

## Follow the Money

After two attempts to leave England and move to Holland, seeking religious freedom during the reign of King James I, a Separatist group was finally relocated to Amsterdam where they stayed for about one year.

From there the group moved to the town of Leiden, Holland, where they remained for about ten years, able to worship as they wished under lenient Dutch law.

Fearing their children were losing their English heritage and religious beliefs, the resumption of war and their inability as non-citizens to find decent jobs, a small group from the Leiden church made plans to settle in Northern Virginia (as New England was known at the time).

In August 1620 the group sailed for Southampton, England, where other English colonists who hoped to make a new life in America met them.

They boarded the Mayflower in September 1620 bound for the New World. They arrived as winter was settling in and endured significant hardships as they struggled to establish a successful colony at Plymouth. In time their colony flourished and led the way to establishing religious freedom and creating the foundations of the democracy Americans enjoy today. (Mayflower Society)

Most of those who emigrated from Leiden to Plymouth, like their friends who remained behind, were artisans; several performed some operation in clothmaking. William Bradford, for example, was a fustian weaver, Robert Cushman was a woolcomber, and Isaac Allerton, formerly from London, worked as a tailor. Among the handicraftsmen were watchmakers, cabinetmakers, carpenters, and makers of tobacco pipes.

Of all who took part in the Plymouth venture, less than a handful had either the experience or capital to be a merchant or, as one might call it, a capitalist.

So, how was such an enterprise funded?

The future emigrants had to make several decisions. First, in what part of the New World should they plant their colony; secondly, how would they defray the heavy costs of shipping stores of food and equipment required for a new settlement?



## Pilgrims Obtain a Patent and Seek Financial Backing

John Carver and Robert Cushman, trusted members of the group, were the agents selected to approach the political authorities and the Virginia Company in London. They had to negotiate first the delicate matter of how much religious toleration they would be allowed if they went to Virginia. They sought help from influential friends in the inner circle of the Company.

In spite of rebuffs, the agents from Leiden kept trying to secure a patent for land from the Virginia Company. (Patents were charters to large areas of land.) Ultimately, they arranged to use John Peirce's Patent that he had taken out from the Virginia Company in February 1620. The patent gave the merchant adventurers permission to start a new settlement (to be inhabited by the Pilgrims) in the Virginia territory. The First Peirce Patent was never effective, because the Mayflower landed outside the bounds of the Virginia Company.



*Plymouth Colony seal circa 1629*

When the Mayflower returned to England in April 1621, the merchant adventurers learned that the Pilgrims had settled at Plymouth. They then obtained a patent from the Council for New England; the Council had the authority to plant and govern land in the Plymouth area. This Second Peirce Patent confirmed the Pilgrims' settlement and governance of Plymouth.

## Seeking Profits from Farming, Fishing and Furs

They met Thomas Weston, a London merchant who had trading interests in the Low Countries (also known as the Low Lands – the coastal lowland region in northwestern Europe, including the Netherlands). A citizen of London, he was altogether a minor figure in the English business world.

Weston had come to discern in the colonizing scheme commercial prospects attractive enough to induce several other London businessmen to join in an unincorporated company to send the Leiden congregation overseas.

It is likely that the slump in the trade in woolen cloth, the traditional mainstay of English commerce abroad, was also a factor influencing their decision. The disturbance in the course of that trade due partly to its reorganization by the Crown in 1614 helped favor an interest in various new money-making projects.

Although not an investor in Virginia, he evidently shared the fever which was stimulating dreams of profit even in highly speculative colonial ventures, and was willing to shift part of his funds to the relatively untried business of shipping settlers to fish and trade in the New World. It is also likely that he had some sympathy with the religious views of the Leiden group.

Seeking profits in farming, fishing and furs, Weston and his partners may have regarded the Pilgrims as the human material to carry out such a plan.

This promoter was welcomed with enthusiasm when he came to confer with the Pilgrims' pastor Robinson and to reassure the discouraged that there was no want of shipping or money. The next step was to persuade his Leiden friends to draw up an agreement with his "merchant adventurers," and set forth in black and white the terms under which they would receive aid and he could persuade his fellow-investors to contribute.

## Merchant Adventurers

The Merchant Adventurers of London was the group of English investors whose capital funded the Pilgrims voyage on the Mayflower. The joint-stock company they invested in hoped to make a profit from the fur trade, from fishing, and from any other method they could invent.

The number of investors was initially about fifty, but began to drop substantially as various internal disputes arose.

From a letter written in 1626, we learn the names of the remaining Merchant Adventurers (info from MayflowerHistory-com):

Robert Allden	Timothy Hatherley	William Penrin
Emmanuel Altham	Thomas Heath	John Pocock
Thomas Andrews	William Hobson	Daniel Poynton
Richard Andrews	Robert Holland	William Quarles
Laurence Anthony	Thomas Hudson	John Revell
Edward Bass	Robert Kean	Newman Rookes
John Beauchamp	Eliza Knight	Samuel Sharp
Thomas Brewer	John Knight	James Shirley
Henry Browning	Myles Knowles	John Thorned
William Collier	John Ling	Matthew Thornhill
Thomas Coventry	Thomas Millsop	Joseph Tilden
Thomas Fletcher	Thomas Mott	Thomas Ward
Thomas Goffe	Fria. Newbald	John White
Peter Gudburn	William Penington	Richard Wright

Only the names of a few investors prior to 1626 are known, from various letters and court documents:

Christopher Coulson	William Greene	William Pierce
Robert Cushman	Edward Pickering	Joseph Pocock
Mr. Gibbs	John Pierce	William Thomas

## Pilgrims and Merchant Adventurers Form a Joint Stock Company

The discussions in England and Leiden over the articles of agreement were protracted. Robert Cushman, as intermediary, thought he closed a hard bargain with the "grasping" merchants.

The terms of July 1, 1620, were not unlike those of other colonial enterprises tried in Virginia and Bermuda. The entire capital, including lands, was to be a joint stock fund, divided into shares.

Under the agreement, all land and profits accrued to the company of merchant adventurers for 7 years, at which time the assets would be divided among the shareholders. Most of the Pilgrims held stock.

Every person over the age of sixteen going to the new colony was rated at £10, and £10 was accounted a single share. Any emigrant outfitting himself with £10 worth of provisions was considered worth £20 or a double share.

The adventurers who contributed only money and stayed at home, and the planters, were to continue the joint stock for seven years during which time all profits from “trade, traffic, trucking, working, fishing, or any other means” must remain in the common stock.

Then they would divide equally the capital and profits, viz. , lands, houses, and goods. The common stock would furnish food, apparel, and provisions.

A good deal of controversy arose when it was learned that the adventurers insisted on harsher terms than those in the original agreement. The assets of the common stock, it was claimed, had not included the houses and home lots of the settlers, nor were they to work seven days a week, two days having been reserved for employment for their own families.

The emigrants objected to the new articles and upon arrival in Southampton from Holland rejected Cushman’s pleas. This refusal, even though backed by their friends at Leiden and held to until Cushman secured their adherence to the terms in 1621, unfortunately embittered relations with the adventurers.

### **Pilgrims Sell Their Possessions**

The preparation of the voyage presented practical problems the Pilgrims were ill equipped to solve. The small number who sold their Leiden property to convert it into shipping and stores, had no experience along this line, and their ineptitude made Mr. Weston “merry with our endeavours about buying a ship .. . .” Edward Pickering was the most knowledgeable of them in trade, but his money was not forthcoming, even though Cushman and Weston had expected him to furnish “many hundred pounds.”

Pastor Robinson gave voice to pained surprise when he discovered that at the time his flock had turned over the money raised from their scanty possessions, Weston still withheld his own money and had taken absolutely no steps to provide shipping.

In spite of all the “clamours and jangling” about the business end of the voyage, there was one important accomplishment during the few anxious months before the Mayflower (180 tons) and the Speedwell (60 tons) sailed from Southampton on August 5, 1620. Between £1200 and £1600 was raised to cover the expedition’s costs. Carver spent £700 of this at Southampton.

Unfortunately we do not know how much was supplied by any particular investor. The £50 put in by Martin, Cushman considered insignificant. £500 which the Ferrars, probably John and Nicholas, prominent in the Virginia Company, had promised and then, for some reason, withdrawn, is the only single large investment mentioned.

The amount John Carver furnished is not specified, but he was credited by a later writer with having put in most of his considerable substance. With seventy-odd “Gentlemen . . . Merchants . . . [and] handy craftsmen” subscribing to the partnership, most investments are likely to have been small.

At the last minute the party had to sell butter worth £60 to pay off a debt of £100. They left port dangerously short of supplies, a fact which, as Cushman predicted, added to their hardships in the New World.

## The Mayflower Departs

The Mayflower, now crowded with the entire group, departed from Plymouth, leaving Robert Cushman behind to serve as chief agent with the adventurers.

A successful relationship with the partners in England now lay at the heart of the welfare of the infant colony. Even though some of the London businessmen sympathized with the religious aims of the Pilgrims, they expected the investment of their capital to yield a return, and that rather quickly. Promotion of colonial ventures was new and risky.



*Pilgrim Fathers boarding the Mayflower, painting by Bernard Gribble.*

Weston and the later leaders of the merchant adventurers had not learned from the bitter experience of the large, incorporated Virginia Company that a long time must elapse before any profit could be expected from a colonial undertaking.

They failed to calculate that even if the colonists engaged promptly in trading furs or catching fish, their initial task must be to build permanent dwellings and to feed themselves and a fair number of women and children.

But, New Plymouth was situated on a good harbor with plenty of fish and woods close at hand. The settlers had built a fort at the top of the hill and common storehouses containing the first harvest, the colony's precious arsenal and supplies from England.

In the small, sturdy, frame houses with roofs of thatch, scattered along the street running up the hill, lived the survivors of the first winter's illness and privation. Their Indian friends, Squanto and Samoset, had helped them conciliate the neighboring Indians and begin trade with them. William Bradford had succeeded Governor Carver, with Isaac Allerton as his assistant.



A gap persisted between the Leiden immigrants and religious exiles, who had ventured their persons and savings, and the London contingent, some of them merely hirelings of the company. Bradford himself wrote Weston about being “yoked with some ill-conditioned people who will never do good. . . .”

The Pilgrims were continually disappointed at the failure to receive replenishment of their scanty provisions, yet they had to share these with newcomers whose arrival they did not expect. The explanation for these harsh circumstances is to be found not so much in the colony as among the partners in England.

The situation was the result of three major events: the defection of Thomas Weston from the ranks of the adventurers; a quarrel with John Peirce over their patent; and the irreparable rift developing inside the partnership itself, which was to precipitate its final dissolution.

## **Weston Leaves, More Pilgrims Come to Plymouth**

Weston got out. He wrote in April 1622: "I have sold my adventure and debts unto them so as I am quit of you, and you of me . . ." The company's reaction was that they were "very glad they are freed of him, he being judged a man that thought himself above the general. . . ."

Meanwhile, the most active of the remaining adventurers had prepared two vessels, the Anne and the Little James, to carry a "large and liberal" supply and a contingent of passengers intending to settle. Both arrived in Plymouth in the summer of 1623.

## **Pilgrims Look to Fishing to Raise Funds**

A great part of the adventurers' hope for profit rested in the Little James, a small pinnace built to remain in the colony for its use. Bradford said "the adventurers did override themselves in her," for her troubles began even on the way over.

New Plymouth at first had expected to engage in fishing, by now the source of successful returns to many small West Country merchants whose ships were cruising up and down the New England coast and then carrying dried fish to market in southern Europe.

The colony's most ambitious attempt in this direction did, indeed, secure a patent taken in the names of Robert Cushman and Edward Winslow. Yet the hope that the Pilgrims "could fall once into the right course" for profitable fishing and saltmaking proved unfounded.

The first fishing season was a failure; the boatmaker died; the saltmaker turned out to be incompetent. The colony almost lost to rivals the fishing stage erected on Cape Ann.

The seven-year partnership between the London adventurers and the planters at Plymouth, unless renewed, as once had been suggested, was to end about 1627 or 1628. In fact, the succession of blighted hopes and dissensions just described dissolved it earlier. Several innovations prepared the way for a new arrangement satisfactory both to the colonists and to their English supporters.

## **Abandoning Common Stock, Land Distribution to Pilgrims**

After two harvests the colony itself had decided that the task of raising food for the settlers would prosper only if it was separated from that of earning profits for London. In 1623 a parcel of land was allotted to each man to till for his family and to maintain those who were exempt from agricultural employment because of other duties.

In abandoning the "common course and condition" everyone worked harder and more willingly. The food problem was ended, and after the first abundant harvest under individual cultivation, the Pilgrims did not have to endure the meager rations of the first years. The plots assigned them permanently in 1624 became privately owned in 1627.

Three heifers and a bull sent over by the adventurers in response to Bradford's request thrived and multiplied, so there was cattle to be divided among the households when the general stock was terminated.



### Renegotiation of Agreement

In 1626, the Pilgrims negotiated a more favorable contract. The “purchasers” agreed to buy out the company over a period of years. In turn, 12 “Undertakers” (8 from Plymouth and 4 from London) agreed to pay off Plymouth’s debts in return for trade benefits.

It took two years of negotiations before the adventurers agreed with Isaac Allerton to accept the following terms for winding up the old stock. They signed them in London on November 16, 1626. Then, reluctantly but courageously, the members of the colony known as the “Undertakers” pledged their own credit to carry them out.

The forty-two adventurers signing the composition in London consented to sell to their associates in New Plymouth all the shares of the stock in the lands or merchandise up to now belonging to them both. The “generality” in Plymouth in turn undertook to pay £1800 in annual installments of £200 each, to be paid at the west side of the Royal Exchange in London, beginning in September 1628.

The method devised for repaying what was a stiff debt for the young colony, as one writer puts it, “shows considerable business ingenuity.” With ownership transferred from London to Plymouth, the plantation became a virtual corporation in fact.

Two important matters still had to be decided. Should all the settlers share in the disposition of the corporate lands and assets and in the obligation of repayment to the adventurers? How would they be able to guarantee satisfaction of the London men?

It was wisely decided to include as holders of shares, or “purchasers,” all men, whatever their former status, who were either heads of families or single and not indentured servants.



## **Division of the Assets**

At the 1627 division of assets in the form of land and cattle, every such person received twenty acres of tillable land to add to the one-acre portion allotted him when the plantation had ended the “common course.”

The livestock was parceled out for a time among twelve groups, a total of 156 individuals, with every six persons receiving one cow and two goats.

These “purchasers,” of whom in 1640 fifty-three were listed as living in Plymouth and five in England, were to benefit from subsequent divisions of land as the colony opened up.

## **The “Undertakers” Commit to Pay Off the Debt**

The immediate task of paying the Londoners fell upon a group of eight leaders, including William Bradford, Myles Standish, Isaac Allerton, Edward Winslow, William Brewster, John Howland, John Alden, and Thomas Prence, known as the “Undertakers.”

These men founded a partnership to manage the fur trade of the colony for six years, the time during which the returns from the Pilgrims’ most profitable business enterprise were to be devoted to paying the debt and importing essential English goods.

This became the business of the eight who took possession at once of the company boats and “the whole stock of furs, fells, beads, corn, wampum [cylindrical beads made from shells, pierced and strung], hatchets, knives, &c.”

It may be asked why the “Undertakers” were willing to saddle themselves with such a responsibility. The answer is their sense of obligation to their old friends in Leiden, as well as their fidelity to the London merchants.

Most of the former adventurers had so opposed sending over any more people from Leiden that the beloved Pastor Robinson prophetically, before his death, looked for no further help until means came from Plymouth itself. They also were able to keep three of the former London investors to stay with them, James Sherley, John Beauchamp and Richard Andrews

As the “Undertakers” took over management, it was evident that numerous competing trading posts, settled up and down the New England coast, were beginning to cut into Plymouth's sources of fur and to raise the price the Indians demanded for it.

In the early stages of the fur trade, transportation presented considerable difficulty. Shallops or open boats were used at first, but a small vessel was needed to coast in and out of the little harbors for several weeks at a time, carrying a few traders and their supplies. To provide for this, an ingenious house carpenter lengthened one of the shallops and built a deck, affording a hold for long voyages in the winter.

The “Undertakers” now decided to build a pinnace on the Manomet River, twenty miles south of Plymouth, and to erect there a permanent trading house of hewn oak planks, furnished with trading goods and in the care of two men the year round.

## **Dealing with the Dutch**

Just at this time the Pilgrims took advantage of a new contact. Responding to earlier Dutch offers to trade for beaver, Governor Bradford invited Isaack de Rasieres, the chief merchant in New Amsterdam, to pay a visit.

Finding the journey overland to Plymouth too far to walk, he requested that a small boat be sent for him, visited the little town, and in due course wrote a description of it. The association thus opened with the Dutch plantation at the mouth of the Hudson lasted several years.

It not only offered the Pilgrims desirable goods, such as sugar, linen cloth, and other stuffs, but in the long run greatly enhanced the colony's opportunities for Indian trade by selling them a quantity of wampum. This valuable native shell money, made by the Narragansetts, now promoted gainful dealings with the Abnakis of the Kennebec country and other tribes.

De Rasieres felt it necessary to justify his selling the Pilgrims the first fifty fathom of sewan (wampum) by saying that he hoped to keep them from seeking it themselves at its source of manufacture and so discovering the profitable fur trade inland. He must have meant by this the trade with the Iroquois the Dutch had tapped through their control of the Hudson River, or that of the upper Connecticut Valley.

The rival shipmasters and settlers now ranging along the rocky coves and inlets of the Maine coast alarmed Plymouth lest they take control of the mouth of the Kennebec River. Since the autumn of 1625, most of the beaver collected had been furnished by the Abnaki Indians of this region.

## **Seeking a New Patent**

To secure this area and to define the boundaries of the colony, which had been unspecified in the Peirce patent, Isaac Allerton was directed to seek a new patent from the Council for New England.

The fruit of these efforts was a patent the Council issued in 1630, signed by the Earl of Warwick. It gave Plymouth not only its first exact boundaries, but a strip of land along the Kennebec, with control of fifteen miles on either side of the river, running up the river as far as the site of Cushenoc or present-day Augusta, Maine.

This document, in the name of William Bradford and his associates, the first of their grants reflecting the complete shift in ownership from London to the New World, provided the basis for the colony's land rights.

## **Growing Competition**

However, with growing competing boats, the "Undertakers" suddenly were confronted by fresh, crushing debts, for each English partner had contributed two or three times as large an investment as before. Thus commenced a new and tedious financial wrangle between Plymouth and London.

Internal challenges led Sherley to write, "if their business had been better managed they might have been the richest plantation of any English at that time," he could blame the financial incompetence of the "Undertakers" at Plymouth as well as conflict of interest. A decade of acrimonious exchange of letters followed from 1631 to 1641.

## **Debt is Discharged – Plymouth as a Business Venture Ends**

By October 15, 1641, Atwood, Bradford, and Edward Winslow had come to terms ending the partnership. In 1645, the debt was discharged.

It is to Plymouth's credit that all these obligations were met in the 1640s, because the colony was no longer as prosperous as in the preceding decade. Its wealth had come to consist increasingly of cattle, so that the price collapse which took place when the influx of new settlers into the Bay ceased, came suddenly and with severe effect.

Cattle came to be worth perhaps 25% of its former value. Even the wealthier colony of Massachusetts discovered that it could no longer secure credit in England. The Pilgrims nevertheless continued to develop their modest resources in animal stock and land.

In their somewhat uneasy alliance, the Londoners with spare funds and the group of obscure artisans and small farmers, mostly dissenters from the established church, no doubt emphasized different goals. Most of the merchants, while Puritan in religious sympathies, nevertheless anticipated profits. This appeared to them fitting, since they risked great loss in so untried a speculation.

Then, after Plymouth was settled and valuable returns established, the Londoners held an advantage to the end, for they were always in a creditor position as they continued to supply essential goods at high prices and rates of interest.

The colonists' payment was slow, interrupted by many misfortunes and contingencies, but eventually it was made. Although the investors in the original company lost most of their money, the businessmen who stayed with the enterprise, such as Sherley, seem to have increased their capital.

The Pilgrims, too, achieved success, for they had built the essentials of a free and self-sustaining community. If they were never wealthy in their new environment, the leaders of Plymouth, developing business experience and judgment, by 1645, enjoyed modest prosperity. They had paid off the expenses of shipping over their fellow exiles from Leiden and bought the livestock and equipment needed as the foundation for settlement.

Ignorance, desertion by their first backers, cruel losses at sea, their agent's misdeeds, all had been overcome. They were now rid of the burdens inherent in the London merchants' sponsorship of the colony. Their debts, both "hopeful and desperate," lay behind.

Thus ended the history of Plymouth Colony as a business venture.

All here is from writing by Ruth A. McIntyre for the Plimoth Plantation, 1963.

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