

Great Migration

The Pilgrims weren't the first Europeans to populate New England. Fishermen and fur traders from France, the Netherlands and Spain set up summer settlements along the coast since the early 16th century.

Plymouth Colony was begun in December 1620 by a small company of English men, women and children. One hundred and two passengers arrived at Cape Cod aboard the Mayflower in November, and eventually chose the abandoned Native town of Patuxet as the site of their new home.

In the next few months, half of them died due to scurvy and other diseases. Those who lived went on to build homes, plant crops and raise families. Other English settlers followed, and the colony expanded.

Plymouth 1624-1633

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.

In 1629 and 1630, numerous ships came to the Massachusetts Bay bringing approximately 1000 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. A few moved across Plymouth Bay to Mattakesett, which became Duxbury. Some men were granted land at Conahasset, known as Green's Harbor (and later Marshfield), in 1632. (Plimoth-org)

Then, More Emigrated to New England

The Puritans knew the Plymouth Colony experiment worked, and others decided to replicate it.

A rage of emigration swept through the eastern and midland counties of England, arousing in the authorities an apprehension which was to be shared by many other local officials of Europe during the next two and a half centuries. (Hansen)

The ballad, "Summons to New England," was sung on the streets. 'The Zealous Puritan' registered in 1639 was found on broadsides, which were sold on the street, and made popular primarily by the subject matter, songs like these would be sung from memory in various social situations.

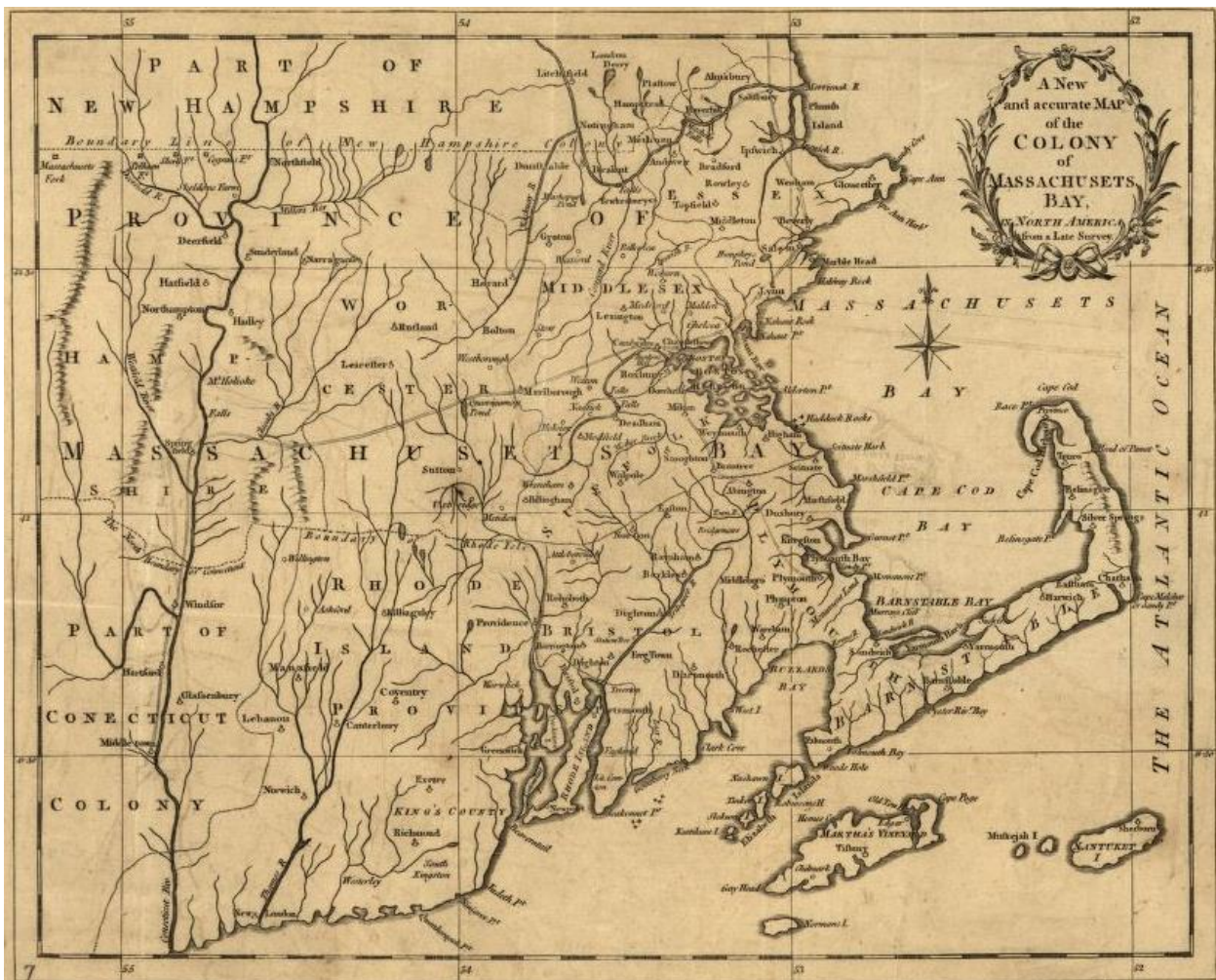
Stay not among the wicked
Lest that with them you perish,
But let us to New England go,
And the Pagan People cherish.

A “great giddiness” to depart prevailed; “incredible numbers” sold their lands; and debtors attempted to get away under the pretext of religion. (Hansen)

Most of the Puritans who came to New England came from prosperous middle-class families. They had skills and they could read, unlike the immigrants to Virginia, 75 percent of whom were servants. They differed from the poor, single male immigrants who dominated immigration to other regions of America. (New England Historical Society)

Massachusetts Bay Colony

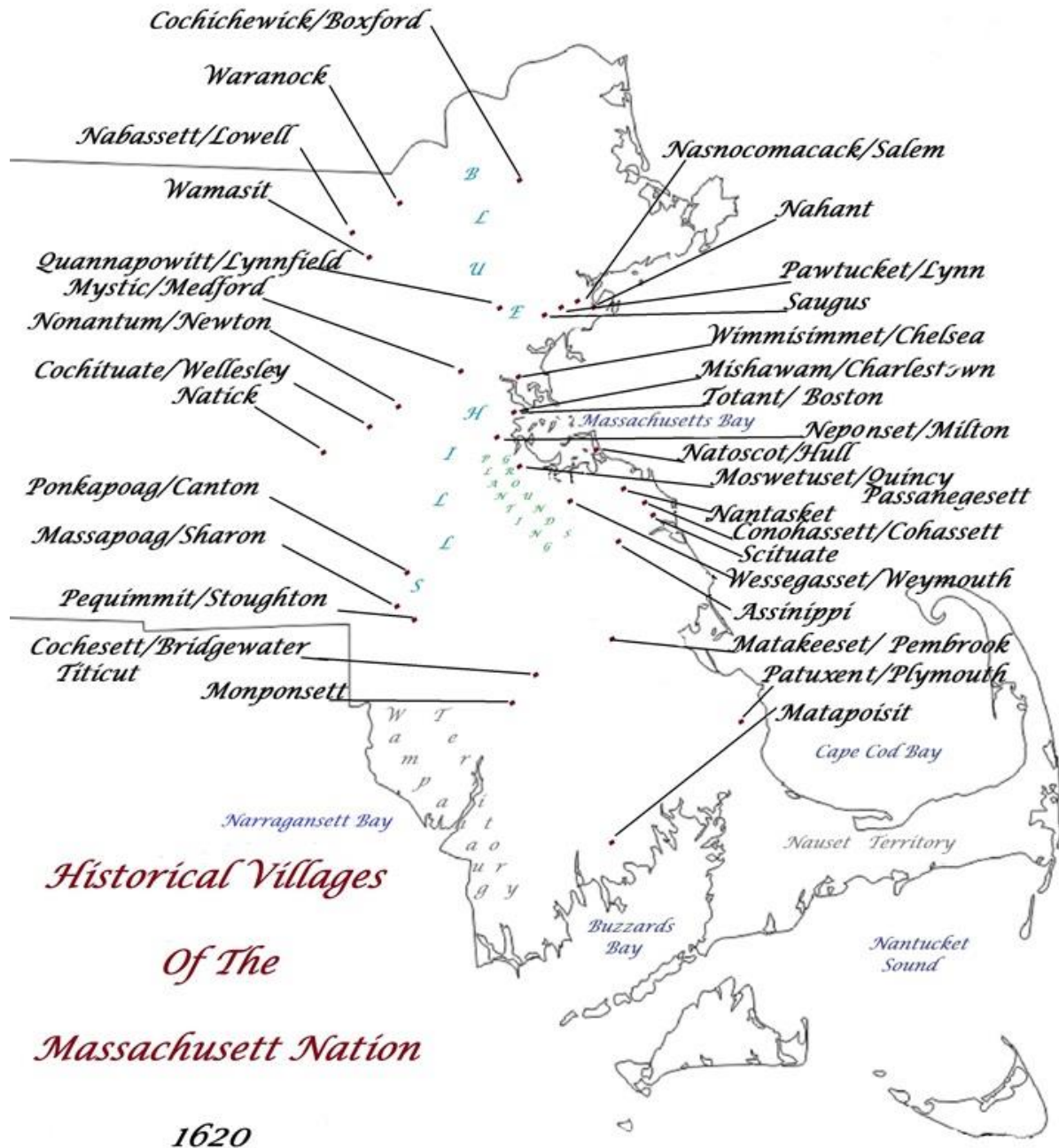
In 1629, the Massachusetts Bay Company organized on a joint-stock basis and obtained a charter from the King authorizing it to establish a colony in New England and to govern it in much the same way as the Virginia Company governed Jamestown. The colony extended from 3-miles north of the Merrimack River to 3-miles south of the Charles River.



The new company was the successor of the New England Company (1628-29), which had purchased land in the area of Massachusetts from the Council for New England (1620-35), which succeeded the Plymouth Company.

Massachusetts was named after the Massachuset tribe that lived in the Blue Hills region of Milton, Massachusetts Bay.

The word Massachuset is an Algonquin word which roughly translates to “large hill place” or “at the great hill.” In the native language the word is spelled mass-adchu-es-et, where “mass” means “large,” “adchu” means “hill,” “es” is a diminutive suffix and “et” is a locative suffix that identifies a place.



In 1628-29, the New England Company had begun a settlement at present Salem. This settlement incorporated small groups of colonists from Dorchester, England, already at the site, who had moved there in 1626 from Gloucester, which they had settled in 1623.

The Massachusetts Bay Company was chartered as a commercial rather than a religious enterprise. But most of the stockholders were Puritans. In August 1629, a significant event in U.S. constitutional development occurred: the signing of the Cambridge Agreement.

This agreement marked the acceptance of the offer of John Winthrop and 11 other prominent nonconformists to migrate to America as members of the board of directors if the headquarters of the company were transferred to the New World. All company officers not willing to migrate resigned, and Massachusetts was designated as company headquarters. (NPS)

A notable proviso concludes this document, that,

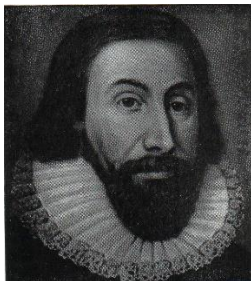
“the whole Government, together with the patent for the said Plantation, be first, by an order of Court, legally transferred and established to remain with us and others which shall inhabit upon the said Plantation; and provided also, that if any shall be hindered by such just and inevitable let or other cause, to be allowed by three parts of four of these whose names are hereunto subscribed, then such persons, for such times and during such lets, to be discharged of this bond.”

In effect, they are resolved to establish full independence of the plantation from any authority in England. The full Court of the Company, within a few days and after much discussion, agreed to this proviso, no doubt influenced by the signatories’ resolve, and the fact that their willingness to settle the plantation hinged upon this point.

Previous patents had defaulted due to lack of action, and so the Company's adventurers as a whole acquiesced to this loss of their authority to those of the Company who were ready to risk their lives and the lives of their families in an attempted settlement in New England. A majority of the adventurers, Puritans of a like mind, supported them. (Winthrop Society)

The agreement had far-reaching significance because the company was authorized to govern the colony; when its headquarters, officers, directors, and principal stockholders moved to the colony itself, Massachusetts became completely self-governing and legitimately authorized by the Crown. Furthermore, the charter became the basis of the government - in essence a written constitution superior to the officers of the company themselves. (NPS)

John Winthrop



Emigration fever spread beyond southern England. When John Winthrop, Jr., in 1635 traveled through Ireland, Scotland and the north of England, he found that the contagion preceded him. “Everywhere he stopped, eager inquirers sought him out,” Hansen wrote.

The Great Migration began to take off in 1630 when John Winthrop led a fleet of 11 ships to Massachusetts. Winthrop brought 800 people with him to New England; 20,000 followed him over the next 10 years. (New England Historical Society)



John Winthrop landing at Salem in 1630 (LOC)

Winthrop was elected Governor. Carrying the charter with him, in 1630 he headed the first contingent of colonists. Before the end of the year, approximately 2,000 persons had migrated to Massachusetts.

In the ensuing decade, more than 200 ships transported about 20,000 Puritans to Massachusetts, which thrived almost from the beginning. In rapid succession, the towns of Boston, Cambridge, Watertown, Charlestown, and 18 others were founded. Other Puritans went to the West Indies in this, the largest mass exodus of Englishmen in history. (NPS)

English migration to Massachusetts consisted of a few hundred pilgrims who went to Plymouth Colony in the 1620s and between 13,000 and 21,000 emigrants who went to the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1630 and 1642. (History of Massachusetts Colony)

Puritans left England for America to escape religious persecution. They hoped to establish a church free from worldly corruption founded on voluntary agreement among congregants. This covenant theory governed Puritan social and theological life, including the annual elections in which all free men, or church members, could vote.

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, described life in Boston in his letter written on May 22, 1634:

I must needs acknowledge it among other the special favours of God towards us, and an undoubted testimony of y^r sincere Love towards us: which makes me the more careful to satisfy y^r desire, of being truly informed of our estate (this being the first safe means of Conveyance since I received y^{rs} in October last) . . .

you may please therefore to understand that first, for the number of our people, we never took any survey of them, nor do we intend it . . . but I esteem them to be in all about 4000 souls & upward: in good health (for the most parse) & well provided of all necessarys . . .

so as (through the Lords special providence) there hath not died about 2: or 3: grown persons, & about so many Children all in the last year, it being verye rare to heare of any sick of agues or other diseases, nor have I known of any quartan Ague amonge us since I came into the Countrey.

For Our susistence here, the means hitherto hath been the yearly access of new Comers, who have supplied all our wants, for Cattle, & the fruits of our labours, as board, pale, smiths work etc: if this should fail, then we have other meanes which may supply us, as fish viz: Cod, bass & herring, for which no place in the world exceeds us, if we can compass salt at a reasonable rate . . .

our grounds likewise are apt for hemp & flax & rape seeds, & all sorts of roots, pumpkins & other fruits, which for taste & wholesomeness far exceed those in England: our grapes also (wherewith the Country abounds) afford a good hard wine.

Our ploughs go on with good success, we are like to have 20 at work next year: our lands are aptest for Rye and oats.

Our winters are sharp & longe, I may reckon 4 months for storing of cattle, but we find no difference whither they be housed or go abroad: our summers are somewhat more fervent in heat than in England.

Our civil Government is mixt: the freemen choose the magistrates every year . . . and at 4: courts in the year 3: out of each town (there being 8 in all) do assist the magistrates in making of laws, imposing taxes, & disposing of lands . . .

Our Churches are governed by Pastors, Teachers ruling Elders & Deacons, yet the power lies in the whole Congregation. (John Winthrop to Nathaniel Rich, May 22, 1634)

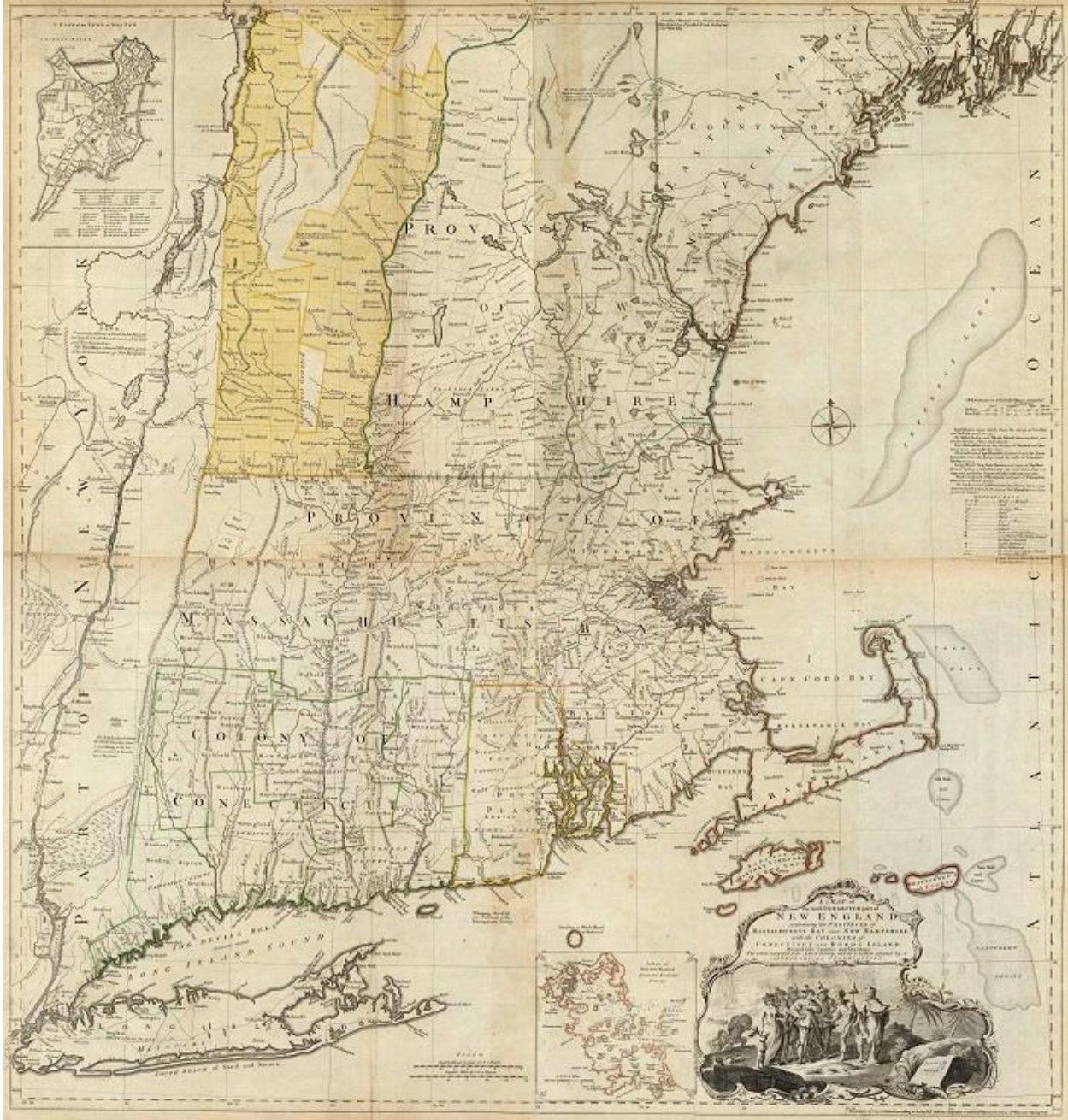
The full stream of immigration which had fed hitherto the Bay Colony, ceased after 1640, when Massachusetts contained probably as many people in the rest of British America; and some retardation of the rate of increase, unequalled in the early stages of any other colony. (American Antiquarian Society)

The population in New England had gone from 4,000 in 1630 to 50,000 in 1640.

After the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Plymouth Colony population declined. When in the 1660s it could count three thousand souls within its boundaries, it was still only one-fourth or one-third the size of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Plymouth's influence in New England declined.

The charter for the Province of Massachusetts Bay was issued by King William and Queen Mary on October 7, 1691. The charter took effect when Sir William Phips arrived in Boston with the new charter on Saturday, May 14, 1692.

In addition to converting the Massachusetts Bay Colony into a royal colony, the charter also absorbed Plymouth Colony, the Province of Maine, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia into the province.



A Map of the most Inhabited part of New England, containing the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, with the Colonies of Connecticut And Rhode Island, by Thomas Jefferys, published in The American Atlas circa 1776

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