

Beer

“Beer is proof that God wants us to be happy”
(Benjamin Franklin)

Drinking beer instead of water in Europe is documented as far back as the 1400s.

Rivers and other water sources were highly polluted, and Europeans feared drinking water due to waterborne disease.

This reasonable fear of drinking water continued through several generations and well into the 1600s, during the Colonial Era in North America. In England, and eventually the colonies, beer was a fundamental part of the everyday diet.

For the Pilgrims, “alcohol was to quench one’s thirst or to treat the sick.” (Deetz)

In England, almost all imbibed beer and it was brewed at home as well as breweries.

Beer was present in the American Colonies from the very beginning, including England’s first permanent settling of Virginia’s Jamestown in 1607. During this early settlement, individuals relied on incoming ships to bring beer and other supplies; there were no breweries yet built, nor were they agriculturally sufficient.

One settler, Thomas Studly, complained that “there remained neither tavern, beer house, nor place of relieve.”

The complaint of not having beer became a common occurrence during the Colonial Era. Due to inadequate supplies, it was not uncommon for colonists to trade stolen goods with sailors for beer and other everyday staples.

Farmers began planting barley along with food crops with plans of brewing beer. During this time, beer was seen as food, or “liquid bread.”

It is important to point out that beer in the 1600s contained an alcohol by volume (ABV) of around 6%. By today’s standards, that is a very normal percentage of alcohol. Today’s commonly sold beer ranges from as low as 3% up to 18% ABV.

Through the accounts of colonists, it is clear that beer is an everyday staple. Not only was beer an important part of a daily healthy diet for the English and English settlers, beer played a large role in the settling of the religious Pilgrims in Plymouth. (Leininger)

Beer was important for survival. In Colonial times, most people believed that water was bad for their health, and they weren’t wrong in thinking this. In London, drinking water directly from the South River could make a person sick and vomit.

The river water was brackish, meaning it was a mixture of salt and fresh water. Some people tried to dig wells to get water from the ground, but they often dug the wells too close to their privies. Privy, another

word for outhouse, is where they had their toilets. The contents of the privy would contaminate the water in the well.

When people drank well water they also got very sick. Germs, bacteria, and viruses had not been discovered during most of the 1700s, so people did not understand why they got sick. They just knew that water made them ill.

So instead of drinking water, many people drank fermented and brewed beverages like beer, ale, cider, and wine. Children drank something called 'small beer' (beer with low alcoholic content).

One of the first steps in brewing beer is to boil the water, which kills the germs and bacteria and makes it safe to drink. This first brewing has alcohol in it.

The ingredients were brewed again in a second and then a third batch of beer or ale (this is similar to us using the same tea bag to make a second and then a third cup of tea). The beer produced by this third brewing had almost no alcohol in it—this is the small beer that children would drink.

On average, an adult drank a gallon of ale a day. People in colonial times believed alcohol was good for your health and many doctors prescribed and sold alcohol to their patients.

Alcohol was consumed at social events, including business meetings, court hearings, and auctions. At funerals, it was expected alcohol would be served - typically in a large pot placed directly on the coffin. (University of Maryland, Baltimore (Center for History Education))

Beer was considered a food, which showed social status (only the most destitute drank water) and allowed for persons to put in a full day's work.

Franklin, while working in a printing house in London, was known as the "water American", because of his affinity to water, by his fellow printers who were,

"great guzzlers of beer ...

"My companions at the press drank every day a pint before breakfast with his bread and cheese, a pint between breakfast and dinner, a pint in the afternoon about six o'clock, and another when he had done his day's work." (Franklin, from Jewett)

Americans of the period believed it was particularly healthier to drink lukewarm alcohol during hot weather rather than drink cold water.

Signs were displayed at public wells warning individuals of the dangers of cold water during the summer.

The rationale for this is that when a person sweated, heat was conducted from the inside of the body. Therefore, the stomach needed warmth, which could be provided by alcohol.

Pilgrims were Beer Drinkers

The Pilgrims loaded more beer than water on the Mayflower.

William Wood, in New Englands Prospect noted that,

“every man have ship-provisions allowed him for his five pound a man, which is salt Beefe, Porke, salt Fish, Butter, Cheese, Pease, Pottage, Water-grewell, and such kinde of Victuals, with good Biskets, and sixe-shilling Beere”

And, there is some evidence that they were put off at Plymouth, rather than Virginia, because the ship's crew wished to make sure they had enough beer to consume on the return voyage. (Jewett)

The voyage took its toll on the Pilgrims. With provisions running low, including beer, supplies were rationed to ensure the survival of the passengers. In addition, water stores tended to spoil very quickly during sea voyages. Even if fresh water was available, it was unlikely that the passengers would have chosen to drink water.

The fact is, water stores were running low on the Mayflower and were becoming very questionable as they began to slime. With supplies dwindling further and hopes of settling Virginia now gone, the Pilgrims decided to land at the (now) famed Plymouth Rock, which then led to the writing of the Mayflower Compact.

The decision to land at Plymouth Rock can be partly contributed to the Mayflower's Captain, Christopher Jones. Captain Jones was to return to England after completing the Pilgrims expedition. Jones knew that crossing the Atlantic during the cold, cruel winter months was unwise.

Returning to England with enough supplies for his crew was a major concern of Captain Jones. Therefore, he made the decision to cut off the Pilgrims' remaining beer stores. Keeping the beer for the sailors was very important. Not only was beer nutritional, it also helped prevent sailors from getting scurvy.

Since there were no resupply of citrus, it was crucial the sailors had enough beer to get back to England.

Captain Jones planned to leave Plymouth immediately for England. Unfortunately, winter was here and Jones knew it would be a perilous journey back to England. The decision to stay meant that Jones had to cut the Pilgrims off of the beer stores. (Leininger)

People started getting sick and on Christmas Day, 1620, “we began to drink water aboard, but at night the master caused us to have some beer, and so on board we had divers times now and then some beer, but on shore none at all.” (Mourt)

Bradford notes,

As this calamitie fell among the passengers that were to be left here to plant, and were hasted a shore and made to drinke water, that the sea-men might have the more bear, and one in his sicknes desiring but a small cann of beere, it was answered, that if he were their owne father he should have none;

the disease begane to fall amongst them also, so as allmost halfe of their company dyed before they went away, and many of their officers and lustyest men, as the boatson, gunner, - 3-quartermaisters, the cooke, and others.

At which the m[aste]r was some-thing strucken and sent to the sick a shore and tould the Gov[erno]r he should send for beer for them that had need of it, though he drunke water homward bound. But now amongst his company ther was farr another kind of carriage in this miserie then amongst the passengers;

for they that before had been boone companions in drinking and joyllity in the time of their health and well-fare, begane now to deserte one another in this calamitie saing, they would not hasard ther lives for them, they should be infected by coming to help them in their cabins, and so, after they came to lye by it, would doe litle or nothing for them, but if they dyed let them dye. (Bradford)

The settlers who arrived in America in the early seventeenth century had to make do with water, however. Wood notes,

“[T]he Countrey it is as well watered as any land under the Sunne, every family, or every two families having a spring of sweet waters betwixt them, which is farre different from the waters of England, being not so sharpe, but of a fatter substance, and of a more jetty colour; ...

it is thought there can be no better water in the world, yet dare I not preferre it before good Beere, as some have done, but any man will choose it before bad Beere, Wheay, or Buttermilke.

Those that drinke it be as healthfull, fresh, and lustie, as they that drinke beere; These springs be not onely within land, but likewise bordering upon the Sea coasts, so that some times the tides overflow some of them, which is accounted rare in the most parts of England.

No man hitherto hath beene constrained to digge deepe for his water, or to fetch it farre, or to fetch of severall waters for severall uses; one kind of water serving for washing, and brewing and other things.

Now besides these springs, there be divers spacious ponds in many places of the Countrey, out of which runne many sweet streames, which are constant in their course both winter and summer, whereat the Cattle quench their thirst, and upon which may be built water mills, as the plantation encreases. (Wood)

The farther down the East Coast they settled, the warmer the climate, and the more likely the water to be contaminated with pathogenic bacteria.



Oak and birch tankard is believed to have belonged to Mayflower passenger Peter Browne. It is on display at the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth

The first contingent of permanent settlers arrived in Virginia in 1607. Six years later, according to a letter of appraisal written by a Spaniard to his government,

“There are about three hundred men there, more or less; and the majority sick and badly treated, because they have nothing but bread of maize, with fish; nor do they drink anything but water - all of which is contrary to the nature of the English - on which account they all wish to return and would have done so if they had been at liberty.”

A decade later a young English settler named Richard Ffrench wrote home to his parents to lament that “I am in a most heavy case ... I have nothing to comfort me, nor is there nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death.” He complained that whereas back in England people grew fat and healthy on strong beer, in Virginia they had to make do with water, which weakened those who drank it.

The settlers could not bring supplies of beer with them from England, because it took up valuable space in the cramped ships and it did not always arrive in drinkable form. The governor and council of Virginia complained more than once about “stinking beer” that had killed passengers and settlers alike.

In theory the colonists could have made their own beer. In England this was normally brewed from barley but it could also be made from other kinds of grain, including maize, which the Indians cultivated.

As early as 1585, members of the first, abortive settlement on Roanoke Island (off the coast of what is now North Carolina) managed to brew satisfactory beer from Indian maize. Moreover, the colonists of the early seventeenth century planted barley. So why did it take another generation to produce enough beer to fulfill the demands of the settlers?

In part, the answer is to be found in a proposal sent in 1620 to the Virginia Company back in London by a Mr. Russell for making “artificial wine” by boiling up sassafras and licorice together in water. Russell made great claims for the medicinal and keeping qualities of his product, which he said was necessary because “There is in Virginia ... three thousand people and the greatest want they complain of is good drink.”

Wine was too expensive, and barley had mostly to be imported from England. Even if more barley was grown in the colony, “it were hard in that country, being so hot, to make malt of it, or if they had malt to make good beer.”

The obstacle was the climate. Not until the introduction of artificial refrigeration two and a half centuries later was a solution found to the problem of producing beer in the warm and humid conditions of the American South.

In the light of the experience of the settlers in Virginia, it is hardly surprising that in 1619, when the Pilgrims were mulling over the possibility of emigrating to America, one of the first doubts they raised was that “the change of air, diet, and drinking of water would infect their bodies with sore sicknesses and grievous diseases.”

When they did eventually reach America, they were not intending to land at Cape Cod, but farther south; they had to settle on the Massachusetts coast because the supply of beer was running short.

The sailors who had brought the Pilgrims over hastened them ashore and made them drink water because they wanted to keep the remaining beer to themselves - believing, apart from anything else, that it helped to prevent scurvy.

The Pilgrims might not have wanted to settle as far north as they did, but, as a result, they found water of much better quality than the Virginia settlers had been compelled to consume.

According to William Bradford, who became the governor of the colony, they found the first water they drank "as pleasant to them as wine or beer had been in foretimes." This was hardly surprising, because they were suffering greatly from thirst.

They would have preferred beer, but they were generally prepared to put up with water. Forced to drink water through lack of choice, they found that it was not as bad as they had imagined. In the opinion of one of their number, William Wood,

"It is thought there can be no better water in the world, yet dare I not prefer it before good beer, as some have done, but any man will choose it before bad beer.... Those that drink it be as healthful, fresh, and lusty as they that drink beer."

By the 1630s, however, the colonists had begun to brew some beer, made from malted barley shipped from England. By this time, too, the health of the Virginia settlers had much improved.

With the introduction of a more regular supply of beer, wine, and cider, the high death rate among the colonists, which would have rendered the settlement impossible to sustain in the long term, fell dramatically.

It was not just a more sensible choice of drinks that explained the better health of the colonists: They also reduced their consumption of oysters and clams during the summer, when these were more likely to be contaminated with harmful bacteria.

The Virginians themselves did not realize why they were healthier and believed that the change should be attributed to an improvement in the climate as a result of forest clearance.

Once the colonists had found better things to drink, they abandoned water precisely because they associated it with the privations of the early days. Roger Clap, who emigrated to New England as part of the Great Migration of 1630, later recalled in his Memoirs that "in the beginning many were in great straits for want of provision.... In those days God did cause his people ... to be contented with mean things. It was not accounted a strange thing in those days to drink water." (Barr in NY Times)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young