The Pilgrims and Puritans come to America to avoid religious persecution.

BUILDING BACKGROUND England’s first successful colonial settlements were in Virginia. They were started mainly as business ventures. Other colonists in North America had many different reasons for leaving their homes. Many, like the Pilgrims and Puritans, came to have freedom to practice their religious beliefs.

Pilgrims and Puritans

Religious tensions in England remained high after the Protestant Reformation. A Protestant group called the Puritans wanted to purify, or reform, the Anglican Church. The Puritans thought that bishops and priests had too much power over church members.

Pilgrims on the Move

The most extreme English Protestants wanted to separate from the Church of England. These Separatists formed their own churches and cut all ties with the Church of England. In response, Anglican leaders began to punish Separatists. The Pilgrims were one Separatist group that left England in the early 1600s to escape persecution. The Pilgrims moved to the Netherlands in 1608. The Pilgrims were immigrants—people who have left the country of their birth to live in another country.

The Pilgrims were glad to be able to practice their religion freely. They were not happy, however, that their children were learning the Dutch language and culture. The Pilgrims feared that their children would forget their English traditions. The Pilgrims decided to leave Europe altogether. They formed a joint-stock company with some merchants and then received permission from England to settle in Virginia.

On September 16, 1620, a ship called the Mayflower left England with more than 100 men, women, and children aboard. Not all of these colonists were Pilgrims. However, Pilgrim leaders such as William Bradford sailed with the group.

The Mayflower Compact

After two months of rough ocean travel, the Pilgrims sighted land far north of Virginia. The Pilgrims knew that they would thus be outside the authority of Virginia’s colonial government when they landed. Their charter would not apply. So, they decided to establish their own basic laws and social rules to govern the colony they would found.

On November 21, 1620, 41 of the male passengers on the ship signed the Mayflower Compact, a legal contract in which they agreed to have fair laws to protect the general good. The Compact represents one of the first attempts at self-government in the English colonies.

In late 1620 the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in present-day Massachusetts. The colonists struggled through the winter to build the Plymouth settlement. Nearly half of the tired Pilgrims died during this first winter from sickness and the freezing weather.

Pilgrims and Native Americans
In March 1621 a Native American named Samoset walked boldly into the colonists’ settlement. He spoke in broken English. Samoset had learned some English from the crews of English fishing boats. He gave the Pilgrims useful information about the peoples and places of the area. He also introduced them to a Patuxet Indian named Squanto. Squanto had at one time lived in Europe and spoke English as well.

From Squanto the Pilgrims learned to fertilize the soil with fish remains. Squanto also helped the Pilgrims establish relations with the local Wampanoag Indians. Conditions in the Plymouth colony began to improve.

The Pilgrims invited Wampanoag chief Massasoit and 90 other guests to celebrate their harvest. This feast became known as the first Thanksgiving. For the event, the Pilgrims killed wild turkeys. This event marked the survival of the Pilgrims in the new colony.

**Pilgrim Community**

Although the Pilgrims overcame many problems, their small settlement still struggled. Most Pilgrims became farmers, but the farmland around their settlement was poor. They had hoped to make money by trading furs and by fishing. Unfortunately, fishing and hunting conditions were not good in the area. Some colonists traded corn with American Indians for beaver furs. The Pilgrims made little money but were able to form a strong community. The colony began to grow stronger in the mid-1620s after new settlers arrived and, as in Jamestown, colonists began to have more rights to farm their own land.

The Pilgrims’ settlement was different from Virginia’s in that it had many families. The Pilgrims taught their children to read and offered some education to their indentured servants. Families served as centers of religious life, health care, and community well-being.

All family members worked together to survive during the early years of the colony. Women generally cooked, spun and wove wool, and sewed clothing. They also made soap and butter, carried water, dried fruit, and cared for livestock. Men spent most of their time repairing tools and working in the fields. They also chopped wood and built shelters.

**Women in the Colony**

In Plymouth, women had more legal rights than they did in England. In England women were not allowed to make contracts, to sue, or to own property. In America, Pilgrim women had the right to sign contracts and to bring some cases before local courts. Widows could also own property.

From time to time, local courts recognized the ways women helped the business community. Widow Naomi Silvester received a large share of her husband’s estate. The court called her “a frugal [thrifty] and laborious [hardworking] woman.”

**Puritans Leave England**

During the 1620s England’s economy suffered. Many people lost their jobs. The English king, Charles I, made the situation worse by raising taxes. This unpopular act led to a political crisis. At the same time, the Church of England began to punish
Puritans because they were dissenters, or people who disagree with official opinions. King Charles refused to allow Puritans to criticize church actions.

Great Migration

These economic, political, and religious problems in England led to the Great Migration. Between 1629 and 1640 many thousands of English men, women, and children left England. More than 40,000 of these people moved to English colonies in New England and the Caribbean. In 1629, Charles granted a group of Puritans and merchants a charter to settle in New England. They formed the Massachusetts Bay Company.

In 1630 a fleet of ships carrying Puritan colonists left England for Massachusetts to seek religious freedom. They were led by John Winthrop. The Puritans believed that they had made a covenant, or promise, with God to build an ideal Christian community.

A New Colony

The Puritans arrived in New England well prepared to start their colony. They brought large amounts of tools and livestock with them. Like the Pilgrims, the Puritans faced little resistance from local American Indians. Trade with the Plymouth colony helped them too. In addition, the region around Boston had a fairly healthful climate. Thus, few Puritans died from sickness. All of these things helped the Massachusetts Bay Colony do well. By 1691, the Massachusetts Bay Colony had expanded to include the Pilgrims’ Plymouth Colony.

Religion and Government in New England

Massachusetts Bay Colony had to obey English laws. However, its charter provided more independence than did the royal charter of Virginia. For example, it created a General Court to help run the Massachusetts colony.

The Puritan colonists turned this court into a type of self-government to represent the needs of the people. Each town sent two or three delegates to the Court. After John Winthrop served as the colony’s first governor, the General Court elected the governor and his assistants. In 1644 the General Court became a two-house, or bicameral, legislature.

Politics and religion were closely linked in Puritan New England. Government leaders were also church members, and ministers often had a great deal of power in Puritan communities. Male church members were the only colonists who could vote. Colonists became full members in the church by becoming what the Puritans called God’s “elect,” or chosen. Reaching this status was a difficult process. Individuals had to pass a public test to prove that their faith was strong.

Perhaps the worst community conflicts in New England involved the witchcraft trials of the early 1690s. The largest number of trials were held in Salem, Massachusetts. In Salem a group of girls had accused people of casting spells on them. The community formed a special court to judge the witchcraft cases. The court often pressured the suspected witches to confess. Before the trials had ended, the Salem witch trials led to 19 people being put to death.
New England Economy

Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island were very different from the southern colonies. The often harsh climate and rocky soil meant that few New England farms could grow cash crops. Most farming families grew crops and raised animals for their own use. There was thus little demand for farm laborers. Although some people held slaves, slavery did not become as important to this region.

Merchants

Trade was vital to New England’s economy. New England merchants traded goods locally, with other colonies, and overseas. Many of them traded local products such as furs, pickled beef, and pork. Many merchants grew in power and wealth, becoming leading members of the New England colonies.

Fishing

Fishing became one of the region’s leading industries. The rich waters off New England’s coast served as home to many fish, including cod, mackerel, and halibut. The Impact Today Merchants exported dried fish. Colonists also began hunting for whales that swam close to shore. Whales were captured with harpoons, or spears, and dragged to shore. Whaling provided valuable oil for lighting.

Shipbuilding

Shipbuilding became an important industry in New England for several reasons. The area had plenty of forests that provided materials for shipbuilding. As trade—particularly in slaves—in the New England seaports grew, more merchant ships were built. The fishing industry also needed ships. New England shipyards made high-quality, valuable vessels. Ship owners sometimes even told their captains to sell the ship along with the cargo when they reached their destination.

Skilled Craftspeople

The northern economy needed skilled craftspeople. Families often sent younger sons to learn skilled trades such as blacksmithing, weaving, shipbuilding, and printing. The young boys who learned skilled trades were known as apprentices.

Apprentices lived with a master craftsman and learned from him. In exchange, the boys performed simple tasks. Apprentices had to promise the craftsmen that they would work for them for a set number of years. They learned trades that were essential to the survival of the colonies. Apprentices received food and often clothing from the craftsmen. Gabriel Ginings was an apprentice in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. He received “sufficient food and raiment [clothing] suitable for such an apprentice,” as his 1663 contract stated.

After a certain amount of time had passed, apprentices became journeymen. They usually traveled and learned new skills in their trade. Eventually they would become a master of the trade themselves.
Education in the Colonies

Education was important in colonial New England. Mothers and fathers wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. The Massachusetts Bay Colony passed some of the first laws requiring parents to provide instruction for their children.

Public Education

To be sure that future generations would have educated ministers, communities established town schools. In 1647 the General Court of Massachusetts issued an order that a school be founded in every township of 50 families. Schoolchildren often used the New England Primer, which had characters and stories from the Bible. They learned to read at the same time that they learned about the community’s religious values.

The availability of schooling varied in the colonies. There were more schools in New England than in the other colonies where most children lived far from towns. These children had to be taught by their parents or by private tutors. Most colonial children stopped their education after the elementary grades. Many went to work, either on their family farm or away from home.

Higher Education

Higher education was also important to the colonists. In 1636 John Harvard and the General Court founded Harvard College. Harvard taught ministers and met the colony’s need for higher education. The second college founded in the colonies, William and Mary, was established in Virginia in 1693.

By 1700 about 70 percent of men and 45 percent of women in New England could read and write. These figures were much lower in Virginia, where Jamestown was the only major settlement.