The Pilgrims

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a time of religious struggle in England. The rulers wanted their subjects to follow the established church, but some people held different beliefs. One such group, referred to as “Separatists,” held secret meetings, but they grew afraid when some of their members were put in prison. They left England for Holland, but they could not settle comfortably among the Dutch. As time passed, they heard stories of a settlement in North America called Virginia. This New World promised land, economic opportunity and, most importantly, the hope of religious freedom.

An agreement was made with a group of London businessmen that the settlers would receive passage and supplies for sending the London Company fish, fur, and lumber for seven years. The Separatists in Holland bought a ship, the Speedwell. Those in London hired another ship, the Mayflower. Many Separatists were left behind with the hope of making the crossing later because the ships were too small to take them all.

Both ships set sail from Southampton, England, but twice the leaky Speedwell had to turn back. Each time the Mayflower followed her, but finally, on September 6, 1620, the Mayflower alone departed from Plymouth, England on her historic voyage.

Of the one hundred and two passengers crowded into the damp quarters, forty-four (19 men, 11 women, and 14 children) were Separatists. The others had been recruited by the London Company. Referred as “Strangers,” they did not entirely share the Separatists’ religious beliefs, but they did share a desire for a new life in a new land. These included Myles Standish, a professional soldier hired as the commander of the Separatists’ militia. There were also some hens, goats, and two dogs.

Noise was a constant companion — timbers creaked, sails and rigging flapped, rats scratched, and bilge water gurgled. At night, some ninety people slept in the area known as “tween decks” — most on straw mattresses on the hard floor. The stuffy space was also cluttered with chests, barrels of provisions, and building equipment. There was not a place on board where there was silence or solitude.

The overcrowding taxed everyone and tensions ran high between the passengers and the sailors. The crew resented the Separatists’ daily Psalm-singing and prayers, while the Pilgrims disliked the sailors’ swearing. The pitch and roll of rough waves made seasickness a constant problem. For those passengers not too seasick to eat, most meals were simple — salted meat or fish and hard, dry ship’s biscuits. There were also dried peas and beans, dried fruits, cheese and butter. The food was washed down with beer, which even the children drank. Lice, boredom, homesickness, and fear added to the misery. During the journey, a servant to the group’s doctor died a fever and was buried at sea. A boy was born and named “Oceanus.”

The weather ranged from fair and gentle to raging storms. During one storm, the ship’s main beam cracked. Some thought all was lost, but the ship rode out the storm, and the beam was repaired with an iron screw that had been brought for house-building. In the course of another
storm, a passenger fell overboard, but managed to catch hold of a rope that was trailing in the water and was hauled back to safety. So on November 11, 1620, it was a weary group that heard the first cries of “Land ho!” and crowded the railing for a look at their new home. They had been at sea for sixty-six days.

From the ship, the passengers gazed at the bleak landscape. Some of the sailors muttered that the place was filled with wild beasts and wild men, called “Indians”.

Because they had landed so far from their intended goal, Virginia, the Strangers felt that they did not have to honor their agreement with the London merchants. But the Separatists argued that they should proceed as they had planned. Ultimately, the Strangers agreed, and together the two groups drafted an agreement known as the “Mayflower Compact,” which set out the principles that would govern their settlement. From this point, the groups became so intermingled that they became known as “Pilgrims.”

The first exploring party left the ship on November 11th to replenish their dwindling supplies of wood and water, and they marveled at the abundance to be found in their new homeland. On Monday, November 13th, a landing was made to repair the shallop (a small boat used for exploring). While the men repaired the boat, the women washed clothes. Since there had been little chance to do more than rinse in salt water on the Mayflower, the washing took all day.

The second scouting party found the remains of a hut with curious mounds nearby. Digging into the mounds, the explorers found baskets filled with corn. They named this place “Corn Hill” and brought forty bushels of corn back to the ship, promising to make payment later, which they eventually did. To the Pilgrims, this strange multi-colored corn must have seemed a fortunate sign indeed. There was also enough seed corn to plant in the spring.

But winter winds and icy rain soon drove all but the hardiest sailors below deck. Men returning from runs to shore reported the ground was covered with snow. The need to find a place for their colony grew more urgent than ever.

Many more scouting parties went out, including one that ventured out in the shallop in mid-December. One night, while camped on shore, they heard a strange cry. Frightened and confused, the men fired their muskets in all directions, and the noise stopped. Early the next morning, they heard the cry again. The Pilgrims retreated, firing two shots. The Indians, still at a distance, continued their cries. They shot a few arrows at the Pilgrims and then fled. Miraculously, no one, Indian or Pilgrim, had been wounded.

On Friday, December 9, the Pilgrims discovered a small cove. The following Monday, they sounded the waters and found them deep enough to harbor large ships. They moored the shallop and explored inland where they found some abandoned corn fields, forests to provide timber, and a number of freshwater streams. Here was the sight they had been seeking.

The Pilgrims spent much of their first winter living aboard the Mayflower. They only had two small boats, and winter weather slowed the unloading process even more. As some unloaded the
ship, others began work on a few small cabins as well as a common house, where most would live and where goods could be stored. A fire that destroyed the thatched roof of the common house slowed the work even further. In that desolate place, not a scrap could afford to be lost, so everyone worked frantically to salvage the stored goods. While most of what was stored inside was saved, repairs could not be made because illness had begun to take a terrible toll. By April, half of the Pilgrims had died -- sometimes as many as two or three in a single day. Because of their dwindling numbers, the Pilgrims began to fear attacks by the Indians, but the Indians remained at a distance.

Toward the middle of March, however, an Indian warrior strode boldly into Plymouth. He spoke a curious English that was hard for the Pilgrims to understand. His name was Samoset. He was an Abnaki sagamore, or chief, from what is now Maine, and he came on behalf of a tribe called the Pokanoket (now called the Wampanoag). He spoke of another Indian named Squanto who had actually been to England. The Pilgrims fed Samoset and sent him on his way with gifts. He soon returned with five men and the stolen tools. He announced that a great chief, Massasoit, was coming to visit the colony.

The chief arrived several days later with a number of warriors, including Squanto. Food was shared, gifts were presented to the Indians, and a peace treaty was forged that endured for many years. When the Indians departed, Squanto stayed behind to act as an interpreter.

Squanto revealed that when he returned to North American after his first journey to London, he had been kidnapped by a ship’s captain who planned to sell him as a slave. But Squanto escaped back to England. Eventually, he returned to New England, where he discovered his tribe had been wiped out by disease. He was the sole survivor.

To the struggling community, Squanto proved to be far more than an interpreter. He taught the Pilgrims how to harvest the natural bounty of the woods, where the best fishing waters were, and how to plant corn using fish as fertilizer. He served as a guide and as a go-between in buying furs from the Indians. Squanto remained at Plymouth until his death in 1622.

On April 5, 1621, the Mayflower returned to England. With the ship gone, the Pilgrims would be wholly dependent on the land and the work of their own hands until the arrival of the next ship. The ship’s captain offered to take anyone who wanted to return to England, but not a single Pilgrim accepted his offer.

That first spring, Governor John Carver died, yet, for most the warming weather brought general health and a sense of relief. Though they had lost half their company, the Plymouth Colony was surviving.

Everywhere there were the sights and sounds of activity. The Pilgrims applied old skills and quickly learned new ones. Boys watched over the fields, hunted, made wooden pegs to fasten beams, and helped build houses. Both boys and girls gathered mussels and clams, turned spits for roasting, and stuffed linen sacks with leaves, corn husks or feathers to make mattresses. When time permitted, the children learned their ABCs and practiced their reading by studying the Bible.
and psalter songbooks.

More and more life took on a settled aspect. There were romances and weddings, births and deaths. The colony was beginning to be caught in the rhythm of village life.

The sea yield a bounty of fish and there were signs that the harvest would be good enough to get them through the coming winter. Even at the height of summer, the Pilgrims had begun preparing for the winter that lay ahead. Corn was shucked and stored away, fruits were dried and vegetables were picked, fish was dried and packed in salt, while meats were cured over smokey fires. In celebration of the abundance of food, plans were made to hold a Harvest Festival. This feast, that we have come to call "Thanksgiving," would also celebrate the help the Indians had given the Pilgrims. The food was plentiful. Though the barley and peas from seeds brought from England had done poorly, they had their fill of beans, corn and squash. There was cod and sea bass which were grilled or served in stews, along with eels, lobsters, mussels and clams. There was pumpkin pudding and skillet breads of corn meal, as well as wild grapes and crab apples, dried strawberries and gooseberries. To supplement the harvest, Governor William Bradford, sent some men to hunt ducks, geese and wild turkeys.

For three days, the Pilgrims feasted. The children played games. The men had contests to test their skill with a musket. At the height of the festivities, Chief Massasoit arrived with ninety men, women and children. A few of the men left briefly and returned with five deer which were added to the feast. All the while, the colony was filled with chatter and laughter.

The first "Thanksgiving" reminded the Pilgrims of all they had to be thankful for and made them confident that their settlement would endure. Their Indian guests left with pledges of friendship and peace—a peace that lasted many years, until the growth of the colonies created tensions between the two groups.