

# Puritan Life and Dissent in Colonial New England

By UShistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.18.17

Word Count **993**

Level **930L**



Mary Dyer, pictured in this illustration, was the first woman executed for her religious beliefs in Massachusetts Bay. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

## Massachusetts Bay - "The City Upon a Hill"

The passengers of the ship *Arbella* and 10 other ships left England in 1630 with their new charter that gave them permission to set up colonies in New England. The Puritans were fed up with the Church of England. They felt they couldn't practice their religion in England. The king of England didn't like the Puritans much either. So, he gave them written permission, in a charter, to set up colonies in New England in the area of Massachusetts. Future governor John Winthrop knew the world would be watching to see if the colony succeeded or failed. His wrote, "We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us."

More than a thousand Puritans sailed to Massachusetts and were determined to be a shining light for the rest of Europe, "A Model of Christian Charity," in the words of the governor.

Puritans believed in predestination which taught that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. So, each person is known to God at birth and nothing a person does or says could change his future.

Not everyone could be a Puritan Church member. Only those chosen by God to be saved would become "the elect". Only "the elect" could serve as Church members. A person must experience "conversion" by seeing and feeling the grace and power of God and know he was saved.

If a person were truly saved, he was a "living saint" and would serve as an example to the rest of the world. During the early years, ministers such as John Cotton carefully screened people who claimed to have had a "conversion."

The colony needed more than "the elect" to survive. Many dissenters, or other Christian men and women who had not felt "conversion," lived in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Towns like Marblehead were founded by non-Puritan settlers who had jobs in commerce and business. These skills were necessary for the colony to survive.

There was also a need for self-government and an elected legislature. Although ministers were not allowed to run in elections for political jobs, many of the most important decisions were made by the ministers. In 1636, Harvard College started to train Puritan ministers.

### **Puritan life**

By the end of the 1630s, nearly 14,000 more Puritan settlers came to Massachusetts from England, so the colony began to spread out across New England. People lived longer and healthier lives than those in England and the southern colonies of Virginia and Maryland. It was often said New England invented grandparents, for it was here that people in great numbers first grew old enough to see their children have children. Puritans wanted their children to be able to read the Bible, so every town with at least 50 families built schools.

Massachusetts Bay was a man's world, so women could not speak at town meetings or vote. Puritan ministers preached about the soul that had two parts. The part that lived forever was male, while the female part did not. They believed women who were pregnant with a male child had pink cheeks, and those having a female child had pale cheeks. Names of women included Patience, Silence, Fear, Comfort and Be Fruitful, which shows what Puritans thought about women.

Everyone went to church. People had to pay fines if they missed services. The minister's sermon or speech was about town problems or worries. Often a man held a long pole to wake people or push children who were laughing. Church was very serious.

### **Puritan dissent**

The Puritans believed they were doing God's work. Those who sinned and did not do God's work were punished. If wives had secret lovers, they could be put in jail. Others were whipped or brought to the public square in the center of town, where people would spit on them. Some were even killed.

People were not free to think for themselves. Some free-thinkers could be forced to leave their homes and never return. Such was the case in Massachusetts Bay when Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson spoke their minds.

Roger Williams preached separation of church and state. He believed no single church should get money from tax dollars. Williams also claimed taking land from the Native Americans without

proper payment was unfair. Massachusetts made this minister leave his home in 1636. He was banished.

Williams bought some land from the Narragansett Indians and founded the colony of Rhode Island. Here there would be complete religious freedom.

Anne Hutchinson was a deeply religious woman. She believed in predestination, which taught that God is all-powerful and all-knowing. God controlled the future, so she felt the powerful control of the ministers was wrong. If God has blessed me or damned me, she asked, how can anyone change that? She said the ministers were teaching people they could do things to get into heaven. She also said people who were "saved" didn't have to follow the law. Ministers felt this free-thinking was dangerous. As many as 80 people would come to her home each week to hear her sermons.

The ministers decided to arrest her. The court, led by John Winthrop, the governor of the colony, found her guilty and banished her from Massachusetts Bay in 1637. So she moved to Rhode Island.

America has long been a land where people have the right to say, "I disagree." Many left England in the first place because they disagreed with the king. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were two brave souls who reminded everyone of their right to disagree.

There is another side of Puritan life that is not well known. They did have some fun, too. People sang and told stories. They drank wine and beer. Children were allowed to play games with their parents' permission. Puritans did not all dress in black as many believe. They tried to follow God's law. People that did what the ministers said, lived in peace.

## Quiz

- 1 What might one learn from the illustration and caption about Mary Dyer?
- (A) There were no punishments.
  - (B) There was religious freedom for all people.
  - (C) People could not choose their religion.
  - (D) People freely shared their beliefs.
- 2 Which paragraph in the section "Massachusetts Bay -- The City Upon a Hill" supports the idea that one reason the Puritans wanted to start a new colony was to be an example for other people?
- 3 Which belief about predestination suggests why Anne Hutchinson disagreed with Puritan leaders?
- (A) God can choose who gets in to heaven from the people of the colonies.
  - (B) God has given the ministers the power to control the New England colonists.
  - (C) God controls the future, and no one can change the results.
  - (D) God is only in control of the people who have asked to be "saved."
- 4 Which sentence suggests that some people living in the Puritan colony lacked any real interest in being a member of the Puritan church?
- (A) The Puritans were fed up with the Church of England.
  - (B) Not everyone could be a Puritan Church member.
  - (C) Towns like Marblehead were founded by non-Puritan settlers who had jobs in commerce and business.
  - (D) Puritans wanted their children to be able to read the Bible, so every town with at least 50 families built schools.
- 5 The Puritans were disliked by the King of England, so he gave them permission to set up colonies in New England. Which of the following is another factor for why the Puritans left England?
- (A) Church services were not open to all Puritan colonists.
  - (B) Any Puritan could change their future if taught by a minister.
  - (C) The Puritans could not practice their own religion.
  - (D) Free-thinking Puritans were encouraged to run for political jobs.
- 6 Which detail BEST supports the article's central idea?
- (A) Puritan ministers preached about the soul that had two parts.
  - (B) The minister's sermon or speech was about town problems or worries.
  - (C) Some free-thinkers could be forced to leave their homes and never return.
  - (D) Puritans did not all dress in black as many believe.

7 Which statement reflects different perspectives in Puritan society?

1. Ministers think the community should follow their teachings in order to go to Heaven.
2. Anne Hutchinson preaches sermons in her home for those who missed Church.
3. Roger Williams believes in separation of church and state.
4. Colonists could become "living saints" if they were saved.

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 2 and 4
- (C) 1 and 2
- (D) 3 and 4

8 Read the two paragraphs from the section "Puritan dissent."

*Roger Williams preached separation of church and state. He believed no single church should get money from tax dollars. Williams also claimed taking land from the Native Americans without proper payment was unfair. Massachusetts made this minister leave his home in 1636. He was banished.*

*Williams bought some land from the Narragansett Indians and founded the colony of Rhode Island. Here there would be complete religious freedom.*

How do the paragraphs reflect a central idea of the article?

- (A) They show that Puritans had to be careful about the ideas they expressed.
- (B) They show that Puritan men discussed important issues in town hall meetings.
- (C) They show that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a wealthy colony.
- (D) They show that Native Americans were treated unfairly by the Massachusetts Bay Colony.