

Why did they come to America? The story behind the early pilgrims

With thanks to the elementary school teachers, we have a wonderful image of the “pilgrim fathers” wearing their buckled shoes, strange, dark hats and those funny looking trousers. And the women were not much more fashionable with those little bonnet style hats and their long, uncomfortable looking dresses. How do we know they dressed like this? Because every Thanksgiving at school those elementary teachers put on a pageant and made their students make cut-out hands that looked like turkeys and had their pupils dress-up just like these characters. Of course, we cannot forget the Native Americans who helped them survive that first winter! But were those pilgrims really like the “role-model” image of the elementary school teacher?

While preparing for this course I read at least twenty different books of primary and secondary sources, many of which I will be using. After a while they all read the except the same except one day I came across an article written by Page Smith¹ which looked at a totally different side of why the pilgrims came to America. High school taught us that they were Puritans, people of strict Protestant belief who left England because they could not “purify” the church. They were seen by the British government as troublemakers and radicals and were not wanted in their society. After reading Page Smith’s article, I think that it was the other way around. They could not wait to get away from England. There was no way these people could “purify” the British people. They were beyond reform!

Here are some of the fascinating points brought out in Smith’s article.

There is no doubt that many were fleeing from religious persecutions by thousand were risking the crossing to the New World to escape their environment. If one ever had a notion that life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was romantic, Smith quickly puts an end to that notion.

“Many more came because conditions were desperately hard in England and Ireland for poor people, even for those who had not yet sunk into the pit of abandoned hopelessness that was the lot of the most wretched.” (p.19)

Smith does not cite where the figures below were taken from but for all intensive purposes, we need not know, we just need to view and interpret.

England in the 18th Century

Total Population: 10,000,000

Number of Beggars: 50,000

Number of Idlers: 10,000

Number of Criminals: 80,000

Number of persons on parish relief: 1,041,000 (welfare donated by local churches)

In the City of London alone - Number of Beggars: 6,000 adults + 9,300 children

Over half of the English population was below what we would call today “the poverty line.”

Number of Vagrants: 20,000

Number of Prostitutes: 100,000

Number of rogues and vagabonds: 10,000

There was a class system in England and Smith enlightens the reader about “who was who.” I can simplify this paragraph easily, they were the “haves” and the have-nots”

¹ Page Smith, extracts from *A People’s History of the America Revolution*, Vol. II: *A New Age Begins*, pp-28-47, McGraw-Hill Publishing Company reproduced in Oates, Stephen B. and Charles J. Errico *Portrait of America, Volume 1 to 1877*, ninth ed. pp 17-27, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007

“Haves” – nobility, gentry, merchants, professionals, freeholders (those who held land on their own) craftsmen and public officials. They were 47% of England

“Have-Nots” – laborers, servants, paupers, all of those rogues and vagabonds as shown previously, and the common sailors and soldiers who had been recruited from this lowest level of society to escape the harsh conditions – yes the mighty British Navy was made up of the nation’s finest – and they were 53% of the population.

Then there were the orphans who Smith describes as the “frequently illegitimate and abandoned at birth” who were sent to “workhouses and to parish nurses.” These children had no life whatsoever.

“A parliamentary study found that of all such infants born or received in London’s workhouses in a three-year period, only seven in every hundred were alive at the end of that time”. (p. 20)

Many of these children, when deemed old enough to travel, were sent to the New World colonies as indentured servants. Smith does not directly insinuate but it does not take a person long to figure out that the people who ran these poor houses made a great deal of money “selling” these children to the colonies. Our American history books create an image of the indentured servant as someone wanting to make a new life for themselves in the colonies, someone mature, hard-working, caring and looking to start a new life morally and ethically. They do not tell us that many were orphaned and unwanted children who were sent on those sailing ships because they were unwanted and objects of greed.

The story of the first pilgrims is that they had a hard time surviving the first winter and we are taught to feel sorry for them. Remember, if not for those “friendly” natives, they would never have made it. So, what did they give up back home? Simple, a work-day that began at six in the morning and finished at eight at night, the wages from which barely supported life. Thanksgiving was the first American holiday. This is a bonus to what they had back in England. According to Smith, there were no holidays except Christmas and Easter. The workers did get extra days off however. They were given time off for “Hanging Days.”

“Hanging Days” were common throughout the year and days of much entertainment and merriment. The people would enjoy watching people being hung at the gallows. Back then, people were hung for crimes that today would be misdemeanors. It was a blood-thirsty society. Other enjoyed forms of entertainment were cock-fighting, bull-baiting and badger-baiting and you can rest assured that no one left until the animal moved its last muscle.

Well, if you did not like life back home, you could always become an indentured servant and try your luck in the colonies! But where, one may ask, does a poor person find the money to pay for their passage across the Atlantic? After all, our history books say that tens of thousands of men and women took the perilous journey across the ocean and came to America’s shores. The answer to this is also contained within Smith’s article. The answer is.....Alcohol!

“The working class drowned its miseries in bad gin and beer. There were some 7,000 ginshops in the suburbs of London, and, by 1750, 16,000 in the city itself (only 1,050 of which were licensed); most of them were in the poorest sections of the city.....

The hard liquor consumed in one year (1733) in London alone amounted to 11,200,000 gallons, or some 56 gallons per adult male".

So, back to the first question, why were so many people from England able to afford their passage to colonies such as Plymouth Bay and Jamestown? Simple, they were hoodwinked! They were allowed to drink themselves into a state of intoxication and then, once under the influence, sign on the dotted line and the next thing they knew, they were waking up reeling from a bad hangover and on board a ship heading for America. These were to become the future of this nation!

Back in the mother country, the colonies hired agents who would act as middle-men finding people who would be willing to become indentured servants. Many of these agents were "of the lowest order" according to Smith. They became known as "spirits and crimps." The life of a "spirit" was simple, they would pay about twenty-five shillings (two British Pounds) to anyone who would bring him a "likely" prospect. In turn, he could sell such a person to their employer in the Americas for forty shillings, making an incredible profit. The "crimp" was the tavern owner. He was the agent for the spirit and easily found new victims, a drunk was the ideal candidate to be converted into an indentured servant. "*One spirit boasted that he had been spiriting persons for twelve years at a rate of five hundred persons a year*". (p. 21)

[That's a total of 6,000 unwilling indentured servants for just one person]
Then there were the convicts that became an integral part of the colonies. According to Smith,

"From 1619 to 1640 all felons reprieved by royal pardon were transported to Virginia to help make up the toll of those settlers lost by disease, and between 1661 and 1700 more than 4,500 convicts were dispatched to the colonies. In the years from 1745 to 1775, 8,846 convicts, 0,035 servants, and 3,324 slaves landed at Annapolis, Maryland. (p. 23)

They were both men and women and most of them were bound into servitude anywhere from seven to fourteen years, which often meant for life. The convicts were also a source of revenue for the British government. Joint Stock Companies bought these people from the government, a male sold anywhere from eight to twenty pounds and a woman for a little less. They were in essence, white slaves.

"Three or four times a year, the convicts to be transported were marched in irons through the streets of London....This procession provided, like the hangings, a popular form of entertainment for mobs who would hoot at the convicts and, when the convicts replied with obscene epithets, sometimes pelt them with mud and stones." (p. 23)

So there we have it. Our first settlers were basically undesirables, the unwanted of English society. Let's not tell the elementary students this story nor have them make up family trees. Who knows what they may find out about some of their ancestors!