

Definition: **Plymouth Colony** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

First colonial settlement in New England (1620). The settlers were a group of c.100 Puritan Separatist Pilgrims, who sailed on the *Mayflower* and settled on what is now Cape Cod bay, Massachusetts. They named the first town after their port of departure. Lacking a royal charter, government was established by the 'Mayflower Compact'. During the first winter nearly half of them died. Plymouth Colony became part of the province of Massachusetts in 1691.

Summary Article: **PLYMOUTH COLONY**

From *Encyclopedia of U.S. Political History*

Plymouth Colony was the second permanent English settlement in North America, after Jamestown. Settled just north of Cape Cod in 1620, the colony was founded by Separatists seeking to avoid religious persecution in England. An early triumph of self-governance, the colony set an example that beckoned others across the Atlantic. Although Plymouth's brief history as a political entity ended in 1691, when it was absorbed by Massachusetts, its early years generated several stories that have long persisted in American memory. To a great extent, American cultural and political identity took root in Plymouth.

"First Foundations" of Government

Plymouth was founded mainly by a group of ardent English Protestants, those we have come to know as Pilgrims. The members of this group, it is important to note, were Separatists: unlike the Puritans who came to America a decade later, Plymouth's founders believed in complete separation from the Church of England. They first sought that separation in Holland and ultimately decided to emigrate to America. Still, those who traveled aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620 were not all members of this committed Separatist congregation. Some were adventurers looking for profit, others servants in search of a livelihood. Before the *Mayflower* landed, in fact, the presence of these "strangers" led to the signing of one of American history's most famous political documents.

Much of Plymouth's fame derives from the signing of this "Mayflower Compact." A brief agreement to submit to common government, the compact was endorsed by 41 of the vessel's male passengers. Although now remembered as one of the most influential texts in American political history, the compact was an unplanned and ultimately temporary solution to circumstances that arose aboard the *Mayflower*. In November 1620, those aboard spotted land—and realized that the ship was well north of the Virginia Company patent's territory, where the group had been given leave to plant a colony. When leaders nonetheless decided to land at Cape Cod, several of the "strangers" threatened to mutiny. They claimed that the colony would have no legal foundation in this northern territory, outside of the patent, and that they were therefore not obliged to obey any laws that might be enacted by its leaders. In order to tamp down this threat of disobedience, the *Mayflower's* men hastily drafted a brief compact, in which signatories committed themselves to enter into a "body politic" and submit to laws agreed on by the whole.

This compact was an improvisation, never intended as permanent law. But Plymouth's longtime governor William Bradford later identified it as the colony's "first foundation" of government, and

generations of Americans have since done the same. (Bradford 75)

Early Political Culture

Plymouth has often been described as an early locus of American democracy. Nineteenth-century Americans even hailed the Mayflower Compact as a precursor to the U.S. Constitution. In fact, the trend in Plymouth Colony seems to have been toward a *contraction* of political citizenship. Earliest Plymouth, it is true, did witness broad political participation. In Plymouth, unlike in Massachusetts Bay, freemen were not required to be church members (to prove their status as God's "elect") in order to enjoy the franchise or to hold office. Widespread involvement in the political life of the colony was also encouraged by the fact that in the settlement's early years, all colonists were stockholders in the company that had financed the colony and therefore had an economic stake in its success. Loose restrictions on political citizenship probably also reflected the necessity of finding consensus during the colony's vulnerable early years.

In the latter half of the seventeenth century, new restrictions were placed on political participation. Quakers, whom Plymouth's leaders saw as a scourge, were barred entirely from political rights. In 1672, moreover, Plymouth for the first time placed a property requirement on the right to vote—£20 ratable estate. To some degree, these developments reflected Plymouth's demographic and geographic growth, which spurred leaders to think twice about who might be granted a political voice. The colony was indeed growing, although it was largely overshadowed by the much larger Massachusetts Bay colony to its north. But this growth led, in the mid-1670s, to the end of a long peace with nearby American Indians.

King Philip's War

In 1675, Plymouth witnessed the beginning of New England's most destructive Indian war, King Philip's War. The conflict, which began in June, took its name from the man the English colonists saw as its leader, a Wampanoag sachem whom they called "King Philip." (To Wampanoags, he was Metacom.) Though its origins were in English-Indian tensions at Plymouth, the violence soon spread over much of New England. It eventually involved virtually all of the colonies and several other native groups, including the Nipmuck and the Narragansett. When the war sputtered to an end in late 1676, following Philip's death, New England was much changed. Many scholars see the war as a watershed that ended any possibility of peaceful coexistence between native people and English colonists.

Decades earlier, Plymouth's first leaders had been careful to cultivate alliances with neighboring Indians. But by the 1670s, pressures on Indian land and culture made balanced diplomacy increasingly difficult to maintain. Philip's people in particular had experienced an acute strain on their resources, aggravated both by expanding English settlement and by roving livestock that continually ransacked their cornfields. Philip also felt the pinch of American Indians' conversions to Christianity, which had begun to undermine his own authority. Because of these tensions, Plymouth's authorities had for years suspected that Philip was planning some sort of attack; in 1671, they even went as far as disarming him. The war was ultimately sparked when a Christian Indian named John Sassamon, who had warned colonists of King Philip's plans, was found dead. Plymouth responded to his death by trying and executing three Wampanoag men for the murder. It was an outcome that enraged some of Philip's followers and precipitated the earliest attacks.

Few scholars disagree about the war's effects. For both English and native communities, King Philip's

War was devastating. At least four thousand people died, three-quarters of them Indians. The war also destroyed many English towns. Nearly half of Plymouth's towns suffered severe damage; three were abandoned altogether. The conflict also caused English colonists to question God's approval of the colonial project in New England. It was widely interpreted as a glaring sign of divine disapproval, perhaps provoked by a decline in faith among New Englanders. But if the war claimed English lives, property, and faith, it took a far greater toll on the region's Indians. Some of those who survived were sold into slavery. Others remained in New England, on ever-dwindling patches of land. Ultimately, King Philip's War was the final episode of native resistance to the onslaught of colonial settlement in the region.

It was also a moment when American identity began to crystallize around the characterization of American Indians as inhuman, barbaric, and fundamentally "other." Even decades later, Philip's skull remained on display atop a post in Plymouth—a gruesome reminder, to English spectators, of his "savagery."

Myth and Memory

Plymouth Colony ceased to exist long before the end of the colonial period. It was subsumed by Massachusetts Bay colony in 1691, when the English monarch issued a new royal charter. Despite this undramatic ending, Plymouth went on to achieve significant fame and commemoration. As the Revolution approached and the new nation subsequently searched for an identity apart from Britain, Plymouth was increasingly celebrated as the site of American origins. (Though it was not, in fact, the place where English colonization had begun in North America, its history was far less turbulent than Jamestown's and therefore more appealing.) During the Revolutionary period, a veritable mythology began to form around the story of Plymouth's "Pilgrims."

RELATED ENTRIES

This Volume

Bradford, William; Dominion of New England; King Philip's War; Mayflower Compact; New England Confederation

It was during this period, for instance, that Plymouth Rock—the rock upon which Plymouth's migrants reputedly first set foot when they disembarked from the *Mayflower*—gained notice. In the late 1760s, a group of young men from Plymouth founded the Old Colony Club, a social group aimed at celebrating the colony's history. This club first began to commemorate the mythical landing. Evidence that the Pilgrims actually landed at this rock was (and is) fairly thin: it rested on a tale that, in 1741, a 95-year-old man had asked to take a final glimpse of the rock, having heard from his father that the earliest English migrants had landed there. Apart from this, no evidence has survived to suggest the spot was significant. But the Old Colony Club helped give America its own unique creation story, at a time when the Stamp Act crisis had only recently erupted in Massachusetts and the Boston Tea Party was just a few years away.

Only after the American Revolution, however, did Plymouth's Pilgrims reach the level of national mythology. As members of the new nation searched for a unique cultural and political identity, apart from Britain's, the settling of Plymouth Colony provided a focal point for national pride. To many citizens of the new republic, the Pilgrims seemed to embody values that all Americans could endorse:

hard work, perseverance, faith. New Englanders took special pride in celebrating "Forefathers' Day," an early forerunner—according to the historical archaeologist James Deetz—of Thanksgiving. Beginning in 1820, the Whig statesman Daniel Webster gave several addresses venerating the "Pilgrim Fathers." These early national commemorations secured Plymouth's place in American memory.

One Small Candle

When Plymouth's most famous governor, William Bradford, wrote his seventeenth-century history *Of Plimoth Plantation*, he imagined the colony as a small step toward "greater things." "[A]s one small candle may light a thousand," he wrote, "so the light here kindled hath shone unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation." (Bradford 236) Although what Bradford meant by "our whole nation" is not clear, he certainly did not foresee anything like the United States of America. Still, the infant American nation took Bradford's words to heart. Early citizens did view Plymouth Colony as the "small candle" of nationhood, and they celebrated its memory as such.

For years, historians also followed this pattern. They looked to New England as the ideal place to study America's colonial past. But in recent decades Plymouth has begun to lose its grip on early American history. Historians have now begun to focus more intensively on other regions of colonization, such as the Chesapeake and the Caribbean. No longer do they necessarily see Plymouth Colony as the place where American history began.

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