

A Comparison of Plymouth and Jamestown Colonies

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The cultural, historical, economic, and religious characteristics of two early 17th century English colonies are compared and contrasted. Questions covered include, but are not limited to: Why did the colonists leave England? What skills did the colonists bring to the New World? What were their farming strategies? What were their expectations upon arriving in the New World? What were their perspectives on slavery? What were their life expectancies? What were their religious goals for the Native Americans? What knowledge and expectations did the Native Americans have about the English prior to the arrival of the colonists?

This Osher course has been developed by David Whiting and John Delano using a large set of peer-reviewed publications. The bibliographies accompany this document. Each of the three classes will be evenly divided between the histories of Jamestown and Plymouth. The three classes have the following themes:

Class #1 on March 25

Jamestown: In the context of great power rivalries (1492-1607)

Plymouth: Reality of Europe and selection of new world site

Class #2 on April 1

Jamestown: Strife, tobacco, quest for supremacy (1607-1634)

Plymouth: Adapting to new world and indigenous culture

Class #3 on April 8

Jamestown: Economic success, strife, supremacy, separation (1634-1699)

Plymouth: Impact of mass English migration (1630-1700)

Overview of Jamestown

Spain was both a model and menace for English colonization of the New World. The indigenous cultures described by the Spanish in Mexico and Peru were found by the English to be fundamentally different than the Powhatan culture in Virginia. Whereas the Spanish strategy of ‘conquest and subjugation’ resulted in the indigenous population providing the vast majority of labor, that was not to be the case in Virginia. The English strategy of ‘conquest and expulsion’ necessitated that labor be supplied by a steady flux of immigrants. Policies that were implemented in Jamestown were also influenced by the experiences of the English in conquering Ireland in 1565-1576.

Jamestown was in large part an investor-driven enterprise by the London Company that sought profitable enterprises in the New World. Despite the appalling health conditions at Jamestown, immigration to Virginia was encouraged by the London Company (until the loss of its charter in 1624) through strong public relations campaigns that extolled financial rewards and religious virtues. The English also believed that success or failure of the Jamestown enterprise depended on being seen to be worthy in God’s eyes of persevering against the Devil’s efforts. English documents written at the time often described the New World in Biblical terms, such as wilderness, beasts, and heathen.

The Headright System, which began in 1618, incentivized immigration to Jamestown by awarding landowners with 50 acres of land for each person, including enslaved Africans until 1699, whose Atlantic passage had been financed. Most English immigrants to Jamestown arrived under contract for seven years of indentured servitude as compensation for having had their Atlantic passage paid for by the more well-to-do members of the colony.

The success of tobacco as the financially lucrative export increased the demand for English immigrants to serve as laborers. However, the system of indentured servitude eventually could not meet those increased labor requirements. As a result, the English resorted to the importation of enslaved Africans beginning in 1619 that strongly accelerated after 1670. The evolution of laws passed by the General Assembly in 1668-1723 provide a revealing glimpse into the development of a slave-owning culture.

The history and symbolism of competition for supremacy between the Powhatans and the English culminated with the Treaty of Middle Plantation in May 1677. The intervening 70 years between the arrival of the first English colonists and the signing of that treaty had been a troubled period with three Anglo-Powhatan wars (1609-1614; 1622-1632; 1644-1646), Bacon's Rebellion (1676-1677), and two Powhatan uprisings (March 1622; April 1644).

The history of Jamestown is characterized by death, suffering, hardship, love, hate, treachery, betrayal, and heroism. Jamestown was the cultural and governmental center of the Virginia colony from 1607 to 1699, whereupon it was replaced by Williamsburg in the region known at the time as Middle Plantation.

Overview of Plymouth/Patuxet

Henry VIII's divorce from the Roman Catholic Church and the subsequent formation of the Anglican Church motivated the Separatists (Pilgrims) to embark on the unknown. For these people of the middle and lower economic strata, their difficult life in England, coupled with their faith in God's guidance and protection, resulted first in their relocation to the Netherlands, and then to an Atlantic crossing to the New World. The multiple hardships they suffered, including their early encounters with New England's fickle weather, and both real and imagined dangers, reinforced their belief in God's providence.

Ultimately, the Separatists' fellow English proved to be more significant inhibitors to the establishment of a successful colony than did the indigenous people. The indigenous people, in particular the Wampanoags, provided them with critical survival information which, coupled with their preparations before leaving, allowed them to initially subsist, and later thrive. However, the English factor, added to their financial woes and legal challenges, lasted for decades, and resulted in Plymouth Colony's eventual absorption.

The Separatists were drawn into two major wars between multiple indigenous groups and the English. The Pequot War took place less than two decades after they disembarked in 1620 from the *Mayflower*. King Philip's War commenced in 1676. Both wars had a negative impact on the indigenous people (from their perspective), and conversely, a positive impact on the English immigrants. Unlike textbook presentations of Plymouth, more recent research by today's historians is providing us with historical accounts from the perspective of the indigenous people. Also, unlike Jamestown, exhaustive genealogical research has resulted in significantly more detail about the *Mayflower* passengers as well as the indigenous people.

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