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Jean Leon Gerome Ferris (1863-1930) - The First Sermon Ashore at Plymouth.

Who were the pilgrims?

By Jim Cornelius, News Editor

To mark Thanksgiving each year, I watch History Channel's excellent docudrama, "Desperate Crossing." Through quality reenactments, it depicts the voyage of the Mayflower and the founding of the Plymouth Colony in 1620.

The voyage of the Mayflower must go down as one of the most courageous — perhaps foolhardy — excursions in history. The voyagers were ill-prepared and under-supplied, they left late in the season, their ship was overcrowded, and its main beam cracked halfway across the Atlantic. If one is religiously inclined, it is easy to interpret their survival of the voyage, and the subsequent survival of the Plymouth Colony, as a miracle.

To its credit, the docudrama spends almost half of its two-hour running time on the years leading up to the voyage, setting the context of the Pilgrims' Separatist faith and politics, which would have such a profound impact on the evolution of the American Republic.

The 17th century was an era of profound religious ferment in Europe. Conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were rife, leading to the most destructive wars the continent would see before the 20th century. The savage Thirty Years War that devastated Central Europe resulted in eight million casualties and nearly destroyed civil society in Germany.

England, from whence the Pilgrims originated, was a Protestant nation and had been since the time of Henry VIII, almost a century before. But the state-established Church of England retained many vestiges of the Roman Catholic church, and that was anathema to more hardline Protestant elements. They sought a simpler, less structured and hierarchical, more austere form of worship, and sought to "purify" the Church. Thus, they became known as Puritans. Because they sought to separate themselves from the established church, they were also known as Separatists.

Because the Church of England was an arm of the State, criticism of and separation from the Church was treated as a form of rebellion against England itself. Their beliefs put the Puritans outside the law.

As the Plimoth Plantation website notes:

"The Separatist church congregation that established Plymouth Colony in New England was originally centered around the town of Scrooby in Nottinghamshire, England. Members

included the young William Bradford and William Brewster. Like others who refused to follow the Church of England's teachings, some of them were harassed, fined or even sent to jail. When they felt they could no longer suffer these difficulties in England, they chose to flee to the Dutch Netherlands. There, they could practice their own religion without fear of persecution from the English government or its church."

Religious freedom they indeed found in The Netherlands, but economic security and prosperity were harder to come by. Most of the congregation worked in trades — especially cloth-making. Anxiety about loss of their English identity and fears that the Protestant Dutch would become embroiled in war with the powerful Catholic Spanish Empire led the leaders of the congregation to look further afield for a place to establish their community. They turned their eyes across the sea to America.

The original idea was to settle somewhere in the area where the Hudson River meets the sea. The Puritans could not fund the voyage themselves, so they took investors, who were to be paid back in furs, fish and agricultural products once the colony was established.

The 66-day voyage across the Atlantic was unpleasant to say the least, and the cracking of the main beam threatened to break the ship up and leave them all to perish in the deep. They managed to brace the beam and the ship made landfall on November 11. They weren't where they intended to be. Weather and rough conditions on shore had pushed them north to Cape Cod Bay, and they decided to stay in the area that would become New England.

The legacy of the Pilgrims, as they came to be called, was built into the DNA of the republic that would grow out of the American soil 150 years later. The Puritans' experience would be part of the impetus for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which forbids the establishment of a state-sponsored religion or church. The Pilgrims carried with their community tensions between economic individualism and the needs of a cohesive "commonwealth" that continue to shape American politics to this day. Their relationship with the land contained conflict between stewardship and exploitation that is a part of the fabric of the entire history of the continent.

Truly, the Separatist Puritans who crossed the sea in 1620 were American Pilgrims.



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