

First Place Scholarship Winner

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The Contributions of Women Pilgrims to Plymouth Colony

The 102 Pilgrims aboard the *Mayflower* embarked on the perilous journey in 1620 to a new domain, a foreign land, and a fresh start to practice Protestantism, free from the Anglican Church and King James I (“The Mayflower”). Their sails set for the bountiful promises held in the New World. With the depths of the unknown awaiting them at their final destination, the Pilgrims sailed from the port at Plymouth and bravely sacrificed their life in England with the hopes of gaining freedom and independence offered in the New World. The valiant Pilgrims left their homeland and gazed upon the vast Atlantic, and a blank canvas awaited them on the other side.

Standing behind the shadows of the men were the women that made the voyage to Plymouth Colony and so courageously cared for the ill, lived in less than adequate and poor conditions, and acted as the matriarchs to their families. While the men of the *Mayflower* were building the structures that would sustain the colony, the women were compacted into the filth, damp, and cold on the ship and supplied attention to the ailing and the children (“Women of Early Plymouth”). The role of women in establishing this great colony is too often overlooked. Pilgrim mothers provided the basic necessities of the home and endured through the brutal and severe state of living in order to create a more ideal life.

Although only five women survived the first winter, Plymouth Colony may not have been successfully established without the strength and will of the women on the *Mayflower*. Vast domestic tasks were allocated to the mothers and wives in the colony. As Noyes states in *The Women of the Mayflower and Women of Plymouth Colony*, “Grey days and golden passed over Plymouth, each one finding the women busy with the successive round of household duties and industries, not ended with the sunset gun as the men’s labors might be.” The women’s day of work continued long after the men’s laborious activities ended. The mothers and wives worked past nightfall to ensure the welfare of their family. Some of their duties included, but are not limited to, candle-making, pounding corn, producing butter and cheese, cooking, weaving, sewing, washing, teaching the youth, and overall maintaining the state of the household (Noyes 146-147).

Also, despite the ideals of subservience and submissiveness in the marriages in the seventeenth century, the Pilgrim women at Plymouth were allowed a larger array of social and legal rights and enjoyed more freedom than women preceding them for generations to come. They were relied upon to construct a thriving colony and due to the relentless conditions, their individuality and liberties were more abundant (“Plymouth Colony Women’s Rights”). Apart from the decreased restrictions on Pilgrim women, the females were still required to perform the imperative task of sustaining the colony’s population. Because of high fatality rates, repopulating the colony was crucial or extinction would surely prove to be inevitable. The women remained loyal to their husbands, dedicated to the hard work, perseverant through the vulnerability, and determined to survive. Only five women lived through the first winter in the small Plymouth settlement in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and a meager four were in attendance at the First Thanksgiving in the fall of 1621 (Kelly). While the number of survivors were grim, the women in Plymouth demonstrated immense significance in establishing the new settlement. Over the course of pioneering their new homeland, the Pilgrim women contributed by supporting and sustaining the men whose hands built on the untamed land.

The Pilgrim women were instrumental in securing the vitality of the colony and the survival of its people. They contributed much through their reverence to the value of life and faith. The last survivor of the original *Mayflower* passengers was a woman, Mary Allerton Cushman (Noyes 182). She symbolized the last living legacy of the voyage. Through valor and spirit, noble women accompanied the men to lead the way for the future of the New World. Every female who traveled into the uncertainty was essential to one of the most significant settlements in America. The suffering and loss the women of the *Mayflower* Voyage experienced will forever be remembered as the pivotal moment in history when women began to pave a path for the future.