

FROM DIGITAL HISTORY: The Puritans

No group has played a more pivotal role in shaping American values than the New England Puritans. The seventeenth-century Puritans contributed to our country's sense of mission, its work ethic, and its moral sensibility. Today, eight million Americans can trace their ancestry to the fifteen to twenty thousand Puritans who migrated to New England between 1629 and 1640.

Few people, however, have been as frequently subjected to caricature and ridicule. The journalist H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism as "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, might be happy." And particularly during the 1920s, the Puritans came to symbolize every cultural characteristic that "modern" Americans despised. The Puritans were often dismissed as drably-clothed religious zealots who were hostile to the arts and were eager to impose their rigid "Puritanical" morality on the world around them.

This stereotypical view is almost wholly incorrect. Contrary to much popular thinking, the Puritans were not sexual prudes. Although they strongly condemned sexual relations outside of marriage--levying fines or even whipping those who fornicated, committed adultery or sodomy, or bore children outside of wedlock--they attached a high value to the marital tie. Nor did Puritans abstain from alcohol; even though they objected to drunkenness, they did not believe alcohol was sinful in itself. They were not opposed to artistic beauty; although they were suspicious of the theater and the visual arts, the Puritans valued poetry. Indeed, John Milton (1603-1674), one of England's greatest poets, was a Puritan. Even the association of the Puritans with drab colors is wrong. They especially liked the colors red and blue.

Although the Puritans wanted to reform the world to conform to God's law, they did not set up a church-run state. Even though they believed that the primary purpose of government was to punish breaches of God's laws, few people were as committed as the Puritans to the separation of church and state. Not only did they reject the idea of establishing a system of church courts, they also forbade ministers from holding public office.

Perhaps most strikingly, the Puritans in Massachusetts held annual elections and extended the right to vote and hold office to all "freemen." Although this term was originally restricted to church members, it meant that a much larger proportion of the adult male population could vote in Massachusetts than in England itself (roughly 55 percent, compared to about 33 percent in England).

John Winthrop (1606-1676) was a well-off landowner who served as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for much of its early history. Unlike the Pilgrims, Winthrop and the other Puritans who traveled to Massachusetts were not separatists. Rather than trying to flee the corruptions of a wicked world, they hoped to establish in New England a pure church that would offer a model for the churches in England.

A central element in Puritan social and theological life was the notion of the covenant. All social relationships--between God and man, ministers and congregations, magistrates and members of their community, and men and their families--were envisioned in terms of a covenant or contract which rested on consent and mutual responsibilities.

For example, seventeenth-century New England churches were formed by a voluntary agreement among the members, who elected their own ministers. Similarly, the governments in Plymouth Colony (before it merged with Massachusetts) and in New Haven Colony (before it merged with Connecticut) were based on covenants. In each seventeenth-century New England colony, government itself rested on consent. Governors and legislative assemblies were elected, usually annually, by the freemen of the colony. In contrast, England appointed Virginia's governor, while in Maryland, the governor was appointed by the Calvert family, which owned the colony. Even marriage itself was regarded as a covenant. Connecticut granted nearly a thousand divorces between 1670 and 1799.

In this famous essay written aboard the *Arabella* during his passage to New England in 1630, John Winthrop (1606-1676) proclaims that the Puritan had made a covenant with God to establish a truly Christian community, in which the wealthy were to show charity and avoid exploiting their neighbors while the poor were to work diligently. If they abided by this covenant, God would make them an example with the world--a "city upon a hill." But if they broke the covenant, the entire community would feel God's wrath.

In his stress on the importance of a stable community and reciprocal obligations between rich and poor, Winthrop was implicitly criticizing disruptive social and economic changes that were rapidly transforming English society. As a result of the enclosure of traditional common lands, which were increasingly used to raise sheep, many rural laborers were thrown off the land, producing a vast floating population. As many as half of all village residents left their community each decade. In his call for tightly-knit communities and families, Winthrop was striving to recreate a social ideal that was breaking down in England itself.

City Upon a Hill: Colonial American Literature

By Esther Lombardi, About.com Guide

"Therefore lett us choose life, that wee, and our Seede, may live; by obeyeing his voyce, and cleaveing to him, for hee is our life, and our prosperity."

John Winthrop- "City Upon a Hill," 1630

John Winthrop used the phrase "City upon a Hill" to describe the new settlement, with "the eies of all people" upon them. And with those words, he laid a foundation for a new world. These new settlers certainly represented a new destiny for this land.

Early Colonial writers spoke of transforming the landscape and its people. In his report from the Mayflower, William Bradford found the land, "A hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men."

Coming to this paradise of horrors, the settlers wanted to create for themselves a heaven on earth, a community in which they could worship and live as they sought fit — without interference. The "Bible" was cited as the authority for law and everyday practices. Anyone who disagreed with Biblical doctrine, or presented different ideas, was banned from the Colonies (examples include Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson), or worse.

With these high ideals ever in their minds, much of the writings of this period consisted of letters, journals, narratives, and histories — highly influenced as they were by British writers. Of course, many of the colonists spend a great deal of time in the simple pursuit of survival, so it's no wonder that no great novels or other great literary works emerged from the hands of early Colonial writers. In addition to the time constraints, imaginative writing was banned in the colonies until the Revolutionary War.

With drama and novels looked upon as evil diversions, most of the works of the period are religious in nature. William Bradford wrote a history of Plymouth and John Winthrop wrote a history of New England, while William Byrd wrote about a border dispute between North Carolina and Virginia.

Probably not surprising, sermons, along with philosophical and theological works, remained the most prolific form of writing. Cotton Mather published some 450 books and pamphlets, based on his sermons and religious beliefs; Jonathan Edwards is famous for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Of the poetry that emerged from the Colonial period, Anne Bradstreet is one of the most well-known authors. Edward Taylor also wrote religious poetry, but his work wasn't published until 1937.

Massachusetts Bay — "The City Upon a Hill"

The passengers of the *Arbella* who left England in 1630 with their new charter had a great vision. They were to be an example for the rest of the world in rightful living. Future governor **JOHN WINTHROP** stated their purpose quite clearly: "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

The *Arbella* was one of eleven ships carrying over a thousand Puritans to Massachusetts that year. It was the largest original venture ever attempted in the English New World. The passengers were determined to be a beacon for the rest of Europe, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in the words of the governor.

Puritans believed in **PREDESTINATION**. This doctrine holds that God is all-powerful and all-knowing; therefore, the fate of each individual soul is known to God at birth. Nothing an individual can do or say could change their ultimate fate. Puritans believed that those chosen by God to be saved — the elect — would experience "**CONVERSION**." In this process, God would reveal to the individual His grace, and the person would know he was saved.

Only the elect could serve as Church members. If a person were truly saved, he would only be capable of behavior endorsed by God. These "living saints" would serve as an example to the rest of the world. During the early years, ministers such as **JOHN COTTON** carefully screened individuals claiming to have experienced conversion.

The colony needed more than a fervent church to survive. Many **DISSENTERS** — Christian men and women who were not converted — also lived within the ranks of Massachusetts Bay. Towns such as **MARBLEHEAD** were founded by non-Puritan settlers. The Puritans allowed this for the sake of commerce. Many skills were necessary for a vibrant economy.

An elected legislature was established, echoing the desire for self-government already seen in other English colonies. Although ministers were prohibited from holding political office, many of the most important decisions were made by the clergy. In 1636, **HARVARD COLLEGE** was instituted for the purpose of training Puritan ministers.

By the end of the 1630s, as part of a "**GREAT MIGRATION**" of Puritans out of England, nearly 14,000 more Puritan settlers came to Massachusetts, and the colony began to spread. In 1691, Plymouth colony, still without a charter, was absorbed by their burgeoning neighbor to the West.

The great experiment seemed to be a smashing success for the first few decades. In the end however, worldly concerns led to a decline in religious fervor as the 1600s grew old.