

Topic Page: [Pilgrims \(New Plymouth Colony\)](#)

Definition: **Pilgrims** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(Pilgrim Fathers) Group of English Puritans who emigrated to North America in 1620. After fleeing to Leiden, Netherlands, in 1608, seeking refuge from persecution in England, they decided to look for greater religious freedom by founding a religious society in America. They sailed from Plymouth, England, on the Mayflower and founded the Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts.

Summary Article: **Pilgrims**

From *Encyclopedia of American Studies*

The Pilgrims were English settlers, members of a Separatist sect, who emigrated to New England in 1620 in search of the opportunity to practice their religion without persecution. England had been in religious turmoil for years. Henry VIII challenged the Pope's authority and broke with Rome in the 1530s, assuming the role of head of the church. The monarchs who followed Henry also reigned over the official church, but they embraced, successively, Protestantism, Catholicism under Rome, and then Henry's Anglican doctrine again. Each change of direction by the crown brought with it persecution, including imprisonment, hanging, and burning at the stake, of leaders of the religious groups not then in favor. It was in this climate that several hundred Separatists moved to Holland around 1600. After nearly twenty years there, however, these refugees feared they were losing their English identities, and they petitioned the crown for a place to settle in the New World.

A group of 104, mostly members of this sect but also a few soldiers and adventurers, arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts, aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620. Just before landing all the men aboard agreed to the Mayflower Compact, a document that set forth a plan of government for the new colony. They suffered through a harsh first winter, during which nearly half the party died. The settlement became established, however, and grew slowly for about seventy years. In 1692 the Plymouth colony was absorbed into the larger (and expanding) Massachusetts Bay Colony, which the Puritans had established in Boston in 1630.

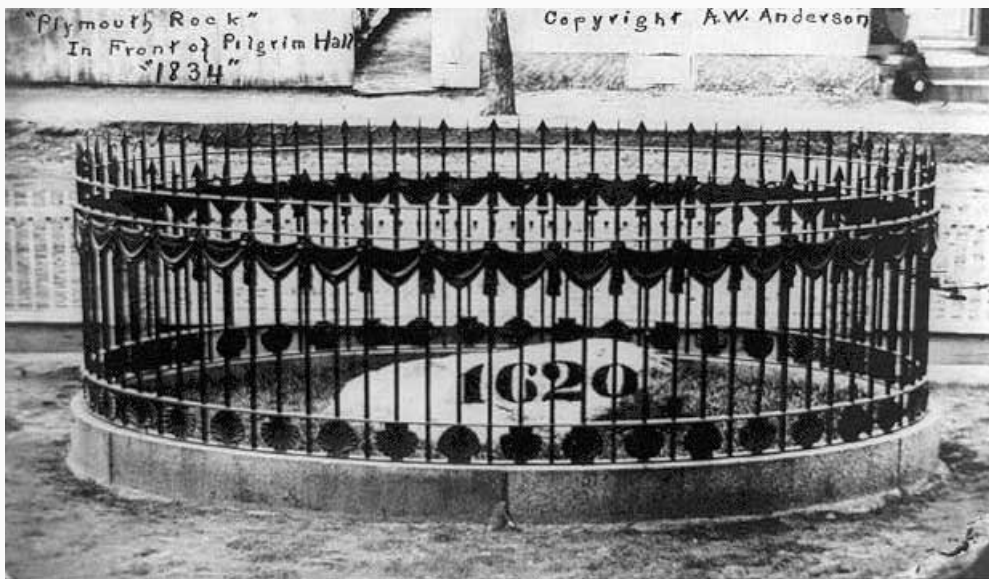
The legend of the Pilgrims, and their role in American history, began to grow in detail and in importance in the years leading up to the Revolution. Annual observances in Plymouth of the Pilgrims' landing probably began in 1769, with religious ceremonies and the telling of the stories of the Pilgrims leaving England to seek religious freedom. The Mayflower Compact, which had been crafted to assure the authority of the Pilgrim majority over the other members of the original party, was exalted as evidence of the right of self-rule. In the early 1770s the Sons of Liberty used the stories of the Pilgrims' struggles to justify resistance to the British taxes and restrictions on trade. In this vein the Plymouth "Liberty Boys" in 1774 moved a large rock (later called Plymouth Rock) from a muddy bed in the harbor to a place of honor in the main town square. (It was moved again, in 1834, to a location near the beach.)

A second period of legend-building began in the 1830s and continued until the Civil War. The Abolitionists used the stories of the Pilgrims' moral propriety and their struggle for freedom in sermons and speeches whenever they could. The heroism of the Pilgrims was also the subject of poetry and painting during this period.

Thanksgiving Day as it is now known is a recent invention. The Pilgrims may have had a feast with the

Indians in 1621, but there is no record of their doing it thereafter. Thanksgiving (spelled with a small t) was an occasional day of prayer proclaimed by colonial and then, later, state governors at various times of the year. The New England states began the practice, in the early 1800s, of an annual day of thanksgiving in the fall, but the observance was never connected to the Pilgrims.

In 1863 a magazine editor's persistent requests finally persuaded Abraham Lincoln to proclaim a New England—style national day of thanksgiving to celebrate Union victories in the Civil War. Later presidents annually declared such days thereafter, and the tradition caught on, at least in the North. The association with the Pilgrims developed long after the Civil War. As the New England states prepared for elaborate commemorations of the 250th anniversary of the Pilgrims' landing, they tied those plans to the new national day of thanksgiving. This notion, turning the focus away from the Civil War battles, gave Southerners an acceptable reason for the observance of a Thanksgiving Day and contributed to its nationwide appeal. In 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed that the fourth Thursday of November was to be fixed as the day for this holiday.



Plymouth Rock, in front of Pilgrim Hall, "1834". c.1909. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Landing of the Pilgrims, engraving. 1877. Alfred Bobbett, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



The Pilgrims signing the compact, onboard the Mayflower, engraving. c.1859. Gauthier, after painting by T.H. Matteson. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Thanksgiving scene in ye old Plymouth colony, cartoon. c.1912. Ehrhart, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



Landing of the Pilgrims. Engraving by J. Andrews, 1869, after P. F. Rothermel. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



The Departure of the Pilgrim Fathers for America A.D. 1620. John Burnet, artist. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



The Mayflower in Plymouth Harbor. 1882. Print of a painting by William Fornby Halsall. Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

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Eli Bortman

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