

Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving



Detail from a Dutch map of New England made in 1682. Patuxet and New Plymouth are shown in the center of the map. (Nicholas Visscher, *Novi Belgii Novaeque Angliae*, Amsterdam, 1682. The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC03582.)

THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

TL TEACHING LITERACY
TH THROUGH HISTORY



Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving

BY TIM BAILEY (created 2018, revised 2024)

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME: Four 45-minute periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. These skills will enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate documents of historical significance.

The four lessons in this unit explore the voyage of the Pilgrims to America aboard the *Mayflower*, the writing of the Mayflower Compact, and the origins of Thanksgiving. Students will read or listen to a historical interpretation and read a legal document and correspondence. You will assess their understanding through class discussions and their graphic and written responses on activity sheets.

Students will be able to

- Read primary sources and a secondary source about a historical event (e.g., the Pilgrims' arrival in Massachusetts)
- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of historical documents
- Demonstrate an understanding of an event by creating illustrations, using text from the document as captions
- Explain their illustrations orally to their peers

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What conditions encouraged the Pilgrims to leave Europe?
- What challenges did the Pilgrims face during their voyage on the *Mayflower*?
- What was the first year after arrival like for the Pilgrims?
- How does Winslow's description of the 1621 event resemble or differ from a traditional telling of the story of the First Thanksgiving?
- What was it like to be a Pilgrim?

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.

MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: Historical Background: “The Wampanoags’ Thanksgiving” by David Silverman, Professor of History, The George Washington University
- Source 1: “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*” by Tim Bailey
- Activity Sheet 1: Telling the Story in Six Parts
- Source 2: The Mayflower Compact, 1620. First published in *Relation or Journall 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), the modernized text presented here is based on a reprint 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.
- Activity Sheet 2: Analyzing the Mayflower Compact
- Source 3: A Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621, excerpts from 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 Journall 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 in Source 3, the original spelling and punctuation have been modernized for readability.
- Activity Sheet 3: Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow
- Activity Sheet 4: What Was It Like to Be a Pilgrim?
- Smartboard, overhead project, or other display device
- Drawing supplies

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Wampanoags' Thanksgiving

by David J. Silverman, The George Washington University

Every year, Thanksgiving celebrations teach that the English or “Pilgrims” of Plymouth Colony and local Native Americans made friends, held a great feast, and thereby permitted United States history to proceed. These stories rarely address who the Natives were, why they were so friendly, and what happened to them later. The story of the Wampanoag people, the Natives of this story, reveals the struggles for power at the heart of American history.

The Wampanoags were in a crisis when the *Mayflower* appeared in the late fall of 1620. Between 1616 and 1619, an unidentified European epidemic disease had devastated them, wiping out at least half of their population. Then, the Narragansett people to the west took advantage of the Wampanoags' weakness to force them to pay an annual tribute (or tax) of corn, shell beads, and furs, and surrender valuable land. When the *Mayflower* arrived, the great Wampanoag leader, or chief, Massasoit faced a momentous choice: should they seek the help of these strangers against the Narragansetts?

The question was challenging because though the Wampanoags wanted English weaponry, they already knew the English to be treacherous. European sailing ships had been visiting the Wampanoag coast periodically since 1524, and at least once a year since 1602. Sometimes, the Wampanoags traded their fur and food for the strangers' goods. The Wampanoags particularly wanted the Europeans' metal knives, hatchets, and swords, arrowheads, and guns. The Wampanoags, like the rest of Native America, did not make their own metal tools. Yet this opportunity came with a steep cost. Too often, the explorers took Wampanoag people captive. Sometimes, the purpose was to train the captives as interpreters and guides. At other times, it was to sell them as slaves. Remarkably, two of these captives managed to return home after years in London with a knowledge of the English language and English society. One of them, named Squanto, would become the interpreter between the Wampanoags and the Pilgrims.

Massasoit decided to ally with Plymouth not because his people were simply friendly or misunderstood who the English were. Rather, it was because he wanted the newcomers' weapons and soldiers to help his people fight off the Narragansetts. Many of his people warned that this decision was a mistake. They wanted to wipe out the Plymouth colony before it became a threat worse than the Narragansetts. But Massasoit held firm. In the short term, his gamble was worth it. With English help, the Wampanoags regained their independence and became rich in English goods.

Yet, in the long term, they lost nearly everything. The survival of Plymouth, with the Wampanoags' help, led to the creation of the neighboring colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. By the 1660s, colonists outnumbered Native Americans in New England. Once the English had the advantage, they turned on their Wampanoag allies, seizing their land and forcing them into servitude.

Consequently, in 1675–1676, the Wampanoags, Narragansetts, and several other Native American tribes allied against the English under the leadership of Massasoit's son, Pumetacom, or King Philip. They lost this war terribly and, with it, control of their own homeland. The Wampanoags and Narragansetts survive in southern New England to this very day, but on just tiny portions of their former territory under the rule of the United States. We all should understand that, for them, loss and subjugation are the legacy of the First Thanksgiving.

David A. Silverman is a professor of history at The George Washington University. He is the author of This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving (2019).

PILGRIMS AND THE *MAYFLOWER*, 1620

BY TIM BAILEY (created 2018, revised 2024)

OVERVIEW

This lesson explores the journey that Pilgrims took on the *Mayflower* in 1620. Students will read or listen to a secondary source describing the journey. You will assess students' understanding through student illustrations depicting key moments and through students' presentations of their illustrations to the class.

Students will be able to

- Read a secondary source about a historical event (e.g., the Pilgrims' arrival in Massachusetts)
- Demonstrate an understanding of an event by creating illustrations, using text from the document as captions
- Explain their illustrations orally to their peers

Tim Bailey taught middle school and elementary school in Utah for over two decades. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he is the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME: One 45-minute period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on primary and secondary sources. The four lessons in this unit explore the voyage of the Pilgrims to America aboard the *Mayflower*, the writing of the Mayflower Compact, and the origin of Thanksgiving.

MATERIALS

- Teacher's Resource: Historical Background: "The Wampanoags' Thanksgiving" by David Silverman, Professor of History, The George Washington University
- Source 1: "Coming to America on the *Mayflower*" by Tim Bailey
- Activity Sheet 1: Telling the Story in Six Parts
- Smartboard, overhead project, or other display device
- Drawing supplies

PROCEDURE

1. We have provided a Historical Background, "The Wampanoags' Thanksgiving" by Professor David Silverman on page 4. It explains the Wampanoag context for the arrival of the Pilgrims in Plymouth Colony and the interactions between the local peoples and the European colonizers. For additional information about Plymouth Colony and the first Thanksgiving itself, you may explore the links under Additional Resources below.
2. Distribute Source 1: "Coming to America on the *Mayflower*" by Tim Bailey, which follows the Pilgrims' travels from Holland to Plymouth, Massachusetts, and, if possible, display it for the whole class to see.

- a. You may read “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*” out loud, ask your students to read it silently, or “share read” it 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).
 - b. 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. You may choose the first one or two events with the students and have them choose the rest in small groups or individually.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 1: Telling the Story in Six Parts and drawing supplies. Each student should get three copies of the activity sheet.
 - a. 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*” next to 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.
 - b. The students will illustrate each of their six underlined events, using a quotation from the text as a caption for each one.
 4. The students will give oral presentations using the illustrations and quotations/captions to summarize the story of the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower*.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Peter C. Mancall, “How America Keeps Adapting the Story of the Pilgrims at Plymouth to Match the Story We Need to Tell,” *Time* (December 17, 2020), <https://time.com/5910755/mayflower-plymouth-meaning/>.

Plimouth Patuxet Museums, <https://plimoth.org/>.

David Silverman, “This Land Is Their Land.” Video. C-Span2 Book TV. November 18, 2019. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?466094-1/this-land-land>.

David Silverman, *This Land Is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving* (Bloomsbury, 2019)

Simon Worrall, “Pilgrims’ Progress,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (November 2006), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/pilgrims-progress-135067108/>.

THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT, 1620

BY TIM BAILEY (created 2018, revised 2024)

OVERVIEW

This lesson explores an early political agreement made by the Pilgrims: the Mayflower Compact (1620). Students will read and understand this complex primary source by answering very precise questions. They will demonstrate their comprehension through class discussion and completion of an activity sheet.

Students will be able to

- Read a primary source about a historical event (e.g., the Pilgrims' arrival in Massachusetts)
- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of historical documents

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GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

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MATERIALS

- Source 2: The Mayflower Compact, 1620. First published in *Relation or Journall 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), the modernized text presented here is based on a reprint 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.
- Activity Sheet 2: Analyzing the Mayflower Compact
- Smartboard, overhead project, or other display device

PROCEDURE

1. Prepare for class by reading Source 2, which is the complete text of the Mayflower Compact. For more information, see the Additional Resources on page 6, particularly “Mayflower and Mayflower Compact” from the Plimoth Patuxet Museums, <https://plimoth.org/for-students/homework-help/mayflower-and-mayflower-compact>.
2. Distribute Activity Sheet 2: Analyzing the Mayflower Compact and, if possible, display an image of it for the whole class to see. This activity sheet provides most of the text of the Mayflower Compact. Make sure the class understands that this is not the whole text and explain the purpose of the ellipsis points. The spelling and punctuation have been modernized for readability.
 - a. Share read the text in the activity sheet with the class as described in Lesson 1.

- b. Model the activity, answering two or three questions with the class. Address one question at a time and help the students reason out the best answer. If they are ready, they may work in small groups or individually to answer the rest of the questions. This activity is designed to develop critical thinking skills and effective strategies in reading difficult texts.
 - c. For the summary section, instruct the students to string together their responses to the questions to summarize the content and purpose of the document in their own words. You may choose to work with them to polish their summaries.
3. Lead a discussion to consider why the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact.

THANKSGIVING, 1621

BY TIM BAILEY (created 2018, revised 2024)

OVERVIEW

This lesson explores 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.

Students will be able to

- Read a primary source about a historical event (e.g., the Pilgrims’ arrival in Massachusetts)
- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of a historical document

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MATERIALS

- Source 3: A Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621, excerpts from 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 Journall 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 in Source 3, the original spelling and punctuation have been modernized for readability.
- Activity Sheet 3: Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students complete the lesson individually, as partners, or in small groups.
2. Distribute Source 3: A Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621. Share read the text as described in Lesson 1.
3. Distribute Activity Sheet 3: Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow.
 - a. Ask students to answer the critical thinking questions. Emphasize that they must support their answers with quotations from the letter. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must fill in their own activity sheet to complete the assignment.

- b. 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.
4. Ask groups or individual students to share their answers to the critical thinking questions. Compare those with the responses from other individuals or groups.
5. Lead a class discussion about what the “First Thanksgiving” meant to the participants, Pilgrims and Wampanoags.

THANKSGIVING, 1621

BY TIM BAILEY (created 2018, revised 2024)

OVERVIEW

This lesson reviews the material from Lessons 1–3. You will assess students’ understanding through the students’ visual depiction of the Pilgrims’ experiences and their presentations of this illustration to the class.

Students will be able to

- Read primary sources and a secondary source about a historical event (e.g., the Pilgrims’ arrival in Massachusetts)
- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of historical documents
- Demonstrate an understanding of an event by creating illustrations, using text from the document as captions
- Explain their illustrations orally to their peers

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MATERIALS

- Source 1: “Coming to America on the *Mayflower*” by Tim Bailey
- Activity Sheet 1: Telling the Story in Six Parts
- Source 2: The Mayflower Compact, 1620
- Activity Sheet 2: Analyzing the Mayflower Compact
- Source 3: A Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621
- Activity Sheet 3: Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow
- Activity Sheet 4: What Was It Like to Be a Pilgrim?
- Drawing supplies

PROCEDURE

1. Students should have all of the items listed in “Materials” from the previous lessons.
2. Ask students what has stood out most about the Pilgrims’ journey and their settlement in Plymouth.

3. Distribute Activity Sheet 4: What Was It Like to Be a Pilgrim? and make sure they have the materials from the previous lessons.
 - a. Instruct students to re-examine the sources and activity sheets. They will select one quotation from each source that they think best represents something important about Pilgrims' experiences. They will write these three quotations in the activity sheet.
 - b. They will then incorporate these quotations into an illustration representing a response to the question, "What was it like to be a Pilgrim?"
4. When students have completed their activity sheets, ask them to share their illustrations with the class.
5. Lead a discussion that features the students' responses to the question drawing on all the sources as well as additional information about the Pilgrims' experiences in Massachusetts and drawing on the information in the Historical Background about the Wampanoags and their relationship with the Pilgrims.