The 17th century began with a hardening of religious persecution in England. The break with the Catholic Church was very recent and King James I wanted the entire population to submit to the Anglican precepts. The deepening of the Protestant Reformation, which challenged all authorities and promoted a much more horizontal view of religion and the world, was too dangerous for the interests of the crown.

A small community in the town of Scrooby, in the county of Nottinghamshire, was reluctant to bow to the rites of the Church of England, which it considered too similar to the Catholics. Followers of Luther and, especially, Calvin, believed that there should not be hierarchies or intermediaries between God and the faithful. Led by William Bradford, they decided to keep their Reformed cult a secret. They began to be called separatists, although later they would be known as pilgrims.

But the pressure was mounting. Faced with the certain threat of losing their freedom, part of the congregation decided to emigrate in 1608. The destination was Holland, which at that time enjoyed a religious freedom unique in the world. After a visit to Amsterdam, they settled in the city of Leiden.

"The Mayflower passengers were a small religious community that was disillusioned with what they saw as an inadequate Protestant Reformation in the Church of England. They turned their backs on it because they considered it anti-Christian, and acquired the nickname of "separatists." At that time, everyone in England was required by law to attend their parish church, but in 1606 this group began to meet illegally in a Separatist church in Scrooby. After a short time they decided that it was impossible to continue practicing their faith clandestinely and they moved to the Netherlands to find greater freedom," Susan Hardman Moore, professor of Early Modern Religion at the University of Edinburgh, told Infobae.

However, they did not feel comfortable there either. Although they could practice their faith without reservation, they were too used to a quiet rural life, which contrasted with the urban and modern stamp of Leiden. In addition, the youngest were becoming Dutch and it was essential for the parents to preserve the English culture.

Thus arose the project of building a community from its foundations in the "New World". England had already sent many expeditions to the north of the American continent, but there was only one permanent settlement, not very successful: Jamestown, in the colony of Virginia. Founded in 1607, it had been briefly abandoned in 1610 and faced serious difficulties to survive.

But the illusion of starting a new life in a kind of promised land became a project that would have a profound impact on the history of England, of what the United States and of the entire world would become. The Pilgrims hired two ships for the crossing: the Speedwell, which took
them from Leiden to the port of Plymouth, and the Mayflower. Due to its constant leaks and damage, the first was abandoned at the beginning of the transatlantic adventure.

“The Mayflower carried 102 passengers to the New World, in addition to 30 crew members. Among them were 44 that William Bradford, the most famous of the group, called pilgrims: 18 men, 11 women, and 15 children. The Pilgrims were strict Calvinists who fled England as separatists: they denied the validity of the Church of England and wanted to practice their religion in their own way, ”said Scott Douglas Gerber, an expert in American legal history and law professor at Ohio Northern University, in dialogue with Infobae.

The Mayflower left on September 6, 1620. It arrived in America 66 days later. Its occupants founded the Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts. It was not a particularly fruitful settlement, but it became the founding myth of the United States.

The Pilgrims had obtained a permit to establish a plantation at the mouth of the Hudson River in New York. To finance the trip, they got a loan from the Mercantile Adventurers company, which was interested in creating a colony to import cotton. Then they were going to have to repay the debt with what they produced in the following years.

But the plan did not go as planned. The Mayflower arrived on November 9 in the Cape Cod area of Massachusetts, a little north of where the Hudson ends. When they tried to go south they found a sea that was too rough, making it difficult for them to advance. They spent almost two days trying to reach the original destination, but realizing that it was too dangerous and that they were running out of supplies, they decided to anchor at the headland, in Provincetown.

The biggest problem is that they did not have permission to settle in that area. This led some of the passengers who were not part of the congregation to say that they were not going to submit to any authority as soon as they disembarked. So, to avoid a chaotic coexistence, 41 men signed the Mayflower Pact, in which they laid the foundations of a loyal self-government to the crown of England. The promoter was John Carver, who would later be elected as the first governor of the brand new colony.

The following weeks were spent choosing a place to settle. In one of the first expeditions, they found corn in a tomb of an aboriginal community. In the next one, they had an unfriendly encounter in which they exchanged projectiles with members of another tribe. Finally, on December 25, they decided to set up the colony in an area that was identified on a map of the time as "New Plymouth." This is the name of the colony, although without the "new". Carver did not last long as governor: five months later he died and Bradford took over, who held office almost continuously until 1657.

The first winter was brutal. The settlers had enormous difficulties building shelters and getting food. 45 of the 102 who had arrived died. But with the spring they managed to stabilize.
They would hardly have succeeded with the native peoples at their peak, who could have easily driven them out. But a few years before the arrival of the settlers, a large part of the Wampanoag, who inhabited the area, had been exterminated by one of the many epidemics brought by the Europeans. So those who remained preferred to have a peaceful bond with the invaders.

Samoset, a reference of the Abenaki ethnic group, appeared before the pilgrims on March 16, 1621 to initiate a peaceful dialogue. Later they would meet Massasoit, an important Wampanoag chief, with whom they sealed a cooperative alliance. The indigenous people helped the settlers a lot to survive in this unfamiliar environment.

In November 1621, on the first anniversary of their arrival in America, the 53 survivors of the Mayflower celebrated the first harvest. That celebration was later considered the first Thanksgiving Day, which in the 19th century became one of the main national holidays in the United States.

The colony grew with the arrival of new ships. The former brought relatives from the first group, as many men had traveled alone. In others, people came without ties to the original expedition, but interested in joining that experience. Out of a base population of 99, Plymouth reached about 7,000 in 1691. A not inconsiderable achievement for the small congregation that had fled England 83 years earlier.

"The Mayflower Pilgrims were very important in the formation of the British American colonies," Gerber said. Plymouth was the first of the religiously based colonies. The second, Massachusetts Bay, was not founded until ten years later. Unlike the Pilgrims of Plymouth, the Puritans of the Bay did not want to abandon the Church of England, but to reform it. Maryland, the so-called Catholic colony of British America, was not founded until 1632, and the two Puritan colonies in Connecticut were founded in 1636 and 1638, respectively. The religion tolerant Rhode Island was established in 1636, and the Pennsylvania Quaker was created in 1681. The rest of the colonies were founded for non-religious reasons, mainly to earn money."

But Plymouth did not become very prosperous and the contrast with the others became more and more noticeable. The Massachusetts Bay Colony attracted about 20,000 people between 1630 and 1640 alone. By the end of the century, Plymouth was home to less than 10% of the people of all of New England.

"In the 1630s, Plymouth was quickly overtaken by mass migration to the New World from all over England, sometimes called the 'Great Migration'. This led to the founding of two new and larger colonies: Massachusetts and Connecticut. It is difficult to calculate exactly how many people crossed the Atlantic in this period, but historians estimate that between 13,000 and 20,000. This movement coincided with the repression in England of the Puritans, enthusiastic Protestants who were not as radical as the Mayflower Separatists. Thus, although the Mayflower Pilgrims had enormous symbolic importance in the history of the formation of the
British colonies in America, they were a largely autonomous group who only wanted freedom to practice their religion in peace, “said Hardman Moore.

In 1691, Plymouth was annexed to Massachusetts Bay, which was renamed the Province of Massachusetts, one of the 13 colonies that declared independence from England in 1776. The Pilgrims tried to resist annexation, but did not have sufficient resources. On the other hand, their legal status was very precarious, since they never got permission to settle there.

“The Plymouth colony was small, poor, and overshadowed by Massachusetts, with which it had a lot in common. But the Pilgrims have drawn so much attention in later American history because they were symbolically powerful. Interest in them increased during the War of Independence, when their flight from a persecuting king was linked to the revolutionary struggle. In the new nation, they provided a founding myth for democracy and religious tolerance. After Thanksgiving became a national holiday in 1863, the celebration of the harvest of 1621 among the Pilgrims and their Native American neighbors was a perfect candidate to be considered as' the first Thanksgiving of America 'and, as such, was catapulted to national fame ”, explained Michael P. Winship, professor in the Department of History at the University of Georgia, consulted by Infobae.

The legacy of the Mayflower Pilgrims had a profound impact on American history. This experience of a group of people who escaped the religious persecution of the central power and decided to create a community of equals, deliberative, without the support of any court - although, logically, they swore allegiance to the king -, served as a model for American democracy.


"The Puritans who settled in Massachusetts in the 1630s imitated their forms of church organization," he continued. Its congregational practices, in which ordinary believers had a say in government, provided a model of participatory democracy in civil society. Their emphasis on the importance of accessing God’s word through the Bible led them to demand literacy. Their belief in obligation to the members of the community led them to reject the new individualism of the time and to develop a form of social gospel. These three elements, participatory democracy in the church and in the state, the importance of literacy and a social gospel that inspired reform, played an important role not only in shaping the culture of the region, but also of the states. United”.

The preeminence of local politics over national politics has a clear anchor there. This very American rejection by the federal government and the postulation of individual liberty as the
supreme principle - which has its most extreme version in the unrestricted proclamation of the bearing of arms in the name of self-defense - find their origin in the Plymouth experience.

However, John Turner, professor of religious studies and colonial history at George Mason University, believes that many of the Pilgrim's values were abandoned over time. Above all, their community and solidarity worldview, which was displaced by a growing individualism.

"The pilgrims expected both to practice their religion and to prosper through trade," he told Infobae. That sounds pretty American I guess. There have been many other religious groups that have engaged in a similar search for the 'true' church, or the 'purest'. But actually it strikes me how American culture is going in very different directions. For the pilgrims, everything revolved around the community, but today's citizens are obsessed with the individual. Sure, the pilgrims wanted to make a profit in the fur trade. But they also cared about equity, not just profit. And they were like other Puritans: they favored a certain freedom of conscience, but they did not recognize the religious freedom for all that exists in contemporary America. "