

*The Virginia Mayflower Society's  
Mildred Ramos Scholarship Recipient for 2014*

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Bailey is attending the College of William and Mary, where she plans to major in neuroscience.

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*The assigned topic for the 2014 Essay was:*

**“During their stay in Leiden, the Pilgrims were exposed to Huguenot exiles from France. Explain how the Huguenots may or may not have influenced Pilgrim beliefs before their sail to the Americas.”**

*(To read Bailey Hall's Essay,  
please scroll down to the next page.)*



*(Continued)*

*Liberal Separatists: How Leiden Showed the Pilgrims the Power of Religious Tolerance*

By: Bailey V. Hall

High School: Maggie L. Walker Governor's School

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2014 Scholarship Essay for the Virginia Mayflower Society

On the historic morning of August 15, 1620, the Mayflower Pilgrims bravely cast away from Leiden, Holland for the unknown shores of the New World. Their success in establishing America's first permanent religious colony at Plymouth remains well known, and their famous First Thanksgiving continues to be upheld as an American cultural icon. Less notorious is the fact that for many on the Mayflower, this trans-Atlantic exodus was not their first pilgrimage.

Approximately 80 of the 102 pilgrims aboard the Mayflower were members of an English Separatist church based in Leiden. Over a decade previous, this Separatist congregation had fled from Babworth, East Retford, and Nottinghamshire England to seek haven first briefly in Amsterdam, and then to settle for eleven years in Leiden.<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on the evolution of this Separatist congregation's strict dogma towards increased tolerance of dissenting religious and social views as a result of their sojourn in Leiden. The cultural *mélange* the Pilgrims were mixed into convinced them that religious tolerance was more conducive to a productive society than their previous uncompromising mindset. Because of the great diversity of different religious groups the Pilgrims were constantly exposed to in Leiden, it is impossible to isolate accurately and purely how only one particular group, such as the Huguenots or the English Reformed Church, influenced the Pilgrims during their eleven year stay.

The Pilgrim's first order of business upon their arrival in Leiden focused on obtaining a building in which to worship. As they could not afford their own site, they were forced to share the Vrouwekerk church with French Huguenot refugees. The church quickly gained popularity; Vrouwekerk membership rapidly swelled from the original 40 families to near 400. Vrouwekerk church took in garrisoned English soldiers, English civilians in Leiden, and Huguenots. Some Huguenots eventually became so attached to the Pilgrims that they even travelled with them to the New World.<sup>2</sup> Historian Keith Sprunger noted that in 1620, "The congregation [at Vrouwekerk] consisted of people from many geographic origins, united by a shared religious attitude".<sup>3</sup>

The Pilgrim's church enveloped these differing groups by becoming less focused on differences in doctrine and more engaged in what joined the groups together. Because of the great amount of religious refugees attending services at Vrouwekerk, the Church's two main unifying tenets of belief were religious toleration and rejection of the "class" or synod system upheld by the English Reformed Church.<sup>4</sup> Separatist William Aspenal perfectly encapsulated Vrouwekerk's open-minded attitude in a letter to the Reformed Church pastor in Leiden, "I suppose the way of your church is presbyterian and differing from our congregational, but that is not offensive to us, whilst our commons aymes are to be edified and built upon the grace of our Lord Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

John Robinson, the parson for Leiden's Separatist church, personally grew increasingly open minded after moving to Leiden. He arrived stringently against the Church of England as well as all other religious views which diverged from his own.<sup>6</sup> Robinson accepted a side job as an English professor at the University of Leiden, the then intellectual capital of the Netherlands.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Bangs, "Pilgrim Fathers," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (n.p.: Oxford University Press, 2006), accessed March 3, 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/theme-print.jsp?articleid=93695>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Pilgrims Before Plymouth," Smithsonian.com, last modified October 19, 2011, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-pilgrims-before-plymouth-111851259/?no-ist>.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Sprunger, "Other Pilgrims in Leiden: Hugh Goodyear and the English Reformed Church," *Church History* 41, no. 1 (1971), accessed March 4, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3164685>

<sup>4</sup> Bangs, "Pilgrim Fathers," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

<sup>5</sup> Sprunger, "Other Pilgrims in Leiden,"

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

In the course of his University tenure, he met with numerous other religious scholars from different faiths who came to the University to study. Robinson's 1617 debates with Pieter Twisck, the Dutch Mennonite author of a book called *Religions vryhey* which advocated religious tolerance, especially seemed to transform his views.<sup>7</sup>

These discussions with intellectuals of other faiths had a mitigating effect on Robinson's strict intolerance of other Christian sects, especially the Anglican Church from which he and his congregation had dramatically split. While in Leiden, Robinson was criticized by other members of his religion for his willingness to listen to "godly" members of the Church of England whom he encountered via the University.<sup>8</sup> This willingness shows a tolerance not present when Robinson left England fleeing that very same church. Indeed, by 1625 Robinson had also relaxed his anti-English Reformed church sentiment, expressed in a letter from the Leiden Reformed Church pastor who gladly professed that Robinson had come "back indeed one half of the way".<sup>9</sup> Robinson's new acceptance undoubtedly found its way into his sermons and influenced his congregation to change their mindset accordingly.

The Pilgrims could not have entered in Leiden during a more auspicious and tumultuous time. The Separatist congregation's arrival coincided with a truce in the war for Dutch freedom from Hapsburg reign. This peace, which lasted twelve years, motivated swift economic growth. Part of that growth was also stimulated by the discovery of a new textile, referred to as "fine draperies".<sup>10</sup> This new industry and the resultant jobs attracted many immigrants, many of which were religious refugees. Thus, at the time of the Pilgrim's 1609 arrival, Leiden ranked as one of the most diverse cities in Europe.

Every day, the Pilgrims worked alongside an incredible variety of ethnicities and religions, from the Flemish and German weavers to the French Huguenots with whom they shared their church space.<sup>11</sup> The Pilgrims transitioned from rural villages in England to the booming metropolis of Leiden. This shifted their perspective from small town homogeneity to big city milieu as they became coworkers, neighbors, and friends with those who were from another religion or Christian sect. As the congregation acclimated to this varied environment, they increasingly discovered the only way to function optimally and peacefully in a diverse society were by tolerance of dissenting political, social, and religious views.

The Pilgrims heeded this lesson when they formed Plymouth. Their tolerance of cultures different than their influenced the positive relationship they enjoyed with the Native Americans around Plymouth. In fact, the Pilgrim's tolerance conceivably saved their colony, for without the farming aid the Native Americans generously offered the colonists never would have survived their first New England winter.<sup>12</sup>

Previous to Leiden, the Pilgrims had treated division in doctrine very severely. In Amsterdam, the Separatist congregation split because of a disagreement between their two parsons concerning infant baptism.<sup>13</sup> Half of the church remained in Amsterdam under Richard Clyfton, and the other section travelled to Leiden following Robinson. However, Plymouth saw

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<sup>7</sup> Bangs, "Pilgrim Fathers," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

<sup>8</sup> Sprunger, "Other Pilgrims in Leiden,".

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "The Pilgrims Before Plymouth," Smithsonian.com.

<sup>12</sup> "History: Who Were the Pilgrims?," Ohio Mayflower Descendants, accessed March 3, 2014, <http://www.ohiomayflower.org/history.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Bangs, "Pilgrim Fathers," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

a more open-minded Pilgrim assembly. A 1645 proposal by the Plymouth Colony leaders suggested that that Jews, Catholics, Unitarians and many other sects be accepted in the Plymouth Colony.<sup>14</sup>

As the first successful religious colony in America, Plymouth established precedent for all subsequent religious colonies and eventually for America as a whole. The religious tolerance espoused by the Pilgrims at Plymouth has remained a central pillar of American political culture throughout the decades. The first footsteps on Plymouth Rock are still heard today in the echoes of the Pilgrim's social ideals enshrined in our Constitution. Our Constitution's First Amendment protects the freedom of religion, and its Article 6 prohibits religious tests to hold office. These amendments exist because of the religious tolerance instilled in the Pilgrims by their sojourn in Leiden. The mixture of religious and social groups that lived, worked, and worshipped in Leiden molded a group of Mayflower Pilgrims radically more tolerant than the Pilgrims who entered Leiden eleven years previous. Leiden equipped the Mayflower Pilgrims to lay a firm and steadfast cornerstone that later generations built upon to construct the next four hundred years of American history.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Marquand, "Thanksgiving Day: Pilgrims Were a Surprisingly Worldly, Tolerant Lot," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 29, 2009, [Page #], accessed March 3, 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2009/1125/p06s22-woam.html>

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