
SICILLUM CUM ET SOCIET MATTACHUSET BAY IN NOVA ANGLIA

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The English colonies in New England established after 1620 were founded with higher goals than those in Virginia. While migrants to New England expected economic gains, religious motives directed the rhetoric and much of the reality of these colonies. Not all Englishmen who moved to New England during the seventeenth century were Puritans, but Puritans dominated New England politics, religion, and culture. Even after 1700, the region's Puritan heritage shaped many aspects of its history.

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The term Puritan began as an insult, and its recipients usually referred to each other as "the godly" if they used a specific term at all. The Puritans believed that the Church of England did not distance itself sufficiently from Catholicism after Henry VIII broke with Rome in the 1530s. They largely agreed with European Calvinists—followers of theologian Jean Calvin—on questions of religious doctrine. Calvinists (and Puritans) believed that mankind was redeemed by God's grace alone, and that the fate of an individual's immortal soul was predestined. The happy minority that God had already chosen to save was known among the English Puritans as the Elect. Calvinists also argued that church decoration, reliance on ornate ceremony, and corrupt priesthood obscured God's message. They believed that reading the Bible was the best way to understand God.

The Puritans were stereotyped by their enemies as dubious killjoys, and the exaggeration has endured. It is certainly true that the Puritans' disdain for excess and opposition to many popular holidays in Europe (including Christmas, which, as the Puritans never tired of reminding everyone, the Bible never told anyone to celebrate) lent itself to caricature. But the Puritans understood themselves as advocating a reasonable middle way in a corrupt world. It would never occur to a Puritan, for example, to abstain from alcohol or sex.

Figure2.6.1 2.6.1: Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The History Project (UC Davis).

During the first century after the English Reformation (c. 1530–1630), the Puritans sought to "purify" the Church of England of all practices that smelled of Catholicism, advocating a simpler worship service, the abolition of ornate churches, and other reforms. They had some success in pushing the Church of England in a more Calvinist direction, but with the coronation of King Charles I (r. 1625–1649), the Puritans gained an implacable enemy who called the English Puritans excessive and dangerous. In the face of increasing persecution, the Puritans initiated the Great Migration, during which some twenty thousand people traveled to New England between 1630 and 1640. The Puritans (unlike the small band of separatist "pilgrims" who founded the Plymouth colony in 1620) remained committed to the reform of the Church of England but temporarily moved to North America to fulfill this task. Leaders like John Winthrop insisted that they were not separating from, or abandoning, England but were forming a godly community in America that would be a "City on a Hill" and an example for the Reformers at home. 31 The Puritans did not seek to create a refuge of religious tolerance, a notion that they—along with almost all European Christians—considered ridiculous at best and dangerous at worst.

While the Puritans failed to build a pious utopia in New England, a combination of Puritan traits with various external factors created colonies tremendously different from any other English-settled region. Unlike those heading to Virginia, settlers from New England (Plymouth [1620], Massachusetts Bay [1630], Connecticut [1636], and Rhode Island [1636]) generally arrived in family groups. Most New England immigrants were small landowners in England, a contemporary Englishman of the kind called the "middle guy." When they arrived in New England they tended to replicate their home environments, founding towns composed of independent landowners. New England's climate and soil made large-scale plantation farming impractical, so the system of large landowners using masses of slaves or indentured servants to grow labor-intensive crops never took hold.

There is no evidence that the New England Puritans would have opposed such a system if it were possible; other Puritans made their fortunes on the sugar islands of the Caribbean, and New England traders benefited as suppliers of provisions and slaves to those colonies. By accident of geography as much as by design, New England society was far less stratified than any of Britain's other seventeenth-century colonies.

While the New England colonies could boast wealthy landowning elites, the wealth disparity in the region remained narrow compared to the Chesapeake, Carolina, or the Caribbean. Instead, seventeenth-century New England was characterized by modest prosperity widely shared based on a mixed economy dependent on small farms, shops, fishing, lumber, shipbuilding, and trade with the Atlantic World.

A combination of environmental factors and the Puritan social ethos produced a region of remarkable health and stability during the seventeenth century. New England immigrants avoided most of the deadly tropical disease outbreaks that turned the Chesapeake colonies into cemeteries. The disease, in fact, only helped English settlement and relations with Native Americans. Unlike other English settlers who had to deal with powerful Native American neighbors, the Puritans faced the stunned survivors of a biological catastrophe. A deadly smallpox pandemic during the 1610s wiped out as many as 90 percent of the region's Native American population. Many survivors welcomed the English as possible allies against rival tribes who had escaped catastrophe. The relatively healthy environment coupled with political stability and the dominance of family groups among early immigrants allowed New England's population to grow to 91,000 people in 1700 from just 21,000 immigrants. In contrast, 120,85 Englishmen went to the Chesapeake, and only 1700, <> white settlers remained in <>. 32

The Puritans of New England set out to build their utopia by creating communities of the godly. Groups of men, often from the same region of England, applied to the General Court of the colony for land grants. 33 They usually divided some of the land for immediate use, keeping much of the rest as "ordinary" or undivided land for future generations. The inhabitants of the city collectively decided the size of each settler's house lot based on their current wealth and status. In addition to property oversight, the city restricted membership and newcomers needed to apply for admission. Those who obtained admission could participate in municipal governments which, while not democratic by modern standards, nevertheless had broad popular participation. All men who owned property could vote at city meetings and choose from among themselves the select, assessors, agents, and other officials to conduct the day-to-day affairs of government. After its founding, the peoples wrote covenants, reflecting the Puritan belief in God's covenant with His people. The peoples sought to arbitrate controversies and contain strife, as did the Church. Wayward or divergent individuals were persuaded, corrected, or coerced. Popular conceptions of the Puritans as hardened authoritarians are exaggerated, but if persuasion and arbitration failed, people who did not conform to communal norms were punished or removed. Massachusetts banished Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and other religious dissenters such as the Quakers.

Although by many measures colonization in New England was successful, its Puritan leaders failed in their own mission to create a utopian community that would inspire their comrades back in England. They tended to focus their disappointment on the younger generation. "But alas!" Increase Mather lamented: "That so many of the younger generation have corrupted their [the founders'] actions so soon!" 34 Jeremiah, a sermon lamenting the fallen state of New England because of its deviation from its early virtuous path, became a staple of late seventeenth-century Puritan literature.

However, jeremiah could not stop the effects of prosperity. The population expanded and grew more diverse. Many, if not most, New English retained strong ties to their Calvinist roots in the eighteenth century, but the Puritans (who became Congregationalists) struggled against a rising tide of religious pluralism. On December 25, 1727, Justice Samuel Sewall noted in his diary that a new Anglican minister "keeps the day in his new Church at Braintree: the people flock there." 35 Previously forbidden holidays such as Christmas were celebrated publicly in church and privately in homes. The divine Puritan Cotton Mather discovered at Christmas 1711 that "a number of young men and women, many of them belonging to my flock, had. a Frolick, a delightful feast, and a Dance, which discovers its Corruption." 36

Despite the laments of the Mathers and other Puritan leaders for their failure, they left a lasting imprint on New England

culture and society that endured long after the region's residents stopped calling themselves "Puritans."

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