

Why Leave England for the “New World”?

Without a doubt, leaving England and heading to America as a colonist required bravery. It takes a lot of courage to get on a ship and sail to a land where you must build not only a house and a farm, but also an entire political community.

They began with only their wits and what they had brought along with them on the ship. They must have felt terrified, and at the same time, exhilarated. America represented opportunity – endless possibility.

In England, *opportunity* and *possibility* were words often reserved for the wealthy or nobility. For many, England was a land of rampant poverty.

England’s population was exploding, with too few resources to support the growing population, resulting in a lower standard of living for most. Since England’s economy was primarily agricultural, those without land, or without enough land, found themselves struggling to survive.

The New World—as the Americas were called—on the other hand, presented opportunities to open shops or farms. The American wilderness offered colonists far more economic opportunity than England, or Holland for that matter—where many Pilgrims briefly settled after leaving England, before deciding to move again for more economic possibility in what became Massachusetts.

Others experienced this possibility of economic freedom in a different way. Criminals were sent to the Americas as an alternative to imprisonment in England—typically for debt, theft, and the like. This practice gave many looking to start life anew the possibility of freedom—the convict would serve sentence as a laborer instead of an inmate.

England’s politics were turbulent, too. In the 17th century alone, conflicts with continental European powers were frequent, such as the Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604) and the Nine Years’ War (1594-1603), several Anglo-Dutch Wars, and other skirmishes, often related to the Thirty-Year War (1618-1648) that roiled Europe (but which England did not formally participate in). Irish rebels sought independence, as did many Scots (though the latter became less prominent when Scotland formally merged into the United Kingdom in 1707). Absolutist kings sought to bypass Parliament and rule dictatorially and were deposed first in the English Civil War (1642-1651) and then the Glorious Revolution (1688). Constant wars meant many continually risked being forced to serve in the British army and/or pay extra taxes to support its upkeep.

Of course, as we know from the settlement of Massachusetts by the Pilgrims and Puritans, England was a place with a single, state sanctioned religion. The Church of England (also called the Anglican Church) had sought to establish itself as the mandatory religion within the nation, to the detriment of Catholicism and Puritanism. As

a result, Catholics, Puritans, and other religious dissenters faced persecution, harassment, or even imprisonment. The 1605 Gunpowder Plot, in which a number of Catholics, most famously Guy Fawkes, attempted to assassinate James I, only led to further animosity and crackdowns against religious dissent.

The colonies themselves had different focuses and purposes, and often several. The Pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower, settling in what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, sought to create a society serving God as the Pilgrims believed they should—they also famously formed a compact agreeing to guarantee the right of self-government (though still under authority of the king). They were soon joined in Massachusetts Bay and the rest of New England by members of a larger but similar Christian dissenting movement, the Puritans. (The two groups had very similar theological beliefs; the difference was that the Pilgrims formally left the Church of England, whereas the Puritans wanted to reform it from within).

Some Puritans who disagreed with how the Massachusetts colonists did things went elsewhere. Most famously, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson went on to found Rhode Island after facing persecution from other Puritans in New England. Maryland became a haven for Catholics and Pennsylvania for Quakers. The colonists in Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent settlement in America, established in 1607, sought to spread Christianity—while also making a good profit.

Yet not all colonies were founded on the basis of seeking religious freedom either. James Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia, sought a colony where the poor, especially those imprisoned for debt, could start over—the colony even initially banned slavery as part of that effort.

The colonies long retained these separate identities even as they also saw themselves as part of the broader British political world. They cherished their local governments; indeed, when the British monarch James II sought to combine many of the colonies into the single Dominion of New England, as part of his broader efforts to centralize control of British political life, the colonists joined with their English brethren back home in resisting his rule in the Glorious Revolution.

Ultimately, British colonists came to America for a variety of reasons—often more than one. If they could survive the harsh conditions, they could serve God as they saw fit, largely govern their own affairs—and hopefully make a profit too in a way they could not in England.