expedition dispatched by Sir Ferdinando Gorges found a region devastated by war and disease, the remaining people so "sore afflicted with the plague, for that the country was in a manner left void of inhabitants."

Two years later another Englishman found “ancient plantations” now completely empty with few inhabitants – and those that had survived were suffering. So before

the Mayflower arrived, this region had greatly suffered from the effects of colonisation.

The first harsh winter

Before settling on what is now Plymouth, the Pilgrims explored other areas of the coast, including an area inhabited by the Nauset people. They saw some figures on the shore who fled when they approached. They explored and found more graves, which they decided not to dig.

They remained ashore overnight but the following morning were attacked with arrows. The colonists shot back with guns but could not find them. That would be the last contact until the spring.

On December 25, 1620, the Pilgrims departed Provincetown and arrived in what is now Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts, on 26th December 1620. This place, once home to the people of Patuxet, would be where they settled and began constructing their first buildings.

The first winter was cold. Many of the passengers stayed on board the Mayflower, which became home to the sick and dying, with many succumbing to a mixture of contagious diseases.

Building the colony

The settlement's first fort and watchtower was built on what is now known as Burial Hill (the area contains the graves of Bradford and other original settlers). The first common house nearly completed in January, built for general use. Each single man was ordered to join himself to one of the 19 families in order to eliminate the need to build more houses than necessary.

Each extended family was assigned a plot and they each built their own home. The settlement was mostly built by February. The first house was built as a hospital. Thirty-one of the company were dead by the end of February, with deaths still rising. Coles Hill became the first cemetery, on a prominence above the beach. Only 47 colonists had survived and at its worst just six or seven were able to feed and care for the rest. In this time, half the *Mayflower* crew also died.

When his crew began to recover from disease, the Mayflower's captain, Christopher Jones, sailed the ship back to England, taking half the time that it did on its outward journey.

The Wampanoag and the Pilgrims

The Pilgrims were settling on land home to the Wampanoag – one of many tribes in the wider region. The Wampanoag had lived here for 10,000 years before they arrived.

Each tribe in New England had their own territory in which to fish, harvest and hunt. The boundaries for hunting were very strict as some areas had large populations.

The Wampanoag people knew how to work with the land and moved between sites to get the best of their harvest. They spent the summer near the shore and the winter in land, amongst the woods.

The Wampanoag worked together - a number of groups united together. A head Sachem managed a Sachem from each of the groups. Within this organisation, family and group links were the most important, connecting them to each other and their territory.

In the years before the Mayflower landed, The Wampanoag had been attacked by neighbouring tribes, losing land along the coast. Then came the Great Dying and the losses were so devastating that the Wampanoag had to reorganise its structure and Sachems had to join together and build new unions.

A historic peace

During March 1621, an English speaking member of the Wampanoag, named Samoset, entered the grounds of the Plymouth colony and introduced himself. He is said to have asked for a beer and spent the night talking with the settlers. Samoset, later, brought another member of his tribe – Tisquantum, whose experience meant his English was much advanced.

Tisquantum taught them to plant corn, which became an important crop, as well as where to fish and hunt beaver. He introduced them to the Wampanoag chief Ousamequin, chief of the Pokanoket people known as Massasoit, an important moment in developing relations.

One of the first to greet him was [Edward Winslow](#), originally from Worcestershire. A leader in the Separatist group and a skillful diplomat, Winslow had not only been instrumental in organising the journey to America, but was also one of the men who signed the historic Mayflower Compact.

The Wampanoag were wary of the nearby Narragansett tribe, who had not been affected by the disease epidemics and remained a powerful tribe. They demanded that the Wampanoag show them honour and tribute. Ousamequin would have known an alliance with these new English colonists might help fend off any attacks from the Narragansett.

In 1621, the Narragansett sent the Plymouth colony a threat of arrows wrapped up in snake skin. William Bradford, who was governor of the colony at the time, filled the snake skin with powder and bullets and sent it back. The Narragansett knew what this message meant, and would not attack the colony.

Ousamequin and The Pilgrims established an historic peace treaty and the Wampanoag went on to teach them how to hunt, plant crops and how to get the best of their harvest, saving them from starvation.

It is believed that Winslow was even able to help nurse Ousamequin back to health when he fell ill, reportedly using his renowned chicken soup and strengthening their relationship further.

The first Thanksgiving

Success followed and following a bumper harvest in the autumn of 1621, the colonists decided to celebrate with a three-day festival of prayer. The 53 surviving settlers invited their Native Americans friends to join them for a huge feast in what was to become known as the first Thanksgiving.

One of two first-hand accounts of this celebration was contained in the book Mourt's Relation, primarily written by Winslow. The book describes in detail what happened from the landing of the Mayflower Pilgrims right through to this celebratory feast.

Winslow's account states:

“Our corn did prove well, and God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn, and our barley indifferent good, but our peas not worth gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun parched them in the blossom. Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruits of our labors; they four in one day killed as much fowl, as with a little help beside, served the company almost a week, at which time amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our Governor, and upon the Captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

Today, the US celebrates Thanksgiving on the fourth Thursday of November.

The impact of colonisation

The repressive church rule in England drove more people to America - another ship arrived in 1621 and two more in 1623.

In 1630, 1,000 Puritans arrived under Governor John Winthrop under a charter by the Massachusetts Bay Company. Winthrop soon established Boston as the capital of Massachusetts Bay Colony, and it would soon grow into the biggest colony in the area.

These Puritans wanted to free themselves of the Church of England and ‘purify’ it from Roman Catholic practices. They arrived under the guise of creating a perfect city – but ended up creating a society just as intolerant. Quakers were persecuted with public hangings and whippings.

Tensions between these colonists and the Native American people rose. The colonists brought more disease to which the Native Americans would have no immunity. Smallpox would ravage communities still recovering from the Great Dying. Violence increased.

By the 1630s, the Native Americans in this region were in the minority in their own lands and wars such as the brutal Pequot War reduced the population significantly.

By 1676 Boston was an economically flourishing town with a population of about 4,000 and had established itself as the dominant force.

King Philip's War

The carefully managed peace that had originated between the Wampanoag and the Plymouth colony was eventually shattered by King Philip's War in 1675.

When Ousamequin died in 1662 his son and heir Metacom no longer believed in the value of the alliance with the colonists. The collapse of trade agreements and the aggressive expansion of the colonies left relations at breaking point.

Tensions were raised when the colonists demanded the peace agreement should mean the Wampanoag hand over any guns, and hung three of the tribe for murder in 1675.

Metacom - who was known as King Philip by the English - led an uprising of Wampanoag, Nipmuck, Pocumtuck and Narragansett tribes. They came up against the biggest army the colonial leaders could muster, that fought in coalition with other tribes. The war is seen as a final attempt to drive out the colonists and lasted 14 months. It is considered the deadliest war in American history.

The colonist army burned villages as they went and by the end of the war, the Wampanoag and their Narragansett allies were almost completely destroyed. Metacom fled to Mount Hope where he was finally killed by the militia.

This war was fought by colonists without support from England or any other European government and is often seen as the moment a new American identity was formed.

The fate of the Plymouth colony

Eventually the likes of Brewster and Winslow went on to found their own communities and the colony began to struggle. The cost of the war did not help and after a colonial governor was appointed to rule over New England in 1692, Plymouth was absorbed into Massachusetts.

The term Pilgrim originated in 1820, when during the 200th commemoration of the colony's landing they were referred to as the Pilgrim Fathers in reference to Bradford's manuscript where he names passengers on the boat from Leiden 'saints' and 'pilgrimes'. The phrase was coined.

Modern Response

The Native American activist group, The United American Indians of New England, continues to raise awareness of racism towards Native Americans and the consequences of colonialism. When the Wampanoag leader, Frank James, was informed that his speech was inappropriate and inflammatory for the annual Thanksgiving ceremony 1970, he refused to read their revised speech.

Supporters followed James to hear him give his original speech on Cole's Hill, next to the statue of Ousamequin. This became the first National Day of Mourning, which continues today in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on the same day as Thanksgiving.