

Early Colonial Towns

It does not seem difficult to find out the reasons why the people multiply faster here than in Europe. As soon as a person is old enough he may marry in these provinces without any fear of poverty.

There is such an amount of good land yet uncultivated that a newly married man can, without difficulty, get a spot of ground where he may comfortably subsist with his wife and children. The taxes are very low, and he need not be under any concern on their account.

The liberties he enjoys are so great that he considers himself as a prince in his possessions.
(Peter Kalm, Swedish traveler in New Jersey, 1748; National Humanities Center)

For centuries, the feudal structure of northern Europe had been based on well-demarcated villages with open-field agricultural land held in common.

The era of enclosure, in which common land was divided into private holdings and the peasantry scattered across the landscape, was beginning to revolutionize the English countryside, shattering old forms of rural life that had previously bound people closely to both the land and the social patterns that land supported.

When the early settlers first sailed for North America, they left England at just the moment when two ancient forms of geographic organization — the manorial town and the parish — were disintegrating.

The first colonists brought with them premodern templates of village organization, and infused them with 17th-century ideas about theocratic utopianism and municipal incorporation, leading to a geographic order in the form of nucleated settlements — they were clustered around a central point, both physically compact and socio-politically bound together. (National Humanities Center)

The physical environment also reinforced their ideological bias for clustered communities: New England was poorly suited for large-scale agriculture, with few opportunities for the mass natural-resource exploitation that had motivated earlier waves of European imperialism in the New World.

In addition, the colonists were well aware of the threat of raids from native confederations and fortified themselves against the Wampanoags, Narragansetts, and Pequots.

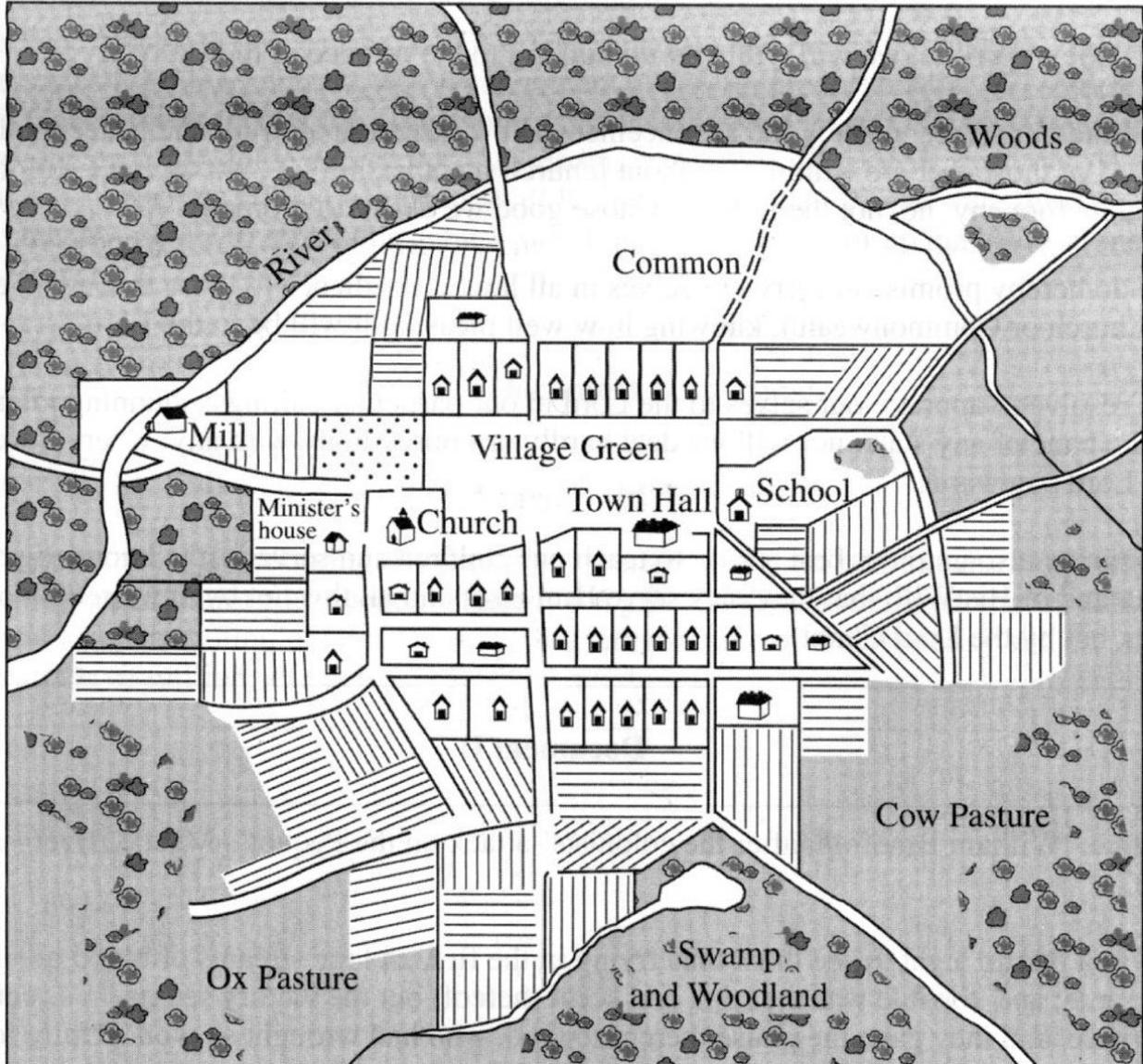
For all these reasons, the New England town developed early on as a distinct kind of socio-spatial unit: a political, religious and social community laid out as a single cell: physically compact and institutionally bound together. (Places Journal)

In 1700 Jamestown was 93 years old, Charleston 37 years old, and Philadelphia only 19 years old. There were two Jerseys but only one Carolina, and Georgia wouldn't be settled until 33 years later.

From 260,000 settlers in 1700, the colonial population grew eight times to 2,150,000 in 1770. (In comparison, the French colonial population grew from 15,000 to 90,000 in 1775, i.e., just 4% of the English total.) In fact, the English colonial population doubled almost every 25 years in the 1700s. (National Humanities Center)

Early Colonial town laws governed not only proper moral behavior, but also decisions about land use, the siting of houses, and the allocation of common resources. Many early settlements were forts surrounded by walls for protection from the natives as well as other colonial powers like France and Spain.

TOWN MAP, COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND



The layout of towns or villages differed. Towns typically started on a river – they needed a water source, it was also used to turn the mill. Many were on the coast where the harbor was an important place of trade and business.

Early land records used the phrase “common lands” to signify both ungranted, undeveloped land and shared land that was used for pasture or agriculture. In addition, the term was used to describe open spaces, although public gathering areas were also called greens. The early central town commons were used for burying grounds and grazing land, in some cases with a pen or “close” for enclosing animals brought in from pasture (also to gather cattle in the event of Indian attack. (National Gallery of Art)

Places and Buildings in Colonial Towns

Meetinghouse

One of the first buildings built in many early colonial American towns was the meetinghouse.

The meetinghouse served both as the church and as the meeting place for the citizens to discuss issues and make plans. Everyone in the town was responsible for helping to build and maintain the meetinghouse.

Larger cities would often have a courthouse where the local judge would oversee disputes and punish crimes. After hearing the evidence and testimony, the judge would quickly make his ruling and any punishments could be carried out immediately.

Church

The church was often the center of the town. Everyone in the town was expected, sometimes by law, to attend church on Sunday. Churches in Colonial America were generally fairly simple buildings.

Houses

The houses built by the first English settlers in America were small single room homes. Many of these homes were "wattle and daub" homes. They had wooden frames which were filled in with sticks. The holes were then filled in with a sticky "daub" made from clay, mud, and grass.

The roof was usually a thatched roof made from dried local grasses. The floors were often dirt floors and the windows were covered with paper.

Inside the single room home was a fireplace used for cooking and to keep the house warm during the winter.

The early settlers didn't have a lot of furniture. They may have had a bench to sit on, a small table, and some chests where they stored items such as clothes. The typical bed was a straw mattress on the floor.

As the colonies grew (physically and economically), so did the houses. Many of these homes were built in a style that reflected the architecture of the owner's homeland. There were German, Dutch, Spanish, and English colonial styles built in different regions of the colonies.

They had many rooms including a separate living room and dining room. They also had glass windows, multiple fireplaces, and plenty of furniture.

In addition, as communities grew they had more support facilities.

Governor's House

Each colony had a special house where the governor lived. This was usually the largest home in the town. The governor's home was where town leaders often met to discuss issues and make new laws.

Gaol

The gaol was the town jail. The word "gaol" is pronounced just like "jail." People were held in the gaol while they awaited their trials or punishment. Prisoners might include criminals, debtors, and runaway slaves.

Magazine

The magazine was a building designed to hold the town's weapons including muskets, swords, pikes, and gunpowder. The magazine was often a stone or brick building to help make it fireproof as it stored the town's gunpowder.

Tavern

Most larger towns had a number of taverns. Taverns were places to get a cooked meal and a drink. They were also important meeting places. Men would go to the tavern after work to discuss business and politics. A lot of plans for the American Revolution were made by patriots in taverns across the colonies.

Market Square

At the center of the town was often a large open square where people could meet and trade goods. Farmers could set up booths to sell produce and small merchants could peddle their goods. Major outdoor events took place at the market square including holiday celebrations and athletic contests.

Coffeehouse

The coffeehouse was sort of an elite form of the tavern. Only gentlemen were allowed inside the coffeehouse where they would drink mostly non-alcoholic beverages such as coffee, tea, and chocolate. It was a place where wealthy and educated men made business deals and discussed intellectual topics.

Shops

Colonial towns had plenty of shops to buy all sorts of items such as shoes, tools, food, candles, clothing, paper, and furniture. Most shops specialized in one area like the wigmaker who made custom wigs or the apothecary who made medicines. (Technological Solutions)

Plymouth Grew Beyond its Bounds

When an early Colonial town became too large to maintain its spatial and social integrity, it would undergo a split, breaking up into separate towns, each with their own full set of religious and political institutions. (Places Journal)

When the Pilgrims arrived at Cape Cod on November 19, 1620 they did not find a suitable place to place their community until December 19.

They chose a site with a protected harbor and high grounds, suitable for defense, and christened their plantation New Plymouth.



Plimoth Patuxet (recreation of the original layout of the Plymouth community)

Annie Russell Marble writes (in part) – in *The Women Who Came in the Mayflower*,

In *The Mayflower* and at Plymouth, ... the women were thrust into a small company with widely differing tastes and backgrounds. One of the first demands made upon them was for a democratic spirit, - tolerance and patience, adaptability to varied natures.

The old joke that “the Pilgrim Mothers had to endure not alone their hardships but the Pilgrim Fathers also” has been overworked . These women would never have accepted pity as martyrs. They came to this new country with devotion to the men of their families and, in those days, such a call was supreme in a woman's life

The family, not the individual, characterized the life of that community . The father was always regarded as the ‘head’ of the family .

Good harvests and some thrilling incidents varied the hard conditions of life for the women during 1621-2 . Indian corn and barley furnished a new foundation for many “ a savory dish” prepared by the housewives in the mortar and pestles, kettles and skillets which they had brought from Holland. Nuts were used for food, giving piquant flavor both to “cakes” baked in the fire and to the stuffing of wild turkeys.

The fare was simple, but it must have seemed a feast to the Pilgrims after the months of self denials and extremity.

Before the winter of 1621-2 was ended, seven log houses had been built and four "common buildings" for storage, meetings and workshops. Already clapboards and furs were stored to be sent back to England to the merchant adventurers in the first ship .

The seven huts, with thatched roofs and chimneys on the outside, probably in cob-house style, were of hewn planks, not of round logs.¹ The fireplaces were of stones laid in clay from the abundant sand.

An important change in the policy of the colony, which affected the women as well as men , was made at this time [1623].

Formerly the administration of affairs had been upon the communal basis. All the men and grown boys were expected to plant and harvest, fish and hunt for the common use of all the households. The women also did their tasks in common .

The results had been unsatisfactory and, in 1623 , a new division of land was made, allotting to each householder an acre for each member of his family. This arrangement, which was called "every man for his owne particuler," was told by Bradford with a comment which shows that the women were human beings, not saints nor martyrs.

He wrote: "The women now went willingly into ye field , and tooke their little -ones with them to set corne, which before would alledge weaknes and inabilitie ; whom to have compelled would have bene thought great tiranie and oppression."

After further comment upon the failure of communism as "breeding confusion and discontent" he added this significant comment:

"For ye yong-men that were most able and fitte for labour and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men 's wives and children without any recompense. . . . And for men 's wives to be commanded to doe servise for other men , as dresing their meate, washing their cloathes, etc., they deemed it a kind of slaverie, neither could many husbands well brooke it."

After 1623, there were few other large groups of passengers for Plymouth. In the next five years, only a handful of colonists arrived, generally aboard ships bringing supplies to the area. By 1629 and 1630, numerous ships came to the Massachusetts Bay bringing approximately 1,000 settlers for that colony. In these two years, Plymouth also got an additional influx, ten or so aboard the Mayflower (not the 1620 ship) and 35 aboard the Talbot in 1629, and about 60 in the Handmaid in 1630.

Many of them were Leiden Separatists. Some people moved from Massachusetts Bay Colony to Plymouth and vice versa, seeking a more congenial home. Small numbers of additional Plymouth colonists trickled in during the next three years.

By 1633, the population of Plymouth Colony was approximately 400 individuals. The colonists expanded beyond the bounds of the town of Plymouth. (Plimoth-org)

Granting of Farms at Duxbury as Noted in Bradford's 'History of Plymouth Plantation'

Land along the coast was allotted to settlers for farming. Each man was given twenty acres for himself and an additional twenty for each person in his family. Thus, the coastline from Plymouth to Marshfield was parceled out and many settlers began moving away from Plymouth.

The first area to grow (and the second town – after Plymouth – in the Plymouth Colony) was Duxbury. Bradford described what happened,

[T]he people of the plantation begane to grow in their owtward estates, by rea[son] of the flowing of many people into the cuntrie, espetially into the Bay of the Massachusets; by which means come and catle rose to a great prise, by which many were much inriched, and commodities grue plentifull and yet in other regards this benefite turned to their hurte, and this accession of strength to their weaknes.

But to touch this sadd matter, and handle things together that fell out afterwards. To prevent any further scatering from this place, and weakning of the same, it was thought best to give out some good faroms to spetiall persons, that would promise to live at Plimoth, and lickly to be helpfull to the church or comone-welth, and so tye the lands to Plimoth as farmes for the same; and ther they might keepe their catle and tillage by some servants, and retaine their dwellings here.

And so some spetiall lands were granted at a place generall, called Greens Harbor, wher no allotments had been in the former divission, a plase very weell meadowed, and fitt to keep and rear catle, good store.

But alas ! this remedy proved worse then the disease; for within a few years those that had thus gott footing ther rente themselves away, partly by force, and partly wearing the rest with importunitie and pleas of necessitie, so as they must either suffer them to goe, or live in continuall opposition and contention.

And others still, as they conceived them selves straitened, or to want accommodation, broak away under one pretence or other, thinking their owne conceived necessitie, and the example of others, awarrente sufficente for them.

And this, I fear, will be the mine of New-England, at least of the churches of God ther, and will provock the Lords displeasure against them. (Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation, 151-153)

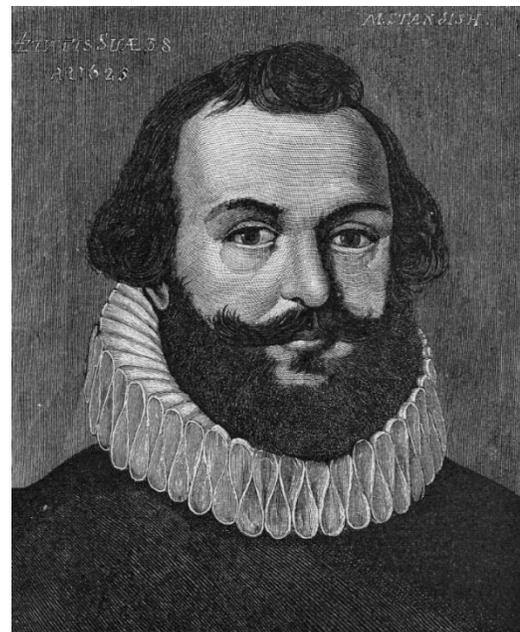
Mayflower Pilgrims Founded Duxbury

Some of the most influential men in the colony received grants in Duxbury (sometimes spelled Duxborough) and became its first leaders. Captain Myles Standish, the military leader of the colony, lived in "the Nook," an area now known as Standish Shore.

Elder William Brewster was for many years the religious leader of the colony. He probably led services in Duxbury until it received its own minister in 1637. John Alden was another important settler, Assistant Governor of the colony for fifty years.

At first, those who settled in Duxbury came to work their new farms just in the warmer months and returned to Plymouth during the winter.

Originally, the land farmed by the settlers at Plymouth was held in common to be commonly worked and the profits commonly used to repay the backers in London.



Myles Standish

It was not long, however, before they began to build homes on their land, and soon requested permission from the colony to be set off as a separate community with their own church. Duxbury was incorporated in 1637 (June 7, 1637, old style, or June 17, 1637, new style) and became the second town in the Plymouth colony.

This is the record of the enactment by the Governor and his Council of the Plymouth Colony.

It is enacted by the Court that Ducksborrow shall become a township, and unite together for their better security, and to have the privileges of a town, only their bounds and limits shall be sett, and appointed by the next Court.

The Transition of the Capital of Virginia From Jamestown to Williamsburg to Richmond

Thirteen years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in what later became Massachusetts, these three ships brought settlers who established America's first permanent English colony: Jamestown.

The Virginia Company, along with the old Plymouth Company, obtained from King James on April 10, 1606, a royal charter for North America that stretched from Long Island Sound in the north to Cape Fear at the thirty-fourth parallel in the south. (Hashaw)

The location of Jamestown was purposefully picked for several reasons: the site was surrounded by water on three sides (it was not fully an island yet) and was far inland; both meant it was easily defensible against possible Spanish attacks. The water was also deep enough that the English could tie their ships at the shoreline. The site was also not inhabited by the Native population. (NPS)

The original capital, Jamestown was the first permanent English-speaking settlement in the New World founded in 1607. Colonial leaders petitioned the Virginia Assembly to relocate the capital from Jamestown to Middle Plantation, five miles inland between the James and the York Rivers. The new city was renamed Williamsburg in honor of England's reigning monarch, King William III. Williamsburg celebrated its 300th Anniversary in 1999.

Williamsburg was one of America's first planned cities. Laid out in 1699 under the supervision of Governor Francis Nicholson, it was to be a "new and well-ordered city" suitable for the capital of the largest and most populous of the British colonies in America. A succession of capitol buildings became home to the oldest legislative assembly in the New World. The young city grew quickly into the center of political, religious, economic, and social life in Virginia.

The Capital was again moved in 1780, this time up the James River to Richmond, where it remains today. Williamsburg reverted to a quiet college town and rural county seat. In retrospect, Williamsburg's loss of capital city status was its salvation as many 18th century buildings survived into the early twentieth century. (Williamsburg)

Information here is primarily from Technological Solutions; Places Journal; Britannica; National Park Service; City of Williamsburg; Bradford

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, 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