

The First Catholics

Spreading Catholicism to Native American groups was a critical mission for the first Spanish settlers. By attempting to spread their Catholic religion to Native groups from the start of colonization, these Spanish settlers and priests were trying to secure their religion's success in the New World.

Efforts to set up a permanent settlement by the Spanish in the 16th century were mostly unfruitful, until French Huguenots threatened their trade routes by settling at the St. John's River in modern day Jacksonville at Fort Caroline.

Almost immediately after the Spanish founded St. Augustine and massacred their French rivals at Fort Caroline, Spanish priests were starting Indian missions. The first Indian mission was founded by a secular priest, Sebastian Montero from 1566-1572.

Jesuit priests were chosen early on by Florida's governors to missionize the surrounding Native American groups; however, these efforts were unsuccessful because of Native opposition. By 1595 Franciscan friars replaced the unsuccessful Jesuits and established missions along the Florida coast and north into Georgia.

These missions were funded by the Spanish government, however these Catholic missionaries at times protested the treatment of Native Americans by civil authorities.

With relative success in the Florida area, missions spread to Texas, New Mexico, and California with varying degrees of accomplishment converting Native American groups throughout the Spanish colonial period.

French Catholics also settled in the New World on Maine's Scoodic River in 1604. French missionaries also missionized to Native Americans, particularly to tribes in their Northern territories. French missionaries converted the entire Abanaki tribe of Native Americans.

The French blended conversion with economic partnerships to use Native groups as allies against the encroaching English settlement in colonial North America. (American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives)

British Catholics in the New World

Unlike the French and Spanish settlements in North America, the British colonists were mostly Protestant and very weary of Catholicism. Catholics did however find their way to the colonies in the 17th century, most notably in Maryland and Pennsylvania, where they found a relative degree of freedom to worship.

Because of the Catholic religion of the Spanish and French, Catholicism's perceived ties to a distant papal ruler, and warfare between Catholics and Protestants in England, many British colonists felt uneasy accepting Catholics into British colonial society. (American Catholic History Research Center)

The religious persecution that drove settlers from Europe to the British North American colonies sprang from the conviction, held by Protestants and Catholics alike, that uniformity of religion must exist in any given society.

This conviction rested on the belief that there was one true religion and that it was the duty of the civil authorities to impose it, forcibly if necessary, in the interest of saving the souls of all citizens. Nonconformists could expect no mercy and might be executed as heretics.

The dominance of the concept, denounced by Roger Williams as 'inforced uniformity of religion,' meant majority religious groups who controlled political power punished dissenters in their midst.

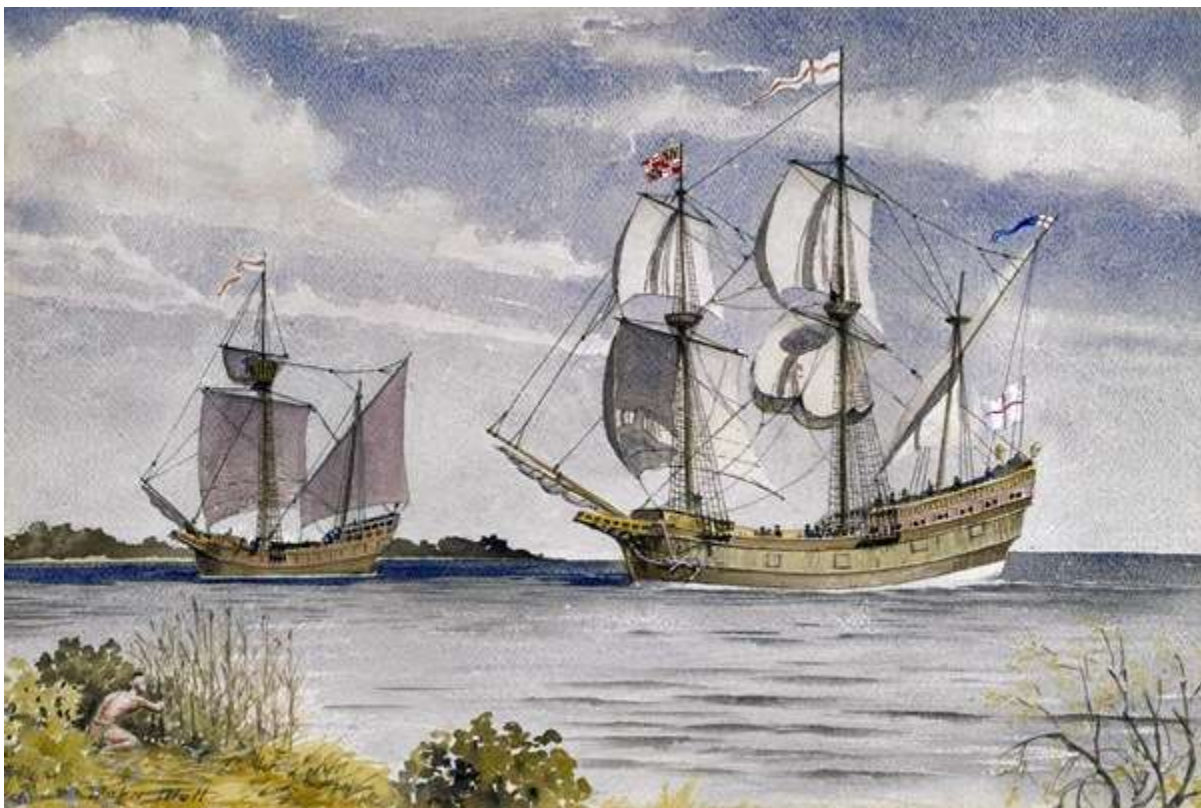
In some areas Catholics persecuted Protestants, in others Protestants persecuted Catholics, and in still others Catholics and Protestants persecuted wayward coreligionists.

Although England renounced religious persecution in 1689, it persisted on the European continent. Religious persecution, as observers in every century have commented, is often bloody and implacable and is remembered and resented for generations. (LOC)

In the British New World colonies, settlers considered themselves to be loyal Englishmen and aligned typically along the sides that divided England. Catholics and most Anglicans sided with their sovereign, whereas Puritans and Dissenters in Jamestown supported Parliament.

Conventional Thought on the First Catholics to the British Colonies

The recognition for the first group of Catholics to arrive at the British colonies had been assumed to be the Europeans who landed in Maryland in 1634, on Lord Baltimore's charter. In 1634, two ships, the Ark and the Dove, brought the first settlers to Maryland. Approximately two hundred people were aboard.



Among the passengers were two Catholic priests who had been forced to board surreptitiously to escape the reach of English anti-Catholic laws. Upon landing in Maryland the Catholics, led spiritually by the Jesuits, were transported by a profound reverence, similar to that experienced by John Winthrop and the Puritans when they set foot in New England. (LOC)

Jesuit Andrew White recorded at that time the following:

25 March, 1634 we celebrated Mass for the first time in the island [St. Clement's]. This had never been done before in this part of the world.

The Actual First Catholics Into the British Colonies

The first group of Catholics actually arrived in English North America in 1619.

They were the thirty-odd black Christians among the sixty Angolans that the White Lion and the Treasurer stole from the Spanish slaver Bautista. (Hashaw)

Catholic missionaries had been active in Angola an entire century before 1619 and had won thousands of voluntary converts among the Bakongo and Mbundu nations.

Antonio, Maria, Juan Pedro, Francisco, and Margarida were voluntary Christians and the children of black Christians in Angola from the eastern provinces of Ndongo and Kongo.



They had already taken their Christian names while in Africa. They had not been forcibly baptized by a Catholic bishop just hours before boarding the slave ship departing from Luanda. Imbangala mercenaries had raided Christian and non-Christian Bantu provinces alike and mingled the captives together before trading them to the Portuguese for export to America.

Many of the earliest African captives were young Angolan men who had previously fought in the Portuguese/Angolan battles. Such soldiers, when captured and shipped west in slave ships, made up a significant part of the African community in North America. (Hashaw)

Angolans arrived in Virginia in 1619 when Jamestown still teetered on the brink and seemed about to disappear like the many doomed Spanish and English colonies before it. Their arrival coincided with the Virginia Company's decision to change its course from seeking treasure to building communities.



Religion did not present a difficult obstacle for the Angolans in interacting with the Jamestown settlers. Many had been exposed to Christianity as children in the late 1500s. Priests such as the Jesuit Francisco de Gouveia had served in royal Kabasa by invitation of the Angola since the 1560s, and other missionaries came before him. (Hashaw)

Catholic fortunes fluctuated in Maryland during the rest of the seventeenth century, as they became an increasingly smaller minority of the population.

After the Glorious Revolution of 1689 in England, the Church of England was legally established in the colony and English penal laws, which deprived Catholics of the right to vote, hold office, or worship publicly, were enforced.

Until the American Revolution, Catholics in Maryland were dissenters in their own country, living at times under a state of siege, but keeping loyal to their convictions, a faithful remnant, awaiting better times. (LOC)

Lots here is copied and pasted from Tim Hashaw, *The Birth of Black America: The First African Americans and the Pursuit of Freedom at Jamestown*; Library of Congress

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young