

Puritan New England: Plymouth

A New England for Puritans

The second major area to be colonized by the English in the first half of the 17th century, New England, differed markedly in its founding principles from the commercially oriented [Chesapeake tobacco colonies](#). Settled largely by waves of **Puritan** families in the 1630s, New England had a religious orientation from the start. In England, reform-minded men and women had been calling for greater changes to the English national church since the 1580s. These reformers, who followed the teachings of [John Calvin](#) and other Protestant reformers, were called Puritans because of their insistence on purifying the Church of England of what they believed to be unscriptural, Catholic elements that lingered in its institutions and practices.

Many who provided leadership in early New England were educated ministers who had studied at Cambridge or Oxford but who, because they had questioned the practices of the Church of England, had been deprived of careers by the king and his officials in an effort to silence all dissenting voices.

Other Puritan leaders, such as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, **John Winthrop**, came from the privileged class of English gentry. These well-to-do Puritans and many thousands more left their English homes not to establish a land of religious freedom, but to practice their own religion without persecution. Puritan New England offered them the opportunity to live as they believed the Bible demanded. In their “New” England, they set out to create a model of reformed Protestantism, a new English Israel.

The conflict generated by Puritanism had divided English society because the Puritans demanded reforms that undermined the traditional festive culture. For example, they denounced popular pastimes like bear-baiting—letting dogs attack a chained bear—which were often conducted on Sundays when people had a few leisure hours. In the culture where William Shakespeare had produced his masterpieces, Puritans called for an end to the theater, censoring playhouses as places of decadence.

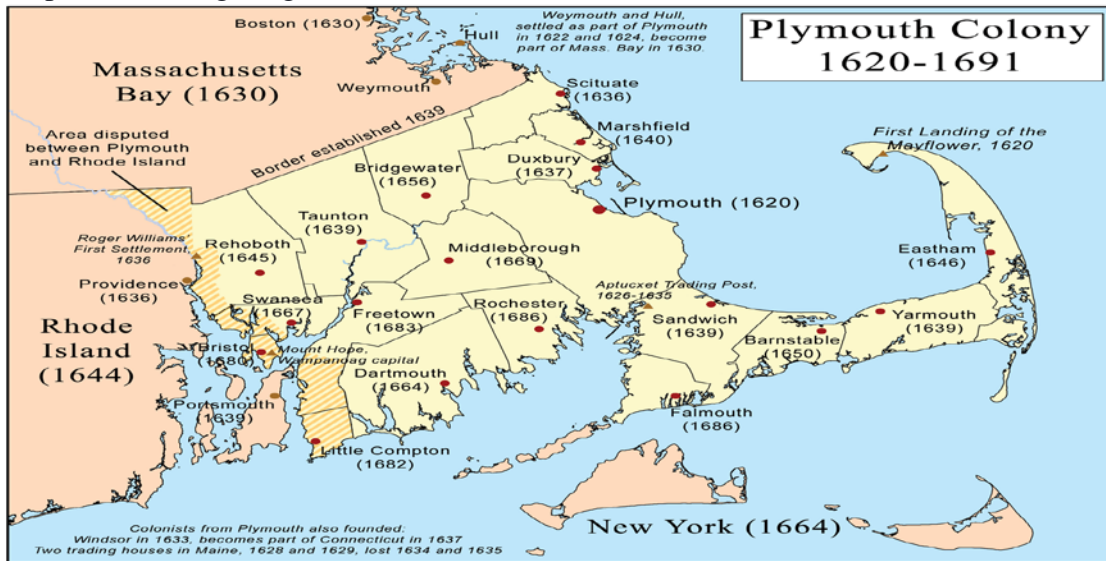
Indeed, the Bible itself became part of the struggle between Puritans and **James I**, who as King of England was head of the Church of England. Soon after ascending the throne, James commissioned a new version of the Bible in an effort to stifle Puritan reliance on the Geneva Bible, which followed the teachings of John Calvin and placed God’s authority above the monarch’s. The King James Version, published in 1611, instead emphasized the majesty of kings.

During the 1620s and 1630s, the conflict escalated to the point where the state church prohibited Puritan ministers from preaching. In the Church’s view, Puritans represented a national security threat because their demands for cultural, social, and religious reforms undermined the king’s authority. Unwilling to conform to the Church of England, many Puritans found refuge in the New World.

Yet those who emigrated to the Americas were not united. Some called for a complete break with the Church of England while others remained committed to reforming the national church.

Plymouth: the first Puritan colony

The first group of Puritans to make their way across the Atlantic was a small contingent known as the **Pilgrims**. Unlike other Puritans, they insisted on a complete separation from the Church of England and had first migrated to the Dutch Republic seeking religious freedom.



Map of the Plymouth Colony, located near present-day Cape Cod.

Map of the Plymouth Colony, located near present-day Cape Cod. Note that the capital of the Massachusetts Bay Colony at Boston was farther north. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Although they found they could worship without hindrance there, they grew concerned that they were losing their Englishness as they saw their children begin to learn the Dutch language and adopt Dutch ways. In addition, the English Pilgrims—and others in Europe—feared another attack on the Dutch Republic by Catholic Spain. Because of this, in 1620 they moved on to found the **Plymouth Colony** in present-day Massachusetts. The governor of Plymouth, William Bradford, was a Separatist—a proponent of complete separation from the English state church. Bradford and the other Pilgrim Separatists represented a major challenge to the prevailing vision of a unified English national church and empire. On board the *Mayflower*, which was bound for Virginia but landed on the tip of Cape Cod, Bradford and 40 other adult men signed the **Mayflower Compact**, which presented a religious—rather than an economic—rationale for colonization. The compact expressed a community ideal of working together.

Massachusetts Bay “A city upon a hill”

A much larger group of English Puritans left England in the 1630s, establishing the **Massachusetts Bay Colony**, the New Haven Colony, the Connecticut Colony, and Rhode Island.

Unlike the exodus of young men to the Chesapeake colonies, these migrants were families with young children and their university-trained ministers. Their aim—according to **John Winthrop**, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay—was to create a model of reformed Protestantism, a “**city upon a hill**,” a new English Israel.

The idea of a “city upon a hill” made clear the religious orientation of the New England settlement, and the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony stated as a goal that the colony’s people “may be soe religiously, peaceable, and civilly governed, as their good Life and orderlie Conversacon, maie wynn and incite the Natives of Country, to the Knowledg and Obedience of the onlie true God and Saulor of Mankinde, and the Christian Fayth.” To illustrate this, the seal of the Massachusetts Bay Company shows a half-naked Native American who entreats more of the English to “come over and help us.”



The 1629 seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. On the seal, a Native American dressed in a leaf loincloth and holding a bow is depicted asking colonists to “Come over and help us.”

The 1629 seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Like their Spanish and French Catholic rivals, English Puritans in America took steps to convert native peoples to their version of Christianity. John Eliot, the leading Puritan missionary in New England, urged Native Americans in Massachusetts to live in “**praying towns**” established by English authorities for converted Native Americans and to adopt the Puritan emphasis on the centrality of the Bible. In keeping with the Protestant emphasis on reading scripture, he translated the Bible into the local Algonquian language and published his work in 1663. Eliot hoped that as a result of his efforts, some of New England’s native inhabitants would become preachers.

Religion and culture in Puritan New England

Puritan New England differed in many ways from both England and the rest of Europe. Protestants emphasized **literacy** so that everyone could read the Bible. This attitude was in stark contrast to that of

Catholics, who refused to tolerate private ownership of Bibles in the vernacular language. The Puritans placed a special emphasis on reading scripture, and their commitment to literacy led to the establishment of the first printing press in English America in 1636. Four years later, in 1640, they published the first book in North America, the Bay Psalm Book.

As [Calvinists](#), Puritans adhered to the doctrine of predestination, whereby a few **elect** would be saved and all others damned. No one could be sure whether they were predestined for salvation, but through introspection, guided by scripture, Puritans hoped to find a glimmer of redemptive grace. Church membership was restricted to those Puritans who were willing to provide a conversion narrative telling how they came to understand their spiritual estate by hearing sermons and studying the Bible.

Like many other Europeans, the Puritans believed in the supernatural. Every event appeared to be a sign of God's mercy or judgment, and people believed that witches allied themselves with the Devil to carry out evil deeds and deliberate harm such as the sickness or death of children, the loss of cattle, and other catastrophes. Hundreds were accused of witchcraft in Puritan New England, including townspeople whose habits or appearance bothered their neighbors or who appeared threatening for any reason. Women, seen as more susceptible to the Devil because of their supposedly weaker constitutions, made up the vast majority of suspects and those who were executed.

The most notorious witchcraft cases occurred in **Salem** Village in 1692. Many of the accusers who prosecuted the suspected witches had been traumatized by the Indian wars on the frontier and by unprecedented political and cultural changes in New England. Relying on their belief in witchcraft to help make sense of their changing world, Puritan authorities executed 19 people and caused the deaths of several others.



1876 engraving depicting the events of the Salem Witch Trials. The engraving shows a young woman writhing on the floor of a court room while shocked townspeople stare. Another woman raises a hand to testify in front of two judges.

Religious intolerance in Massachusetts Bay

Although many people assume Puritans escaped England to establish religious freedom, they proved to be just as intolerant as the English state church. When dissenters, including Puritan minister Roger Williams and midwife Anne Hutchinson, challenged Governor Winthrop in Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s, they both were banished from the colony.

Roger Williams questioned the Puritans' theft of Native American land. Williams also argued for a complete separation from the Church of England, a position other Puritans in Massachusetts rejected, as well as the idea that the state could not punish individuals for their beliefs. Although he did accept that nonbelievers were destined for eternal damnation, Williams did not think the state could compel true orthodoxy.

Puritan authorities found Williams guilty of spreading dangerous ideas, but he went on to found **Rhode Island** as a colony that sheltered dissenting Puritans from their brethren in Massachusetts. In Rhode Island, Williams wrote favorably about native peoples, contrasting their virtues with Puritan New England's intolerance.

Anne Hutchinson also ran afoul of Puritan authorities for her criticism of the evolving religious practices in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In particular, she held that Puritan ministers in New England taught a shallow version of Protestantism emphasizing hierarchy and actions—a “covenant of works” rather than a “covenant of grace.” Literate Puritan women like Hutchinson presented a challenge to the male ministers' authority. Indeed, her major offense was her claim of direct religious revelation (that she spoke directly with God), a type of spiritual experience that negated the role of ministers.

Because of Hutchinson's beliefs and her defiance of authority in the colony, especially that of Governor Winthrop, Puritan authorities tried and convicted her of holding false beliefs. In 1638, she was excommunicated and banished from the colony. She went to Rhode Island and later, in 1642, sought safety among the Dutch in New Netherland. The following year, Algonquians killed Hutchinson and her family. In Massachusetts, Governor Winthrop noted her death as the righteous judgment of God against a heretic.

Puritan relationships with native peoples

Tensions had existed from the beginning between the Puritans and the native peoples who controlled southern New England. Relationships deteriorated as the Puritans continued to expand their settlements aggressively and as European ways increasingly disrupted native life. These strains led to **King Philip's War**—from 1675 to 1676—a massive regional conflict that was nearly successful in pushing the English out of New England.



This is a map of New England indicating the domains of New England’s native inhabitants—including the Pequot, Narragansett, Mohegan, and Wampanoag—in 1670.

When the Puritans began to arrive in the 1620s and 1630s, local Algonquian peoples viewed them as potential allies in the conflicts already simmering between rival native groups. In 1621, the Wampanoag, led by Massasoit, concluded a peace treaty with the Pilgrims at Plymouth. In the 1630s, the Puritans in Massachusetts and Plymouth allied themselves with the Narragansett and Mohegan people against the Pequot, who had recently expanded their claims into southern New England. In May 1637, the Puritans attacked a large group of several hundred Pequot along the Mystic River in Connecticut. To the horror of their Native American allies, the Puritans massacred all but a handful of the men, women, and children they found.

By the mid-17th century, the Puritans had pushed their way farther into the interior of New England, establishing outposts along the Connecticut River Valley. There seemed no end to their expansion. Wampanoag leader **Metacom** or Metacomet, also known as **King Philip** among the English, was determined to stop the encroachment. The Wampanoag—along with the Nipmuck, Pocumtuck, and Narragansett—went to war to drive the English from the land.

In the ensuing conflict, called King Philip’s War, native forces succeeded in destroying half of the frontier Puritan towns; however, in the end, the English—aided by Mohegans and Christian Native Americans—prevailed and sold many captives into slavery in the West Indies. The severed head of King Philip was publicly displayed in [Plymouth](#). The war also forever changed the English perception of native peoples; after King Philip's War, Puritan writers took great pains to vilify Native Americans as bloodthirsty savages. A new type of racial hatred became a defining feature of Native American-English relationships in the Northeast.