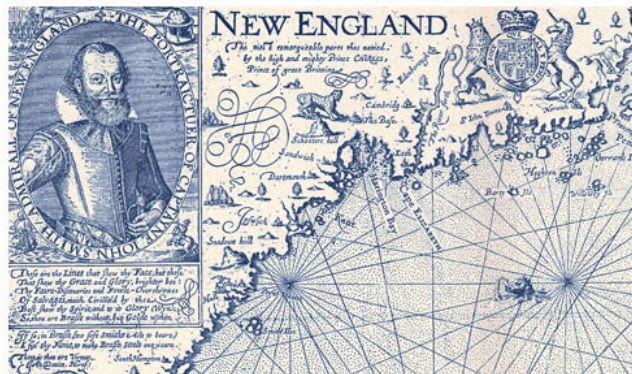


New England's Great Migration



by Lynn Betlock

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In 1988, the New England Historic Genealogical Society initiated the Great Migration Study Project, conceived and directed by Robert Charles Anderson. The Project aimed to summarize and document everything known about the individual immigrants who came to New England in its first years of settlement. Now, fifteen years later, a substantial body of work has been produced: *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1633* (three volumes), *The Great Migration: Immigrants*

to New England 1634–1635 (currently three volumes covering surnames A–H) and the *Great Migration Newsletter* (now in its twelfth year), which addresses broader themes and topics. Thanks to the substantial scholarly contributions of the Great Migration Study Project, the genealogical community has grown increasingly familiar with details of the lives of these early immigrants. In this article, I have relied heavily on *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century* by Virginia DeJohn Anderson[1] to help reacquaint readers with the movement that came to be known as the Great Migration.

The Great Migration Study Project uses 1620 — the date of the arrival of the *Mayflower* — as its starting point. The year 1620 marks the founding of Plymouth Colony by the Separatists — the most extreme Puritan sect. (While more moderate Puritans sought only to purify and reform the Church of England, the Separatists severed all ties to it.) The Separatists left England and in 1609 moved to the city of Leiden in Holland to escape persecution. After ten years in Holland, they were eager to establish a colony of their own. With the support of London merchants they secured a land patent in the New World and formed a joint-stock company. In September 1620, the *Mayflower* set sail from Plymouth with 101 passengers, including both Separatist believers and non-believers. With the ship's arrival in December in what became Plymouth, the English settlement of New England began.

The peak years of the Great Migration lasted just over ten years — from 1629 to 1640, years when the Puritan crisis in England reached its height. In 1629, King Charles I dissolved Parliament, thus preventing Puritan leaders from working within the system to effect change and leaving them vulnerable to persecution. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, chartered in the same year by a group of moderate Puritans, represented both a refuge and an opportunity for Puritans to establish a “Zion in the wilderness.” During the ten years that followed, over twenty thousand men, women, and children left England to settle permanently in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1640, when Parliament was reconvened, attention was redirected from the New World back to the old and migration to New England dropped sharply.

Seventeenth-century conditions in England caused hundreds of thousands of emigrants to leave England and seek new homes elsewhere: in Ireland, the Caribbean, and the other colonies of North America. For sheer numbers and longevity, these movements to other regions dwarfed New England's “Great” migration. But the term “Great Migration” was coined for a reason: it reflected the greatness of the endeavor's purpose rather than its size. The immigrants who came to New England differed from immigrants to other regions in a variety of ways, all stemming from their fundamental desire to obtain spiritual rather than economic rewards. Unlike colonists to other areas, those who migrated to New England had known relatively prosperous lives in England. In fact, it was a greater economic risk to leave than to stay. From the colonists' perspective, they traded economic advantages and stability in a corrupt England for a more precarious economic situation tempered by the opportunity to live more pious and worthy lives in a Puritan commonwealth.

Motivated primarily by religious concerns, most Great Migration colonists traveled to Massachusetts in family groups. In fact, the proportion of Great Migration immigrants who traveled in family groups is the highest in American immigrant history. Consequently, New England retained a normal, multi-generational structure with relatively equal numbers of men and women. At the time they left England, many husbands and wives were in their thirties and had three or more children, with more yet to be born. This situation contrasts with that of the southern colonies, which were populated primarily by single young men. In the Chesapeake Bay area, even at the end of the seventeenth century, the male-to-female sex ratio was skewed.

Great Migration colonists shared other distinctive characteristics. New Englanders had a high level of literacy, perhaps nearly twice that of England as a whole. New Englanders were highly skilled; more than half of the settlers had been artisans or craftsmen. Only about seventeen percent came as servants, mostly as members of a household. In contrast, seventy-five percent of Virginia's population arrived as servants. And in much greater proportion than the English population as a whole, New England settlers came from urban areas.

Unlike colonists of other regions, the Great Migration colonists were primarily middle class, and few were rich or poor. English emigrants primarily in search of economic betterment were unlikely to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony; the potential rewards were not great. Similarly, those already rich saw little opportunity to increase their wealth in a harsh region with no obvious cash crop. Emigrants seeking to realize the greatest economic opportunity would choose to go elsewhere, in effect excluding from New England those who placed material concerns first. The result of this exclusion was a remarkably homogeneous population, with colonists sharing similar backgrounds, outlooks, and perspectives.

An important rite of passage for all Great Migration colonists, and one that further bound them together as a group, was the voyage to Massachusetts. The majority of emigrants lived within a few days travel of a port of departure. Ships left from several points along the English coast, including London, Bristol, Barnstaple, Weymouth, Plymouth, Southampton, Ipswich, Great Yarmouth, and Gravesend. Most emigrant ships left England in March or April, allowing sufficient time for the journey and the ship's return trip to England before cold weather began again. An average ocean crossing lasted from eight to ten weeks but the time of the voyage could vary greatly, from a trip of just thirty-eight days to one of six months.

Once in New England, the settlers usually spent a minimum of several weeks — frequently the entire first winter — in the port town at which they arrived or another established town. After gathering information about possible places to settle, they dispersed to towns throughout the colony, sometimes moving several times before finding permanent residences. Most chose to move to a new town, generally one less than two years old. The key to success was arriving early enough after a town's founding to become a proprietor and share in the original land distribution, administered and controlled by the town. Proprietors received the best and largest land grants, as well as rights to share in future divisions. This share in future land divisions was extremely important to the settlers because it ensured viable economic futures for their children.

In order to best secure these rights, towns limited the number of possible proprietors. Once the limit was reached, the town was considered closed. In Dorchester, this process happened quite early — in 1636, just six years after its founding. Twenty-two towns, from Maine to Rhode Island, were closed or entry was drastically restricted within the first ten years of settlement. Fortunately for new arrivals, the frontier continued expanding and many new towns formed during the lifetimes of the original settlers. Settlement expanded from Boston, to both the north and the south, along the coast. The colonists first occupied land cleared by previous Native inhabitants. After these more desirable areas were taken, settlers moved into increasingly difficult terrain. Twenty-three towns in Massachusetts were founded in the 1630s, and these towns, as well as those settled in succeeding decades, provided a stable and secure land distribution system for the immigrants.

Another aspect of life in New England proved noteworthy: the remarkable health and longevity of the population. Many colonists lived to the age of seventy, and a substantial number lived to be eighty. Both male and female settlers in New England lived significantly longer than their English counterparts. This longevity is no doubt due to a variety of factors: dispersed settlement patterns, lack of epidemic disease, the healthful effects of a "little ice age," clean air and water, possibly a better diet, and the original good health of most immigrants. Also, infant and

childhood mortality rates were lower in New England, and the settlers produced large and healthy families — most having seven or more children. Accordingly, New England experienced tremendous population growth within the lifetime of first generation settlers.

Overall, Massachusetts Bay Colony settlers were able to attain a comfortable living for themselves and assure some measure of economic success for their children. Most owned houses and land, as well as a sufficient amount of livestock, farm equipment, and household goods. (Interestingly, with their disposable income New Englanders chose to forgo the purchase of silverware, pottery and other household goods in favor of books — principally the religious books that were so key to Puritanism.) If few in New England were wealthy, few lived in poverty either. Most settlers lived in circumstances similar to their neighbors and if one colonist was more prosperous than the rest, this prosperity was likely to manifest itself in a greater amount of land rather than a more ostentatious way of life. Both the community's spiritual outlook and the material conditions experienced by the first generation in New England fostered a uniquely communal and stable way of life. The commitment to life in a Puritan commonwealth on which the Great Migration colonists staked everything when they left England had indeed paid off.

Today's descendants of Great Migration settlers are fortunate to have a wealth of resources to add to their knowledge of their ancestors' lives. Using the Great Migration Study Project's detailed individual sketches in conjunction with broad historical studies, genealogists can hope to capture some of the personalities and motivations of ancestors who lived nearly three centuries ago.

Note

¹ Anderson, Virginia DeJohn. *New England's Generation: The Great Migration and the Formation of Society and Culture in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

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