**New England's Great Migration**

In 1988, the New England Historic Genealogical Society initiated the Great Migration Study Project. The Project aimed to summarize and document everything known about the individual immigrants who came to New England in its first years of settlement. Now, a substantial body of work has been produced:

**The Beginning of the Migraton**

The Great Migration Study Project uses the date of the arrival of the *Mayflower* as its starting point. The year 1620 marks the founding of Plymouth Colony. In September 1620, the *Mayflower*  set sail from Plymouth with 101 passengers, including both Separatist believers and non-believers. With the ship’s arrival in December, the English settlement of New England began.

**The peak years**

The peak years of the Great Migration lasted just over ten years — from 1629 to 1640, years when the Puritan crisis in England reached its height. In 1629, King Charles I dissolved Parliament, thus preventing Puritan leaders from working within the system to effect change and leaving them vulnerable to persecution. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, chartered in the same year by a group of moderate Puritans, represented a refuge, During the ten years that followed, over twenty thousand men, women, and children left England to settle permanently in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1640, when Parliament was reconvened, attention was redirected from the New World back to the old and migration to New England dropped sharply.

**Reason to Leave England**

Seventeenth-century conditions in England caused hundreds of thousands of emigrants to leave England and seek new homes elsewhere: in Ireland, the Caribbean, and the other colonies of North America. The term “Great Migration” was coined for a reason: it reflected the greatness of the endeavor’s purpose.

**New England Immigrats were different**

Immigrants who came to New England differed from immigrants to other regions in a variety of ways, all stemming from their fundamental desire to obtain spiritual rather than economic rewards. Unlike colonists to other areas, those who migrated to New England had known relatively prosperous lives in England. In fact, it was a greater economic risk to leave than to stay. From the colonists’ perspective, they traded economic advantages for a more precarious economic situation but with the opportunity to live more worthy lives in a Puritan settlement.

Motivated by religious concerns, most Great Migration colonists traveled to Massachusetts in families. Consequently, New England retained relatively equal numbers of men and women. At the time they left England, many husbands and wives were in their thirties and had three or more children, with more yet to be born. This situation contrasts with that of the southern colonies, which were populated primarily by single young men. In the Chesapeake Bay area, even at the end of the seventeenth century, the male-to-female sex ratio was skewed.

New Englanders had a high level of literacy, twice that of England. New Englanders were highly skilled; more than half of the settlers had been artisans or craftsmen. Only about seventeen percent came as servants. In contrast, seventy-five percent of Virginia’s population arrived as servants.

Unlike colonists of other regions, the Great Migration colonists were primarily middle class. English emigrants primarily in search of economic betterment were unlikely to settle in the Massachusetts Bay Colony; the potential rewards were not great. Similarly, those already rich saw little opportunity to increase their wealth in a harsh region with no obvious cash crop. Those who left England to seek the greatest economic opportunity would choose to go elsewhere. Thus, New England was a remarkably homogeneous population, with colonists sharing similar backgrounds, outlooks, and perspectives.

**Making the Voyage**

The majority of emigrants lived within a few days travel of a port of departure. Ships left from several points along the English coast, including London, Bristol, Barnstable, Weymouth, Plymouth, Southampton, Ipswich, Great Yarmouth, and Gravesend. Most emigrant ships left England in March or April, allowing sufficient time for the journey and the ship’s return trip to England before cold weather began again. An average ocean crossing lasted from eight to ten weeks but the time of the voyage could vary greatly, from a trip of just thirty-eight days to one of six months.

**The First Year in the New World: The Search for a Town**

Once in New England, settlers usually spent a minimum of several weeks — frequently the entire first winter — in the port town at which they arrived. After gathering information about possible places to settle, they dispersed to towns throughout the colony, sometimes moving several times before finding permanent residences. Most chose to move to a town less than two years old. The key to success was arriving early enough after a town’s founding to become a land owner and share in the original land distribution, controlled by the town. Land owners received the best and largest land grants. This was extremely important because it ensured economic futures for their children.

**The Land Grab**

Towns limited the number of possible land owners. Once the limit was reached, the town was considered closed. Twenty-two towns, from Maine to Rhode Island, were closed or entry was drastically restricted within the first ten years of settlement. The frontier continued expanding and many new towns formed to the north and the south, along the coast. The colonists first occupied land cleared by previous Native inhabitants. After these more desirable areas were taken, settlers moved into increasingly difficult terrain. Twenty-three towns in Massachusetts were founded in the 1630s.

**Living a Longer Life**

Another aspect of life in New England was the remarkable health and longevity of the population. Many colonists lived to the age of seventy, and a substantial number lived to be eighty. This longevity is due to a variety of factors: dispersed settlement patterns, lack of disease, clean air and water, and better diet. Infant and childhood mortality rates were lower and settlers produced large and healthy families — most having seven or more children. Accordingly, New England experienced tremendous population growth within the lifetime of first generation settlers.

**New England's Great Migration**

1. According to the reading, when did the Great Migration start?

2. What event marked the beginning of the Great Migration?

3. The height of the migration took place during what time period?

4. What were some reasons why people wanted to leave England?

5. Why were people motivated to come to New England as opposed to other migratory destinations?

6. Explain some of the things that made New England immigrants unique.

7. Detail what families would do once they arrived in the Puritan colony.

8. Why was it important to get into a town before it "closed?"

9. Speculate as to why people in New England lived longer than their counterparts in Old England