

The First Church in Plymouth

The First Parish Church traces its history to a Separatist congregation that formed in Scrooby, England, in the early 17th century, members of which later sailed to Plymouth aboard the Mayflower.

Meetings of the Scrooby congregation first took place in a manor house owned by the Archbishop of York and occupied by William Brewster (ca. 1560-1644), a former diplomat who served as postmaster for the village and bailiff to the archbishop.

In 1606 and 1607, Brewster convened a series of meetings for those who were seeking to practice a more liberal expression of Protestantism, free from the creed and ritual of the Church of England.

They formed their own congregation with Richard Clyfton as its first minister and John Robinson (ca. 1576-1625) as their assistant pastor. Due to continued persecution in England, the congregation fled to Amsterdam in 1608 and from there to Leyden (Leiden) in southern Holland in 1609.

John Robinson was chosen to be their minister in Leyden (Clyfton had remained in England), and William Brewster was chosen to be their Elder.

William Bradford, who would later become the second Governor of the Plymouth Colony, was another prominent member of the Separatist congregation. Bradford is credited with giving them the name "Pilgrims," although that term would not be commonly applied to the Separatist emigrants until the late 18th century.

Upon leaving Leyden, Bradford had written in his journal that "they knew they were pilgrims, & looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to ye heavens, their dearest cuntry, and quieted their spirits." Bradford's use of the term "pilgrim" was a reference to a biblical passage, Hebrews 11:13-16:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

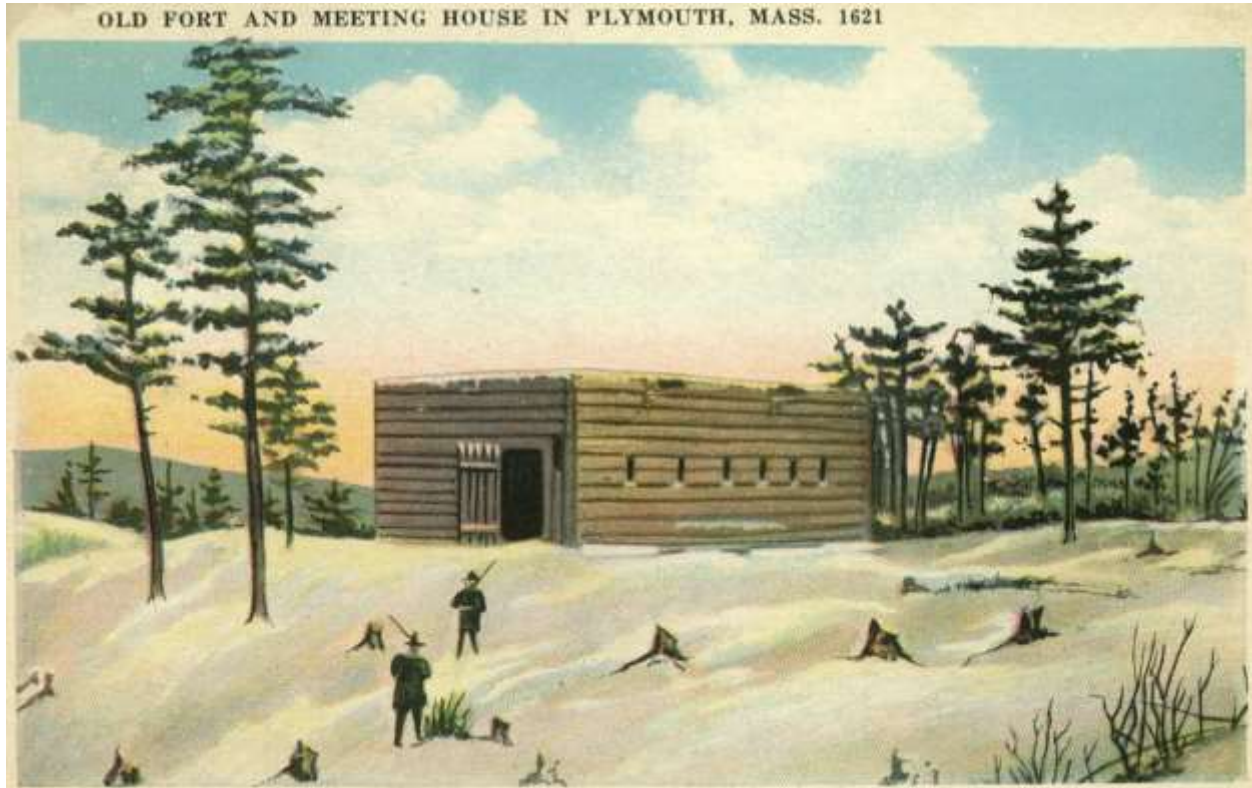
Due to a variety of factors, including difficulty finding work in Leyden and the challenge of living in a non-English speaking country, some members of the Leyden congregation decided to obtain a charter from England to establish a colony in America. By congregational vote, only a minority had decided to emigrate, and Robinson remained in Leyden as minister to those who chose to stay.

After securing a patent from the London Company (later replaced by a charter from the Plymouth Council for New England), the Leyden Separatists (hereinafter referred to as the "Pilgrims") were among the passengers aboard the Mayflower as it departed for the American colonies from Plymouth, England, on September 6, 1620.

After a brief stay in Provincetown in November, the Mayflower landed in Plymouth in late December, where the Pilgrims established the Plymouth Colony. The head of their congregation at that time was William Brewster. John Carver became the first governor of the Plymouth Colony for a short time, followed by William Bradford, who remained Governor from 1621 to 1657. (NPS)

The First 'Church' Building

The first public building to be erected by the Pilgrims was a large house, twenty-feet square, which was used for storage and public worship; but shortly after its completion, it took fire, and The Common House was burnt to the ground.



In the month of April "whilst they were bussie with their seed," Governor Carver was taken suddenly ill, and died, leaving a widow who soon followed him.

The death of the first Governor was a severe loss to the community. He was not only a deeply religious man, but had won their esteem and endeared himself to them, by long and patient service and sacrifice. He was sagacious, skilled in practical affairs, and upright in all his dealings. He was succeeded in office by William Bradford, with Isaac Allerton, as assistant.

In the month of November 1621, the depleted ranks of the colonists were partly filled up by the unexpected arrival of the Fortune, and thirty-five persons were added to the plantation.

The summer of 1622, saw the erection of the Fort. Bradford writes,

"they builte a fort with good timber, both strong and comly, which was of good defence, made with a flatte rofe and batilments, on which their ordnance was mounted, and where they kepte constante watch, especially in time of danger. It served them also for a meeting-house, and was fitted accordingly for that use."

Here on the summit of Burial Hill, the Pilgrims perpetuated the church founded in England under the ministrations of Elder Brewster. The ecclesiastical polity of the church was copied, with slight modifications, from that provided by Guillaume Farel and John Calvin, for the Reformed Churches of France.

The church universal consisted of those, of every nationality, who accepted the fundamentals of the Christian faith, preached from the Scriptures, and administered the sacraments.

The permanent officers of the church, were

1. The pastor, whose duty it was to preach, and to preside over the discipline of the church, to administer the sacraments, and to admonish and exhort the members.
1. A teacher, or teachers, who explained and interpreted the Scriptures, and inculcated the truth therein revealed, as it was made known to them from time to time.
2. Certain devout and experienced men, known as deacons, who were to attend to the material interests of the church, and to relieve the poor.

The election of the officers in the church was vested in the people, and those duly chosen and called, were ordained by the laying on of the hands of the pastors. The Sacraments were Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism was administered only to such infants, as whereof one parent, at the least, was of some church. The Lord's Supper was administered by a duly ordained clergyman to members of the church.

For several years the Church at Plymouth was without a pastor. It lived upon the truths which John Robinson had taught, with such care and learning, and broke the bread of life in the way which exile had made so precious.

On the Lord's day, the people gathered in the meeting-house, sang the psalms, had the Scriptures read and explained, and joined in prayers, which flowed spontaneously from grateful hearts, and were born in the depth of an experience, which had made the goodness and mercy of God, and the blessings of his daily providence, the most real and vital of all convictions.

They knew that they were the humble instruments of God for good, and that their successes and failures, joys and sorrows, losses and gains, were included in his immediate purpose, and were to be accepted without murmur or complaint.

The Plymouth Church continued to retain its convictions, and its sturdy independence, during the years it was without a pastor, desiring none of the imported clergymen sent by the Adventurers, whether of Episcopal or Puritan leanings, and heeding not the veiled rebukes and supercilious airs of the Salem fraternity. It was Separatist, and was neither to be bribed nor driven from its steadfast allegiance to the true ideal of liberty and independence.

In 1629, there arrived in the "Talbot" one Ralph Smith, a clergyman whose ecclesiastical status when he boarded the ship, was a matter of conjecture. He was thought to be a Separatist, and Matthew Cradock, Governor in England of the Massachusetts Colony, sent a message to Endicott of Salem, concerning him, "that unless he be conformable to our Government, you suffer him not to remain within the limits of our grant."

Cradock's suspicions were well-founded, and Smith, upon inquiry, was compelled to accept the alternative of being shipped back to England, in the "Lion's Whelp," or of seeking quarters where his views would meet with more favour than Salem accorded to them.

He fled to Nantasket, and after struggling for some time in poverty, he persuaded the captain of a Plymouth vessel, to take him and his family on board, and convey them to the freer Colony. He was received by the Pilgrims somewhat cautiously, but after close investigation was welcomed, and finally ordained the first minister of the church in Plymouth.

Although a man of ordinary abilities, and it was said, not equal to Brewster as a preacher, he served the church acceptably for five or six years. During three years of his ministry he was assisted by Roger Williams who arrived in America on the 5th of February 1631, and had been commended to the Colony by Governor Winthrop.

On his arrival, he was invited to temporarily fill the pulpit of the Reverend John Wilson of Boston, who was about to make a visit to England.

Roger Williams graduated from Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1626, and took orders in the church in 1629, serving as chaplain to Sir William Masham. The Anglican Liturgy proved distasteful to him, and the persistent attentions of Archbishop Laud drove him out of the land. He sailed from Bristol in England on the 1st of December 1630.

The hope of finding liberty of conscience, and a field for his unquestioned ability and character in Boston, turned out to be delusive. In April 1631, he accepted an appointment as preacher or teacher, at Salem. This change brought him no advantage. In matters ecclesiastical, Boston and Salem were too closely identified, and after a few months, he removed to Plymouth, where he remained for nearly three years.

He appears to have been an eccentric genius, able, scholarly, but of unsound judgment.

Here, as elsewhere his pronounced views, and personal idiosyncrasies led him into trouble with the Puritan section, and not being able to smother his convictions at the behest of his worldly interests, the Plymouth church reluctantly parted with him.

His principal contentions were, that the King had no right to grant the services of the Church of England was a sin, and that any interference whatever with the right of private judgment was an injustice to the individual and the community.

These, and some minor extravagances of his, were intolerable to the Puritan faction, and finally ended in his banishment from the Bay Colony.

The local scattering of the Colonists led to the founding of new churches in and around Plymouth.

“Those that lived on their lots on ye other side of ye bay (called Duxberie) they could not long bring their wives and children to ye publick worship and church meetings here, and with such burthen as growing to some competente number, they sued to be dismissed, and so they were dismist, about this time, though very unwillingly.”

Shortly afterwards, and for similar reasons, another body, living at Green's harbour, Marshfield split off from the parent church, and set up on its own account. These defections greatly weakened the resources of the Plymouth church, and were viewed with alarm, and, yet, nothing could be said against them.

In 1633, Bradford resigned the Governorship after twelve years' service, and Edward Winslow succeeded him. Seven assistants were chosen, and that was the number of the Governor's Council ever afterwards. The Bay Colony had never taken very kindly to the Plymouth Separatists, and veiled suspicion and dislike soon ripened into meddlesome interference.

The Puritan and the Pilgrim had many things in common, but one or two vital principles, on which they differed, kept them apart.

The Puritan was conservative, accommodating, obsequious to the powers that be, and inclined to furbish up the old weapons, which had been used against himself, for use against others.

The Pilgrim was radical. He had broken with the past, even to a greater extent than he could realize, and was making a new experiment, civil and ecclesiastical. He was more tolerant than the Puritan, both in matters of opinion and conduct, and wore a more gracious mien.

About this time, the feeling between them was neither pleasant nor safe. Strictures on the religious attitude of the Pilgrims were passing into efforts to divert their trade, and to trespass on their territory, which met with resistance, ending in bloodshed.

In the year 1636, Ralph Smith resigned his pastorate, and was succeeded by the Rev. John Reyner, a quiet, godly man, who seems to have pursued the even tenour of his way, doing his duty modestly and efficiently, and commending himself to the good-will and affection of his flock, whom he served faithfully for eighteen years.

About two years after his ordination, the Rev. Charles Chauncey a graduate, and for some time a professor, of Trinity College, Cambridge, drifted towards Plymouth, and preached so acceptably, that he was invited to become co-pastor with Mr. Reyner.

He had been vicar of Ware, Hertfordshire, and came into disfavour, by characterizing Laud's sacerdotal regulations as "idolatrous." He was brought before the Court of High Commission in 1630, and again in 1634, when he was suspended from the ministry, and imprisoned.

The colonies of Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, had been looking for some time towards federation. It was felt that their mutual interests and protection would be furthered by union, and in 1643, they entered into a Confederation known as 'The United Colonies of New England.'

This union no doubt gave strength to the Colonies in their relations with the mother-country, and provided for the better administration of law, and more adequate defence in case of war. But, it gave to the Massachusetts Colony a preponderating power, and reacted unfavourably upon the liberalism of Plymouth.

In every union of independent organizations something must be sacrificed. Corporations, like individuals acquire characteristics, which differentiate them from other bodies; but, when they sink themselves in federation, these original qualities are either modified or entirely lost.

Plymouth Colony was unique.

It represented heroic history and traditions in which no other colony could share. Its ideals of liberty, self-reliance, and manliness, were its own.

From the first, it had carved out an independent course for itself, and had pursued that course, with unflinching loyalty and determination.

Now, the age of chivalry and romance was coming to an end. The old Colony had fought a good fight and finished its course.

It had stood out bravely for the widest conception then known, of civil and religious liberty, preserving the independence and integrity of the State, bridling religious intolerance, and offering an asylum for brave and honest men, who had been cast out by Prelacy and Puritanism.

Henceforth, it was to form a minor part in a union with forces against which it had long contended. The heroes who had stood faithfully by it, were one by one failing under the weight of years, and stood ready to sing their *nunc dimittis*. Its name was to be relinquished; its career completed; and its wonderful history merged into the annals of secondary events.

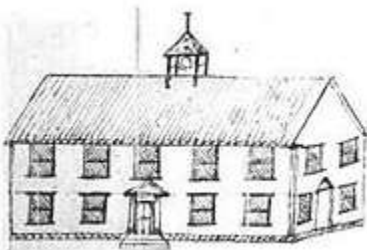
In 1648 the first church was built. It was situated behind Bradford's lot, and facing Leyden St and like every first church, however modest, was raised with becoming pride and joy. (Cuckson)

All of the land between Burial Hill and Main Street, which included present-day Town Square, originally belonged to William Bradford and John Alden. The land on which the First Parish Church now stands was likely given up by John Alden when he left Plymouth in 1627, after which the land became known as the Town Commons. (NPS)

Seven years before, an ordinance had passed the General Court "that no injunction should be put on any church, or church member, as to doctrine, worship, or discipline, whether for substance or circumstance, besides the command of the Bible."

This might mean much or little, for justification of oppression was easily found in the Scriptures, but on the lips of those who had suffered greatly, and so often, for conscience sake, it meant a good deal.

It meant that although men met for worship under one roof, it was not to be expected that they should think or feel alike; but whether or not, they were to enjoy such freedom, as was not to be found in any other church of their time. (Cuckson)



The second meetinghouse was built in 1683 on the site of the present First Parish Church, at the west end of Town Square. This building consisted of a two-story, side-gabled building with a center entrance and cupola.

Cuckson quotes an unnamed source who described this building as having an "unceiled Gothic roof, diamond glass, with a small cupola and bell."

The third meetinghouse was constructed in 1744 on the same site, replacing the prior building that had fallen into disrepair.

The building was described as “an attempted copy of a Boston church building. A graceful structure, it was the first real church, architecturally speaking.”

In 1831, as membership grew at the First Parish Church, the congregation voted to replace the third meetinghouse with another that would be “larger and more in keeping with the improved taste and broader outlook of the times.”

The Gothic Revival-style fourth meetinghouse was a wood-frame building designed by George W. Brimmer of Boston and included a



bell, cast by Paul Revere in 1801, which was controlled and used by the town to mark the time and as an alarm for emergencies. The fourth meetinghouse was destroyed by fire in 1892.

Other denominations in Plymouth offered the temporary use of their churches for worship by the First Parish members. The first service after the fire was held at the Universalist Church on December 4, 1892.

On December 19, 1892, a Parish Committee meeting of the First Parish Church was held, and the initial \$5,000 was raised towards the building of a new church. At that meeting, according to committee member Arthur Lord’s report, it was decided that they should “secure in the church to be built a fitting memorial to that spirit of religious liberty and tolerance which characterized the Pilgrims.” He went on to say that, “The subject cannot be treated as if the church was purely local or denominational.”

On April 4, 1896, the building committee voted to hire John Y. Mainland of Boston as the contractor for construction of the church. Mainland was born in Scotland in 1849, learned the building trade in Nova Scotia in 1866-1867, and moved to Boston in 1868.

The cornerstone was laid on Monday, June 29, 1896. Once again, the perceived importance of this church as a memorial to the Pilgrims was reflected in the address given by Arthur Lord, Parish Committee member and President of the Pilgrim Society:

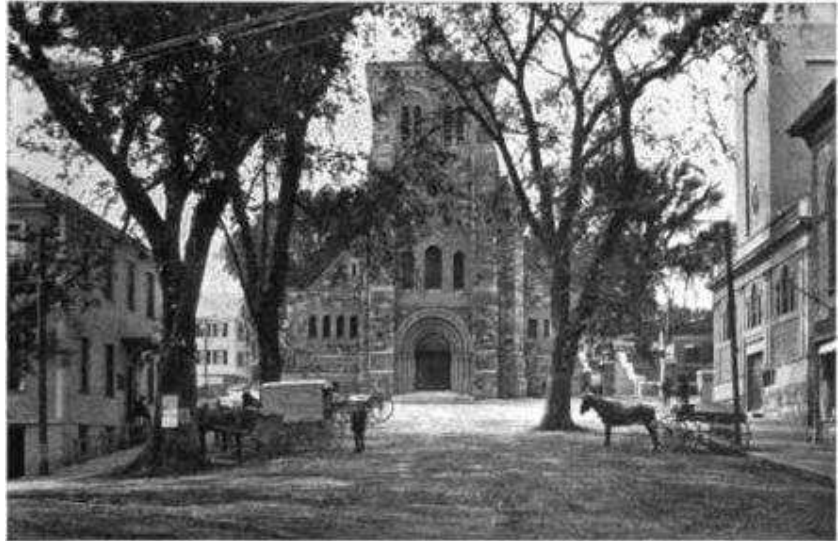
On this hill-side, rich in memories, associations and history, we meet today, to lay the corner stone of the First Church in Plymouth, and the first church in America.

Behind us, rises the hill, where rest in peace the dead of by-gone generations; before us stretches, the first street of the Pilgrims, once bordered by their simple dwellings, once echoing to the tread of their weary feet; and beyond, lies the sea, now sparkling in the sunlight of June, but whose dark waters in that stormy December reflects the white sail of the Mayflower.



All around us is historic ground. It witnessed the humble beginnings of a great people. It was the cradle of a mighty nation; the rude yet tender home of religious and civil liberty, which elsewhere, seemed but a scholar's idle dream. ...

To this generation, came the duty and the opportunity to erect upon the ruins of the old church, a memorial, simple yet enduring, to the religious life of its founders, the last and best of the great memorials to the Pilgrims of Plymouth.



Built of granite from the rocky hillsides of Massachusetts, of stone

from the quarries of that other Massachusetts on the banks of the Ohio, it is no less firm and enduring than they. In its stately tower shall hang the bell which Paul Revere cast, whose tones, as on other days, again will mark the fleeting hour, will call to duty, and will sound the dread alarm.

The carved tablets in its open vestibule shall tell the Pilgrim names and story to the thousands as they pass. The rays of the setting sun falling softly through its stained glass, shall gild with a new radiance the pictured forms and faces of the leaders of the Pilgrim band.

The first service was held in Kendall Hall on April 25, 1897, before the sanctuary level had been completed, and continued to be held there until the church dedication on Thursday, December 21, 1899.

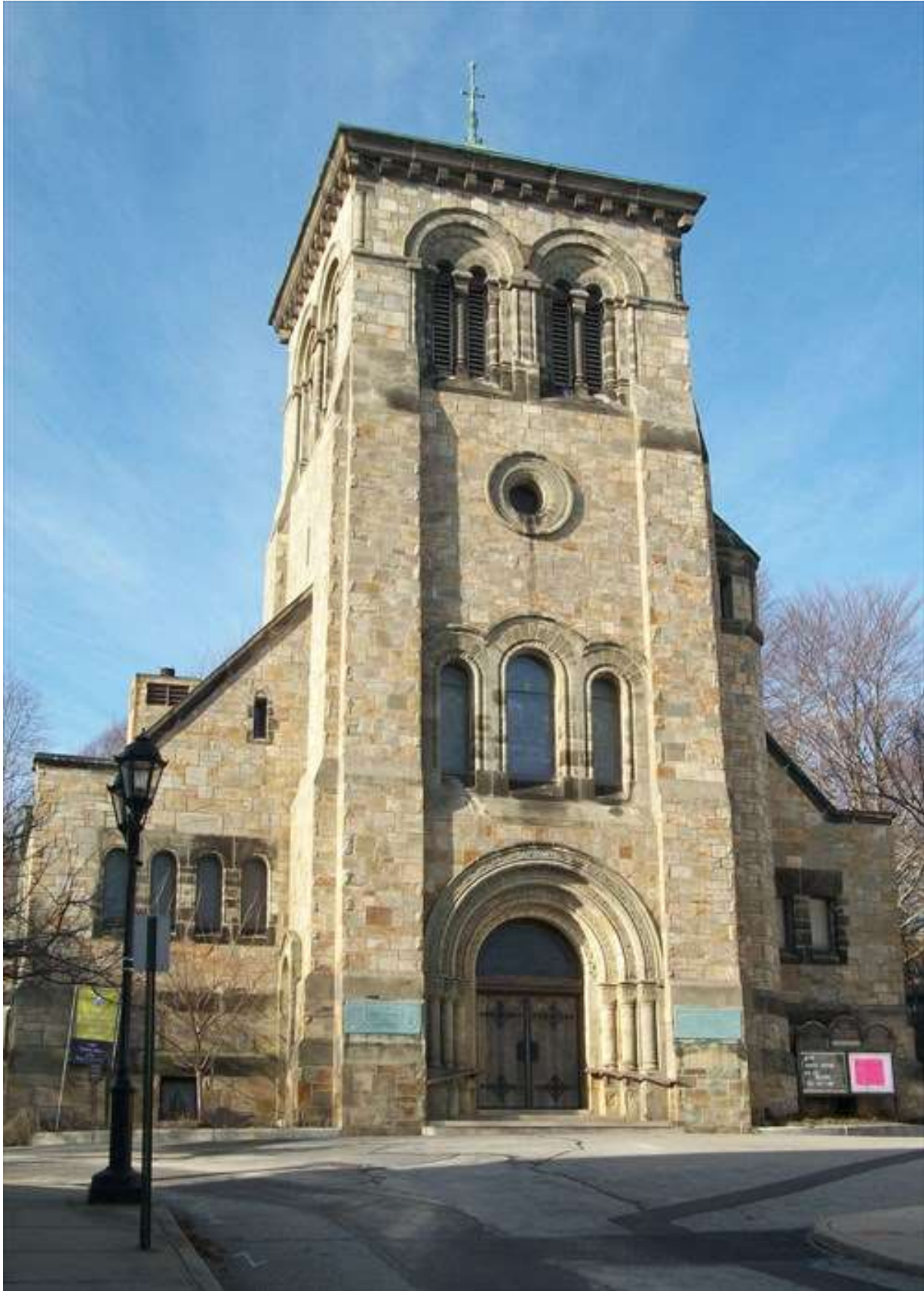
Mayflower Society Given (and Restoring/Maintaining) First Parish Meeting House

The First Parish Church, completed in 1899, is the fifth meetinghouse built for its congregation, and the fourth built at the current location. (NPS)

When the General Society of Mayflower Descendants (GSMD) became aware that the congregation was having trouble with the increasing maintenance and restoration of the building, it approached the congregation about donating the Meetinghouse to GSMD as a place to fulfill its educational mission.

Since the General Society of Mayflower Descendants was founded in 1897, the same year the present structure was built at the top of Leyden Street, families of descendants – our families – have made regular pilgrimages to this spot.

In fact, Member Societies have helped to furnish this structure with Tiffany stained-glass windows from the New York and New Jersey Societies, objects in the sanctuary from Rhode Island, as well as many other contributions through the years.



To save the building they love, the First Parish Church congregation has agreed to donate it to GSMD upon the condition that funds be put in place to permanently maintain it, and that they be allowed to continue scheduling their services there.

The General Society of Mayflower Descendants and First Parish Church signed a Joint Venture Agreement, which led to the Charitable Trust, during Congress 2017.

Along with the Meetinghouse, GSMD will be given all the church records from modern times back to 1620, written by William Bradford, William Brewster, Robert Cushman, and many others.

There are references and stories of our Mayflower ancestors going back to Leiden, information that simply must be curated and properly maintained permanently. There is no group better to do this than the actual descendants of the Mayflower Pilgrims. (GSMD)



The bulk of the information here is taken directly from A Brief History of the First Church In Plymouth, from 1606 to 1901, by John Cuckson, Minister; with some from Bradford; First Parish Church of Plymouth, National Registration Nomination Form, NPS

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