

Colonial Key Documents in Plymouth Colony Research

Introduction

Governor William Bradford included a list of *Mayflower* passengers in his history of Plymouth Colony. For other early colonists, however, researchers must rely on different sources in the colonial records. These are the first division of land in 1623, the division of livestock in 1627, the list of freemen of Plymouth Colony for 1633 and the first tax list, also created in 1633.

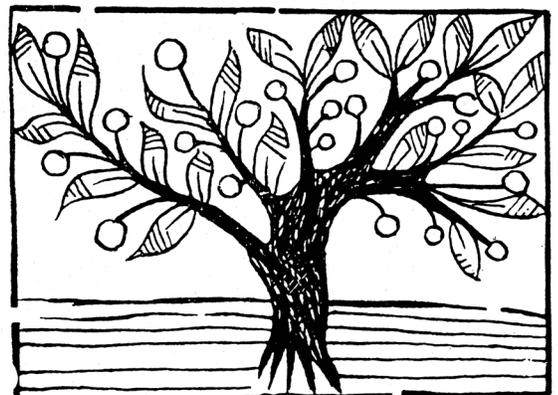
The Land Division

In the beginning, the financial agreement with the colony's backers called for property to be held in common. While the colonists owned their personal possessions, the houses, land and livestock belonged to the company as a whole for the first seven years. In 1621 and 1622, the men planted and tended the common fields, and the harvest was rationed out to the households. This did not give them the results they needed for several reasons. Those who were stronger disliked receiving no more than those who were weak and not able to do a quarter of the work. Single men resented working to support other men's families. Those who were "aged and graver" felt that being treated equally with the younger was disrespectful to them.

In 1623, Governor Bradford determined that each family, and the young men placed under them, would receive a parcel of land, an acre apiece, to farm themselves. They would have to turn in a portion of their harvest for common use, but would keep the remainder. This pleased all sides and more corn was planted than Bradford felt would have been done under any other plan. Fortunately for Plymouth Colony researchers, a list was drawn up at that time portioning out the land. Each ship's company was allotted land in specific sections, providing rough lists of passengers for the *Mayflower*, *Fortune* and *Anne* (which included the *Little James*). Most of the colonists were grouped under their head of household, unless the family members had come on different ships. Some of the acres, particularly for the *Mayflower*, were assigned to people who had died, perhaps accounting for shares they had held. The resultant list provides our best knowledge for Plymouth's population at that time.

The Cattle Division

The Colony's assets were owned in common for the first seven years (1620-1627). On May 22, 1627, they assigned ownership of the large livestock: cattle, goats and swine, among the colonists. To begin the division, they "equalized the cattle for goodness." A good milk cow, for example, was paired with a bull or steer for which the colonists had to care. The colonists were grouped into four companies of thirteen people, generally a combination of families and single men. From what researchers can determine, the family groups are arranged by head of household, his wife, their sons, their daughters, both listed in order of age, and her children from a former marriage, if there were any. The list did not include servants, but provides the population, name by name, of the colony's 156 shareholders at that time.



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The 1633 list of freemen and tax list

In the absence of passenger lists for early ships to New England, in some cases these lists provide the first evidence of a colonist's presence in Plymouth Colony.

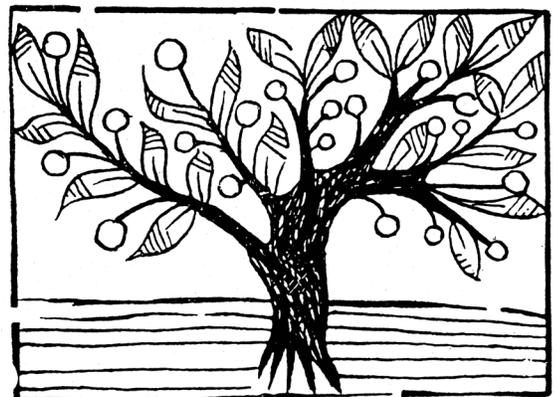
Freemen's List

Plymouth Colony did not originally have any men designated as "freemen." In a September 1623 letter to the colony's investors, Governor Bradford wrote that besides not allowing women and children any voice in the government, "neither do we admit any but such as are above the age of 21 years, and they also but only in some weighty matters, when we think good." As the colony's population increased, its government also grew. In 1633, the number of Governor's Assistants went from five to seven. The freemen elected these officials at yearly elections, as well as voting on other matters. The first list of freemen extant is the one for 1633. Unlike Massachusetts Bay, they were not required to be church members, but apparently had to be of some standing in the community. Later records indicate that prospective freemen were propounded at one court, and voted in (or not) by the freemen at the next session. Most men did become freemen, but not all.

Tax list

On March 25, 1632/3, Governor William Bradford and the seven Governor's Assistants rated the colonists for tax purposes. The taxes were to be paid in corn at six shillings a bushel by November of that year. It is not clear how the amounts were determined, although Eugene Stratton in *Plymouth Colony: Its History and People* suggested it might be the value of their crops plus livestock. Rates ranged from nine shillings to three pounds, eleven shillings for one man, Isaac Allerton. Out of the 88 residents on the list, 73 paid between nine and 18 shillings. Those rated might have been heads of households, as there were several widows included.

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