

## Religion in the Colonies

Since the early days of the colonization, people came to America in order to worship freely. This tradition can be traced back to the Pilgrims in 1620; they came to America in search of a place where they would not be harassed because of their religious beliefs. When other groups heard there was a place where they could worship in peace, they traveled to the colonies. However, problems soon arose because the same people who once had been persecuted for their religious beliefs in Europe began to prohibit freedom of religion to newcomers to the colonies. This cycle of harassment and religious persecution eventually led the American colonists to draw a clear distinction between church and state as they sought to keep the institutions separate.



*Embarkation of the Pilgrims*  
Robert Weir, 1843

When the first Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth, they hoped to establish a colony where they could worship as they wished without fear of persecution from the Church of England. The Pilgrims had left England years earlier to escape harassment when they traveled across the English Channel to Holland. Although they objected to England's state-supported church, the Pilgrims wanted their children raised as English. After

living among the Dutch, however, the Pilgrims' children became more Dutch than English. Hoping to retain their cultural identity, the Pilgrims sailed for America in 1620. Because of their prior experience with the Church of England, the Pilgrims were tolerant of other cultures. Their experiences with Indians and people of differing religious beliefs demonstrated that the Pilgrims were more tolerant than other groups. The Pilgrims, however, were not the only religious group to settle in the New England colonies.

The Puritans, who like the Pilgrims had suffered persecution by the Church of England, arrived in the colonies in 1630. The Puritans differed from the Pilgrims and often harassed people of different faiths in much the same way they had been harassed in England. Regardless of their differences, both Pilgrims and Puritans viewed faith as the most important aspect of their lives and established Christianity as the cornerstone of New England colonial life.

The Pilgrims and Puritans dominated the New England colonies, and Lord Baltimore established the colony of Maryland as a refuge for Catholics in 1632. Lord Baltimore's father had received the charter for the colony; unfortunately, he died before he could establish the colony. The charter was passed to his son who had converted to Catholicism and wanted a safe place for fellow Catholics to worship in peace. Like the Pilgrims, Maryland's Catholics were tolerant of religious differences because of their own suffering in Europe.



*Cecilius Calvert*  
*2nd Lord Baltimore*

Another group that came to America seeking religious freedom was the Society of Friends, or Quakers as they were more commonly known. In 1656 William Penn established Pennsylvania as a refuge for his people. Quakers viewed religion as a personal choice. They believed there was no need for a tightly structured church to establish rules of correct behavior. Quakers believed individuals made decisions reflective of their individual beliefs. In addition, the Quakers were very peaceful people who did not believe in violence of any kind, and they argued against slavery in the colonies.

With the success of Penn and his followers, a flood of religious groups soon assumed the American colonies were a safe place to practice their religious beliefs. Many religious groups including Jews, Lutherans, Mennonites and Presbyterians began to settle in the middle and southern colonies; and they usually were treated fairly. By the time the thirteen original colonies were established, religious diversity was a way of life in the colonies. Because of many differences, colonists had to find a way to live in harmony with one another and to respect different religious beliefs. These differences led the framers of the United States Constitution to include freedom of religion as the first amendment to the document. Soon people from all around the world came to think of one word when describing America — freedom.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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### Discussion Questions:

1. In what country were the Pilgrims living when they decided to come to America?
2. What religious group hoped to establish a Christian colony?
3. What colony was founded as a safe place for Catholics? Who established it?
4. What religious group believed any form of violence was wrong?
5. Which amendment to the United States Constitution addresses the issue of freedom of religion?