

## ■ Of Plymouth Plantation

**Date:** 1630

**Author:** Bradford, William

**Genre:** journal

*“Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean . . .”*

### Summary Overview

An English Pilgrim, William Bradford was one of the leaders of Plymouth Colony. Established by the religious dissenters after their arrival in Cape Cod on the *Mayflower* in 1620, Plymouth became the first permanent European settlement in New England. Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written mostly during the period from 1630 through 1646, serves as the leading primary source on the Pilgrims' journey, settlement, and social and political practices. The history was not published, however, until 1856, some two centuries after Bradford's death.

*Of Plymouth Plantation* offers a lens on the extreme challenges facing the small group of Pilgrims as they sought to establish a new home in America. These excerpts focus on the Pilgrims' arrival and immediate concerns, which included establishing a form of self-government through the Mayflower Compact; Bradford was a signatory to this document. The complete text also provides commentary of the colony's many struggles and rare successes, including an account of the first Thanksgiving.

### Defining Moment

Although the foundation of Plymouth did not mark the first instance of English settlement in the Americas—Jamestown had been founded under the auspices of the

Virginia Company of London in 1607—the Pilgrims' settlement in New England proved definitive in the continuing colonial settlement and emerging character of the region that later gave rise to the American independence movement. The Pilgrims were a Separatist religious group that sought to leave the Church of England to practice their own forms of religious worship. When the Crown began persecuting and imprisoning the leaders of Separatist groups, Bradford and other members of a congregation based at Scrooby fled England for the Netherlands. They remained in that country for about twelve years, forming a congregation in Leiden, but the experience was not as they had hoped. Church members struggled to earn enough money to survive, young people became increasingly assimilated into Dutch society, and true religious freedom remained unsecured.

The Scrooby congregation decided to leave the Netherlands to create a new home in territory controlled by the English in the Americas. Migrating to this little-known land proved difficult from the beginning, however. The economic agreement between the Pilgrims and their financial backers gave a significant stake of their hoped-for settlement to their backers. Many congregation members were unable or unwilling to travel. Financial pressures led the Pilgrims to take on “strangers” who were not members of their religious sect but

were willing to pay the financial backers for their passage and to provide vital skills in the new colony. One ship, the *Speedwell*, was not up to the voyage, forcing the 102 travelers into the leaky, cramped *Mayflower*. This mixed band set out for a spot north of the existing Virginia Colony in September 1620.

After a difficult journey of some 2,750 miles, the Pilgrims landed at Cape Cod in November, far north of their intended destination and outside of the area they were legally permitted to inhabit. Yet the group could not travel any farther, and the approach of winter made necessities such as shelter and food particularly pressing. An exploratory group selected Plymouth as the site of their settlement, and the travelers—after signing the Mayflower Compact and selecting a colonial governor—disembarked to begin the dual challenges of creating a colony where they could practice their religion and of becoming sufficiently successful to repay the heavy debts that had incurred to undertake the endeavor.

### Author Biography

A native of Austerfield, Yorkshire, England, William Bradford was baptized in the local Church of England parish there on March 29, 1590, presumably within a few days of his birth. As yeoman farmers, Bradford's family possessed their own land, and the young Bradford was instructed in farming from an early age. He also managed to acquire some level of education, probably in large part through self-teaching. Both of Bradford's parents died by the time he was seven years old. He spent much of his youth living with various relatives. By his early teens, Bradford had become involved in the reformist congregation at nearby Scrooby. Widely considered radicals in their day, these reformers became the heart of the Separatist group that settled Plymouth.

In 1609, Bradford joined members of the Scrooby congregation in the Netherlands.

There, Bradford found work in the textile industry and married Dorothy May, the daughter of a Separatist family that had come to Leiden some time earlier; the couple later had a son who did not make the journey to New England with them. Bradford's wife drowned shortly after the ship arrived in Cape Cod. Aboard the *Mayflower*, Bradford became one of the signers of the Mayflower Compact, and his importance as a colonial leader grew after the foundation of Plymouth Colony. The settlement's original governor, John Carver, died during the difficult winter of 1620–21, and Bradford was elected to replace him. He served as Plymouth's governor for about thirty of the next thirty-six years. As governor, Bradford worked with the local Wampanoag community to learn how to grow corn and help the Pilgrims survive, if not thrive, in their new home. Even twenty-five years after Plymouth's establishment, Bradford oversaw a community of no more than a few thousand; estimates vary as to the exact population. He and fellow Pilgrim Edward Winslow wrote an account of the group's early efforts, which was published in London as *Mourt's Relation* in 1622.

In 1630, Bradford began work on what would become *Of Plymouth Plantation*. This journal recounted Bradford's experiences first in the Netherlands and later as the Pilgrims founded and attempted to make a success of Plymouth. Although Bradford's work went unpublished for many years, modern historians widely consider it the authoritative source on the Pilgrims' experiences in the New World, a nod to Bradford's mostly objective accounting of activities and their consequences. Bradford had completed the manuscript by 1650, but he remained active in colonial government until shortly before his death on May 9, 1657.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

Being thus arived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the periles and miseries therof, againe to set their feete on the firme and stable earth, their proper elemente. And no marvell if they were thus joyefull, seeing wise Seneca was so affected with sailing a few miles on the coast of his owne Italy; as he affirmed, that he had rather remaine twentie years on his way by land, then pass by sea to any place in a short time; so tedious and dreadfull was the same unto him.

But hear I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amased at this poore peoples presente condition; and so I thinke will the reader too, when he well considera the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation (as may be remembred by that which vente before), they had now no freinds to wellcome them, )for inns to entertaine or refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seeke for succoure. It is recorded in scripture as, a mercie to the apostle and his shipwraked company, that the barbarians shewed them no smale kindnes in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they mette with them (as after will appeare) were readier to fill their sides full of arrows then otherwise. And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winters of that cuntrie know them to be sharp and violent, and subjecte to cruell and feirce stormes, deangerous to travill to known places, much more to serch an unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hidious and desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts and willd men? and what multitudes ther might be of them they knew not. Nether could they, as it were, goe up to the top of Pisgah, to vew from this willdernes a more goodly cuntrie to feed their hops; for which way soever they turnd their eys (save upward to the heavens) they could have litle solace or content in respecte of any outward objects. For summer being done, all things stand upon them with a wetherbeaten face; and the whole cuntrie, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage heiw. If they looked behind them, ther was the mighty otean which they had passed, and was now as a maine barr and goulfe to seperate them from all the

civill parts of the world. If it be said they had a ship to sucour them, it is trew; but what heard they daly from the mr and company ? but that with speede they should looke out a place with their shallop, wher they would be at some near distante; for the season was such as he would not stirr from thence till a safe harbor was discovered by them wher they would be, and he might goe without danger; and that victells consumed apace, but he must and would keepe sufficient for them selves and their returne. Yea, it was muttered by some, that if they gott not a place in time, they would turne them and their goods ashore and leave them. Let it also be considred what weake hopes of supply and succoure they left behinde them, that might bear up their minds in this sade condition and trialls they were under; and they could not but be very smale. It is true, indeed, the affections and love of their brethren at Leyden was cordiall and entire towards them, but they had litle power to help them, or them selves; and how the case stode betweene them and the marchanta at their coming away, hath allready been declared. What could now sustaine them but the spirite of God and his grace? May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly soy: *Our faithers were Englishmen which come over this great otean, and were ready to perish in this willdernes; but they eried unto the Lord, and he heard their voyce, and looked on their adversitie, etc. Let them ther fore praise the Lord, because he is good, and his mercies endure for ever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how he hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressour. When they wandered in the deserte willdernes out of the way, and found no citie to dwell in, both hungrie, and thirstie, their sowle was overwhelmed in them. Let them confesa before the Lord his loving kindnes, and his wonderfull works before the sons of men. . . .*

\* \* \*

### The remainder of Ano: 1620.

I SHALL a litle returne backe and begine with a combination I made by them before they came ashore, being the first foundation of their govermente in this place; occasioned partly by the discontented and mutinous

speeches that some of the strangers amongst them had let fall from them in the ship-That when they came a shore they would use their owne libertie; for none had power to command them, the patente they had being for Virginia, and not for New-england, which belonged to an other Government, with which the Virginia Company had nothing to doe. And partly that shuch an acte by them done (this their condition considered) might be as firme as any patent, and in some respects more sure.

The forme was as followeth.

In the narre of God, Amen. We whose names are under-written, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britaine, Frane, and Ireland king, defender of the faith, cte., haveing undertaken, for the glorie of God, and advancemente of the Christian faith, and honour of our king and countrie, a voyage to plant the first colonie in the Northerne parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly and mutually in the presente of God, and one of another, covenant and combine our selves togeather into a civill body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by vertue hearof to enacte, constitute, and frame such just and equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices, from time ta time, as shall be thought most meete and convenient for the generall good of the Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obediente. In witnes wherof we have hereunder subscribed our narres at Cap-Codd the 11. of November, in the year of the raigne of our soveraigne lord, King James, of England, France, and Ireland the eighteenth, and of Scotland the fiftie fourth. An: Dom. 1620.

After this they chose, or rather confirmed, Mr. John Carver (a man godly and well approved amongst them) their Governour for that year. And after they had provided a place for their goods, or combne store, (which were long in unlading for want of boats, foulnes of winter weather, and sicknes of diverce,) and begune some small cottages for their habitation, as time would admitte, they mette and consulted of lawes and orders, both for their civill and

military Gouvernente, as the necessitie of their condition did require, still adding therunto as urgent occasion in severall times, and as cases did require.

In these hard and difficulte beginnings they found some discontents and murmurings arise amongst some, and mutinous speeches and carriags in other; but they were soone quelled and overcome by the wisdome, patience, and just and equall carrage of things by the Govr and better part, which clave faithfully togeather in the maine. But that which was most sadd and lamentable was, that in 2. or 3. moneths time half e of their company dyed, especially in Jan : and February, being the depth of winter, and wanting houses and other comforts; being infected with the scurvie and other diseases, which this long vioage and their inacomodate condition had brought upon them; so as ther dyed some times 2. or 3. of a day, in the foresaid time; that of 100. and odd persons, scarce 50. remained. And of these in the time of most distres, ther was but 6. or 7. sound persons, who, to their great comendations be it spoken, spared no pains, night nor day, but with abundance of toyle and hazard of their owne health, fetched them woode, made them fires, drest them meat, made their beads, washed their lothsome cloaths, cloathed and uncloathed them; in a word, did all the homly and necessarie offices for them which dainty and quesie stomacks cannot endure to hear named; and all this willingly and cherfully, without any grudging in the least, shewing herein their true love unto their freinds and bretheren. A rare example and worthy to be remembred. Tow of these 7. were Mr. William Brewster, ther reverend Elder, and Myles Standish, ther Captein and military comander, unto whom my selfe, and many others, were much beholden in our low and sicke condition. And yet the Lord so upheld these persons, as in this generall calamity they were not at all infected either with sicknes, or lamnes. And what I have said of these, I may say of many others who dyed in this generall vissitation, and others yet living, that whilst they had health, yea, or any strength continuing, they were not wanting to any that had need of them. And I doute not but their recompense is with the Lord.

But I may not hear pass by an other remarkable passage not to be forgotten. As this calamitie fell among the passengers that were to be left here to plant, and were hasted a shore and made to drunke water, that the sea-men might have the more bear, and one in his sicknes desiring but a

small cann of beere, it was answered, that if he were their owne fatlier he should have none; the disease begane to fall amongst then also, so as allmost halfe of their company dyed before they went away, and many of their officers and lustyest men, as the boatson, gunner, quarter-maisters, the cooke, and others. At which the mr was something stricken and sent to the sick a shore and tould the Govr he should send for beer for them that had peed of it, though he drunke water homward bound. But now amongst his company ther was farr another kind of carriage in this miserie then amongst the passengers; for they that before had been boone companions in drinking and joyllity in the time of their health and wellfare, begane now to deserte one another in this calamitie, saing they would not hasard ther lives for them, they should be infected by coming to help them in their cabins, and so, after they came to dye by it, would doe litle or nothing for them, but if they dyed let them dye. But shuch of the passengers as were yet aboard shewed them what merey they could, which made some of their harts relente, as the boatson (and some others),

who was a prowld yonge man, and would often curse and scofe at the passengers; but when he grew weak, they had compassion on him and helped him; then he confessed he did not deserve it at their hands, he had abused them in word and deed. O! saith he, you, I now see, shew your love like Christians indeed one to another, but we let one another lye and dye like doggs. Another lay cursing his wife, saing if it had not ben for her he had never come this unlucky viage, and anone cursing his felows, saing he had done this and that, for some of them, he had spent so much, and so much, amongst them, and they were now weary of him, and did not help him, having need. Another gave his companion all he had, if he died, to help him in his weaknes; he went and got a litle spise and made him a mess of meat once or twise, and because he dyed not so soone as he expected, he went amongst his fellows, and swore the rogue would cousen him, he would see hita choaked before he made him any more meate; and yet the pore fellow dyed before morning. . . .

## GLOSSARY

**boatson:** sailor who oversees a ship's deck crew

**bretheren (brothers):** fellow members of religious group

**Cap-Codd:** Cape Cod

**civill body politick:** political unit; a group formed as a temporary government

**cousen:** cheat or trick someone out of something; archaic variation of "cozen"

**deserte willdernes:** desert through which Moses led the Hebrews on their search for the Promised Land

**generall vissitation:** widespread illness

**heiw:** view

**marchanta:** merchants; in this case, the financial backers of the Pilgrims' journey

**mr:** captain

**Pisgah:** a biblical mountain, from which God commanded Moses to survey the Promised Land

**scurvie (scurvy):** a potentially fatal disease caused by vitamin C deficiency

**Seneca:** a Roman philosopher and writer

**viage:** voyage

**victells:** food

## Document Analysis

William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* is a lengthy, complex work detailing the efforts of the Pilgrims who called on God's providence to settle the wild lands of New England through the colony at Plymouth. The excerpts presented here, all written several years after their occurrence, show the author's belief in the hand of God in shaping the Pilgrims' mission in New England through both direct statement and the use of comparison between biblical and human events. By setting forth the claim that New England was a wild land filled with trepidation and danger, Bradford establishes the Pilgrims' work as one even more difficult than that endured by biblical figures such as Moses and the apostle Paul. At the same time, Bradford acknowledges the practical efforts of the Pilgrims' leaders to find success by working with the "strangers," those *Mayflower* passengers whom the group's financial backers had added to the party to fill the slots vacated by Pilgrims who had chosen to stay on in the Netherlands. This uneasy alliance culminated in the signing of the Mayflower Compact, a document creating the English colonists' first system of self-government in North America and paving the way for the system of local government employed in New England for centuries to come.

Prefacing these selections from *Of Plymouth Plantation* is Bradford's history of the Scrooby congregation's decision to leave England for the Netherlands, their experiences in that country, and the efforts to organize the Pilgrims to migrate to the northern reaches of the Virginia Colony to found a settlement where they could practice religion without interference. The process of organizing and embarking upon the transatlantic journey was a difficult one leading to a voyage that was undertaken on an overcrowded ship shared with a group of strangers who did not hold to the Pilgrims' Separatist views.

Yet Bradford condenses this arduous journey into scant paragraphs, focusing a larger quantity of text instead on the ship's arrival and the group's ensuing reactions. His teleological interpretations are immediately apparent in his discussion of the Pilgrims' thanking of "the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the periles and miseries therof"; clearly, Bradford saw the success of the voyage as a mark of divine intervention rather than skillful sailing on the part of the *Mayflower's* hard-pressed crew. He then declares his shock at the challenging prospects facing the ragtag group of arriv-

als, whom, he bemoans, have survived the difficulties of the lengthy journey only to be met with a barren welcome. He emphasizes this idea by listing point by point the lacking amenities that a traveler within the civilized world might logically expect: "no freinds to wellcome them, . . . [no] inns to . . . refresh their weatherbeaten bodys, no houses or much less townes to repaire too, to seek for succoure."

A firm believer in Providence, Bradford employs a degree of typology—the use of biblical events, particularly from the Old Testament, as symbolic representations presaging later Christian belief—throughout his writing. For example, he dramatically contrasts the Pilgrims' arrival in New England with Moses' biblical search for the Promised Land, focusing largely on the differences between the two experiences rather than drawing direct parallels. "Nether could they . . . goe up to the tope of Pisgah," he writes, referencing the biblical passage in which God commands Moses to climb to the top of Mount Pisgah to view the distant but longed-for Promised Land. Instead, Bradford claims, the Pilgrims cannot find such a "more goodly cuntrie" due to the overwhelming wilderness presented by the New England landscape. Furthermore, Bradford expressed concerns quite specific to the Americas. He points out that in the Book of Acts, the apostle Paul and his "ship-wraked company" received "no smale kindnes" from the islanders of Malta, where that ancient group managed to swim ashore. In Acts, Paul and his party are received by a group of natives who build them a fire and help recuperate from their doomed adventure. Bradford, however, frets that the native peoples of New England were more likely to shoot the Pilgrims "full of arrows" than to offer them a warm fire or other assistance. In fact, Bradford's worries were not entirely justified; although the settlers endured many challenges during the difficult winter at Plymouth and conflicts between the group and native peoples did eventually arise, the local Wampanoags were instrumental in contributing to the group's survival by teaching them to grow corn and providing other early support for the struggling Pilgrims.

Bradford continues by pointing out the massive difficulties facing the arriving *Mayflower* passengers. He recalls the pessimistic comments of captain and crew as they sought to find a suitable landing spot in a timely manner so that the ship could return to England before its food supplies ran too low; Bradford records that the crew even threatened at time to "turne them [the Pilgrims] and their goods ashore and leave them,"



presumably without regard for whether the group was pleased with the location where they were left. He reiterates the extreme emptiness of the landscape in terms of available assistance, emphasizing their recognition that they had left their friends and family far behind. Bradford also wryly acknowledges that the possibility of help from the group's professed backers was slim by pointing out that "how the case stode betweene them and the marchanta at their coming away" had already been discussed.

Thus, Bradford saw the blessing of God and Providence as the sole possibility of not just spiritual but also worldly salvation for the troubled migrants, declaring that "the spirite of God and his grace" were the only saving factors remaining. He speaks more or less directly to the descendents of the original traveling party—one of the few times that Bradford clearly addresses a specific audience—to recall the great sacrifices that the Pilgrims had been willing to make and the extent to which God stepped in to preserve his faithful followers in the brutal New England land. Another series of comparisons between the Old Testament and the plight of the Pilgrims follows, as Bradford speaks of the "hand of the oppressour," a likely reference to both the Egyptians who enslaved the Hebrews and the religious persecutors of the Pilgrims. With this phrase, Bradford again conjures the images of Moses leading his followers in the "deserte willdernes," here equated with the English arrival in the wilds of Cape Cod.

In his work, Bradford also recounts civil matters. These excerpts contain passages covering the decision to draft and sign the Mayflower Compact, widely considered one of the early inspirations for later US political principles such as consent of the governed and the social contract. Unlike the more philosophical notions of good government promulgated by the framers of the US Constitution and other national founding documents, however, the Mayflower Compact was an agreement born largely of necessity. The strangers made up nearly half of the passengers, and among their number was the *Mayflower's* governor, Christopher Martin. Martin had long clashed with Pilgrim leaders. The group's financial backers had named him a purchasing agent, and in this role, he shared the responsibility for acquiring needed supplies for the lengthy voyage. Martin, however, had refused to work with the Pilgrim organizers, causing chief organizer Robert Cushman to complain about the tensions among them during the summer of 1620. Certainly, Martin thought poorly of

the Pilgrims and treated them with little respect in the months before the journey. Documentary evidence records that Cushman continued to fret over Martin's insults and unwillingness to work with the Pilgrims, so much so that the Pilgrim leader began to worry that the settlement was doomed to failure over the divisions between the groups and their inadequate provisioning for what was expected to be a difficult first several months of settlement.

Matters worsened as the voyage at last began. The structural problems of the Pilgrims' second ship, the *Speedwell*, caused the party to stop for repairs not long after departing Southampton, England. The ship was eventually abandoned, and the passengers who elected to continue the voyage—the pessimistic Cushman was not among them—were forced to crowd onto the *Mayflower*. The last-minute Pilgrim defections meant that they now comprised just half of the ship's passengers, and the ship swap meant that they fell under the governorship of the unpleasant Martin. The rift grew during the long and difficult journey across the ocean, so much so that by the time they landed Bradford noted that some of the strangers were making "discontented and mutinous speeches" in which they announced their intention to break away from the Pilgrim group and "use their owne libertie." The strangers, Bradford notes, justified this decision by the ship's distance from its intended arrival point in Virginia, for which the group had initially received a patent to settle from the Virginia Company. Because they instead landed in New England, the strangers claimed that "none had power to command them."

Others among the strangers, particularly those with close ties to the financial backers and thus a more vested interest in the success of the enterprise, joined with the Pilgrims to agree that dividing their limited ranks was a recipe for overall disaster. Thus, the disparate passengers agreed to form a united bond in the hopes of ensuring their mutual survival through the difficult period ahead. Although the Pilgrims were a religious group, the strangers were decidedly not; it is therefore unsurprising that the agreed-upon Mayflower Compact was secular in nature. Historians have also noted that the decision to form a secular "civill body politick" may have reflected the Pilgrims' long tenure in the Netherlands, where the state rather than the church controlled institutions such as marriage, as well as their experiences with state-sponsored religious persecution in England.

The local government formed by the agreement was not an especially radical one. Bradford notes that the group affirmed their status as “loyall subjects of our dread sovereigne.” The document also emphasized the importance of the success of the community above the power of any one person or group, with signers affirming their “due submission and obediente” to the overall good of the colony and agreeing to abide by the “lawes, ordinances, act, constitutions, and offices” determined by the local government. The document also reflected the church covenants typically used by Pilgrim congregations, which allowed male members to elect their religious leaders. Nearly all of the adult males on the *Mayflower* signed the document, although Bradford does not reproduce their names. He does, however, go on to note that the assembled signatories elected John Carver, the remaining Pilgrim organizer of the journey, as the colony’s new governor; this likely reflected the Pilgrims’ great desire to prevent Martin from becoming the head of their religious colony.

Yet this covenant did not assure the overall success of the colony, despite their best intentions. Bradford acknowledges that the Mayflower Compact was not perfect, and that “some discontents and murmurings” continued to plague the group as they began their settlement. He praises the recently elected Carver for his efforts to hold the group together, although the governor fell victim to the harsh winter that Bradford baldly states halved the surviving *Mayflower* passengers. This group did not include Bradford’s own wife, who had drowned in what scholars have speculated was a suicide while the ship sought a place for a permanent settlement. Although Bradford does not mention this event in his history, his sorrow at the event surely colored his interpretation of the surrounding times.

These times, Bradford claims, were inordinately difficult ones that the group survived only through the intervention of a handful of healthy people acting under the divine influence of God. The difficulties of the journey had weakened many of the travelers, leaving them susceptible to the cold weather and the spread of disease brought on at least in part by inadequate nutrition; Bradford attributes that the relative health of the few who were spared illness to the hand of God, who “so upheld these persons” to care for their companions. Bradford, who adhered to the Christian belief that those who had achieved salvation such as the Pilgrims would flourish in the afterlife, suggested that

even those who died had received their proper reward in heaven.

Bradford draws a sharp contrast between those Pilgrims who “willingly and cherfully” cared for their sickened companions and those sailors who Bradford saw as selfishly refusing to help their ersatz community. In recounting a “remarkable passage” in which a sailor refused to share a small quantity of beer with an ill colonist and then the crew themselves rapidly began to fall ill, Bradford emphasizes the potential punishments that could befall those who did not adhere to the Pilgrim value of community that he himself so treasured. The efforts of the community changed some of the sailors’ minds. Bradford tells that the captain rapidly saw the error of his ways by offering to “send for beer” for those ill people who required it, even if the captain himself “drunke water homward bound.” Another crew member who had looked down on the Pilgrims proclaimed the value of their work to “shew your love like Christians indeed” after receiving care from some Pilgrims still aboard the ship. Other crew members resisted the call to engage in the community spirit that Bradford hailed and paid the price. Bradford describes one sailor who promised to name another his heir if he helped him while he was sick. The presumed heir did so but was greatly angered when the sick man did not die quickly enough and then refused to continue to feed him, causing the invalid to die promptly. Such examples were certainly intended to illustrate the nobility of the Pilgrims and their community, which Bradford had, by the time of writing, led as governor for many years.

Throughout *Of Plymouth Plantation* Bradford seems to be addressing an intended historical audience. The gap between composition and publication makes the exact audience that Bradford had in mind somewhat unclear, however. He writes of himself and his fellow Pilgrims objectively, coloring events somewhat with his own interpretation but not overly aggrandizing his own contributions to the Plymouth Colony. This may suggest that Bradford intended the history to stand as an enduring record rather than as a personal exercise. Scholars have proposed a number of potential intended audiences, ranging from members of the Pilgrims’ congregation that remained in the Netherlands to the younger generation of Plymouth colonists to fellow New Englanders living in the nearby Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The language of the Bible has been identified as an influence on Bradford’s rhetorical style. Although the



complexity of the archaic language employed in the original seventeenth-century manuscript might intimidate the modern reader, historians and literary scholars alike have praised Bradford's writing for its simple, direct style as well as for its author's humor and personal touches. Many scholars have noted the rhetorical connections between Bradford's text and the style of the Geneva Bible, a Protestant Bible commonly used before the creation of the King James Version.

Throughout the work, Bradford held true to the style of Pilgrim historical writing that sought to show the divine hand of Providence in shaping earthly events. Yet he also showed in other sections of the history a clear awareness of the influence of the acts of humans upon their own existence. By the end of the complete work, Bradford has begun to ruminate on the failures of the Pilgrims to create a colony that lived up to the mission set to them by God. *Of Plymouth Plantation* thus provides opportunities for not just historical consideration of the events surrounding the settlement of the first New England colony, but also for examining the motives and beliefs of one of its leading members.

### Essential Themes

Scholars have long looked to Bradford's journal as a source on Pilgrim history, culture, politics, and society. As a result, *Of Plymouth Plantation* has done a great deal to establish both academic and popular ideas about the Pilgrims in the American mind. Although the manuscript was unpublished, it was available to early historians such as Thomas Prince, who relied on it as a source for his eighteenth-century *Chronological History of New England*. Bradford's focus on the strengths of the Pilgrim community at Plymouth and the attention paid to his history have thus long contributed to the notion of the Pilgrim Fathers as the nation's original founders despite their eventual overshadowing by the nearby—and more successful—Massachusetts Bay Colony. Bradford's complete *Of Plymouth Plantation* also stands as the primary account of the nation's first Thanksgiving, a ritual enshrined in US culture and identity centuries after its occurrence. In the twentieth century, historian Francis J. Bremer acknowledged Bradford and his dedication to his Pilgrim community as a driving force behind continued interest in Pilgrim history in modern times.

Also contained within Bradford's history is the highly influential Mayflower Compact. Because the original document containing the Mayflower Compact did

not survive, Bradford's re-creation of its language in *Of Plymouth Plantation* provides the standard text for this pivotal source. Although at heart a practical agreement born largely out of sheer necessity, the Mayflower Compact has long been acknowledged as one of the founding documents of the United States. Speaking in 1802, John Quincy Adams hailed the Mayflower Compact as "perhaps the only instance in human history of that positive, original social compact, which speculative philosophers have imagined as the only legitimate source of government." This free association into a self-governing group certainly provided a philosophical inspiration for Revolutionary leaders who sought to create a government based on the principles of consent of the governed and the promotion of the common good; it also provided a model for the New England style of town hall government that has persisted from the colonial era into contemporary society. Historian Nathaniel Philbrick has argued that the most noteworthy thing about the signing of the Mayflower Compact was not its contents but its reflection of the Pilgrims' decision to address brewing discontent through political discourse and agreement rather than through military force.

Yet the Mayflower Compact's short-term impact was in fact somewhat limited. The group that sailed on the *Mayflower* did organize into a "civill body politick" as outlined in the Mayflower Compact, but their actual authority to do so was more truly affirmed the following year when the Council of New England, under the auspices of the English monarch, approved the Pilgrims' heretofore questionably legal settlement at Plymouth and acknowledged their right of self-government. Thus, the Mayflower Compact remained in effect for only a brief time.

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### Additional Reading

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## LESSON PLAN: Plymouth Plantation

Students analyze excerpts from William Bradford's history of Plymouth and formulate ideas about what might have or have not happened if the Pilgrims had reached their intended destination.

### Learning Objectives

Describe religious groups and the role of religions in colonial America; appreciate historical perspectives; analyze how the rise of individualism contributed to the idea of participatory government; use details in the excerpt to challenge arguments of historical inevitability.

**Materials:** *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Excerpt: "The Pilgrims Land in Plymouth"; *Powhatan and John Smith Exchange Views*.

### Overview Questions

What motivated Bradford and the Pilgrims to travel to America? What events led to the drafting of the Mayflower Compact? How does the practicality of the compact foreshadow later American documents? How could other decisions in November 1620 have had different consequences?

### Step 1: Comprehension Questions

How does the Puritan ethic shape Bradford's prose? Why were the Pilgrims on the *Mayflower*?

- **Activity:** On printed copies of the document, have students highlight religious references. Discuss the references. Have students discuss why Seneca is mentioned. Have students highlight details of Puritan pre-voyage history. Discuss the potential practical effects of that history at the Mayflower's landing.

### Step 2: Context Questions

What things specifically led Bradford and others to understand the crisis they faced? Who were the strangers and how did they influence events?

- **Activity:** Have students each write a list of reasons why *Mayflower* passengers were facing a crisis after reaching New England. Discuss how Bradford characterizes the strangers.

### Step 3: Context Questions

What did the Mayflower Compact do? What concessions did Puritan leaders make in the creation of the document?

- **Activity:** Choose a student to read the compact aloud; have students discuss the Pilgrim attitude toward King James and why he is mentioned. Discuss what rights the compact gave

to the strangers. How might compact compromises set a precedent for America's founding documents?

### Step 4: Exploration Questions

How might have a Virginia landing affected the Pilgrim's fate? How might a Virginia landing have led to different political consequences in America?

- **Activity:** Have students discuss what the realities described in *Powhatan and John Smith Exchange Views* suggest about an alternative history for the Pilgrims. Direct students to outline how Pilgrim and American history might have been different if the Pilgrims had landed in Virginia.

### Step 5: Response Paper

Word length and additional requirements set by Instructor. Students answer the research question in the Overview Questions. Students state a thesis and use as evidence passages from the primary source document as well as support from supplemental materials assigned in the lesson.