

Third Place Scholarship Winner

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The Contributions of Women Pilgrims to Plymouth Colony

During this period in history, women were not visible nor recognized as equals to men, and as a result, records of their lives are sparse. The contributions made by pilgrim women to Plymouth Colony are not documented as well compared to the contribution of pilgrim men. It is written that the Pilgrim men were worried that the women, due to their fragile nature, would not be able to live through the hardships of the trans-Atlantic sailing, and the subsequent creation of the Plymouth colony. This concern resulted in only eighteen men choosing to have their wives to journey with them. Three of the wives, expectant mothers, were in their last trimester of pregnancy. Impressively, all of the women survived the sailing. Sadly, more than three quarters of them died during their first winter due to accident, pneumonia, and other illness; only five women survived the first winter. Reportedly, by the first Thanksgiving, only four married women and five young girls remained, to take care of the surviving men and children. Life was extremely difficult, and most of the women's death dates were not recorded.

There are most likely more contributions by the pilgrim women than what is documented. Given the nature of women in history combined with survival instinct, the contributions women made are not documented clearly, but the implications are obvious. For example, Mary Chilton arrived in Plymouth at the tender age of thirteen, accompanied by her parents. She has historically been given the honor of being the

first female to step ashore, although no documentation exists proving the event. Subsequently, her parents died, and she received both her share as well as their share of the land and animals that were divided among the early inhabitants. Mary wed and gave birth to ten children. Similarly, Mary Allerton Cushman arrived at age four, never leaving Plymouth until she died at age 83. She raised eight children and was the last survivor of the Mayflower passengers who landed at Plymouth. Elizabeth Tilley Howland was just four years old during the sailing. Tragically, one by one, her entire family died either on the trip over to America or during the first winter at Plymouth, leaving Elizabeth without any family while living in a strange land. Elizabeth lived into her eightieth year, having survived the insurmountable. Most everyone lost loved ones, and a majority of the lives

were lost during the sailing or within the first year in Plymouth. As parents and guardians died within a year, young girls and widows moved in with other families. They, like the others, helped in the community with domestic duties and babysitting.

The answer to the essay "The Contributions of Women to the Plymouth Colony" becomes transparent in the statement that young girls helped in the community with domestic duties and babysitting. The most discounted, although most significant job in history, is motherhood. Helping within community, keeping the home orderly and as clean as possible and preparing meals were necessary tasks. The greatest accomplishment of motherhood is raising the next generation, while supporting the current one consisting of males and females contributing to the common goal. The successful result of this mothering ability is a small group, including just 5 surviving women from the *Mayflower* started the growth of what became the greatest country in the world, now 380 million strong. Our great country, America, grew into a democratic republic that continues to be dependent on the unsung heroes of those who birth the next generation, provide the meals, add to or provide the household income, perform both community duties and domestic, while rarely receiving the recognition for the far-reaching impact and the scope of this untiring and essential effort. Two years after the *Mayflower's* initial arrival at Plymouth, the *Fortune* arrived with 35 Pilgrims and reportedly no provisions. The women allocated the servings, and came to serve the community in their time of need when starvation was otherwise certain. The fact that at least three of the original Pilgrim females lived into their 80's is extremely noteworthy. One has to feel that the participation and contributions by each of these women is significant, as the dream that lives on today grew from only a handful of pilgrim women to the hundreds of millions presently in our country. We can be thankful to the few, for so much. God Bless America.