

Pilgrims and Puritans by Bennett Close

In the early years of the 17th century, many English colonists settled in North America. In New England two groups, the Pilgrims and the Puritans, travelled across the Atlantic in search of religious freedom. Although the Puritans and the Pilgrims had many religious and ideological differences, both valued religious freedom and played crucial roles in the development of America.

The Pilgrims landed in what is now modern day Massachusetts in 1620 after a long, crowded, and stormy journey across the Atlantic Ocean in search of religious freedom and with plans to start a new colony. The Pilgrims were motivated to leave England by their Protestant Calvinist beliefs and their desire to separate from the restrictive Church of England. As separatists, they hoped to establish a new colony in America in order to gain the freedom of religion that they could not obtain within England.

Ten years after the Pilgrims settled in New England, another group in search of religious freedom arrived known as the Puritans. Establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans did not desire to separate from the Church of England like the Pilgrims, but instead to “purify” it. Although they would not call themselves separatists or denounce the Church of England, their practices were extremely different. The non-separatist Puritans believed that the Church of England needed to be seriously reformed, not abandoned altogether. Many Puritans, such as John Winthrop, believed they could create a totally reformed and purified version of the English church in the new colony, demonstrated by Winthrop’s vision of a “city upon a hill.”

The two groups displayed a few obvious differences. Firstly, the Pilgrims were a separatist religious group; the Puritans were reformists. Pilgrims were mainly working class people, while the Puritans were of higher social and economic status. The two groups were also vastly different sizes. The Pilgrims were formed from a smaller religious group, arriving in New England with roughly 100 people. On the other hand, the Puritans left after King Charles dissolved the parliament in England and a rather large group of about 700 people sailed to the Massachusetts Bay Colony and were then followed by thousands more in the coming years. Due to their small population, lack of resources, and a harsh first winter, the Pilgrims also faced many more hardships during the early times in New England than the Puritans. In the first few months, nearly half of the original 102 people that had sailed over on the Mayflower had died, and it wasn’t until more ships arrived from England that the Plymouth Colony was able to grow.



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These differences aside, the Pilgrims and the Puritans had many things in common. Obviously, both left England for similar reasons regarding the Church of England. Both groups believed so strongly in their religious convictions that they were willing to leave their country and sail across the ocean to a largely unknown land in order to practice their religion.

In many ways, the Pilgrims were in fact “puritans” and the Puritans “pilgrims”. The Pilgrims held religious beliefs that incorporated many aspects of Puritanism. Although they called themselves separatists, the Pilgrims wanted reform in the Church of England; in other words, the Pilgrims wanted to “purify” the church. Similarly, the Puritans left England in search of a new land where they could openly practice their religion. In other words, the Puritans embarked on a “pilgrimage” to the new world. Clearly the names Pilgrim and Puritan are terms that we use to refer to specific groups of English people that travelled to New England in 1620 and 1630, but the definitions of the actual terms pilgrim and puritan can easily be applied to either group.

Both groups also played key roles in the establishment of America as an independent nation. Each established their own governments and colonies that grew until, eventually, they were combined into one territory. As the region of New England and the colonies became larger and larger, the conflict between the colonies and England became enough to demand independence. During the formation of this independent nation, the same religious freedom that both the Puritans and Pilgrims valued so highly became a central value in the foundation of the United States, and this idea of religious freedom is still essential in American society today.

Despite the obvious differences in size, class, and religion among other attributes, the Pilgrims and the Puritans actually had very much in common. While I am very proud to trace my ancestry back to the Mayflower, I am also very thankful for the Puritans, because without them I would not be able to live in the wonderful nation that I do today.

Bennett was notified of his selection as the winner and responded, “Thank you so much for this opportunity and I am very grateful to be selected as the winner. This scholarship will definitely help me a great deal financially. I look forward to attending the Compact Day! Thank you again,
Bennett Close