



# THIS DAY IN HISTORY

## STUDY GUIDE



## DEC. 18, 1620: MAYFLOWER ARRIVES IN PLYMOUTH

*Biographies, discussion questions, suggested activities and more*



# THE PILGRIMS

## Setting the Stage

It is widely known that the Pilgrims journeyed to America aboard the Mayflower to escape religious persecution and find a place where they could live freely according to their own beliefs. But the Pilgrims were not the only people aboard the Mayflower. About half of the Mayflower's passengers were entrepreneurs. The Pilgrims had enlisted the help of a group of investors called the London Adventurers, who agreed to fund the journey in return for a sizable share of the colony's future profits. The London Adventurers sent a group of about 70 entrepreneurs with the Pilgrims to help ensure the enterprise's success.

Although the relationship between the Pilgrims and neighboring Native American groups is often depicted as one of feasting and friendship, for the Pilgrims, it was a friendship born of dire necessity. In 1621, the Mayflower returned to England, and its former passengers were left very much on their own. In many ways, they were woefully unprepared for life in the New World. Without help from the Native Americans, particularly their knowledge of what to plant and how to plant it, the residents of Plymouth most likely would have starved to death, and the colony would have ended in utter failure. Instead, it grew to a town of 3,000 people over the next 70 years. Today, some 35 million Americans are thought to be direct descendants of Mayflower passengers.

Cover photo: Embarkation of the Pilgrims. By Robert W. Weir (photograph courtesy Architect of the Capitol) (Architect of the Capitol) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.



# DEC. 18, 1620

# MAYFLOWER ARRIVES

# IN PLYMOUTH



Mayflower in Plymouth Harbor, by William Halsall, 1882

**O**n December 18, 1620, the British ship Mayflower docked at modern-day Plymouth, Massachusetts, and its passengers prepared to begin their new settlement, Plymouth Colony.

The famous Mayflower story began in 1606, when a group of reform-minded Puritans in Nottinghamshire, England, founded their own church, separate from the state-sanctioned Church of England. Accused of treason, they were forced to leave the country and settle in the more tolerant Netherlands. After 12 years of struggling to adapt and make a decent living, the group sought financial backing from some London merchants to set up a colony in America. On September 6, 1620, 102 passengers—dubbed Pilgrims by William Bradford, a passenger who would become the first governor of Plymouth Colony—crowded on the Mayflower to begin the long, hard journey to a new life in the New World.

On November 11, 1620, the Mayflower anchored at what is now Provincetown Harbor, Cape Cod. Before going ashore, 41 male passengers—heads of families, single men and three male servants—signed the famous Mayflower Compact, agreeing to submit to a government chosen by common consent and to obey

all laws made for the good of the colony. Over the next month, several small scouting groups were sent ashore to collect firewood and find a good place to build a settlement. Around December 10, one of these groups found a harbor they liked on the western side of what is now Cape Cod Bay. They returned to the Mayflower to tell the other passengers, but bad weather prevented them from docking there until December 18. After exploring the region, the settlers chose a cleared area previously occupied by members of a local Native American tribe, the Wampanoag. The tribe had abandoned the village several years earlier, after an outbreak of European disease. That winter of 1620-21 was brutal, as the Pilgrims struggled to build their settlement, find food and ward off sickness. By spring, 50 of the original 102 Mayflower passengers were dead. The remaining settlers made contact with returning members of the Wampanoag

tribe and in March they signed a peace treaty with a tribal chief, Massasoit. Aided by the Wampanoag, especially the English-speaking Squanto, the Pilgrims were able to plant crops—especially corn and beans—that were vital to their survival. The Mayflower and its crew left Plymouth to return to England on April 5, 1621.

Over the next several decades, more and more settlers made the trek across the Atlantic to Plymouth, which gradually grew into a prosperous shipbuilding and fishing center. In 1691, Plymouth was incorporated into the new Massachusetts Bay Association, ending its history as an independent colony. □

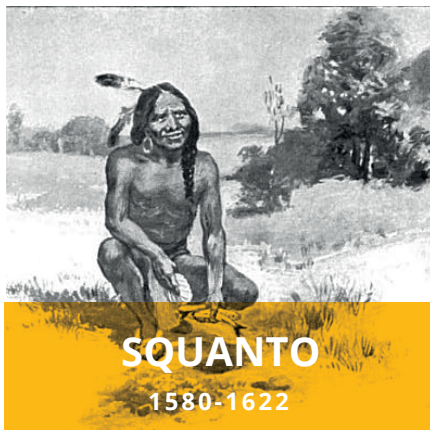
## **DID YOU KNOW?**

**Besieged by frequent storms, it took the Mayflower 66 days to sail across the Atlantic Ocean. This is an average of just 2 miles per hour.**

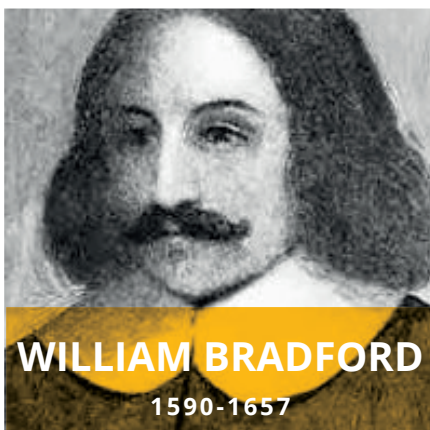
# PEOPLE TO KNOW



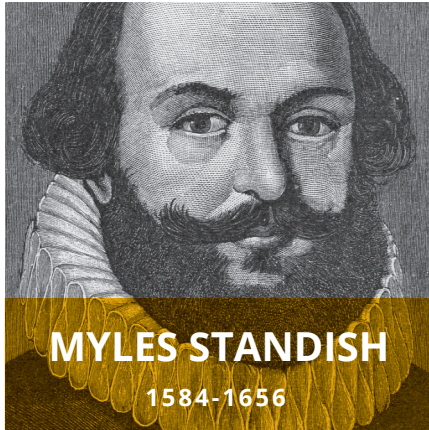
Massasoit was the grand sachem, or inter-tribal chief, of the Wampanoag Indians, who had lived in areas of what is now Massachusetts and Rhode Island for some 10,000 years before the Mayflower arrived. Massasoit and his fellow chief Samoset traveled to Plymouth to meet the colonists in March 1621. Massasoit believed trade with the Pilgrims could be valuable for his people and fostered a friendly relationship with the Pilgrims. This included the April 1621 signing of a peace treaty that lasted for more than 50 years. Massasoit and his people helped teach the Pilgrims skills they needed to be successful in the New World, including farming, fishing and cooking techniques.



Tisquantum, more commonly known as Squanto, was an English-speaking member of the Pawtuxet tribe who was one of the first Native Americans the Pilgrims met after their arrival. Squanto learned English after he was captured by explorer John Smith's expedition in 1614-15. Destined for slavery, he escaped and returned home to find his tribe devastated by plague. Squanto served as an interpreter and mediator between the Pilgrims and Native American leaders, including Massasoit, and helped teach the Pilgrims how to plant and fertilize corn and where to fish and hunt. Late in his life, Squanto unsuccessfully attempted to increase his own power by turning the Pilgrims against Massasoit.



Bradford was the founder and longtime governor of Plymouth colony. Born in England, he migrated with the Separatist congregation to the Netherlands as a teenager. Bradford was among the passengers on the Mayflower, and a signer of the Mayflower Compact. Bradford served as governor of Plymouth for more than 30 years, helping to draft its legal code and build a community based on subsistence agriculture and religious tolerance. Around 1630, he began to compile "Of Plymouth Plantation," an important early chronicle of the settlement of New England.



The British-born Standish had served as a soldier in the Netherlands, where he likely met the British exiles who became the Pilgrims. Standish joined the Pilgrims on their transatlantic journey aboard the Mayflower, and, upon arrival, led the first group of armed men who left the boat to look for a suitable place to establish their settlement. Standish became the military leader of the Plymouth colony and led the Pilgrims in several skirmishes against hostile local tribes. Standish was also instrumental in the 1627 buyout of the London-based investors that had financed the Pilgrims' journey.



# SEE IT



Map of Plymouth Bay



Replica Mayflower II at Plymouth Pier, MA, 2006



Plimoth Plantation living museum

# CONCURRENT EVENTS



## ROANOKE COLONY

The Roanoke Island colony, the first English settlement in the New World, was founded by English explorer Sir Walter Raleigh in August 1585. The first Roanoke colonists did not fare well, suffering from dwindling food supplies and Indian attacks, and in 1586 they returned to England aboard a ship captained by Sir Francis Drake. In 1587, Raleigh sent out another group of 100 colonists under John White. White returned to England to procure more supplies, but was delayed, and by the time he finally returned in August 1590, the colonists had vanished. The word “Croatan” carved into a tree was the only clue to their whereabouts. Archaeologists later used tree-ring data to determine that an extreme drought occurred at Roanoke in 1587-1589, but where the colonists went after they left Roanoke remains a mystery; one theory holds that they were absorbed into the local Croatan Indian tribe.



## JAMESTOWN COLONY

On May 14, 1607, a group of roughly 100 members of a joint venture called the Virginia Company founded the first permanent English settlement in North America on the banks of the James River in what is now Virginia. Famine, disease and conflict with local Native American tribes in the first two years brought Jamestown to the brink of failure before the arrival of a new group of settlers and supplies in 1610. Tobacco became Virginia’s first profitable export, and a period of peace followed the marriage of colonist John Rolfe to Pocahontas, the daughter of an Algonquian chief. During the 1620s, Jamestown expanded to the east; it remained the capital of the Virginia colony until 1699.



## ADVANCEMENTS IN ASTRONOMY

In 1609, German mathematician and astronomer Johannes Kepler published the first two of his three laws of planetary motion, which held that planets moved around the sun in ellipses, not circles (as was widely believed at the time), and that planets speed up as they approach the sun and slow down as they move away. In 1619, he produced his third law, which correlated the time a planet takes to orbit the sun to the average distance of the planet from the sun. Kepler’s research was a key influence on Sir Isaac Newton’s work, including his law of gravitational force. Meanwhile, in 1609, Galileo Galilei, considered the father of modern science, built his first telescope and used it to observe the moons of Jupiter and the rings of Saturn, among other phenomena, for the first time. Galilei also confirmed the Copernican theory that the Earth revolves around the sun, for which he was charged with heresy by the Catholic Church.



# CONCURRENT EVENTS



## DEATH OF SHAKESPEARE

In 1616, William Shakespeare, considered the greatest English-speaking writer in history, died. "The Bard of Avon" wrote at least 37 plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, as well as a collection of sonnets. He has had more theatrical works performed than any other playwright.



## CONSTRUCTION OF THE TAJ MAHAL

Built between 1632 and 1653, the Taj Mahal is a 42-acre white marble mausoleum in Agra, India. It was built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan to house the remains of his favorite wife, Mumtaz Mahal. It is one of the most famous and beautiful structures in the world, and is visited by millions of people each year.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Commemorative stamp released in 1920 to commemorate 300 years since the Mayflower's landing

- 1 The passengers on the Mayflower endured a harrowing journey across an ocean on their way to an unknown land. Why do you think they made this choice? What are some words you would use to describe them?
- 2 What was the Mayflower Compact? Why was it important? In what ways do you think it helped set the stage for subsequent generations of Americans?
- 3 How would you describe the relationship between the new settlers and the Native American groups living in the area prior to their arrival? How do you think you would have responded to the struggling Pilgrims if you had been in the Native Americans' shoes?

# SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES



The First Thanksgiving, 1621 (print, 1912-1915)

## CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

Ask students to imagine they were aboard the Mayflower. Then, ask them to create an era-appropriate persona and write three journal entries in that voice: one before the journey; one as they were midway across the Atlantic; and one after the colony at Plymouth had been established. Motivations; expectations for the journey and the new colony; living conditions aboard the ship and upon arrival; interpersonal relationships; and observations and learnings can all be recorded.

## THE TIES THAT BIND US

Ask students to research the Mayflower Compact and read the full text. Then, have students imagine they were aboard the ship (or a more modern situation, like the first human settlement on Mars) and had to create a similar agreement. Ask students to write their own “compacts” and share them with the larger group.

## BEFORE THEY ARRIVED

The Narragansett and Wampanoag are only two of the hundreds of Native American groups that inhabited North America before the arrival of the Mayflower. In small groups or individually, ask students to research one of these Native American groups and create presentations exploring their history and customs.



# RESOURCES

**Text: Mayflower Compact**

[http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/mayflower\\_compact\\_text.htm](http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/mayflower_compact_text.htm)

**Text: List of passengers aboard the Mayflower**

[http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/list\\_passengers.htm](http://www.pilgrimhallmuseum.org/list_passengers.htm)

**Video: Deconstructing History: The Mayflower**

<http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower/videos/mayflower-myths>

**Video: The Pilgrims in America**

<http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower/videos/the-pilgrims>

**Video: The History of Thanksgiving**

<http://www.history.com/topics/mayflower/videos/history-of-thanksgiving>