

Colonial America: Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving



THE GILDER LEHRMAN
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Colonial America: Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving

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UNIT OVERVIEW

Over the course of three lessons the students will analyze primary and secondary sources on the voyage of the Pilgrims to America aboard the *Mayflower*, the writing of the Mayflower Compact, and the origin of Thanksgiving. The texts are a modern secondary source about the journey of the *Mayflower* and two primary sources: The Mayflower Compact (1620) and a letter by a colonist, Edward Winslow (1621). Students will closely analyze these materials, draw conclusions, and demonstrate their understanding through classroom activities as directed in each lesson.

UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Read primary sources and a secondary source about a historical event
- Demonstrate an understanding of the event described by creating illustrations, using text from the document as captions
- Explain their illustrations orally to their peers
- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of historical documents

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

You can use these essential questions to stimulate discussion throughout the unit:

- What conditions encouraged the Pilgrims to leave Europe?
- What challenges did the Pilgrims face during their voyage on the *Mayflower*?
- Why is the Mayflower Compact considered the first document establishing an American government?
- How did Edward Winslow describe relations between the colonists and American Indians?
- Why is Winslow's letter considered a description of the "First Thanksgiving"?
- How does Winslow's description of the 1621 event fit with our traditional telling of the story of the First Thanksgiving?

NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS: 3

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.1: Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.2: Determine the main idea of a text and explain how it is supported by key details; summarize the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1.d: Review the key ideas expressed and draw conclusions in light of information and knowledge gained from the discussions.

LESSON 1

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will read a brief essay describing why the Pilgrims decided to go to the New World and what difficulties they encountered on the voyage aboard the *Mayflower*. They will demonstrate their understanding by drawing a series of illustrations that depict the events described, using quotations from the text as captions. The students will then explain their drawings in a short oral presentation to the class. Throughout the unit, let the students learn as much as possible from the readings before you discuss the historical background with them.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Plymouth Colony, the first English colony in New England, was founded by religious dissenters called Separatists (future generations would call them “Pilgrims”) who believed that the Church of England was so corrupted by the trappings of Catholicism that it could not be reformed from within. The Separatists formed their own independent congregations and eventually decided to leave England altogether, moving to the more religiously tolerant Holland in 1609.

After about a generation in Holland, many Separatists worried that their children were losing their connection to English culture and falling into the “manifold temptations” of Dutch society. Their concerns led them to accept an offer from the Virginia Company of London to travel to North America. Members of the Separatist congregation in Leiden, led by William Bradford, a tradesman who would eventually become the colony’s first governor, left England for America in 1620 with 102 people (thirty-seven were Separatists) on the *Mayflower*.

The Pilgrims landed at the former village of the Patuxet Indians, a group of Wampanoags that had been decimated by smallpox and other diseases spread by European traders and fishermen. They named the site after Plymouth, England, the city of their departure. The ship's landing point was outside the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company, meaning that the Plymouth Colony could not pass laws or form a provisional government. When non-Pilgrim travelers, many of them servants, began to chafe under Bradford's strict religious leadership on board the *Mayflower*, the governor wrote an agreement requiring male members of the colony to "covenant and combine [themselves] together into a civil body politic." This document was called the Mayflower Compact and it was the first document of self-government in North America.

Bradford described the new settlement as "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." Nearly half of the Pilgrims died of scurvy and malnutrition during the winter of 1620–1621. Those who survived the winter owed their livelihood to Massasoit, the Wampanoag sachem who provided them with food and support in exchange for the Pilgrims joining the Wampanoags in a military alliance against their enemies, the Narragansetts. One of those Wampanoags, Squanto, was a Patuxet warrior who spent the worst of the disease-ridden years in Europe after he was kidnapped by an English ship captain, sold into slavery in Spain, and escaped to London. Squanto and another local Indian, Samoset, taught the Pilgrims how to grow corn using fish as a fertilizer. The Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest in 1621 with a ceremony securing their relationship with the Indians. One attendee, Edward Winslow, wrote that they "entertained and feasted" for "three days." In the twentieth century, this event became associated with the modern American celebration of "Thanksgiving."

Over the course of the next several decades Plymouth became a self-sufficient community rooted in the Pilgrims' understanding of biblical doctrine. Bradford was elected to thirty consecutive terms as governor and kept a journal, which he called "Of Plimoth Plantation," that chronicled the history of the colony through 1647. In 1691, Plymouth's roughly 7000 inhabitants merged with the neighboring Massachusetts Bay Colony as part of a reorganization of the British colonies in North America.

MATERIALS

- “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*”
- “Telling the Story in Six Parts”
- Drawing supplies

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*.”
2. “Share read” this brief essay with the students. To share read, have the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading while you continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
3. Ask the students to decide which six events in the story are the most important and to underline them in their copy of the text.
4. Distribute “Telling the Story in Six Parts” and drawing supplies.
5. Ask the students to draw a picture of the first important event that they underlined and write down a phrase from “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*” below the illustration as their caption. For instance, a student may draw a picture of a ship in a storm and write “Storms began pounding on the little ship” as the caption. You may allow the use of computer-generated illustrations or other graphics in addition to drawing.
6. The students will illustrate each of their six underlined events, using a quotation from the text as a caption for each one.
7. The students will give oral presentations using the illustrations and quotations/captions to summarize the story of the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower*.

LESSON 2

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, the students will learn how to read and understand a complex primary source. This will be done by “chunking” the text and asking very precise questions to help students understand the seventeenth-century language and, ultimately, the purpose of the document. They will demonstrate their comprehension through class discussion and completion of an activity sheet.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After arriving on the East Coast of North America, far north of the intended location for their settlement in the Hudson River valley, the Pilgrims found themselves facing a number of challenges. One of those challenges was the creation of an organized form of government. The Pilgrims had assumed that upon reaching the land set aside for them by the Virginia Company they would be under the governance of England and the king, although they would be free to practice their religious beliefs. They had negotiated a trade agreement with the Virginia Company and had reached an amicable arrangement with King James. Yet the Pilgrims found themselves outside the jurisdiction of either the Virginia Company or the king, and they knew that without some kind of government, their colony would devolve into chaos. William Bradford wrote that he was already seeing signs of factionalism in the group. The Mayflower Compact represents the establishment of that new government. The Mayflower Compact was signed on November 11, 1620, by forty-one of the adult men. This agreement established majority rule as the foundation for their new society.

MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: The Mayflower Compact (Complete). Source: The modernized text presented here is based on the original version (London, 1622) as reprinted in *Mourt’s Relation or Journal of the Plantation at Plymouth with an Introduction and Notes* by Henry Martyn Dexter (Boston: John Kimball Wiggin, 1865), 6–8.
- “Analyzing the Mayflower Compact”
- Overhead projector or other display device

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute “Analyzing the Mayflower Compact.”
2. Project an image of the worksheet so that the entire class can see it and follow along on their personal copies.
3. Share read the text in the activity sheet with the class as described in Lesson 1.

4. Model the activity with the class. Address one question at a time and help the students reason out the best answer. This activity is designed to develop critical thinking skills and effective strategies in reading difficult texts. This abbreviated version of the text is based on the original 1622 document as reprinted in *Mourt's Relation* (1865), with punctuation and spelling modernized for readability.
5. For the summary section, show the students how to use the answers to the questions to construct a paragraph.
6. Use the Historical Background information to discuss with the students why the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact.

LESSON 3

OVERVIEW

Students will read a primary source describing what has come to be known as the “First Thanksgiving.” Students will closely analyze a letter written by colonist Edward Winslow on December 11, 1621. They will demonstrate their comprehension through class discussion and answers to critical thinking questions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Pilgrims’ settlement in Plymouth very nearly ceased to exist only a few months after it was established. Of the 102 Pilgrims who reached America in the late fall of 1620, less than one-half lived to see the spring. Several factors led to this calamity. Many of the colonists were very weak and sick from the Atlantic crossing, and therefore fewer people were available to build shelters and forage for food. The supplies aboard the *Mayflower* had nearly run out, and since it was so late in the season, there was not enough time to plant and harvest any crops. During the winter of 1620–1621 both starvation and disease devastated the new colony.

Fortunately for the Pilgrims, they established a friendly relationship with an English-speaking American Indian named Tisquantum, or Squanto. He had been captured and taken to Spain but escaped and returned home, where he found that his people had died of disease. He introduced the Pilgrims to Massasoit, chief of the Pokanokets, and other leaders of the various tribes of the Wampanoag people who had lived near the Plymouth settlement for centuries before the Pilgrims arrived.

One of the colonists who had crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower*, Edward Winslow, survived the first terrible winter and served as a leader of the colony.

MATERIALS

- “Excerpts from a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621.” Source: E[dward] W[inslow], “A Letter Sent from New England to a Friend in These Parts, Setting Forth a Briefe and True Declaration of the Worth of that Plantation,” *Relation or Iournall of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation Settled at Plimoth in New England, by Certaine English Aduenturers both Merchants and Others* (London: John Bellamie, 1622), 60–64. In the version of the text presented below, the original punctuation and spellings have been modernized for readability.
- “Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621”

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students complete the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups.
2. Distribute “Excerpts from a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621.”
3. Share read the text as described in Lesson 1.
4. Distribute “Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621” and ask students to answer the critical thinking questions. Emphasize that they must support their answers with quotations from the letter.
5. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must fill in their own activity sheet to complete the assignment.
6. Let the students reason out the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary through context. If they are truly stuck or context clues are insufficient, then provide a simple definition.
7. Ask groups or individual students to share their answers to the critical thinking questions aloud. Compare those with the responses from other individuals or groups. Use the Historical Background information during a class discussion about the “First Thanksgiving.”