Pilgrim’s First Winter Survival in America

Problems Pilgrims Faced Arriving in the New World During the Winter

By: R. Renée Bembry

The pilgrims arrived on the coast of Massachusetts in November after winter had already set in. They had to spend several weeks aboard the Mayflower because they needed to explore the land in effort to find adequate grounds to set up camp and, of course, housing. Their explorations took several weeks because the scouts were seeking land that would be suitable for farming and that would provide sufficient drinking water.

Remaining on the ship for the additional period of time left the Pilgrims living adverse conditions that continued to subject them to starvation, diseases, and death.

Confined Living Space

Life on the Mayflower was difficult, to say the least. The ship was not very large, and in fact, most Eerie Canal boats had cargo compartments that were larger than the entire Mayflower. Yet the Mayflower had to house 102 passengers, food and necessities, plus the sailing crew.

Freezing Temperatures

Arriving at Provincetown Harbor in the dead of winter in conjunction with subsisting in insufficient living quarters made surviving the first winter that much more complicated. The Pilgrims had to battle the cold as well as overcrowded living conditions with minimal accommodations to make them comfortable.

Poor Diets

To complicate their lives even further, seventeenth century life did not include an understanding of proper eating habits to prevent malnutrition and deficiencies such as scurvy. Therefore, it should come to no surprise that the Pilgrims had no appreciation for the value of eating vegetables or fruit. Their diets pretty much consisted of salted meats, meal, and beer. This poor diet may have caused some of the emigrants to come down with scurvy.

Sharing Illnesses

In addition to limited dwelling space, cold temperatures, and insufficient diets, ventilation on the ship was poor. The passengers could not spend too much of their time on deck in the dead of winter because of snowfall. The snow overtook the deck and it became necessary to shovel it away several times. This left the Pilgrims below deck spreading and contracting each others germs.

Loss of Life

While still living aboard the ship, members of the group began to die due to the spread of disease from their living within close quarters with one another. In addition to deaths that were attributed to scurvy and brought on by lack of vitamin C due to poor dieting many settlers died from diseases referred to as the “sickness” or “illness” that were believed to be small pox.

Moreover, since the pilgrims knew little about spreading germs by coughing, sneezing, and kissing to pass on illness, they consistently failed to take precautions that could have prevented those who were sick from spreading illness to the well.

Starvation

Although the Mayflower had been equipped with food for the journey to and from the New World, food eventually became of short supply. In addition to being malnourished, pilgrims entered starving states that weakened their immune systems even further and left them more ill equipped to fight disease.

By time spring came along, half the settlers had died from living on the ship.

The pilgrims had to erect a common quarters as quickly as possible in order to get all survivors off the freezing ship. They only had time to build one large structure, however, and that structure had to house everyone. Although they managed to get everyone into the warm building, in which they could warm themselves by burning firewood, housing everyone in a common structure meant the Pilgrims were still living in close quarters and thus were still spreading bad germs.

After meeting up with Native Americans, battles came about that led to the Pilgrims burying their dead in ways that would be less noticeable to the natives. The Pilgrims believed they would be safer if the natives did not know how few settlers remained. They kept grave plots as low to the ground as they could. When weather conditions allowed, they planted corn seeds atop the graves.

With all the Pilgrims had to go through in order to survive the first winter in the new world, one could say it was miraculous that half of them made it through. It was unfortunate, of course, that half of them did die over the winter.