



Following in the Pilgrims' Footsteps in Leiden

In 2020 the United States, the Wampanoag Nation, England, and the Netherlands will commemorate the events of 400 years ago, when—after eleven years of voluntary exile in Leiden—a group of English religious refugees left for North America and founded Plymouth Colony. The role of Leiden in the Pilgrim story has long been of interest and will be fully explored through 2020 and beyond.

Refuge in Leiden, 1609–1620

On February 12, 1609, approximately 100 English religious refugees were granted permission to settle in Leiden by the city government. In 1611, two years after Pilgrim John Robinson had moved from Amsterdam to Leiden with about a hundred followers, he and three others bought a large building with seven chimneys and a large piece of land on the Kloosteege, opposite the Pieterskerk. The area, called the “Green gate,” soon became popularly known as the “English gate.” Other Robinson supporters—about three hundred—found living space in the neighborhood.

Because the Pilgrim congregation was not a recognized denomination, the group was not allowed to establish its own church. For this reason, Pilgrims who understood Dutch occasionally attended public services in the Pieterskerk and the Hooglandse Kerk, both Dutch Reformed, while Pilgrims who understood French preferred services in the Walloon Vrouwekerk,

where they felt more closely connected theologically.

The Pilgrims held their own meetings on Sunday and Thursday, which allowed them to experience their faith together and listen to Robinson’s sermons. On Sunday afternoons they discussed a chosen Bible text. These encounters took place in the English gate, presumably initially in Robinson’s residence and later the Faliede Bagijnhof chapel, which bordered the grounds of the English gate.¹

Most of the Pilgrims who found refuge in Leiden had previously made their living from small-scale agriculture in England. Upon arrival in Leiden, they could immediately find employment in the city’s labor-intensive textile industry—among the largest in Europe at the time. Children eight years and older were also employed. The work, performed in small cottages, included tasks such as wool scouring, sorting, spinning, and weaving. Economically,

many laborers lived on the edge of subsistence.

The demand for workers was so great that the city tried hard to attract Flemish, German, French, and English migrant groups. Most Pilgrims had little trouble integrating into this dynamic multicultural society and, as time passed, their leaders feared that the group would lose its religious and cultural identity. A private colony where their community could retreat and sustain their pure faith became an increasingly enticing solution. Moreover, the Pilgrims were attracted



Jori Zijlmans is the Curator of History at the Museum De Lakenhal. **Ariela Netiv** is the director of Heritage Leiden. **Michaël Roumen** is the executive director of Mayflower 400 in Leiden.

Previous page: View of the Fishmarket with Leiden City Hall in the background, ca. 1600. Unknown artist. Museum De Lakenhal. Right: Pieterskerk, Leiden.

to the idea of leaving the arduous textile industry to build new lives cultivating lands in the wilderness of North America. All these factors led to the *Mayflower* voyage and the creation of Plymouth Colony.

Memorializing the Pilgrims in Leiden

At the time the Pilgrims lived in Leiden they attracted hardly any notice. Not until later did their story begin to assume mythic proportions, as the Pilgrim voyage and settlement became synonymous with the birth of the United States.

In Leiden the Pilgrim story was spread largely by Dr. Henry Martyn Dexter (1821–1890), a Congregationalist minister from Boston, Massachusetts, and his son, Henry Morton Dexter (1846–1910). In 1865, Henry Martyn Dexter and Dr. George E. Day, professor at the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, visited Leiden and received permission to install a memorial stone to honor John Robinson. Robinson had intended to emigrate in one of the ships that followed the *Mayflower*, but died in Leiden in 1625.

In 1683 the houses where he and other Pilgrims had lived were demolished and the Jean Pesijnhof, an almshouse, was built there. The memorial placed in the facade of the Pesijnhof in Leiden in 1865 bears the following inscription: “On this spot lived, taught and died John Robinson, 1611–1625.” This was the first Pilgrim memorial in Leiden.² At the time of his visit, Henry Martyn Dexter was corresponding secretary at NEHGS and his activities were reported in *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*.³



Beginning in 1877, Henry Martyn Dexter and George E. Day were involved in another effort to memorialize the Pilgrims in Leiden. The goal was a bronze tablet honoring John Robinson on the wall of the baptistery of the Pieterskerk.⁴ Although the senior Dexter died shortly before these plans were realized, Day, Morton Dexter, and many others saw the project to completion. In July 1891 a delegation from the National Council of the Congregational Churches in the United States came to Leiden for the plaque’s unveiling.

Minister and historian William Elliott Griffis took part in the ceremony. For many years he had given numerous lectures and sermons in the Netherlands and America about the Dutch origin of ecclesiastical life in

the United States. He also published several books, articles, and pamphlets that argued that late sixteenth-century Dutch ideas—such as religious tolerance, free press, local self-government, free education, written elections, and a written constitution—had been decisive for American development. He was convinced that the Pilgrims laid the foundation of the United States in Leiden.⁵

In 1905, Morton Dexter finished his father’s incomplete manuscript and published *The England and Holland of the Pilgrims*, which assumed an important place in Pilgrim literature.

On August 29, 1920, during the tercentenary commemorations of the *Mayflower*’s crossing, dozens of people attended memorial services in the Pieterskerk and in the courtyard of the

To learn more, visit Mayflower400nl.com.

The Mayflower 400 Leiden partners:

- Leiden Heritage, Ariela Netiv, director
- Leiden Marketing, Martijn Bulthuis, director
- Museum de Lakenhal, Meta Knol, director
- Pieterskerk Leiden, Frieke Hurkmans, director
- Official advisor: Jeremy Bangs, director Leiden American Pilgrim Museum
- PR & Publicity: Mincke Pijpers, marketing manager Leiden Marketing
- Executive Director: Michaël Roumen, Michael@leidenmarketing.nl



This tablet marking the burial site of John Robinson was installed in the Pieterskerk in 1891.

Pesijnhof. After that, the prominence of the Pesijnhof and Pieterskerk as places associated with the Pilgrims increased not only among the English and Americans, but also among Leideners.

The city of the Pilgrims still stands

Fortunately for history buffs and *Mayflower* descendants, many

buildings the Pilgrims knew are still standing, due to Leiden's long economic decline after the boom years of the 17th century. The University Academy, where Robinson and William Brewster taught and debated, still stands on the Rapenburg. Next to it, the Hortus, Leiden University's Botanical Garden, contains a reconstruction of the garden as it appeared in the Pilgrims' time. A few houses where Pilgrims lived still exist. The Vliet River, from which the Pilgrims left Leiden to start their journey, is marked by a commemorative statue with all *Mayflower* family names listed on a plaque.

Not every building has been preserved and we don't know where

2020 Initiatives in Leiden

"Mayflower 400 Leiden," a consortium of Leiden organizations, including the Pieterskerk, Museum de Lakenhal, and Heritage Leiden, is planning a roster of programs and projects for 2020. These educational, cultural, diplomatic, and tourism initiatives are aimed at establishing lasting meaningful relationships that will extend beyond 2020. Here are a few examples:

Intellectual Baggage: an international museum exhibit & academic publication

As described on pages 43–45, the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum and Museum De Lakenhal have joined curatorial forces to create a traveling exhibit on books owned by the Pilgrims, and on the ideas and works that influenced them and traveled with them to the New World. The exhibit, drawn from multiple international collections, will travel from Leiden to the United States and England (visit Mayflower400nl.com in summer 2018 for the exhibit schedule.) The exhibit will also be the starting point for an international academic research group and a publication drawing on exhibit themes such as migration and settlement, civil law, and religious doctrine.

"Meet your Ancestors" booth at Leiden Heritage

Heritage Leiden is tasked with protecting and promoting local heritage in Leiden, from archaeological collections to municipal archives, including the "Pilgrim Archives": official documents from the years the Pilgrims spent in Leiden. In 2020, Heritage Leiden will open a special booth for visitors looking for local information on their genealogical heritage. Experts will guide visitors through the archives and assist them in finding family archival material.

We are Leiden: a local program aimed at community building

"We are Leiden" is a multi-year program aimed at connecting newcomers (expats, students, and refugees) with Leiden residents. This initiative, run by local social and cultural organizations, is inspired by the Mayflower 400 commemoration. Four centuries after the Pilgrims found refuge here, Leiden still has a relatively high percentage of new immigrants compared to other cities in the Netherlands. Events will include a massive open-air city dinner.

every Pilgrim lived. But if you want to see how a Pilgrim household looked, you can do no better than the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, located in a beautifully preserved house built about 1365–70 and furnished as if it were still 1620.

Two Walloons married into the Pilgrim community: Philippe de la Noy, ancestor of Ulysses S. Grant and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Hester Mahieu, who married *Mayflower* passenger Francis Cooke. De la Noy sailed to Plymouth on the *Fortune* (1621);

Mahieu arrived on the *Anne* (1623). Although the Vrouwekerk, where Walloons attended services, no longer stands, Heritage Leiden will present a digital reconstruction of this church and other places that would have been familiar to the Pilgrims—like Rembrandt's birthplace and the room in City Hall where civil marriages were performed.

The Pieterskerk will update its current Pilgrim exhibit. The church also has plans for a permanent Pilgrim visitor center. Numerous activities

relating to the Pilgrims, including the Thanksgiving service, will take place at the Pieterskerk.

Mayflower400nl.com—launching in the spring of 2018—will tell the story of the Pilgrims in Leiden. It will also provide access to digitized documents related to the Pilgrims' stay in Leiden, forthcoming from Heritage Leiden in 2018. Visit Mayflower400nl.com to learn about events that will enable you to follow in the footsteps of Pilgrim ancestors. ♦

NOTES

¹ Joke Kardux and Eduard van de Bilt, *Newcomers in an Old City: The American Pilgrims in Leiden, 1609–1620* (Leiden: Burgersdijk & Niermans, 2001), 35–37.

² Tamara Jones, "The First Pilgrim Memorial in Leiden," tamurajones.net/JohnRobinsonStone.xhtml.

³ *Register* 20 (1866): 90–91.

⁴ Morton Dexter, "The John Robinson Tablet," *The Mayflower Descendant* 2 (1900): 97–103; *Proceedings at the Unveiling of the John Robinson Memorial Tablet in Leyden, Holland, July 24, 1891* (Boston: Thomas Todd, 1891).

⁵ William Elliot Griffis, *Brave Little Holland and What She Taught Us* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1894); *The American in Holland* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1899); Griffis, ed., *The Siege of Leyden Condensed from Motley's "Rise of the Dutch Republic"* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co.,

Pilgrim walking tour for visitors

Much of Leiden's city center looks as it did when the Pilgrims walked the cobblestoned streets around the Pieterskerk. Multiple Leiden partners have joined forces to create a walking tour that enables visitors to imagine life in the 17th century. Guided visits to the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, the Pieterskerk, and the university help visitors understand why the Pilgrims first came to Leiden and why it was such a dynamic city.

Native Nations in 17th-century America: National Museum of Ethnology Exhibit

The Dutch National Museum of Ethnology is planning an exhibit on the history and culture of 17th-century native nations of Northeastern America. This exhibit will help Dutch visitors learn about this vital aspect of the Pilgrim story, often overlooked in the past. The exhibit will be on display in Leiden in 2020.

