Pilgrim Fathers (& Puritans)

**NOTE:** Puritans: stayed in the Church of England and tried to purify it from the inside

Pilgrims were Non-coformist separatists – separated from what they thought was a corrupt church

1603 – The Plague/Black Death. James becomes King James (Gunpowder Plot)

1607 – Tsunami floods a lot of Britain. Then the summer was very hot and dry so there was no crops and lack of food. Then Late summer Haley’s comet appeared [The last times this had happened AD70 – Jeruslaem fell, 1066-Normans invaded Britain] – bad omen.

All this led to fear in the country. Some people thought this was signs that God was displeased with Britain. Furthermore, the two main ‘parts’ of the church were Roman Catholics and Church of England(set up by Henry Viii). But both of these were tradition/priests/robes/prayer books etc – not what was in the Bible.

The Pilgrims – as they became known- came from all over middle England,- Nottingham, Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. The core of the group that would come to be known as the Pilgrims were brought together by a common belief in the ideas promoted by Richard Clyfton, a Brownist parson at All Saints’ Parish Church in Babworth, near East Retford, Nottinghamshire, between 1586 and 1605.

They had their own ideas and wanted the freedom to practice their own religion, but many priests and clergy were against this. They believed they should be able to pray without a prayerbook etc. Laws were passed to prevent them from practicing and the penalty for breaking these laws was execution.
This congregation held Separatist beliefs comparable to nonconforming movements (i.e., groups not in communion with the Church of England) led by Robert Browne, John Greenwood and Henry Barrowe. Unlike the Puritan group who maintained their membership in and allegiance to the Church of England, Separatists held that their differences with the Church of England were irreconcilable and that their worship should be organized independently of the trappings, traditions and organization of a central church. William Brewster, a former diplomatic assistant to the Netherlands, was living in the Scrooby manor house, serving as postmaster for the village and bailiff to the Archbishop of York. Having been favorably impressed by Clyfton’s services, he had begun participating in Separatist services led by John Smyth in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire.

Under the 1559 Act of Uniformity, it was illegal not to attend official Church of England services, with a fine of one shilling (£0.05; about £16 today) for each missed Sunday and holy day. The penalties for conducting unofficial services included imprisonment and larger fines. Under the policy of this time, Barrowe and Greenwood were executed for sedition in 1593.

Two men named William Bradford and William Brewster, along with about a hundred separatists arranged a passage on a Dutch ship to take them to a new life in Holland, where they would be free to practice their own religion. In those days emigration was illegal without first obtaining permission from the relevant authorities and even then it was difficult to obtain.

Unbeknown to them, the captain of the ship had betrayed them and reported them to the authorities and upon boarding the vessel they were immediately put under arrest. They were imprisoned in Boston, some of them were sent to the town gaol and the rest held at the Guild Hall, where they were kept in the most appalling conditions. There are two small cells in
the Guild Hall, designed to hold no more than two prisoners in each. It is reported that on this occasion each cell held ten men, who were treated worse than animals.

They were eventually brought to trial but were released. However, this did not deter them and in 1620 they managed to set sail for Holland. In Holland, the Pilgrims were happy for about 12 years, but didn’t have much money and were very very poor. The children made Dutch friends, spoke Dutch and wanted to conform to Dutch ways — they didn’t want to go to church any more.

The Netherlands was, however, a land whose culture and language were strange and difficult for the English congregation to understand or learn. They found the Dutch morals much too libertine. Their children were becoming more and more Dutch as the years passed by. The congregation came to believe that they faced eventual extinction if they remained there. Bradford noted that the congregation was aging, compounding the difficulties some had in supporting themselves. Some, having spent through their savings, gave up and returned to England. It was feared that more would follow and that the congregation would become unsustainable. The employment issues made it unattractive for others to come to Leiden, and younger members had begun leaving to find employment and adventure elsewhere.

So they decided to go to America. They bought a ship to take them back to England called the Speedwell. In July 1620, Speedwell departed for England to Southampton.

At Southampton more puritans had hired a larger ship called the Mayflower.

On August 5 (Old Style)/August 15 (New Style), with final arrangements made, the two vessels set out from Southampton.

Soon thereafter, the Speedwell crew reported that their ship was taking in water, so both were diverted to Dartmouth,
Devon. There it was inspected for leaks and sealed, but a second attempt to depart also failed, bringing them only so far as Plymouth, Devon. It was decided that Speedwell was untrustworthy, and it was sold; the ship’s master and some of the crew transferred to Mayflower for the trip.

Of the 121 combined passengers, 102 were chosen to travel on Mayflower with the supplies consolidated. Of these, about half had come by way of Leiden. The reduced party finally sailed successfully on September 6/September 16, 1620.

Initially the trip went smoothly, but under way they were met with strong winds and storms. One of these caused a main beam to crack, and although they were more than half the way to their destination, the possibility of turning back was considered. They repaired the ship sufficiently to continue. One passenger, John Howland, was washed overboard in the storm but caught a top sail halyard trailing in the water and was pulled back on board.

One crew member and one passenger died before they reached land. A child was born at sea and named “Oceanus”.