



# Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower

Many students today are aware that the establishment of the European colonies in North America was not as simple as the traditional image of pilgrims and Native Americans sharing corn and pumpkin pie would lead us to believe. This documentary delves into the history of William Bradford and those who became the settlers of the Plymouth, Massachusetts colony, exploring the depth of faith that pushed them to endure the challenges of an unknown land. This captivating program shows how religious persecution at the hands of King James I drove Bradford and his Separatist followers first to Holland and then to

the New World to establish a new community. Finally convincing a group of British investors that their hopes of achieving prosperity in the New World were not just thin dreams, these exiles secured funding and set out across the treacherous waters of the Atlantic hoping to make their visions of freedom real.

This epic four-hour documentary details the rough path of the Mayflower, evoking the drama of this famous journey through Bradford's own writings, commentary from historians, and gripping re-creations. When unexpected weather drove the colonists to lands far north of their intended destination, they arrived to discover the surprising climate and peoples of the Massachusetts territory. *Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower* recounts a critical chapter in the encounters between Europeans and Native Americans as the British interacted with the Wampanoag and an interpreter named Squanto. Stories of trade, of cooperation, of violence and devastation, of fortitude and determination, unfold as this documentary traces the establishment of Plymouth and the dramatic consequences which followed in its wake.



## curriculum links

*Desperate Crossing: The Untold Story of the Mayflower* would be an excellent addition to American History, American Studies, World History, Environmental Studies, Religion and Science and Technology courses. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students and fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: (1) Civilization, Cultural Diffusion, and Innovation, (2) Conflict and Cooperation, (3) Human Interaction with the Environment and (4) Patterns of Social and Political Interaction.

## vocabulary

Using the dictionary at [www.merriamwebster.com](http://www.merriamwebster.com), an Internet resource such as [www.history.com](http://www.history.com), or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

**blasphemous**  
**habeas corpus**  
**inscrutable**  
**magistrate**

**manifest**  
**non-conformity**  
**persecution**  
**repression**

**sedition**  
**theology**  
**tolerant**



## discussion questions

1. What was the core philosophy of the Separatists? Why were they so frustrated with the Church of England?
2. Why was King James I so opposed to the Separatists' philosophy and practices? What was his philosophy of obedience?
3. Why do you think Bradford and his followers moved to Holland? What explanation is given for the tolerance of many religious views in Holland?
4. Why were Bradford and his followers unable to make their community work in Holland? How did they convince investors that they could be prosperous in the New World?
5. What were three unexpected events that occurred in this documentary? How do you think the story of the Mayflower could have been different?
6. What was the Mayflower Compact and why was it important?
7. Before the arrival of the Mayflower, over 50 million Native Americans inhabited North America. What did the British think or know about these groups before they arrived?
8. Describe the early encounters between the British and the Native Americans. How did they communicate with one another?
9. Do you think the Native Americans stood to benefit anything from cooperating with the British and vice versa? What obstacles prevented them from living peacefully?
10. At what point do you think the foundation of Plymouth was most imperiled? At what point do you think it was clear that Plymouth would survive?
11. How did this documentary change your view of the Mayflower and its journey?





## extended activities

1. Signed by the male passengers aboard the ship, the Mayflower Compact is considered a foundational document in the development of North America. At the library or online, have students research the Mayflower Compact and read it in its entirety. Then have students imagine they were aboard the ship and needed to write a similar document. Ask students to write their own “compacts” and share them with the larger class or group.
2. The Narragansett and the Wampanoag are only two of the hundreds of Native American groups that inhabited North America before the arrival of the Mayflower. Ask students to break up into small groups and create posterboard projects or PowerPoint presentations exploring the history and customs of one of these Native American groups.
3. William Bradford left behind many writings which are some of the richest primary sources available from the early colonies. Ask students to locate some of Bradford’s texts online or at the library and explore his writings and style. Then, ask students to write their own journal entries or letters from Bradford’s perspective. These letters can pertain to any aspect of Bradford’s journey, from his experiences in England and Holland to his encounters in the New World.

## websites & books

### websites

Plymouth Plantation’s excellent website on the history and culture of the colony: [www.plimoth.org](http://www.plimoth.org)

A wonderful site from the Wisconsin Historical Society with primary sources and images from the early colonies: [www.americanjourneys.org/index.asp](http://www.americanjourneys.org/index.asp)

Additional history on the Mayflower:  
[www.mayflower.org](http://www.mayflower.org)

### books

Bradford, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford’s History of the Plymouth Settlement* (Reprint; Vision Forum, 1999).

Joseph Jr., Alvin. *500 Nations: An Illustrated History of North American Indians* (Gramercy, 2002).

Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community, and War* (Viking, 2006).

Waters, Kate. *Sarah Morton’s Day: A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim Girl* (Scholastic, 1993).