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From Europe to North America: The Strangers

Read, highlight, and annotate the text to answer the question: Why did the Strangers immigrate to North America?

In 1620, 102 English men and women departed for North America to start a new life in a colony that would come to be called Plymouth, Massachusetts. They traveled aboard a ship called the *Mayflower* for more than two months, eventually arriving on the stony coast of New England at what is today Provincetown, Massachusetts. On board the *Mayflower* were two groups, the Saints, a group who sought religious freedom, and the Strangers, who migrated for reasons other than religion. The Saints gave the Strangers their name because they viewed any person who was not saved by God as a “stranger.” The story of these men, women, and children aboard the *Mayflower* is essential to understanding why people chose to come to North America in the 17th century.

The Strangers migrated to North America for a variety of reasons. While some Strangers were religious, religious freedom was not something most Strangers were seeking. Most Strangers were merchants, adventurers, skilled workers, and servants seeking new opportunities in North America. For many, economic problems in England motivated them to leave for the chance of a better life. For others, the journey to North America was an opportunity to be a part of an investment. If the colony was successful, the Strangers would earn money as investors, escape a life of poverty in England, and have a chance to start over in North America.

The motivation to find a new life outside England’s economy was strong. The economy in England had changed dramatically in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. A massive population increase had taken place in the 1500s, and by the early 1600s the population of England had grown from 3 million to 4 million people. This alarming population increase was coupled with stagnation in the cloth trade, the most important part of England’s economy. Moreover, the wealthy English landowners began the process of “enclosure,” in which they fenced in large tracts of land and thereby displaced thousands of people. Approximately half of the poorest people in the English countryside lost their homes to enclosure between 1530 and 1630. With so many unemployed workers, the wages for the people who could find work began to plummet, while the increased demand of so many people drove the prices of goods ever higher. Soon England was filled with thousands of people in abject poverty, and few ways to solve the problem.

One possible solution was the establishment of colonies in North America. For investors in London, North America presented the possibility of a huge return on investment. If a colony could be established, and workers could be found to develop the land and resources, the profits could be immense. At this time, stockholders in corporations like the Virginia Company began to argue that encouraging the poorest English people to migrate across the ocean to work in North America would be a way to alleviate poverty in England while creating new economic frontiers

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From Europe to North America: The Strangers, continued

in the New World. In the early 17th century, the Company of Merchant Adventurers of London began the process of recruiting people to migrate to North America. It was this company that sponsored the voyage of the *Mayflower*.

The individuals the Merchant Adventurers chose to accompany the Saints on their journey were mostly people looking for a new economic lease on life. For example, about 20 of the Strangers were indentured servants. Indentured servants typically exchanged several years of free labor for passage to North America and possibly a piece of land in the new British colonies. This was a desperate option for many people. It meant leaving behind all that one had known and traveling to a foreign land as the property of another. Yet indentured servitude became a popular option during the 17th century due to dwindling economic opportunities in England.

As the *Mayflower* set sail in 1620, a variety of people found themselves pulled across the Atlantic to North America and into history. The Strangers found their way to North America as a way to escape the economic conditions in England. As England's population grew, and wealthy landowners continued to push the poor off their land, establishing a new colony became an appealing option for many. These Strangers looked to North America as a land of opportunity and prosperity.

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