

Fitzgerald

Puritans and The Massachusetts Bay Company - Reading

Based on [http://www.greatmigration.org/new\\_englands\\_great\\_migration.html](http://www.greatmigration.org/new_englands_great_migration.html)

Two groups were involved in what is known as “The Great Migration” to Massachusetts: the Pilgrims and the Puritans. The Great Migration is said to have started in 1620, when the Separatists, also known as Pilgrims, arrived on *The Mayflower* and founded Plymouth Colony. The Puritans, however, actually had a charter for the land and started the colony of Massachusetts. The Puritans were a more moderate religious group who wanted to “purify,” or reform, the Church of England, not separate from it.

The peak years of the Great Migration actually began ten years later and lasted just over ten years, from 1629 to 1640. In 1629, King Charles I, a Catholic, closed down Parliament, the British legislature. The King wanted to stop Puritan leaders in Parliament from passing laws to reform the Church of England. The King also punished Puritans. Puritan leaders then formed the Massachusetts Bay Company and asked for a charter to start their own colony in America. The King gave them the charter because he was happy to see them go. They wanted their colony to be a model to England of what they had been stopped from establishing there, a “City Upon a Hill.” During the ten years that followed, over twenty thousand men, women, and children left England to settle permanently in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1640, when Parliament was allowed to start meeting again, Puritan migration to New England dropped sharply, as Puritans began again to work to change the church in England.

But the term “Great Migration” was used not just to refer to the high number of Puritans who came; it also referred to the important purpose they came to achieve. The Puritans wanted to achieve spiritual as well as economic rewards. Unlike colonists to other areas, those who migrated to New England had had prosperous lives in England. In fact, coming to America was a greater economic risk to them than staying. Puritans traded economic advantage and stability in a corrupt England for the opportunity to live more pious and worthy lives in a Puritan colony.

Most Puritans traveled to Massachusetts in family groups. In fact, the percentage of Puritans who traveled in family groups is the highest in American immigrant history. Consequently, New England retained a normal balance of different generations and relatively equal numbers of men and women. At the time they left England, many husbands and wives were in their thirties and had three or more children, with more yet to be born. This situation contrasts with that of the southern colonies, which were populated primarily by single young men. In the Chesapeake Bay area, even at the end of the 1600s, there were still far more men than women.

Puritans shared other distinctive characteristics. New Englanders had a high level of literacy, perhaps nearly twice that of England as a whole. This was caused by the fact that Puritans felt it was necessary for all Christians to read the Bible themselves on a daily basis. Puritans began teaching their children to read as toddlers, and both men and women were literate. New Englanders were also highly skilled; more than half of the settlers were artisans or craftsmen. Only about seventeen percent came as servants. In contrast, seventy-five percent of Virginia’s population arrived as servants. Finally, a larger percentage of Puritan settlers in New England were from cities in England, not rural areas, than in any other region in the American colonies.

The Great Migration colonists were primarily middle class; only a few were rich or poor, which was very unlike the settlers in Virginia, who tended to have been wealthy gentlemen with land or poor servants in England. English emigrants in search of economic opportunity were unlikely to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Similarly, those already rich saw little opportunity to increase their wealth in such a harsh region with no obvious cash crop. The result of all of this was a remarkably homogeneous population, one in which colonists shared very similar backgrounds and views.

The voyage to Massachusetts was an experience most Puritan immigrants had in common. The majority of emigrants lived within a few days travel of the port from which they left England. Ships left from several ports along the English coast. Most emigrant ships left England in March or April, allowing enough time for the journey and the ship’s return trip to England before cold weather began again. An average ocean crossing lasted from eight to ten weeks but the time of the voyage could vary greatly, from a trip of just thirty-eight days to one of six months.

Once in New England, the settlers usually spent the entire first winter in the port town at which they arrived or another established town. After gathering information about possible places to settle, they spread out into towns throughout the colony. The charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony had limited the size of towns. When a town reached its prescribed limit. It was closed, and new towns had to form. So most Puritan immigrants moved to a new town, generally one less than two years old. The key to success was arriving early enough after a town was founded to share in the original land distribution because each town was given a certain amount of land and that land was distributed as the people arrived to form the town. The first settlers tended to receive the best and largest land grants, as well as the right help decide on the future division and distribution of the remaining land. This system provided a reasonable fair process for dividing land.

Fortunately for new arrivals, the frontier continued expanding, and many new towns formed during the lifetimes of the original settlers. Settlement expanded from Boston both the north and the south, along the coast. The colonists first occupied land cleared by previous Native inhabitants. After these more desirable areas were taken, settlers moved into increasingly difficult terrain. Twenty-three towns in Massachusetts were founded in the 1630s.

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Puritans also had formed a system for governing these towns. The church was to be the basis of government, thus there was no separation between government and religion in New England. Each town was centered around a single church, and the church was built on the town square of each town. The town was run through monthly, sometimes weekly, town meetings held in the church. All town members attended these meetings. All decisions to be made were discussed and voted on at the meeting. All male church members who held land in the town were allowed to speak and vote. It was felt that the man represented the opinion of the family, so women did not vote. It was also thought important that one hold land in order to vote. Thus, younger sons who did not yet hold land and male servants, did not vote; their views were represented by their fathers or masters. The laws that governed the town were decided at these meetings. The governing of the entire colony was done by the High Court, the name for the Massachusetts Bay Legislature, and a governor. Each town sent a representative to the High Court. The members of the High Court set rules for governing the colony and chose the governor, who executed those rules. The governor could choose his own group of advisors.

Another aspect of life in New England proved noteworthy: the remarkable health and longevity of the population. Many colonists lived to the age of seventy, and a substantial number lived to be eighty. This longevity is no doubt due to a variety of factors. Towns were separated from one another, limiting the spread of epidemic disease. The weather was cool, limiting mosquito-borne diseases, and there was clean air and water. People in New England ate a diverse diet. Finally, the original settlers had been healthy in England due to their middle class background. Infant and childhood mortality (death) rates were lower in New England, and the settlers produced large and healthy families, often having seven or more children! Accordingly, New England experienced tremendous population growth within the lifetime of first generation settlers.

Overall, Massachusetts Bay Colony settlers were able to attain a comfortable living for themselves and assure some measure of economic success for their children. Most owned houses and land. They ran subsistence farms, producing enough for their families, having, perhaps, a cow for milk and some meat, a hog, chickens, a small orchard, and a small field planted with diverse crops. Many Puritan families had members who lumbered, built ships, worked as sailors or captains, own shipping businesses, or owned a small business based on their skill as an artisan or craftsman, as they were tailors, butchers, brewers, shoemakers, silversmiths, blacksmiths, etc. Puritan families had sufficient farming equipment and household goods, and used their disposable income to purchase books, religious texts, instead of silverware, pottery or other niceties.

Though few Puritans were wealthy, most lived comfortable lives. Most settlers lived in circumstances similar to their neighbors. If one colonist was more prosperous than the others, his prosperity was likely to be seen in that he owned more land than in that he lived in a more fancy style than other people. Showing off one's wealth was not considered Godly. Puritans believed that this comfortable life they had achieved was a symbol to others of the correctness of their religious views. They were a "City on a Hill." Their life served as a model others should follow.