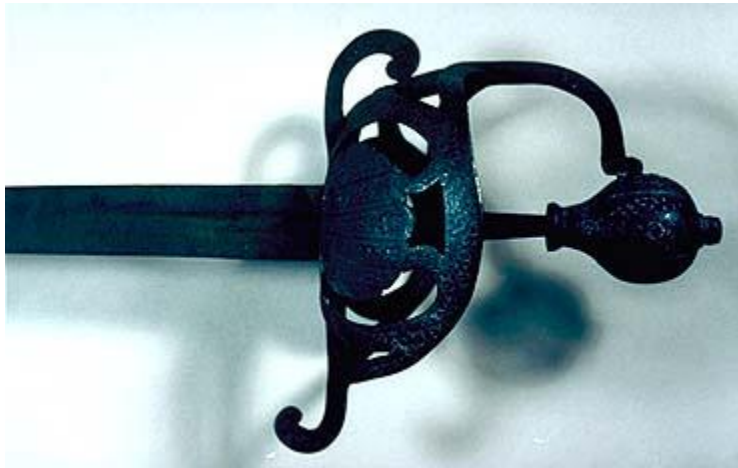


Arms & Armor of the Pilgrims

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An exhibit sponsored by WearGuard
April - October 2001

Explore the English and European basis of New England's early militias. Begin with the two basic military divisions: infantry (including both pikemen and musketeers) and cavalry, and continue with the trained bands and military leaders of the New World.



Sword, ownership attributed to John Thompson
Steel, iron and silver (grip missing)
Made in England, 1630-1650

John Thompson (1616-1696) was born in Wales or in England and had settled in Plymouth by the early 1640s. He served as Town Selectman, juror and constable. He later moved to Middleboro. He also served the Colony in a military capacity. In 1673, Thompson was named sergeant and sent on an expedition to New York to stop the Dutch from harassing Plymouth ships. He was promoted to the rank of lieutenant in King Philip's War. The probate inventory of his possessions at the time of his death lists "arms and ammunition" worth £13, 7 shillings.

Infantry: the Musketeer



Tin-glazed earthenware tile of musketeer. Made in The Netherlands, 1625-1675.

The infantry was composed of pikemen and musketeers. In battle formation, ranks of musketeers fired upon the enemy. Armored pikemen protected the musketeers.

A musket is a gun with a long, heavy, smooth-bore barrel (as opposed to a rifle, which has spiral grooves).



Fork from musket rest.
England, 1600-1650.
Excavated from Alden Site, Duxbury, Mass

Early muskets were large and too heavy to support without assistance. Soldiers used crutch-like musket rests to support the gun's weight. A "u" shaped musket fork made of iron was mounted onto a tall wooden pole, which was set into the ground.

Musket balls, which could weigh up to an ounce, could pierce most armor. Musketeers did not themselves wear armor. Each carried a musket rest, powder flask and bandoleer and other supplies, as well as a sword.

Simple powder containers could be made from animal horns. The ends were sealed with wooden plugs. This powder horn, made in New England in 1709, is inscribed with "H I", the unknown owner's initials.



Long guns most often had one of two different firing mechanisms - matchlock or firelock. The matchlock relied on a smoldering matchcord to ignite the powder, while a firelock used flint and steel. Matchlocks were less dependable than firelocks. They could not be fired in the rain, for instance, because moisture doused the match.

The Guns or pieces allowed for service are these: viz. muskets, firelocks and matchlocks, so they have 4 fathoms of match at all times for every matchlock.
Plymouth Colony Laws, 1640

Infantry: the Pikeman

Pikemen were the backbone of European armies in the 15th through 17th centuries. Armed with long spears called pikes, reaching up to 20 feet in length, pikemen stood in ranks to protect musketeers from enemy cavalry. In the 16th century, pikemen made up one-half to two-thirds of the infantry. As firearm technology improved, musketeers began to outnumber pikemen.



Iron pike head 1600-1650, probably made in England
Excavated from the Alden Site, Duxbury, Mass.
A long ash wood staff would fit into the socket at the base of the pike head.

Pikemen, who had to maneuver the long wooden pike staff, were often chosen for their robust build. Each wore a cuirass (breast and backplate) with tassets to protect his thighs, and a helmet (known as a pikeman's pot) on his head. Leather gauntlets protected his hands from the staff.



Iron Tasset
1600-1650, made in Europe.
Courtesy of the Pilgrim John Howland Society

Very little armor associated with the Pilgrims has survived. This tasset from a suit of pikeman's armor was excavated from the Kingston, Massachusetts, homesite of *Mayflower* passenger John Howland. Tassets protected the pikeman's thighs. Documentary references suggest that many of the Pilgrims wore protective padded jackets, as supplies of iron armor were often lacking.

At muster, held several times a year in England and four to six times a year in Plymouth, men aged 16 to 60 drilled with pikes. Pikes and other staff weapons were not very practical in America, as pikemen needed space to march in their square formation. Large masses or "squares" of pikemen worked well in Europe, but not in the heavily forested colonies of America. Pikes were used until October 1675 in Massachusetts, at which time they were replaced by firearms.

By the end of the 17th century, musketeers carried bayonets to defend themselves against cavalry, making pikemen obsolete.

The Cavalry

The English had a long tradition of mounted soldiers, going back to the knights of the Middle Ages. Being a mounted soldier was costly. Horses were expensive to keep and there was considerable equipment to maintain.

The cavalry was a shock weapon, used to break pike squares and pierce weak areas. To protect themselves from pikes, swords and bullets, the cavalryman wore the most complete armor of 17th-century soldiers. Heavy cavalrymen were covered with armor from head to knees. Medium and light cavalry wore half armor with an open helmet to guard the head and neck. Often a heavy leather buffcoat protected arms and thighs from sword cuts.



Helmets like this, with neck and face protection, were used by many 17th-century cavalrymen. Officially called a *Zischagge* helmet, it is more popularly known as a "lobstertail pot" because the neck protection looks like a lobster's tails.

This helmet was made in either The Netherlands or Germany, between 1625 and 1650.

Cavalrymen were armed with guns and long swords. A matchlock musket was too heavy and impractical to fire from horseback, so the cavalryman carried a carbine, a petronel (heavy carbine) or pistols. The most common pistol ignition in New England was the snaphance.



English-lock pistol, made in England, probably 1620s
Descended in the family of John Thompson

This pistol is an unusually early example of an English-lock firing ignition (commonly called "dog lock"). The "dog" was a catch on the left side of the lock plate that held the "cock" in the safe position.

The flint was clasped in the jaw at the top of the cock. When the flint struck the steel frizzen, the resulting sparks ignited the powder and fired the pistol. The butt of the pistol has a round knob to make it easy to grab. A number of pieces are lost from the lock plate, as is the ramrod.

Cavalry formations were designed for use in the open against a European enemy and were not very effective in heavily-forested colonial America. In New England, cavalry served most as the mounted component of the "trained band," or militia.

The Trained Band

In England, citizens were trained to serve as a reserve army in case of invasion. Each family was expected to provide certain weapons, dependent on their status. Men between the ages of 16 and 60 gathered at a muster about four times each year, where military leaders checked their equipment to see if it "passed muster." Military training exercises followed the inspection.

The New England colonists followed the same tradition. Without an English military presence, the colonists needed to be prepared to defend themselves from threats from the French, the Dutch or Natives. The Plymouth colonists elected a military leader to train them at musters. After 1636, as the colony grew, a captain was appointed for each town. Captain Myles Standish was elected as the colony's military leader until 1636 and, after that, appointed military captain for the town of Plymouth. The military leaders trained the bands of men to use pikes and muskets.

By the 1640s, musters were held at least six times per year. Men brought their weapons to the muster. They were fined if their equipment was defective. Each town provided pikes, as well as flags (colors) and a drum for training.



**Tin-glazed earthenware tile of soldier with halberd.
Made in The Netherlands, 1625-1675.**

While they were leading the men in training, sergeants carried halberds as a sign of their rank. Halberds were originally used for cutting and stabbing. By the 1600s, they were mainly ceremonial.



This thin-bladed decoratively-pierced halberd would not have been very useful as a weapon. Documents show that in Plymouth halberds were used largely as a sign of rank. This iron halberd head, with a restored wooden staff, was made in either England or New England between 1600 and 1650. It was found in the cellar of the c1653 John Alden House in Duxbury, Massachusetts. Alden served several terms as an assistant governor.

Myles Standish

Myles Standish was the Pilgrims' military leader. Standish was born on the Isle of Man in 1584.

Standish joined the army around 1601. Many English and Scottish soldiers fought in the Dutch Wars between The Netherlands and Spain. Beginning in 1585, Queen Elizabeth (as well as her successor King James) sent troops to help the Protestant Netherlands become independent of Catholic Spain. Many English military leaders gained experience in the Dutch Wars. Some scholars believe that a *Myls Stansen*, listed in Leiden hospital records as having been wounded in 1601, was Standish. Standish served in and around Leiden until 1616, under the command of Captain Adolf Meetkerken and Horatio De Vere. It is assumed that Standish was a noncommissioned officer; at least, no records of any commission have yet been found. He stayed in Leiden even after a truce between The Netherlands and Spain was signed in 1609. There Standish met the Pilgrims.



When the Pilgrims decided to emigrate to America, they needed a military leader to train the colonists in self defense. Captain John Smith (of Virginia and Pocahontas fame) was considered. The Pilgrims chose Standish over Smith although they did use some of Smith's maps and writings. Standish is referred to as "Captain" from the beginning.

This rapier is said to have belonged to Myles Standish. A rapier is a sword with a stiff, sharply pointed blade used for thrusting, rather than cutting. The blade of this rapier was made between 1630 and 1650 in Solingen, a German city known for its production of edged weapons. Standish probably acquired the sword after arriving in Plymouth. It was probably worn with his finest military dress at musters and official events.

Standish and his wife Rose embarked with the Pilgrims aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620. Rose died the first winter. Bradford noted Standish's dedication in tending the sick that harsh first winter, when half the passengers died. Standish remarried soon after (notwithstanding his legendary affection for Priscilla Mullins, later Priscilla Alden). Standish continued to serve Plymouth for many years, not only as military captain but also as treasurer and assistant governor.