

THE MAYFLOWER

This article is provided courtesy of History.com

In September 1620, a merchant ship called the Mayflower set sail from Plymouth, a port on the southern coast of England. Typically, the Mayflower's cargo was wine and dry goods, but on this trip the ship carried passengers: 102 of them, all hoping to start a new life on the other side of the Atlantic. Nearly 40 of these passengers were Protestant Separatists—they called themselves “Saints”—who hoped to establish a new church in the New World. Today, we often refer to the colonists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower as “Pilgrims.”

PILGRIMS BEFORE THE MAYFLOWER

In 1608, a congregation of disgruntled English Protestants from the village of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire, left England and moved to Leyden, a town in Holland. These “Separatists” did not want to pledge allegiance to the Church of England, which they believed was nearly as corrupt and idolatrous as the Catholic Church it had replaced, any longer. (They were not the same as the Puritans, who had many of the same objections to the English church but wanted to reform it from within.) The Separatists hoped that in Holland, they would be free to worship as they liked.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Separatists who founded the Plymouth Colony referred to themselves as “Saints,” not “Pilgrims.” The use of the word “Pilgrim” to describe this group did not become common until the colony's bicentennial.

In fact, the Separatists (they called themselves “Saints”) did find religious freedom in Holland, but they also found a secular life that was more difficult to navigate than they'd anticipated. For one thing, Dutch craft guilds excluded the migrants, so they were relegated to menial, low-paying jobs. Even worse was Holland's easygoing, cosmopolitan atmosphere, which proved alarmingly seductive to some of the Saints' children. (These young people were “drawn away,” Separatist leader William Bradford wrote, “by evill [sic] example into extravagance and dangerous courses.”) For the strict, devout Separatists, this was the last straw. They decided to move again, this time to a place without government interference or worldly distraction: the “New World” across the Atlantic Ocean.

THE MAYFLOWER

First, the Separatists returned to London to get organized. A prominent merchant agreed to advance the money for their journey. The Virginia Company gave them permission to establish a settlement, or “plantation,” on the East Coast between 38 and 41 degrees north latitude (roughly between the Chesapeake Bay and the mouth of the Hudson River). And the King of England gave them permission to leave the Church of England, “provided they carried themselves peaceably.”

In August 1620, a group of about 40 Saints joined a much larger group of (comparatively) secular colonists—“Strangers,” to the Saints—and set sail from England on two merchant ships: the Mayflower and the Speedwell. The Speedwell began to leak almost immediately, however, and the ships headed back to port. The travelers squeezed themselves and their belongings onto the Mayflower and set sail once again.

Because of the delay caused by the leaky Speedwell, the Mayflower had to cross the Atlantic at the height of storm season. As a result, the journey was horribly unpleasant. Many of the passengers were so seasick they could scarcely get up, and the waves were so rough that one “Stranger” was swept overboard and drowned. (It was “the just hand of God upon him,” Bradford wrote later, for the young sailor had been “a proud and very profane yonge man.”)

THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT

After two miserable months at sea, the ship finally reached the New World. There, the Mayflower’s passengers found an abandoned Indian village and not much else. They also found that they were in the wrong place: Cape Cod was located at 42 degrees north latitude, well north of the Virginia Company’s territory. Technically, the Mayflower colonists had no right to be there at all. In order to establish themselves as a legitimate colony (“Plymouth,” named after the English port from which they had departed) under these dubious circumstances, 41 of the Saints and Strangers drafted and signed a document they called the Mayflower Compact. This Compact promised to create a “civil Body Politick” governed by elected officials and “just and equal laws.” It also swore allegiance to the English king.

PLYMOUTH COLONY AND THE FIRST THANKSGIVING

The colonists spent the first winter, which only 53 passengers and half the crew survived, living onboard the Mayflower. (The Mayflower sailed back to England in April 1621.) Once they moved ashore, the colonists faced

even more challenges. During their first winter in America, more than half of the Plymouth colonists died from malnutrition, disease and exposure to the harsh New England weather. In fact, without the help of the area's native people, it is likely that none of the colonists would have survived. An English-speaking Pawtuxet named Samoset helped the colonists form an alliance with the local Wampanoags, who taught them how to hunt local animals, gather shellfish and grow corn, beans and squash. At the end of the next summer, the Plymouth colonists celebrated their first successful harvest with a three-day festival of thanksgiving. We still commemorate this feast today.

Eventually, the Plymouth colonists were absorbed into the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony. Still, the Mayflower Saints and their descendants remained convinced that they alone had been specially chosen by God to act as a beacon for Christians around the world. "As one small candle may light a thousand," Bradford wrote, "so the light here kindled hath shone to many, yea in some sort to our whole nation."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who were the "Saints?"

- A secular colonists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower
- B Protestant Separatists who crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower
- C Americans who greeted the Pilgrims as they arrived in Cape Cod
- D Dutch craftsmen who came to America on a merchant ship

2. For the Saints, coming to America was a solution to a problem. What main problem did the Saints face in England and Holland?

- A They were given too much power, leading to corruption and instability within their religion.
- B They were given low-paying, menial jobs in both countries because of their religious beliefs.
- C They could not practice their religion without government interference or social distraction.
- D They could not handle the harsh weather there, and suffered from malnutrition and disease.

3. "In fact, without the help of the area's native people, it is likely that none of the colonists would have survived."

What evidence from the text best supports this statement?

- A "After two miserable months at sea, the ship finally reached the New World. There, the Mayflower's passengers found an abandoned Indian village and not much else."
- B "Many of the passengers [on the Mayflower] were so seasick they could scarcely get up, and the waves were so rough that one "Stranger" was swept overboard and drowned."
- C "At the end of the next summer, the Plymouth colonists celebrated their first successful harvest with a three-day festival of thanksgiving. We still commemorate this feast today."
- D "An English-speaking Pawtuxet named Samoset helped the colonists form an alliance with the local Wampanoags, who taught them how to hunt local animals, gather shellfish and grow corn, beans and squash."

4. The Saints were strict and devoutly religious. How else could the Saints be described based on the information in the article?

- A determined
- B relaxed
- C powerful
- D physically strong

5. What is the main idea of this article?

- A The Mayflower crossed the Atlantic Ocean at the height of storm season, resulting in a horribly unpleasant journey for the "Saints" and "Strangers."
- B The Saints came to New England to practice their religion freely, overcoming challenges both on their journey and in America.
- C Although the colonists who came to America on the Mayflower called themselves "Saints," today they are often called "Pilgrims."
- D The native people helped the colonists survive by showing them how to hunt animals, gather shellfish, and grow crops.

6. Read these sentences from the text.

"In fact, the Separatists (they called themselves "Saints") did find religious freedom in Holland, but they also found a secular life that was more difficult to navigate than they'd anticipated. For one thing, Dutch craft guilds excluded the migrants, so they were relegated to menial, low-paying jobs. Even worse was Holland's easygoing, cosmopolitan atmosphere, which proved alarmingly seductive to some of the Saints' children."

Based on these sentences, what does the word "secular" most nearly mean?

- A political
- B free
- C attractive
- D nonreligious

7. Read these sentences from the text. Choose the answer that best completes the last sentence.

The colonists spent the first winter, which only 53 passengers and half the crew survived, living onboard the Mayflower. (The Mayflower sailed back to England in April 1621.) Once they moved ashore, the colonists faced even more challenges. _____, during their first winter in America, more than half of the Plymouth colonists died from malnutrition, disease and exposure to the harsh New England weather.

- A Consequently
- B For example
- C On the contrary
- D However

8. Why did the Protestant Separatists not want to pledge their loyalty to the Church of England?

9. Why did the Protestant Separatists, or "Saints," decide to move to the New World?

10. Read these sentences from the text.

“Still, the Mayflower Saints and their descendants remained convinced that they alone had been specially chosen by God to act as a beacon for Christians around the world. ‘As one small candle may light a thousand,’ Bradford wrote, ‘so the light here kindled hath shone to many, yea in some sort to our whole nation.’”

What might Separatist leader William Bradford have meant by this quote? Support your answer using evidence from the text.
