

## Today in Our History

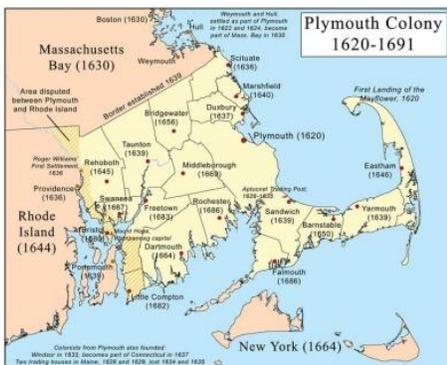
### Establishing Plymouth Colony

#### December 1620



*The Landing of the Pilgrims.* England, 1820. Commissioned by Plymouth historian Samuel Davis to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landing of the Pilgrims in Plymouth. Read the speech by Daniel Webster: *Plymouth Oration by Daniel Webster.*

On **December 15, 1620**, three hundred ninety-six years ago, your ancestors arrived at Plymouth to establish the first permanent colony in New England. They had left from Plymouth, England, three months before aboard the *Mayflower*, not knowing that they would providentially live in Plymouth! An explorer named John Smith had surveyed the area in 1614, naming the location, “Plimoth”. The decision to make this location their home was not a difficult one, even though they thoughtfully scouted the land to be certain that met their needs to survive as a colony: “...there were...oaks, pines, walnuts, beech sassafras, vines, and other trees which we know not. This bay is a most hopeful place...four or five running brooks of very sweet fresh water, that all run into the sea”. “They arrived safe in this harbor... [and] began to erect the first house for common use to receive them and their goods.” - William Bradford

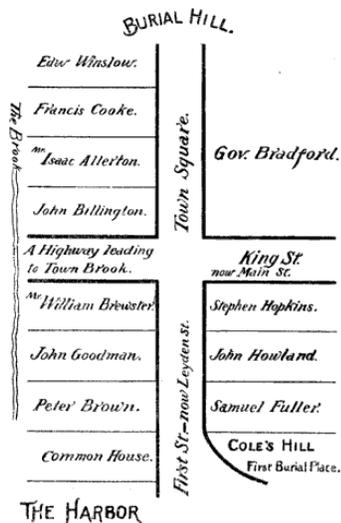


On the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, twenty men went on shore, searching several miles of the area. The next morning, they met and agreed that Plymouth was a “fitting” place for them to build houses. Historians describe the winter of 1620 as a “mild” one, although the ground was frozen and covered in snow! There was a great deal of wind-driven rain, and it wasn’t until four days later that they were able to go on shore and cut trees “to provide ‘stuff’ for building.”

The *Mayflower* was anchored about a mile away in Plymouth Harbor, making travel to the shore quite a task, and requiring multiple trips in the shallow and long boat. Very ill passengers who were low on food, were still aboard the *Mayflower*, being tended to those who were still well, many were children caregivers. The illnesses began taking a toll on the population of this future colony.

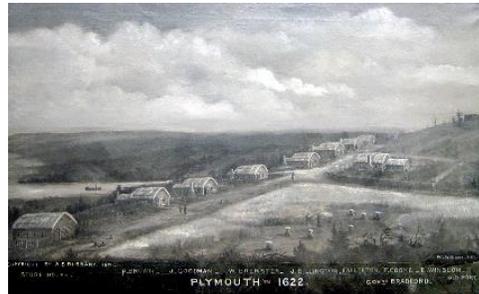
With some supplies on land, the Pilgrims determined where the main street should be. On December 23, 1620, the first street was named "The Street" and it ran from the top of the hill to the beach.

On December 25, the first structure, a “common house” was begun. It was deemed necessary to store provisions (supplies) from the *Mayflower* but soon became a shelter for the ill. At the end of the first winter in 1621, half of the colony died as a result of the severe winter and disease.



Division of land among Pilgrims. Today brass plaques mark the sites of the first homes on First Street, later named Leyden Street – source, Wikipedia

More pleasant weather permitted the able bodied men to work building a platform (fort) at the top of the hill on December 28. This site had views of the bay and a protective overview of The Street, later called First Street and now named Leyden Street. On this “fair street” was the construction of two rows of plank houses and the fort would serve as a lookout for their security as well as a meeting house for their religious services.



Painting of Plymouth Colony as it might have looked in 1622 - Courtesy of Plimoth Plantation

In early January the plank homes began to resemble a colony. The common house was nearly finished and the plot of land to build their town was being divided among the families, with each man responsible for building his own house. The men sawed planks from trees while the boys made wooden pegs

which would be used to hold the planks together. Packed dirt became a floor and the roof was made of dried reeds tied into bundles called thatch. The storage house was finished in time for the colony’s two leaders to join the others who were also ill. John Carver and William Bradford were recovering inside when the thatch on the roof caught fire from a spark. All of the patients made their escape with before the stored gun powder caused the new world’s first explosion, or this story would have had a different ending!

By January 29, the group began sending the long-boat and shallop to the *Mayflower* to transport more of their “common goods” back to the common house on the shore. Many days and nights were still spent aboard the *Mayflower* because the fierce wind, snow and rain prevented them from working on their homes. Some of the storms were so violent that the rain washed the clay daubing (mortar) from the sides of the houses.

The Pilgrims built their homes with thatched roofs at first, but they soon learned how easily they could catch fire. The colony eventually passed a law that required new homes to be built with plank instead. The homes had dirt floors and each had an area inside for a fire. This was their only source of heat and the only way to cook. Each family was also assigned a plot of garden land just outside of town, where they could grow corn, beans, peas, wheat, and other crops that required more space.

Today, the Harlow Old Fort House is one of the few remaining buildings in Plymouth built in the 1600s by a farmer, cooper and town official named William Harlow. When the Pilgrims’ fort was removed in 1677, he was given permission to use the wood in the construction of his home and as Mayflower Pilgrim descendants, the wood beams inside this home are pieces of our history.

Sources:

<http://www.stormfax.com/thanksgv.htm>

<http://www.plimoth.org/learn/just-kids/homework-help/who-were-pilgrims>

HyperliMourt's Relation: A Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth. Henry M. Dexter, ed. Boston, John Kimball Wiggin, 1865, pages 35-43.

The Mayflower and the Pilgrims' New World. Nathaniel Philbrick. pages 83-88.

Bob Vila at Plimoth Plantation: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc21h\\_adwfc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hc21h_adwfc)

Wikipedia: Leyden Street; removal of fort