

The Mayflower, Her Captain and Crew

“[T]hese names [Mayflower and Speedwell] do not occur either in the Bradford manuscript or in Mourt’s Relation.’ ... they nowhere appear in any of the letters of the ‘exodus’ period, whether from Carver, Robinson, Cushman, or Weston; or in the later publications of Winslow; or in fact of any contemporaneous writer.”

“[T]he earliest authentic evidence that the bark which bore the Pilgrims across the North Atlantic in the late autumn of 1620 was the Mayflower, is the ‘heading’ of the ‘Allotment of Lands’ - happily an ‘official’ document - made at New Plymouth, New England, in March, 1623.”

“It is not a little remarkable that with the constantly recurring references to ‘the ship,’ - the all-important factor in Pilgrim history, - her name should nowhere have found mention in the earliest Pilgrim literature.”

“Bradford uses the terms, the ‘bigger ship,’ or the ‘larger ship,’ and Winslow, Cushman, Captain John Smith, and others mention simply the ‘vessel,’ or the ‘ship,’ when speaking of the Mayflower, but in no case give her a name.” (Ames)

The Ship

The Pilgrim ship Mayflower was a typical English merchant ship of the early 17th century - square-rigged and beak-bowed, with high, castle-like structures fore and aft that served to protect the ship's crew and the main deck from the elements.

But having on her stern such structures as the 30-foot high, square aft-castle made the Mayflower extremely difficult to sail against the wind.

This awkward superstructure configuration of the Mayflower, making it unable to sail well against the North Atlantic Prevailing Westerlies, especially in the Fall/Winter season of 1620, is the direct cause of the ship's voyage from England to America taking over two months.

The Mayflower's return trip to London in April–May 1621, with the same strong winds following this time, took less than half that time.

By 1620, the Mayflower was an aging ship, nearing the end of the usual English merchant ship working life in that era of fifteen years. No dimensions of its hull can be exact since this was an era many years before such measurements were standardized.

Very likely Mayflower measured about 100 feet in length from the forward end at the beak of her prow aft to the tip of her stern superstructure. She was about 25 feet at her widest point, with about 12 feet of keel below the waterline.

William Bradford estimated that Mayflower had a cargo volume of 180 tons, but he was not a mariner.

What is known on the basis of records from that time that have survived is that she could certainly accommodate 180 casks of wine in her cargo hold. The casks were great barrels that each held hundreds of gallons of claret wine.



This was a ship that traditionally was heavily armed while on trading routes around Europe due to the possibility of encountering pirates and privateers of all types. And with its armament, the ship and crew could easily be conscripted by the English monarch at any time in case of conflict with other nations.

The general layout of the ship was as follows:

She had three masts – Mizzen (aft), Main (midship) and Fore, and also a spritsail in the bow area.

She had three primary levels – main deck, gun deck and cargo hold.

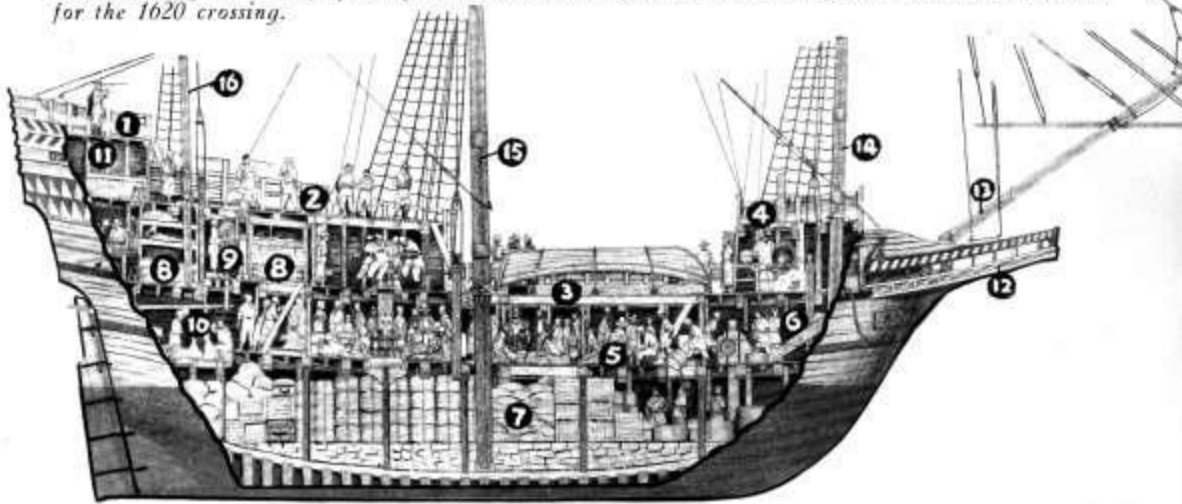
Main deck

Aft on the main deck in the stern was the cabin for Master Jones, measuring about ten by seven feet. Forward of that was the steerage room, which housed a whipstaff (tiller extension) for sailing control - not a wheel as in later ships.

Also here was the ship's compass and likely berthing place for the ship's officers. Forward of the steerage room was the capstan – a vertical axle used to pull in ropes or cables.

Far forward on the main deck just aft of the bow was the forecabin space where the ship's cook prepared meals for the crew; it may also have been where the ship's sailors slept.

This cut-away view shows passengers and crew as they would have been packed into the Mayflower for the 1620 crossing.



KEY TO DRAWING

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| 1. Poop deck. | 6. Crew's quarters. | 11. Captain's cabin. |
| 2. Half deck. | 7. Large hold. | 12. Beak. |
| 3. Upper deck. | 8. Special cabins. | 13. Bowsprit. |
| 4. Forecastle. | 9. Helmsman with whipstaff controlling the tiller. | 14. Foremast. |
| 5. Main deck where most of the Pilgrims were housed. | 10. Tiller room. | 15. Mainmast. |
| | | 16. Mizzen mast. |

Above the cabin of Master Jones, on the highest ship's level above the stern on the aft castle, was the poop deck, on which was the poop house, which may have been for passengers' use either for sleeping or cargo. On normal merchant ships this space was likely a chart room or a cabin for the master's mates.

Gun deck

The gun deck was where the passengers resided during the voyage in a space measuring about fifty feet by twenty-five feet with a five foot overhead (ceiling). But it was also a dangerous place in conflict as it had port and starboard gun ports from which cannons could be run out to fire on the enemy.

In the stern area of the gun deck was the gun room, to which passengers had no access due to it being the storage space for powder and ammunition for the ship's cannons and any other guns or weapons belonging to the ship.

The gun room might also house a pair of 'stern chasers' - small cannons used to fire out the stern of the ship. Forward on the gun deck in the bow area was a windlass - equipment similar in function to the capstan in steerage - which was used to raise and lower the ship's main anchor.

There was no stairs for the passengers on the gun deck to go up through the gratings to the main deck. To get up to the main deck, passengers were required to climb a wooden or rope ladder.

There was no facility for a latrine or privy on the Mayflower and ship's crew had to fend for themselves in that regard. Gun deck passengers most likely used a bucket-turned-chamber pot affixed to the deck or bulkhead to keep it from being jostled at sea.

Gun deck armament

The largest gun was a minion cannon, which was brass, weighed about 1,200 pounds, and could shoot a 3.5 pound cannonball almost a mile.

The Mayflower also had on board a saker cannon of about 800 pounds, and two base cannons that weighed about 200 pounds which shot a 3 to 5 ounce ball.

She carried at least ten pieces of ordnance on the port and starboard sides of her gun deck – seven cannons for long range purposes and three smaller guns often fired from the stern at close quarters that were filled with musket balls.

Later at New Plymouth, Mayflower Master Jones unloaded four of the pieces to help fortify the colony against invaders and would not have done so unless he was comfortable with the armament he still had on board.

Cargo hold

Below the gun deck was the cargo hold where the passengers kept most of their food stores and other supplies. Other items included most of their clothing and bedding. The hold also stored the passengers' personal weapons and military equipment – armor, muskets, gunpowder and shot, as well as swords and bandoliers.

Also all the tools the Pilgrims would need, as well as all the equipment and utensils needed to prepare meals in the New World. It is also known that some Pilgrims such as Allerton and Mullins, and possibly others, loaded trade goods on board, with these also most likely being stored in the cargo hold. (The above description of the Mayflower is from the World Heritage Encyclopedia Edition – Gutenberg)

The Captain and Crew

“The officers and crew of the Mayflower were obviously important factors in the success of the Pilgrim undertaking, and it is of interest to know what we may concerning them.”

The first to be hired was the pilot, John Clarke, even before the vessel upon which he was to serve had been found, and he had hence the distinction of being the first man ‘shipped’ of the Mayflower complement.

Clarke “seems to have begun his American experiences as early as 1612, and to have frequently repeated them. That he was at once hired by Weston and Cushman as a valuable man, as soon as found, was not strange.”

“He seems to have had the ability to impress men favorably and secure their confidence, and to have been a modest and reliable man. Although of both experience and capacity, he continued an under-officer for some years after the Pilgrim voyage, when, it is fair to suppose, he might have had command of a ship.”

“It is evident that he was promptly hired on its being known that he had recently returned from a voyage to Virginia in the cattle-ship Falcon, as certain to be of value in the colonists’ undertakings. Knowing that the Adventurers’ agents were seeking both a ship and a master for her, it was the natural thing for the

latter, that he should propose the Captain under whom he had last sailed, on much the same voyage as that now contemplated.

“There is no room for doubt that the Captain of the Falcon - whose release from arrest while under charge of piracy the Earl of Warwick procured, that he might take command of the above-named cattle-ship on her voyage to Virginia, as hereinafter shown - was Thomas Jones.”

“The identity of this man and ‘Master Jones’ who assumed command of the Mayflower - with the former mate of the Falcon, John Clarke, as his first officer - is abundantly certified by circumstantial evidence of the strongest kind, as is also the fact that he commanded the ship Discovery a little later.”

“With the powerful backing of such interested friends as the Earl of Warwick and Sir Ferdinando Gorges, undoubtedly already in league with Thomas Weston, who probably made the contract with Jones, as he had with Clarke, the suggestion of the latter as to the competency and availability of his late commander would be sure of prompt approval, and thus, in all probability, Captain Thomas Jones, who finds his chief place in history - and a most important one – as Master of the Mayflower, came to that service.”



(Others note that the Mayflower Master/Captain was Christopher Jones.)

“That Jones was a man of large experience, and fully competent in his profession, is beyond dispute. His disposition, character, and deeds have been the subject of much discussion. By most writers he is held to have been a man of coarse, ‘unsympathetic’ nature, ‘a rough sea-dog,’ capable of good feeling and kindly impulses at times, but neither governed by them nor by principle.”

“That he was a ‘highwayman of the seas,’ a buccaneer and pirate, guilty of blood for gold, there can be no doubt. Certainly nothing could justify the estimate of him given by Professor Arber, that ‘he was both fair-minded and friendly toward the Pilgrim Fathers,’ and he certainly stands alone among writers of reputation in that opinion.”

“Jones’s selfishness, threats, boorishness, and extortion, to say nothing of his exceedingly bad record as a pirate, both in East and West Indian waters, compel a far different estimate of him as a man, from that of Arber, however excellent he was as a mariner.”

“It is noteworthy that Jones did not command the Mayflower for another voyage, and never sailed afterward in the employ of Thomas Goffe, Esq., or (so far as appears) of any reputable shipowner.”

“Of Robert Coppin, the ‘second mate’ (or ‘pilot’) of the Mayflower, nothing is known before his voyage in Pilgrim ship, except that he seems to have made a former voyage to the coast of New England and the vicinity of Cape Cod, though under what auspices, or in what ship, does not transpire. Bradford says: ‘Their Pilotte, one Mr. Coppin, who had been in the cuntry before.’”

There was no apparent ship’s surgeon, however, it has been stated that Giles Heath served in that role. Likewise, reference to passenger Dr. Samuel Fuller suggests to some that he filled that role and that there was “increased mortality of the seamen after his removal on shore” during the General Sickness.

“That she had no chaplain goes without saying. The Pilgrims had their spiritual adviser with them in the person of Elder Brewster, and were not likely to tolerate a priest of either the English or the Romish church on a vessel carrying them.”

“[O]ne other officer in merchant ships of the Mayflower class in her day was dignified by the address of ‘Master’ (or Mister), or had rank with the Captain and Mates as a quarter-deck officer ... was the representative of the business interests of the owner or chartering-party, on whose account the ship made the voyage; and in that day was known as the ‘ship’s-merchant,’ later as the ‘purser,’ and in some relations as the ‘supercargo.’”

“No mention of an officer thus designated, belonging to the Mayflower, has ever been made ... [however] A certain ‘Master Williamson,’ ... once mentioned by Governor Bradford ... seems to have filled this berth on board the Mayflower.”

“That ‘Master Williamson’ was above the grade of ‘petty officer,’ and ranked at least with the mates or ‘pilots,’ is clear from the fact that he is invariably styled ‘Master’ (equivalent to Mister), and we know with certainty that he was neither captain nor mate.”

“That he was a man of address and courage follows the fact that he was chosen by Standish as his lieutenant, while the choice in and of itself is a strong bit of presumptive proof that he held the position on the Mayflower to which he is here assigned.”

“The only officer commonly carried by a ship of the Mayflower class, whose rank, capacities, and functions would comport with every fact and feature of the case, was ‘the ship’s-merchant,’ her accountant, factor, and usually when such was requisite - her ‘interpreter,’ on every considerable (trading) voyage.”

“That ‘Master Williamson’ was a veritable person at New Plymouth, in February and March, 1620/21, is now beyond dispute; that he must have been of the ship’s company of the Mayflower is logically certain ...”

“... that he was one of her officers, and a man of character, is proven by his title of ‘Master’ and his choice by Standish and Mullens for exceptional and honorable service; that the position of ‘ship’s-merchant’ alone answers to the conditions precedent, is evident; ...”

“... and that such an officer was commonly carried by ships of the Mayflower class on such voyages as hers is indicated by the necessity, and proven by the facts known as to other ships on similar New England voyages, both earlier and later.”

“The fact that he was called simply ‘Master Williamson,’ in both cases where he is mentioned, without other designation or identification, is highly significant, and clearly indicates that he was some one so familiarly known to all concerned that no occasion for any further designation apparently occurred to the minds of Mullens, Carver, or Bradford, when referring to him.”

“The Carpenter [Francis Eaton], Gunner, Boatswain, Quartermaster, and ‘Masters-mates’ are the only ‘petty officers’ of the Pilgrim ship of whom any record makes mention. The carpenter is named several times, and was evidently, as might be expected, one of the most useful men of the ship’s crew.”

“Called into requisition, doubtless. in the conferences as to the condition of the SPEEDWELL, on both of her returns to port, at the inception of the voyage, he was especially in evidence when. ...”

“... in mid-ocean, ‘the cracking and bending of a great deck-beam,’ and the ‘shaken’ condition of ‘the upper works’ of the Mayflower, gave rise to much alarm, and it was by his labors and devices, and the use of the now famous ‘jack-screw,’ that the bending beam and leaking deck were made secure.”

“The repairs upon the shallop in Cape Cod harbor also devolved upon him, and mention is made of his illness and the dependence placed upon him. No doubt, in the construction of the first dwellings and of the ordnance platform on the hill, etc., he was the devising and principal workman.”



“He undoubtedly returned to England with the ship, and is known in history only by his ‘billet,’ as ‘the carpenter’ of the Mayflower.”

“The Master Gunner seems to have been a man with a proclivity for Indian barter, that led him to seek a place with the ‘third expedition’ at Cape Cod, thereby nearly accomplishing his death, which indeed occurred later, in Plymouth harbor, not long before the return of the ship.”

“The Boatswain is known, by Bradford’s records, to have died in the general sickness which attacked the crew while lying in Plymouth harbor. The brief narrative of his sickness and death is all that we know of his personality.”

“The writer says: ‘He was a proud young man, and would often curse and scoff at the passengers,’ but being nursed when dying, by those of them who remained aboard, after his shipmates had deserted him in their craven fear of infection, ‘he bewailed his former conduct,’ saying, ‘Oh! you, I now see, show your love like Christians indeed, one to another, but we let one another lie and die like dogs.’”

Four Quartermasters are mentioned (probably helmsmen simply), of whom three are known to have died in Plymouth harbor.

“‘Masters-mates’ are several times mentioned, but it is pretty certain that the ‘pilots’ (or mates) are intended.”

“Bradford and Winslow, in ‘Mourt’s Relation,’ say of the reappearance of the Indians: ‘So Captain Standish, with another [Hopkins], with their muskets, went over to them, with two of the masters-mates that follow them without [side] arms, having two muskets with them.’”

“Who these ‘masters-mates’ were does not appear. The language, ‘two of the masters-mates,’ would possibly suggest that there were more of them.”

“It hardly seems probable that both the mates of the Mayflower would thus volunteer, or thrust themselves forward in such a matter, and it seems doubtful if they would have been permitted (even if both ashore at one time, which, though unusual, did occur), to assume such duty. Whoever they were, they did not lack courage.”

“The names of the petty officers and seamen of the Mayflower do not appear as such, but the discovery of the (evidently) nuncupative will of William Mullens has perhaps given us two of them.”

“Attached to John Carver’s certificate of the particulars of this will, filed at Somerset House, London, are the names, ‘Giles Heale’ and ‘Christopher Joanes.’”

“As Mr. Mullens died Wednesday, February 21, 1620, on board the Mayflower in Plymouth harbor, on which day we know from Bradford that ‘the Master [Jones, whose name was Thomas] came on shore with many of his sailors,’; ...

“... to land and mount the cannon on the fort, and as they had a full day’s work to draw up the hill and mount five guns, and moreover brought the materials for, and stayed to eat, a considerable dinner with the Pilgrims, they were doubtless ashore all day.”

“It is rational to interpret the known facts to indicate that in this absence of the Captain and most of his crew ashore, Mr. Mullens, finding himself failing fast, sent for Governor Carver and - unable to do more than speak - dictated to him the disposition of his property which he desired to make.”

“Carver, noting this down from his dictation, undoubtedly called in two of the ship’s company (Heale very likely being the ship’s-surgeon), who were left aboard to ‘keep ship,’ to hear his notes read to Mullens and assented to by him, they thus becoming the witnesses to his will, to the full copy of which, as made by Carver (April 2), they affixed their names as such.”

“As there were then at Plymouth only the passengers and crew of the Mayflower, and these men were certainly not among the passengers, it seems inevitable that they were of the crew.”

“That ‘Christopher Joanes’ was not the Master of the ship is clear, because Heale’s is the first signature, and no man of the crew would have dared to sign before the Captain; because the Captain’s name was Thomas; and because we know that he was ashore all that day, with most of his men.”

“It is by no means improbable that Captain Jones had shipped one of his kinsmen in his crew, possibly as one of the ‘masters-mates’ or quartermasters referred to (and it is by no means certain that there were not more than two), though these witnesses may have been quartermasters or other petty officers left on board as ‘ship-keepers.’”

“The number of seamen belonging to the ship is nowhere definitely stated. At least four in the employ of the Pilgrims were among the passengers and not enrolled upon the ships’ lists.”

“From the size of the ship, the amount of sail she probably carried, the weight of her anchors, and certain other data which appear, - such as the number allowed to leave the ship at a time, etc., - it is probably not a wild estimate to place their number at from twenty to twenty-five.”

“This is perhaps a somewhat larger number than would be essential to work the ship, and than would have been shipped if the voyage had been to any port of a civilized country; but on a voyage to a wild coast, the possibilities of long absence and of the weakening of the crew by death, illness, etc., demanded consideration and a larger number.”

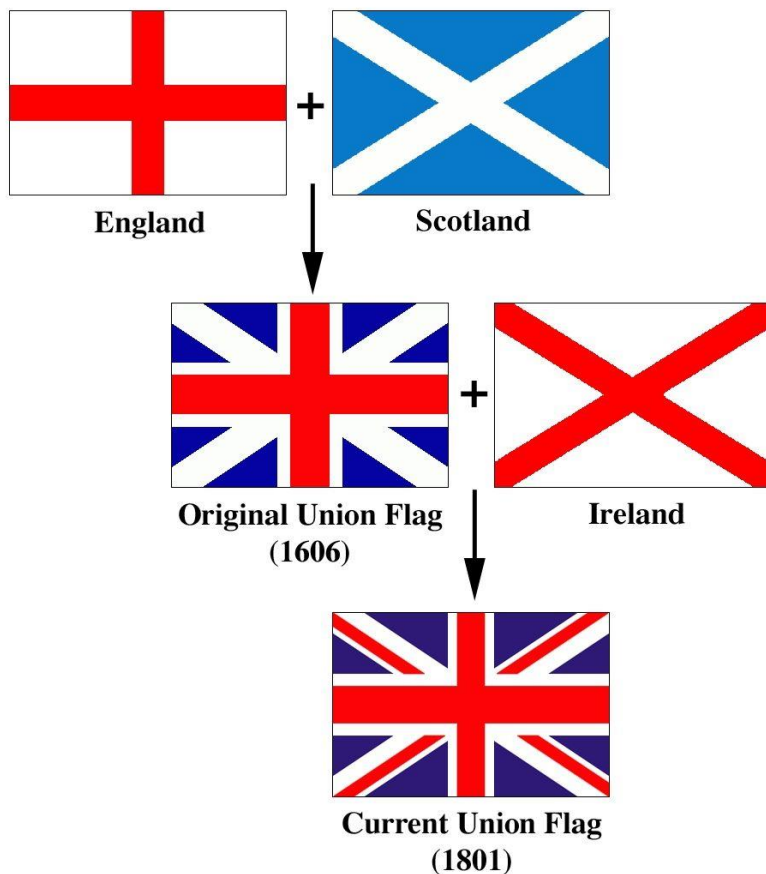
“The wisdom and necessity of carrying, on a voyage to an uninhabited country, some spare men, is proven by the record of Bradford, who says: ‘The disease begane to full amongst them [the seamen] also, so as allmost halfe of their company dyed before they went away and many of their officers and lustyest men; as ye boatson, gunner, 3 quarter maisters, the cooke, and others.’”

Union Jack

“In 1603, James VI. of Scotland was crowned James I. of England. The Scots, in their pride that they had given a king to England, soon began to contend that the cross of St. Andrew should take precedence of the cross of St. George, that ships bearing the flag of the latter should salute that of St. Andrew.”

“To allay the contention, the King, on the 12th of April, 1606, ordered that all subjects of Great Britain travelling by sea shall bear at the maintop the red cross of St. George and the white cross, commonly called the cross of St. Andrew, joined together according to a form made by his heralds ...”

“... besides this all vessels belonging to South Britain or England might wear the cross of St. George at the peak or fore, as they were wont, and all vessels belonging to North Britain or Scotland might wear the cross of St. Andrew at the foretop, as they had been accustomed; and all vessels were forbidden to wear any other flag at their peril.”



“The new flag thus designed by the heralds and proclaimed by this order was called the ‘King’s Colors.’”

“The new flag resulted from the ‘union’ of the crowns and kingdoms of England and Scotland, upon the accession of James VI. of Scotland to the English throne, as James I. of England, upon the death of Queen Elizabeth.” (Ames)

“Before 1600, ‘jack’ was certainly used to describe a small flag flown from the mast mounted at the end of the bowsprit; by 1627, a small version of the Union flag – later described as the ‘Jack’, ‘Jack flag’ or ‘King’s Jack’ – seems to have flown commonly in this position; and by 1674, this flag was described formally as ‘His Majesty’s Jack’ and in common usage – officially acknowledged – as the Union Jack.” (Flag Institute)

“There is no doubt, according to the British Admiralty Office, - which should be authority upon the matter, - that the flag under which the Mayflower, and all other vessels of the merchant marine of Great Britain, sailed, at the time she left England, was what became known as the ‘Union Jack.’” (Ames)

Information here is primarily from The May-flower and Her Log July 15, 1620 – May 6, 1621, Azel Ames and World Heritage Encyclopedia Edition – Gutenberg. Note that Ames is adamant that the Mayflower’s Master’s/Captain’s name was Thomas Jones; others note he was Christopher Jones.

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