

## **The Role of Women at the Time of the Mayflower Contrasted with 1691, at Plymouth's Absorption into the Massachusetts Bay Colony**

Before the arrival of the *Mayflower* in 1620, few English women had made the journey to the New World. When the *Mayflower* departed England, there were eighteen married women aboard. None died while in transit; however, the women stayed on board for four months after the landing while the men built storehouses and living quarters on shore. Subsequently, due in part to confinement on the ship and susceptibility to disease, only five adult women survived the first winter in the New World.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with the arrival of the *Anne* in 1623, more women were brought from England,<sup>2</sup> and women represented a greater part of Plymouth's population. Yet over time, New England was slowly overtaken from the Pilgrims by the much larger Puritan society. By the 1640s, there were 2,500 Pilgrims and 20,000 Puritans.<sup>3</sup> In 1691, Plymouth, along with New York, was absorbed into the Massachusetts Bay Colony under a new charter. Society in the Massachusetts Bay Colony at that time was radically different than Plymouth's small community in 1620. The 1691 charter took away the sovereignty of the Puritan colony of Massachusetts, and eliminated many laws founded in Puritan religion, but the societal impact of those previous years under religious law remained and affected the women in the newly combined colony. The fundamental rights and privileges of women in Plymouth upon landing in 1620, compared to the rights of women at the time of their absorption into Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1691, had been greater because of differing roles of religion, social circumstances, and the laws enacted in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Both the Pilgrims and the Puritans came to the New World seeking religious freedom. However, religion played a larger role in the lives of women in Plymouth in 1691 than upon landing 71 years

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<sup>1</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Plymouth Colony Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Mays, Dorothy A. *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004. Print, 296.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 298.

earlier, and the increased importance of religion led to a decreased role of women by 1691. The Christian religion at the time, whether Separatist, Puritan, or other, created a patriarchal society that demeaned women. John Robinson, the charismatic leader of the Separatist church in England and then Holland, called women a “weaker vessel.”<sup>4</sup> The Pilgrims listened to their pastor, who unfortunately never made it to the New World, and imposed these values on the women who lived in the colony.<sup>5</sup> The Separatists were devout believers in the teachings of St. Paul, who called for the submission of women to God and man.<sup>6</sup> Yet, in the earliest years of the colony, the Pilgrims were struggling for survival, which took priority over religion and afforded women more freedom than their religious dogma would have justified. Once the church was officially established in the colony, women in Plymouth were limited to a submissive role in the church. They were not allowed to talk in church or interpret scripture.<sup>7</sup> By 1667, women were often lectured by the General Court of Plymouth as being the “chief source of sin” for increasing sensuality, not teaching children to respect the Sabbath, and not educating children properly.<sup>8</sup> This is highly paradoxical because the women themselves were not provided the tools of education, but expected to teach their children. By comparison, religion played a larger role in the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. The strictures of Puritan religion created a patriarchal society anchored in the belief that women were the root of all evil, stemming from Eve’s original sin.<sup>9</sup> The new charter of 1691, implemented in 1692, loosened the laws based on religion, which had required settlers to

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<sup>4</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Puritan Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 16 Oct. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, Cabel. "Religion." *MayflowerHistory.com*. Mayflower History, 2016. Web. 8 Mar. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Gómez Galisteo, María Carmen. "'But That I Be Not Tedious': Women's Role, Representation, and Lack of Relevance in Of Plymouth Plantation by William Bradford." *Universidad De Alcalá*. Academia, 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Plymouth Colony Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Willison, George F. *Saints & Strangers: Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers and Their Families*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport, 1945. Print, 368.

<sup>9</sup> Mays, Dorothy A. *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004. Print, 316.

be part of the Puritan church and rejected other Protestant denominations.<sup>10</sup> However, the laws and expectations imposed on women during the times Puritan laws were in place continued in force years later when Plymouth joined the new colony.

The five women remaining in Plymouth after the first winter had greater responsibilities to the community and at first held functions beyond their domestic roles. Eventually, however, they reverted to traditional roles. Compared to seventeenth century England, women in Plymouth had more rights socially because of the the demands of creating a new community in the New World.<sup>11</sup> All hands were needed to build a new settlement. Women took charge of more than just domestic tasks in the early days in Plymouth. For a brief time, the belief in the inferiority of females was subordinated by the need to survive, and women enjoyed limited independence. Women were in the field planting crops with their children and assisting neighbors, but still were expected to maintain their domestic tasks in a more communal manner than they were used to in England, as they struggled against the lack of adequate food and clothing supplies.<sup>12</sup> Yet, there were still restrictions based on sex. Women kept their hair covered in public by a coif, a bonnet.<sup>13</sup> However, there was one major distinction between women in the Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay Colony. Women in Plymouth were uneducated; education for them was considered vain and inconsequential.<sup>14</sup> Almost all of the first women in Plymouth, except Alice Bradford and Bridget Fuller, were illiterate,<sup>15</sup> but education was important to the Puritans. On April 14, 1642,

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<sup>10</sup> Brooks, Rebecca B. "History of the Massachusetts Bay Colony." *History of Massachusetts*. History of Massachusetts, 05 Jan. 2015. Web. 09 Mar. 2016.

<sup>11</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Plymouth Colony Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Noyes, Ethel J. R. C. *The Women of the Mayflower and Women of Plymouth Colony*. Massachusetts: Memorial, 1921. *Google Books*. University of Michigan, 22 Sept. 2008. Web. 8 Mar. 2016, 113.

<sup>13</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Plymouth Colony Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016, 316.

<sup>14</sup> Willison, George F. *Saints & Strangers: Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers and Their Families*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport, 1945. Print 387.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 387.

Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law requiring every family to teach their children, male and female, to read and write.<sup>16</sup>

Women had more legal rights in Plymouth upon landing compared to later years, because they lost many privileges once they came under the governance of the crown in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Pilgrims continued observing most of the laws established in England concerning family, women, and marriage. In the early days of the colony, William Bradford insisted that women did not gain any new rights or privileges at Plymouth. He stated, "You are quite mistaken if you think we admite weomen ... to have to doe in the same, for they are excluded, as both reason and nature teacheth they should be."<sup>17</sup> However, compared to seventeenth century England, women in Plymouth did have greater legal privileges. Women could be parties to contracts. Unlike in England, Plymouth women had more claims to owning property individually, especially upon divorce or widowhood.<sup>18</sup> When Governor Bradford decided to divide up the communal land into individual holdings for planting season, Mary Chilton and Humilty Cooper each received an acre of land.<sup>19</sup> This did not hold true in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Since the establishment of that colony, there were stricter laws for women founded in the Puritan religion and the English common law system, many of which diminished the role of women in society. Married women were not allowed to own any property, because all of their possessions were transferred to their husband upon marriage, even when it was a remarriage. This meant that by law, women in Massachusetts Bay Colony were not allowed to possess property, sign contracts, or conduct business.<sup>20</sup> Laws in the Massachusetts Bay Colony upon its founding not only related to the right to contract and own property,

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<sup>16</sup> "Massachusetts Passes First Education Law." *Mass Moments*. Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Willison, George F. *Saints & Strangers: Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers and Their Families*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport, 1945. Print, 385.

<sup>18</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Plymouth Colony Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 9 Apr. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Noyes, Ethel J. R. C. *The Women of the Mayflower and Women of Plymouth Colony*. Massachusetts: Memorial, 1921. *Google Books*. University of Michigan, 22 Sept. 2008. Web. 8 Mar. 2016, 115.

<sup>20</sup> Mays, Dorothy A. *Women in Early America: Struggle, Survival, and Freedom in a New World*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004. Print.

but also extended into personal choices as well. In Plymouth, women covered their hair and dressed modestly because of social expectations, not as a legal requirement. The Massachusetts Bay Colony translated these unwritten, religious rules into law. In the Massachusetts Bay Colony, women were required to cover their hair and arms. Women found guilty of dressing immodestly were stripped to the waist and whipped until their backs were bloody. Other forms of public humiliation included confessing sins in front of the whole church.<sup>21</sup> The attitude did not dissipate when the new charter was issued in 1691. Although the charter banned laws based on religion, it did not alter the status of women in the community.

The lives of women in the early days of Plymouth were quite challenging. They lived day to day fending off disease and hunger. Their struggles were immense and “to picture the forlorn lot or share the soul-searing experience of the pioneer women who first came to our shores is impossible for even the liveliest imagination today”<sup>22</sup> Although the first women did see great expansion of their roles upon disembarking from the *Mayflower*, their rights diminished over time. Though much can be said about the greater rights accrued by the women on the *Mayflower*, they were not included in the choice to leave Holland and were not permitted to sign the Mayflower Compact.<sup>23</sup> Women gained some power in moving to the New World, but a patriarchal society supported by religion and laws soon overtook their newly acquired privileges.

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<sup>21</sup> MacLean, Maggie. "History of American Women." *Puritan Women's Rights*. History of American Women, 16 Oct. 2007. Web. 08 Mar. 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Willison, George F. *Saints & Strangers: Lives of the Pilgrim Fathers and Their Families*. Kingsport, TN: Kingsport, 1945. Print 157.

<sup>23</sup> Gómez Galisteo, María Carmen. "'But That I Be Not Tedious': Women's Role, Representation, and Lack of Relevance in Of Plymouth Plantation by William Bradford." *Universidad De Alcalá*. Academia, 2016. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.

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