



SCHOLARSHIP COMPETITION WINNER

Education in Plymouth Colony

by
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Pilgrims in 1600s Plymouth Colony lived difficult lives that required a willingness to learn skills that were essential to survival. One aspect of life that this was highly reflected in was the Pilgrims' approach to educating their children. Rather than sending their children to what one would consider "traditional school" (which the Pilgrims did not even have access to), parents based their children's education around teaching them the skills that would keep them alive into their adulthood.

The Pilgrims wasted no time in getting their children accustomed to working. It was common for children to start learning how to herd chickens, bring water from wells to the colony, and run various errands by the time they were five years old. Parents had to get their children familiar with hard work for their own good, as anyone with an iota of laziness in their bones in a place like Plymouth would be in trouble, to put it lightly. Also, with a life expectancy of around 45 years old, Pilgrim parents did not have an endless amount of time to teach their kids the foundational skills and habits that would serve as training wheels until they became older and physically able to contribute more.

For boys, with age came more laborious tasks and much more responsibility. Rather than doing work simply to build good habits and contribute to smaller tasks, young men graduated to doing the work that would keep the colony's heart beating. Once they were a little older, boys would help their fathers ready the fields for planting, sow seeds, and harvest crops. They would also learn skills such as hunting, tending to livestock, fishing, and craftsmanship to build anything their families may have needed. On top of this, they were taught to be leaders, as they would one day have to provide for their families and teach their future children the same lessons they had been taught.

The older girls of Plymouth often learned and worked in tandem with their mothers, learning and mastering key skills that would be essential to keeping a family and household running smoothly. Girls learned how to garden, cook, preserve food, mend fabrics and clothing, and care for small children. Essentially, girls were taught everything they would need to know later in life in order to provide for their families on the home front while the men would be out in the fields. It was a crucial role that provided lots of experience, wisdom, and sacrifice.

Though Pilgrim parents put an emphasis on teaching their children the manual skills and tasks that would serve them later in life, they also often taught them academic skills from home such as reading and writing. This would usually be an evening activity after all the day's work was done and dusted. Most of the time, children learned how to read by reading the Bible, which was the most common book in Plymouth. Even though there were no schools in Plymouth, parents made an effort to educate their children as completely as possible and ready them for the challenges that they would face later in life.

Education meant far more than simply "school" to the Pilgrims; it meant preparing their children for the challenges that life in a new world would bring them. For Plymouth to function properly, children had to learn the skills and habits that would keep both them and their families alive from the time they were young in order to carry that same knowledge and mentality into their adult lives. This meant mastering tasks that would prove to be the backbone of Pilgrim daily life and ensure that the people of the colony were in good hands. The lack of an official school in Plymouth was not the result of the Pilgrims placing education in the back seat. In fact, it was the opposite; a traditional school was not a necessity, whereas learning how to exist and work as a familial unit and learning how to survive efficiently were the sort of things children needed to learn as opposed to grammar or complex math. Education was an enormous aspect of Pilgrim life in Plymouth, and I am proud to come from a people who valued teaching and learning as highly as my ancestors from The Mayflower did.