

Netherlands

The Separatists left England for the Netherlands¹.

This wasn't Mayflower passenger William Brewster's first time in Holland. In his capacity as an assistant to William Davison, who served as Queen Elizabeth I's Secretary of State, Brewster likely visited Leiden twice, in 1585 and 1586.

Holland was one of seven provinces that united to form the Dutch Republic in the 1580s after declaring independence from Catholic Spain. For political imperatives, it was a proudly Protestant, and yet a relatively tolerant place. And in 1609, as the Pilgrims arrived, the recent negotiation of a truce with Catholic Spain meant an end, at least for the moment, of warfare that had been ravaging the Dutch for four decades.

Amsterdam was home to a diverse and growing population. The ongoing religious wars sweeping across Europe pushed thousands of religious refugees toward the Dutch Republic, causing rapid population growth and housing shortages.

Most of the English congregation had lived a rural life, "not acquainted with trades nor traffic (by which that country doth subsist) but had only been used to a plain country life, and the innocent trade of husbandry [farming]." Urban life was a difficult adjustment. Most found unskilled work in the textile trades.

Other English Reformed congregations preceded the Pilgrims in Amsterdam. In fact, it was one of the reasons they considered Holland a viable place to relocate. Upon arrival, however, they quickly realized that these other groups were in turmoil. Fearing "that the flames of contention were like to break out in that ancient church itself (as afterwards lamentably came to pass)," the Pilgrims resolved to leave Amsterdam. After several months of preparation and receipt of permission from the City of Leiden to relocate, the congregation departed for Leiden.

"The Court...declare that they refuse no honest persons ingress to come and have their residence in this city, provided that such persons behave themselves honestly, and submit to all the laws and ordinances here: and, therefore, the coming of the memorialists will be agreeable and welcome to them." (Court of the City of Leiden, Note in the margin of the Pilgrims' petition to relocate to Leiden, February 1609) (plimoth-org)

In selecting the Netherlands,

"Life in this placid, thriving country was so different from the feverish stress to which the Brewsters had been subjected that all wounds healed. They had found a haven of refuge, and a great peace brooded over the fugitives, who were enjoying safety with liberty, and for years lived in the most ideal brotherly love with each other and the kindly Hollanders. 'What more can a pilgrim ask?' said Brewster to his wife, five years after their coming.'" (Champney)

Leiden, the second largest city in Holland after Amsterdam. The city was home to the oldest university in the Dutch Republic, founded just thirty-five years earlier as the first university in the new republic.

¹ The official name of the country is the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The Netherlands consists of 12 provinces; Holland actually only means the two provinces of Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland. However, the name Holland is often used when all of the Netherlands is meant.

Let's look back ...

After Studying at Cambridge, Brewster Served Under Secretary of State, William Davison

Brewster entered Peterhouse (the oldest of the Cambridge colleges) in December 1580, aged about 14; the last reference to him in the College's records occurs in December 1581.

After studies at the university (in 1584 when Brewster was about 18), Brewster notes, "I had studied law, had come home with my degree, and was waiting for some opening for the practice of my profession ..."

"... when a chance, nay a providential, meeting with that high minded and incorruptible man, the noblest statesman of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, William Davison, changed the entire current of my life."

Brewster became a member of the household of William Davison, then important in administrative and diplomatic life at the court of Elizabeth I, and, became one of his trusted retainers, while his father back home maintained a position as the postmaster of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire.

Brewster describes what's next, "Until I knew Davison I had never thought of life outside of England, of mingling with the great men of my time, - the men who make history, - still less of taking a hand at making it myself."

"I had the privilege of being schooled in diplomacy at a very exciting and important time, when great issues were at stake, not only between the Netherlands and England, but involving all Europe as well. We met great men of Holland, of France, and of Spain."

"It was a game of skillful fencing between us, for the battles in the council chamber were even more important than those in the field. I could not have had a better teacher than Davison."

"The Queen (Elizabeth I) retained Davison at her court as Secretary of the Privy Council, a great advance in his fortunes."

Davison Goes to the Low Countries to Observe The War with Spain

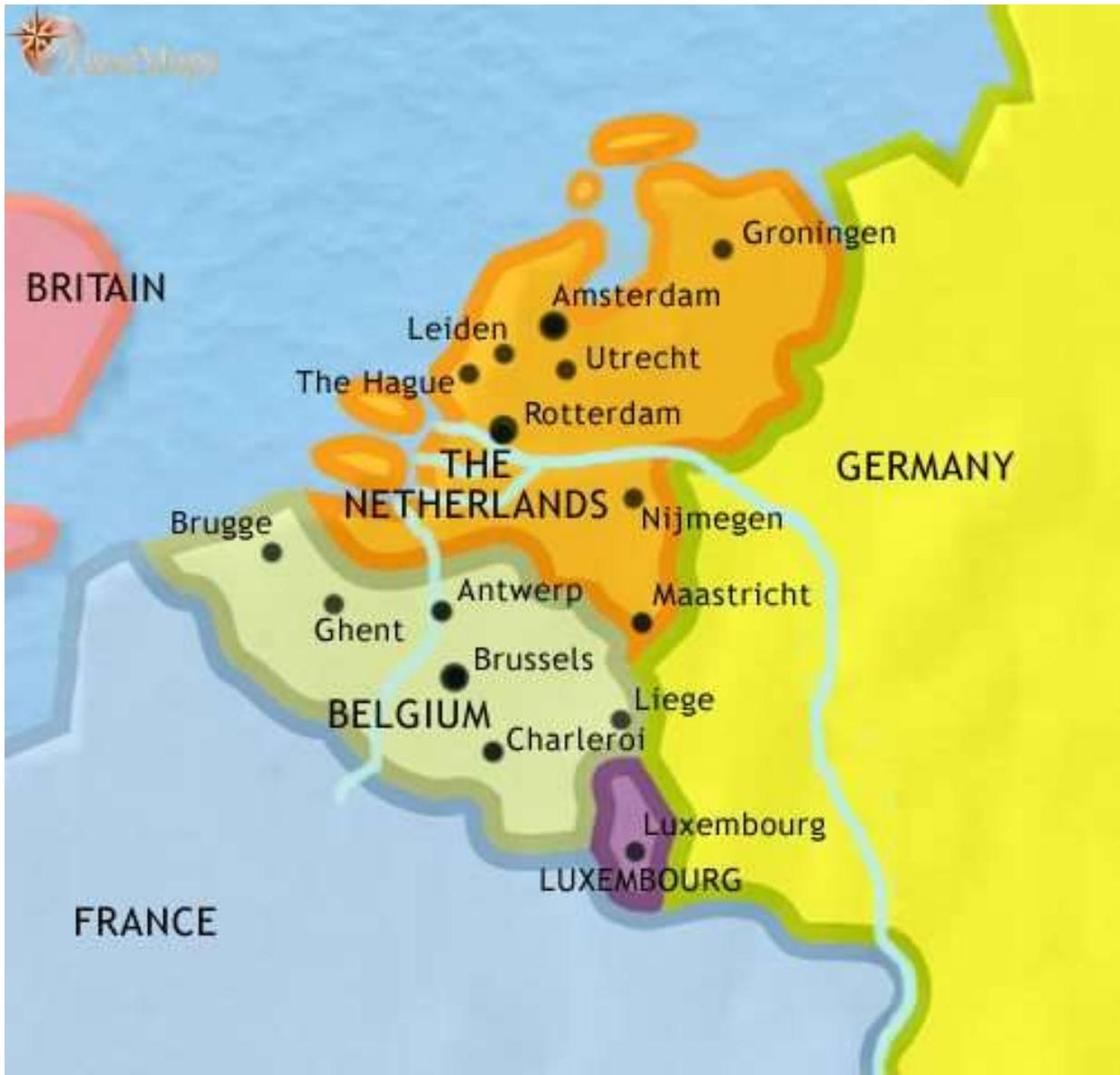
A conversation exchange between Brewster and his son Love (found in a book about his daughter, Patience - written by Champney), helps explain ...

"[Davidson] had been sent to the Low Countries (AKA Low Lands, consisting of Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), as English Resident Agent at Antwerp, to watch the progress of the war with Spain, but had been recalled by the queen to undertake a delicate diplomatic mission to Scotland."

"This was nothing less than to prevent King James from contracting a French alliance. He was on his way back, having been successful in his mission, when he stopped here over night."

"I remember his sitting on this very form and telling us of his meeting with Fenelon, who had been sent by the French king to arrange the marriage. In spite of their antagonistic position, they met in a friendly manner and discussed religious matters."

"[W]hen he asked me if I would go back to the Netherlands with him as his confidential secretary I was delighted beyond bounds. It was, indeed, a wonderful opportunity for a young man."



“Besides the novelty of travel in a foreign land, of adventures in a country where war was in progress,- naturally fascinating to young blood ...”

“... I had the privilege of being schooled in diplomacy at a very exciting and important time, when great issues were at stake, not only between the Netherlands and England, but involving all Europe as well.”
(Champney)

Davison Negotiates and Carries Out A Treaty

At the end of 1584, Davison “had audience of the States General [the legislative body of the Netherlands] on the 8th December.”

“He then informed that body that the Queen had heard, with sorrowful heart, of the great misfortunes which the United Provinces had sustained since the death of the Prince of Orange the many cities which they had lost, and the disastrous aspect of the common cause.”

“Moved by the affection which she had always borne the country, and anxious for its preservation, she had ordered her ambassador Stafford to request the King of France to undertake, jointly with herself, the defense of the provinces against the King of Spain.”

Davison “informed the States that she had commissioned him to offer them ‘all possible assistance, to enquire into the state of the country , and to investigate the proper means of making that assistance most useful.’” (History of the Netherlands, Motley, 1888)

The States of the Low Countries became obliged to throw themselves on the Queen's protection, and after Antwerp was seized by the Spaniards, she was necessitated to adopt decided measures.

Elizabeth determined to assist them in their resolution of defending their freedom by force of arms; and Mr. Davison was selected as her Majesty' s ambassador to form the treaty with them, which was to be the basis of their alliance with England ...

... he went into Holland, according to Lord Burleigh's account, in August 1585; who thus notices his departure: “August 1585, Mr. William Davison sent of special message into the Low Countries, with 40 shillings diet.”

His instructions are without date, and consist of nine articles: the principal point in them is, to assure the States that the Queen had taken them under her protection; with some directions as to his conduct in particular contingencies. (Nicolas)

The treaty with the States was negotiated between their ministers - and a committee of the Privy Council here; but the carrying it into execution was entirely remitted to the care of Mr. Davison. (Nicolas)

Mr. Davison's conduct as her Majesty's Ambassador to the States of Holland , added very considerably to the reputation he had already acquired.

The negotiation with which he was entrusted has been considered one of the most intricate, and difficult transactions of Elizabeth's reign.

But he had extraordinary good fortune to render an important service to his own country, by obtaining ample security for the expenses it had occurred in aiding the Low Countries against Spain; whilst, by his urbanity and address, he conciliated the esteem of the States, and received their strongest acknowledgments.

Soon after his return to England, he was declared a member of her Majesty's most honorable Privy Council, and in the autumn of the same year appointed one of her principal Secretaries of State. (Nicolas)

Brewster Was With Davison Throughout This Time

Throughout this time, William Brewster, the future Pilgrim and spiritual leader of the Mayflower and Plymouth colony, was working as a “discrete and faithful” assistant of William Davison.

“[Davison] was constantly in attendance on the Queen, conducting her official correspondence.”

(Love) “You mean you conducted it, father; for if Mr. Davison was the Queen's secretary, you were his, so you really wrote the Queen's letters for her, did you not?”

(Brewster) “Only the manual part, my son. It was Davison who had the task of making the whims of that selfish and double-faced woman comport with honor and sound policy.”

Separatists Move from Amsterdam to Leiden

Soon after the Pilgrims settled in Amsterdam circumstances arose which made it seem more advisable for them to make Leiden their residence. Amsterdam was the metropolis of Holland, a populous, wealthy city, and as such its entire atmosphere was saturated with money (getting it and spending it).



A thoroughly worldly, commercial, and extravagant manner of living prevailed among its burghers; while they found the Brownists, (a Separatist congregation which had emigrated before them, with whom they had hoped to fraternize), opposed to a democratic church government, jealous of the newcomers, and quarrelsome; and it soon became evident that they could not live together in harmony.

The Brownists, from living among their Dutch neighbors, who thoroughly believed in enjoying all the good things of this present life, seemed to the Pilgrims to have grown too luxurious. (Champney)

While the Pilgrims looked upon this rich and pleasant city of Amsterdam as too much given to luxuries and temptations to worldliness, the more scholastic atmosphere of the university town of Leiden was peculiarly attractive to men who believed in ‘plain living and high thinking.’

Leiden was at this time “ one of the grandest, the comeliest, and the most charming cities of the world.” One of the professors of its university, Polyander, was wont to say: “ Of the four quarters of the globe Europe is the noblest. The Low Countries are the best part of Europe.

Of its seventeen provinces Holland is the richest. Its most altogether charming city is Leiden, while the loveliest street in Leiden is the Rapenburg. Wherefore I am lodged in the most beautiful spot in the world.”

The University, the glory of Leiden, had been chosen by its people when the Prince of Orange offered them as a reward for their heroic defense of the city against the Spanish either exemption from taxes or the foundation of this great school of learning.

Separatists Decide to Leave Leiden for America

There were reasons why even beautiful Leiden could be no “continuing city” for the exiles, reasons which forced them to take as their motto, *Migratwrus habita* (I dwell as about to depart).

First of all, the twelve-years' truce between the Dutch and the Spaniards was drawing to a close and the country was soon to be plunged again in war; and the Pilgrims, who were averse to fighting other people's battles, saw with regret their more adventurous sons enlisting in the Dutch army.

The kindness with which they had been received by the Dutch had also a not altogether desired effect ; the young people were intermarrying and dropping away from the Puritan congregation.

They were learning the Dutch language, and the Fathers saw that if they remained in Leiden they would lose their individuality as to church and nationality, and the next generation would become thoroughly Dutch. (Champney)

Only a part of the Leiden congregation had decided to emigrate. Their pastor, John Robinson, was to remain, and William Brewster would take upon himself the duty of minister to those who went.

The parting between those old neighbors and tried companions was most tender. Their Dutch friends joined in the general expression of regret, and even their old neighbors in Amsterdam came to see them off, and a great deputation accompanied the voyagers to Delfshaven – ‘where falling down on their knees with watrie cheeks they commended them to the Lord and his blessing.’ (Champney)

A lot of the information here is from Dictionary of National Biography, 1888; Patience a Daughter of the Mayflower, Champney, 1899; plimoth-org; Pilgrim Hall Museum; American National Biography; Life of William Davison, Nicolas, 1823

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