

# Colonial America: Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving



THE GILDER LEHRMAN  
INSTITUTE *of* AMERICAN HISTORY



# Colonial America: Pilgrims, the Mayflower Compact, and Thanksgiving

BY TIM BAILEY

## 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- Analyze and summarize the content and purpose of historical documents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 journey of the Pilgrims to America in the fall of 1620 was the culmination of a series of events that had begun decades before, when King Henry VIII abandoned the Roman Catholic Church and established the Church of England. During his reign and the reign of his daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, it became illegal to practice any religion other than that of the Church of England. A group known as Separatists demanded that they be allowed to practice religion as they chose. This was not tolerated by the English government and the group found it necessary to leave the country. They relocated to Holland, and although they could practice their religion there, life was difficult. They stayed in the Netherlands for more than a decade, but with a Dutch-Spanish war looming and a fear that their children were losing their family traditions, the Separatists decided to make a pilgrimage to 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 Setled 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.”





## Coming to America on the *Mayflower*

In the early 1600s a group of English men and women called Separatists were living in Holland. They had moved there because in England they did not have religious freedom and were forced to belong to the Church of England. They did not believe in the Church of England, so they decided to separate from that church and go to Holland where they could worship God as they chose. But after living in Holland for a while these people began to think that their children were losing their family traditions and becoming too much like the Dutch. They decided that they needed to move again. This time they would go somewhere where they could raise their children as they chose and no one could tell them what religion they had to follow. They chose to sail to the New World—America.

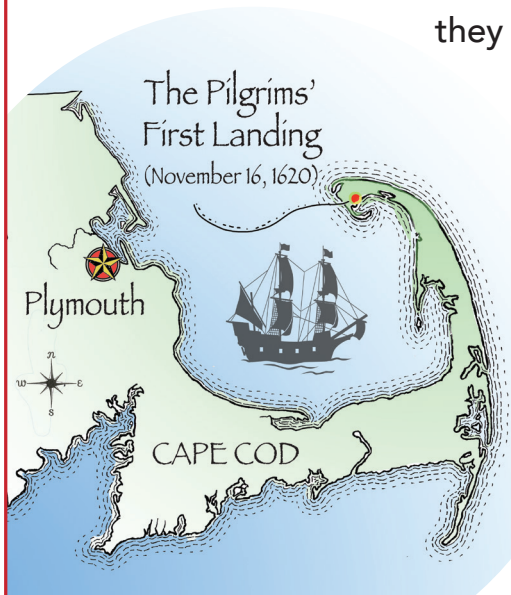
These people, who we now call Pilgrims, hired two ships to take them to America. The two ships were the *Mayflower* and the *Speedwell*. The Pilgrims made an agreement with the Virginia Company to build a settlement in Virginia and begin a new life in America. After loading the two ships with food, water, and other supplies the Pilgrims set sail for America in August 1620. Almost immediately the *Speedwell* began leaking. The Pilgrims had to turn around and sail back to England to fix the ship. Over two weeks passed before the *Speedwell* was ready. On August 21, 1620, the Pilgrims set off again for America. But soon water was again leaking into the *Speedwell*. After sailing nearly 300 miles toward America they had to turn back again. This time the Pilgrims decided to leave the *Speedwell* in England and sail to America with just one ship, the *Mayflower*.



Of course, putting all of the supplies and all of the people from two ships onto one ship made the *Mayflower* very crowded. There were now about 130 people on the small ship, 102 of them Pilgrims. On September 6, 1620, the *Mayflower* set sail once again for America. Unfortunately, because of the delay, the *Mayflower* was going to cross the Atlantic Ocean during the dangerous stormy season.

The first few weeks of the voyage went fairly well. The only real problem was seasickness among many of the Pilgrims. It was cold, wet, and very uncomfortable aboard the ship.

Then violent storms began pounding on the little ship. One man was washed overboard during a storm and was only saved by grabbing a rope and being pulled back onboard. The *Mayflower* began to take on water and a wooden beam cracked. The ship's crew quickly began to plug the cracks in the *Mayflower* and repair the broken beam. The storms pushed the ship farther and farther north. When the storms finally ended the Pilgrims and the crew of the *Mayflower* found themselves hundreds of miles north of where they were supposed to be. But there was some good news as well. A baby was born to Elizabeth Hopkins during the voyage. She named him Oceanus. On November 11, 1620, the *Mayflower* stopped at Cape Cod. It had been sixty-six days since they left England.

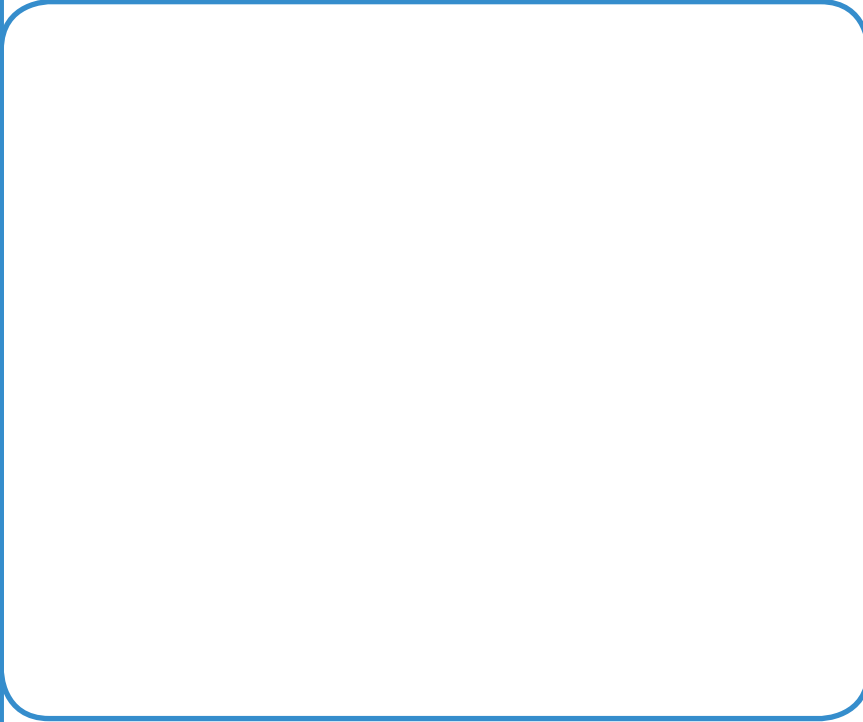


The Pilgrims decided to build their settlement near Cape Cod in a place they named Plymouth. The *Mayflower* stayed in Plymouth through the winter as the Pilgrims built their houses, and the ship finally returned to England on April 5, 1621.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Period \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Telling the Story in Six Parts**

Number your drawing here \_\_\_\_\_.



Write your caption here.

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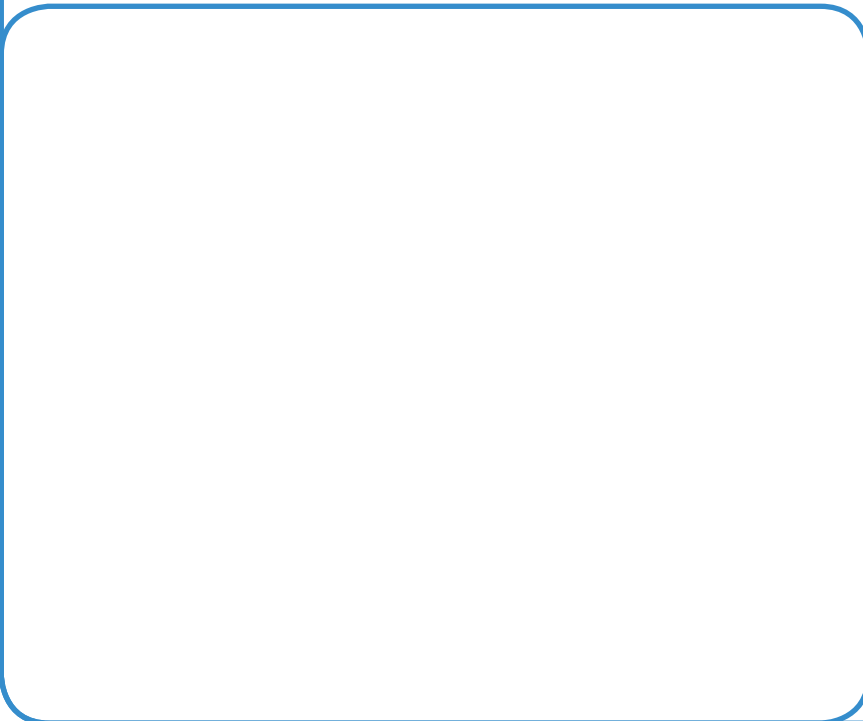
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## The Mayflower Compact

In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal Subjects of our dread sovereign Lord King JAMES, by the grace of God of Great *Britain, France, and Ireland* King, Defender of the Faith, &c.

Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian Faith, and honor of our King and Country, a Voyage to plant the first Colony in the Northern parts of VIRGINIA, do by these presents solemnly & mutually in the presence of *God* and one of another, covenant, and combine ourselves together into a civil body politick, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid; and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, acts, constitutions, offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony: unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names, *Cape Cod* 11. of *November*, in the year of the reign of our sovereign Lord King JAMES, of *England, France, and Ireland*, 18. and of *Scotland* 54. Anno Domini 1620.

John Carver	Richard Warren	Francis Eaton	Richard Britteridge
William Bradford	John Howland	James Chilton	George Soule
Edward Winslow	Stephen Hopkins	John Crackstone	Richard Clark
William Brewster	Edward Tilley	John Billington	Richard Gardiner
Isaac Allerton	John Tilley	Moses Fletcher	John Allerton
Miles Standish	Francis Cook	John Goodman	Thomas English
John Alden	Thomas Rogers	Digory Priest	Edward Doten
Samuel Fuller	Thomas Tinker	Thomas Williams	Edward Leister
Christopher Martin	John Ridgdale	Gilbert Winslow	
William Mullins	Edward Fuller	Edmond Margeson	
William White	John Turner	Peter Brown	

## Analyzing the Mayflower Compact

The Mayflower Compact	The Mayflower Compact Analysis
<p>In the name of God, Amen.  We . . . the loyal Subjects of  our dread sovereign Lord King  JAMES . . .</p>	<p>Who wrote this compact?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>Having undertaken for the glory  of God, and advancement of  the Christian Faith, and honor of  our King and Country, a Voyage  to plant the first Colony in the  Northern parts of VIRGINIA,</p>	<p>Why did they take a voyage?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>do by these presents solemnly  &amp; mutually in the presence  of <i>God</i> and one of another,  covenant, and combine  ourselves together into a civil  body politick,</p>	<p>What action are they taking?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p>for our better ordering and  preservation, and furtherance of  the ends aforesaid . . .</p>	<p>Why are they doing this?</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>







## Excerpts from a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621

Loving, and old Friend,

[W]e have built seven dwelling houses . . . and have made preparation for divers others. We set the last spring some twenty acres of Indian corn, and sowed some six acres of barley and peas, and according to the manner of the Indians, we manured our ground with herrings . . . which we have in great abundance . . .

Our corn did prove well, & God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn . . . our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a more special manner rejoice together, after we had gathered the fruit of our labors . . . at which time amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and amongst the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain, and others. And although it be not always so plentiful, as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want, that we often wish you partakers of our plenty. We have found the Indians very faithful in their covenant of peace with us . . . it hath pleased God so to possess the Indians with a fear of us, and love unto us, that not only



the greatest king amongst them called Massasoit, but also all the princes and peoples round about us, have either made suit unto us, or been glad of any occasion to make peace with us . . . so that there is now great peace amongst the Indians themselves, which was not formerly, neither would have been but for us; and we for our parts walk as peaceably and safely in the wood, as in the highways in England, we entertain them familiarly in our houses, and they as friendly bestowing their venison on us. They are a people without any religion, or knowledge of any God, yet very trusty, quick of apprehension, ripe-witted . . .

I never in my life remember a more seasonable year, than we have here enjoyed . . . For fish and fowl, we have a great abundance, fresh cod in the summer is but coarse meat with us, our bay is full of lobsters all the summer, and affordeth variety of other fish . . . all the springtime the earth sendeth forth naturally very good sallet herbs: here are grapes, white and red, and very sweet and strong also. . . . [T]he country wanteth only industrious men to employ, for it would grieve your hearts (if as I) you had seen so many miles together by goodly rivers uninhabited, and withal to consider those parts of the world wherein you live, to be even greatly burdened with abundance of people. . . . I forbear further to write for the present, hoping to see you by the next return, so I take my leave, commending you to the Lord for a safe conduct unto us. Resting in Him  
Plymouth in New England this 11 of December, 1621.

Your loving friend  
E. W.

Source: *Relation or Iournall of the Beginning and Proceedings of the English Plantation Setled at Plimoth in New England, by Certaine English Aduenturers both Merchants and Others* (London: John Bellamie, 1622), 60–64.



## Analyzing a Letter by Edward Winslow, December 11, 1621

### Critical Thinking Questions

Use quotations from the text in the answers to these questions.

1. Whose planting technique did the Pilgrims copy?

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2. Why did the governor send "four men on fowling" (to go bird hunting)?

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3. What did Chief Massasoit and his men bring to the celebration?

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4. According to Winslow, what is the Pilgrims' relationship with the American Indians?

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5. According to Winslow, are the Pilgrims afraid of the American Indians or are the Indians afraid of the Pilgrims?

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6. What kinds of food are there for the Pilgrims to eat?

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7. Does Winslow want more people to come to America?

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8. Using evidence from the text, where do you think Edward Winslow's friend might live?

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