

Name _____

Date _____

From Europe to North America: The Saints

Read, highlight, and annotate the text to answer the question: Why did the Saints immigrate to North America?

In 1620, 102 English men and women departed for North America to start a new life in a colony that would come to be called Plymouth, Massachusetts. They traveled aboard a ship called the *Mayflower* for more than two months, eventually arriving on the stony coast of New England at what is today Provincetown, Massachusetts. On board the *Mayflower* were two groups, the Saints, a group who sought religious freedom, and the Strangers, who migrated for reasons other than religion. The story of the men, women, and children aboard the *Mayflower* is essential for understanding why people chose to come to North America in the 17th century.

The Saints were mostly from the middle class in England and were extremely devout Christians. They were Protestants, which means they protested many practices of the Catholic Church. Protestantism became the official religion in England during the reign of Henry VIII, who established the Church of England during the 1530s. The king became both the political and religious leader of the country. Though it was a Protestant church, the Church of England retained many elements of Catholicism. For example, ministers of local congregations were appointed by Bishops, as was done in the Catholic faith. But the Saints believed ministers should be elected by a local congregation, not appointed by Bishops. It could also be difficult to distinguish between Catholic and Anglican (Church of England) worship services. In both churches, priests adorned themselves in elaborate and expensive robes, called vestments, and placed great significance on ceremony.

Across Great Britain, many people advocated for reforms to the Church of England. Members of the church who believed it could be fixed, or “purified,” were called Puritans. The most radical Puritans, known as Separatists, wanted to separate themselves from all other Christians—including the Church of England—to truly follow the teachings of Jesus. Separatists believed that the Church of England was completely unholy and impossible to redeem. The Saints who traveled to North America aboard the *Mayflower* were Separatists.

In the decades before their voyage to North America, the Saints had many difficulties in England. In 1603, King James I was concerned that citizens who could advocate for separation from the Church of England could very well start a revolution against the king. James I began to harass Separatists—obstructing their ability to make a living, arresting some of their leaders, and limiting the places where they could live. Perhaps the most famous Saint, William Bradford,

From Europe to North America: The Saints, continued

explained that Separatists were “hunted and persecuted on every side, so as their former afflictions were as flea-bitings in comparison with these that now came upon them. For some were taken and clapt up in prison, others had their houses besett and watcht night and day, and hardly escaped their hands; and the most were faine to flie and leave their howses and habitations, and the means of their livelihood.”¹

The congregation of Saints that would later travel aboard the *Mayflower* moved to Holland in 1607 to escape the persecution in England. Holland was much more tolerant of religious dissent, and the Saints set to work in the clothing trades. The economic conditions in Holland were not ideal, however, because the Saints were not able to become citizens. Lack of citizenship limited their possibilities for employment and the group soon found itself in poverty. Moreover, the Saints began to worry about their children being influenced by non-believers, whom they called “Strangers.” Bradford explained that many of their children “were drawn away by evill examples into extravagante and dangerous courses.”²

By 1619 the Saints were ready for a fresh start in a place where they could practice their religion freely, secure the welfare of their children, and enjoy a better standard of living than they were able to achieve in Holland.

Having heard of the opportunity to establish a colony in North America through the writings of John Smith and other adventurers, the Saints briefly moved back to England and formed a plan to travel across the Atlantic and settle in the New World. The Saints had now come to believe that God was leading them to create a model English society, based on Protestantism, in the New World. They met with John Smith, who offered to take them to the bay of Massachusetts, but the group chose a different military adviser, Myles Standish, to accompany them on their voyage. In 1620, the Saints boarded the *Mayflower* and began their journey across the Atlantic and into history.

¹ William Bradford and William T. Davis, *Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation: 1606-1646*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 32.

² Bradford, 46.