



Intellectual Baggage

A new exhibition, *Intellectual Baggage*, is being developed in Leiden by Jeremy Bangs of the Leiden American Pilgrim Museum and Jori Zijlmans of the Museum De Lakenhal.

By examining 510 inventories and wills of Plymouth colonists from all levels of society, Bangs identified a significant portion of the books owned by the first generations of Plymouth settlers, from 1633 to 1692.¹ This analysis showed that not everyone owned books; 198 wills did not list any books and a further ninety only mentioned Bibles and psalm books. Of the remaining 222 inventories that do name books, 50 show fairly detailed records of personal libraries.

The exhibit will reconstruct Pilgrim life and thought through their books, both ones the settlers brought with them and those they imported. At the time, book collections were extremely valuable and therefore usually modest in size. But available books were widely shared and were intensively, carefully, and repeatedly read, analyzed, and discussed. These books can be seen as the seventeenth-century equivalent of today's modern media in terms of how they shaped the Pilgrims' frames of reference.

Religious books

All the book owners possessed several religious books, including biblical, psalm, and prayer booklets, and published sermons. Each colonist read the Geneva Bible, an English translation of the Bible first published in 1560. Bible reading happened communally, but also within the home. Although not everyone could afford to own a

Jan Steen,
"Husband and wife
studying Scripture,"
ca. 1650. Museum
De Lakenhal.



Examining the Books of the Pilgrims

Bible, Pilgrims valued this book more than any other. Bibles may have been frequently borrowed, and the Bible was also read aloud during church services and home meetings. Psalm books were less expensive and more readily available.

William Brewster (1568–1644) owned one of the largest libraries in Plymouth, consisting of 394 books. A key member of the Puritan movement from its earliest years, Brewster was the right-hand man of John Robinson in Scrooby, England, and an influential spiritual leader. Brewster's house in Scrooby served as an important religious meeting place for the Pilgrims. During his stay in Leiden he taught English at the university.



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Brewster's impressive library featured books on a variety of intellectual topics. He worked hard to keep his knowledge up-to-date throughout his lifetime and spared no expense in maintaining his collection. Within the community, Brewster also played an important role in producing and distributing new publications. Most of these books focused on spiritual and religious affairs. Among other topics, the concept of predestination was intensely discussed by the Pilgrims during their Leiden period—in print, at the university, and on the streets.

Forbidden books

The Pilgrims used Dutch freedom of the press to publish books and pamphlets on their social and religious views in the Netherlands and then distributed them in England. These works were highly critical of the English king, James I, the Church of England and its opposition to reform, and the central role of the king in religious affairs. As a solution, the Pilgrims advocated a radical separation between church and state, which can be seen in the pamphlet *Justification of Separation*, printed in Amsterdam in 1610. In it, spiritual leader John Robinson strongly argued that true believers were obliged to

secede from the Church of England if it continued to admit impure believers.

These types of pamphlets were printed in Holland and smuggled to England in an attempt to stir up opposition to the Church of England. William Brewster played an important role in this process by publishing twenty of these pamphlets in Leiden between 1617 and 1619. His efforts only ended after the English king successfully had Brewster's printing press in Leiden confiscated, through diplomatic intervention in the Dutch States-General. In the years that followed, books on international politics were subjected to censorship by the Republic of the United Netherlands. The affair brought increasing uncertainty to the Pilgrim community, no doubt contributing to their desire to leave Leiden.

Practical guides

Books on the practical side of immigrating to the New World formed another important category in Pilgrim libraries. Renowned explorer John Smith offered a very positive perspective in *A Description of New England* (1616). Intending to encourage migration, Smith presented the New World as a paradise, largely empty and only

inhabited by a handful of indigenous tribes, with an unprecedented abundance in natural resources, animals, and fertile land. As a travel and survival guide, the book shared useful information, images, and detailed maps of the area. Smith's message was clear: both adventurers and religious refugees could, with God's blessing, build a new life through hard but honest labor in the wilderness and bring civilization to the far corners of the world.

Plymouth colonists also owned books that described sailing routes and navigation techniques. Among the oldest are *Divers Voyages Touching the Discoverie of America* (1582) and the multi-volume work, *The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598–1600) by English geographer and writer Richard Hakluyt. Also of note are the charts of Gerard Mercator, which presented sailing routes in constant long lines, an innovation that made navigation much easier.

The Pilgrims were concerned about armed resistance in the New World, as shown by the presence of Myles Standish (ca. 1584–1656) on the *Mayflower*. A soldier who had served the army of Prince Maurice of Orange,

Interior of a printing workshop in Leiden, 17th century. Unknown artist. Heritage Leiden # PV34430.



Standish was elected military leader of the new colony in 1621. He was familiar with the latest military technology, and he applied his knowledge to the construction of a wooden defensive fort in Plymouth. He also headed violent expeditions against a local Native American tribe.

Standish must have been an erudite man, as his last will and testament listed more than 43 books. Two of them directly deal with rediscovered Roman combat strategies, which were increasingly important to military theories of the time. Typically Roman army formations can be seen in *Military discipline: or, the young artillery man* (1635) by William Bariffe.

Standish kept current on developments in other fields, including the latest medical breakthroughs, as

reflected in his library. In addition to the medical aid book *Praxis medicinae, or, the physicians practice* (1632) by Gualtherus Bruele, he owned a copy of the renowned *Herbarium* (1578) by Rembert Dodoens—as did William Brewster. Towards the end of his life, Dodoens, a famous physician and botanist, became a professor at Leiden University and gave practical training in the university’s botanical garden. *Herbarium* provides carefully arranged data on the origins, harvesting, storage and uses of medicinal herbs.

Migrating ideas

The library of William Bradford, who was elected as the colony’s governor upon arrival, included *A Generall History of the Netherlands* (1608) by Edward Grimstone. This book

addressed Dutch concepts of civil marriage. A key passage described the practice of securing legally binding secular contracts between husband and wife from civil magistrates—rather than church authorities. According to Bradford, this book was a source for the Dutch law that the Pilgrims took as their legal precedent in establishing civil marriage, and consequently separation of church and state, in the spring of 1621.²

Inspired by scripture and their experiences in the Netherlands, Plymouth Colonists divided inheritances into equal parts based on the number of surviving children, with the eldest son receiving a double share. In addition, wives could no longer be excluded from inheritances: widows received a third of the estate. In the Netherlands and in Plymouth Colony, medical services and care for the disabled and the elderly were seen as responsibilities to be carried by the entire society.

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The *Intellectual Baggage* exhibit allows us to familiarize ourselves with ideas in the books the Pilgrims read. In doing so, we gain a better understanding of the intellectual and spiritual world of the Pilgrims and the topics they discussed and analyzed in Plymouth Colony. ♦

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- ¹ Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, *Plymouth Colony’s Private Libraries, as Recorded in Wills and Inventories, 1633–1692* (Leiden: Leiden American Pilgrim Museum, 2016).
- ² Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, “Some Thoughts on the Books and Libraries of Plymouth Colony, in connection with the publication of *Plymouth Colony’s Private Libraries*,” *Mayflower Journal* 1 (Fall 2016): 39–67, at 42.



Jan Georg van Vliet after Rembrandt van Rijn, “Old Woman Reading,” 1631–33. Engraving. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.