Massachusetts Bay Colony

In the early seventeenth century, the Puritan community was divided into two groups: Separatist Puritans and non-Separatist Puritans. Separatist Puritans saw themselves as different from the corrupt English society around them. Disillusioned with the Anglican Church and by the King’s challenge to their beliefs, they fled to the New World in the beginning of the seventeenth century. They established what they felt were ideal Christian communities at Plymouth, Salem, Dover, and Portsmouth.

By contrast, moderate, non-Separatist Puritans remained in England because they believed that they could still reform the church from the inside. In 1603, moderate Puritans in England hoped the new monarch, James I, would be sympathetic to their views, since he had been raised in Calvinist Scotland. Although this did not prove to be the case, the Puritans still tried to work within the religious system while he was king.

In 1629, James’ son, King Charles I, dismissed Parliament and allowed the anti-Puritan Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, to tighten royal control over the church. He removed ministers with Puritan tendencies and threatened church elders who harbored such ministers. With these increasing pressures from the crown, the non-Separatist Puritans no longer felt they could remain in England within the Anglican fold and decided to migrate to the New World. They remained committed to reforming the Church of England and claimed that they did not want to separate from the church, only from its impurities.

A group of non-Separatist Puritans secured a royal charter from King Charles I to form the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1629. The Massachusetts Bay Company was primarily intended to be a business venture, but the colony was also used as a refuge for Puritans. In 1630, nearly 1,000 settlers in 11 ships arrived on the rocky Massachusetts coast, becoming the largest group to immigrate to the New World at one time. In the decade that followed, between 16,000 and 20,000 settlers came to the New England region due to turmoil in Britain, a movement that came to be called “The Great Migration.”

The Massachusetts colonists did not face nearly as many hardships as the Jamestown and Plymouth settlers before them did. The colonists had taken careful steps to prepare for their venture, and they also received a constant flow of new settlers, which helped replenish supplies and helped the colony grow. Many of the immigrants were well educated and their skills helped the Bay Company succeed in various industries. Since the soil in the northeast was not favorable to farming, the Bay Company made the most of the forests and water resources by establishing mills for grain and lumber, developing the fishing industry, using the local timber for shipbuilding, and using the harbors to promote trade. The Bay Colony quickly became the largest and most influential of all of the New England colonies. The British New England colonies included Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. While there were several large communities within the Bay Colony, the city of Boston became the capital for the group.

A typical Puritan New England town was centered around a “commons,” or a central pasture for all to use. The meeting house, which was the main religious and community building, overlooked the commons. Nearby was a tavern, which was the main social institution for the community. Although drunkenness was frowned upon, drinking itself was acceptable because beer was often safer to drink than water. Thus, early New England towns mandated that taverns be as close to the meeting house as possible so that congregants could take a break from long Sunday services to warm up before returning to worship. There were some residences in town for the artisans, such as the blacksmiths, cobblers, and those connected to shipping. The farmer’s residences extended out from the commons, with the wealthy and prosperous having more and better land than poorer families.

For several years, the Massachusetts Bay charter was used as a constitution for the Company. Governmental power in the Bay Company rested with the General Court, or the shareholders, who then elected the governor and his assistants. The right to vote and hold office was limited to male church members, called “freemen.” It was not considered democratic in the modern sense, but the system was considered a practical democracy based on the relationship between the Clergymen and the freemen who voted. At least in local affairs, the General Court developed powers and a structure similar to England’s Parliament. It had two houses: the House of Assistants, which was similar to the House of Lords, and the House of Deputies, which was similar to the House of Commons. Meanwhile, each community held town hall meetings made up of qualified male residents that managed local affairs, usually electing a moderator to officiate over meetings.

Before leaving England, the Massachusetts Bay Colony elected their first governor, John Winthrop, who was a well-off English lawyer. Winthrop believed that their venture was divinely inspired and that he had been called by God to lead the new experiment. He served as governor of the Bay Colony for over a decade. During the trip to the New World, Winthrop gave a sermon called “A Model of Christian Charity,” during which he outlined God’s purpose for the Bay Colony. "We shall be a city set on a hill," Winthrop said of Boston, where the church was the center of life. His goal was to build a holy society that would be a model for humankind. He described a harmonious Christian community whose laws and government would logically proceed from a godly and purposeful arrangement. Winthrop clearly set out the purposes of God and warned that their success or failure would depend on their dedication to the ideal of a selfless community. These common convictions did much to shape the Bay Colony community in its early years of existence.

The Puritan Religion

As the Puritans migrated from England to the New World, they had a clear vision of what their churches should be like. Membership was restricted to those who could present evidence that they had experienced “saving grace.” This most often included a compelling description of some extraordinary experience that indicated intimate contact with God. Only those who could submit this proof were considered “visible saints” and allowed full membership in the church. In the early seventeenth century, however, few were denied membership since leaving England was considered sufficient proof of spiritual purity.

Puritans led their lives based on a group of strong beliefs, one of which was predestination. They felt that all events are foreknown and foreordained by God and that God chose who was saved and who was damned. They enjoyed life but they also had a clear picture of the fate of the damned and believed that hellfire was very real.

As was evident by their migration to the New World, Puritans also wished to purge their churches of every remnant of Roman Catholic ritual and practice, retaining only those customs and practices that the New Testament described for the early Christian church. They felt that this was their chance to build a completely new community with new institutions. Accordingly, the Bay Company congregational churches were self-governing bodies, answerable to no higher authority. The central community meeting house was dominated inside by the pulpit. This meeting house, however, was not a church in the modern sense. The Puritans believed that the whole community, when gathered, was the church. Their worship services were simple and dominated by long sermons in which their clergy expounded passages from the Bible. As in the Old Testament, the Puritans believed that if they honored God’s covenant by being faithful servants, God would in turn preserve and enrich their community.

The religious leaders of the time had a great deal of influence on society as a whole. Religious leaders were actively involved while the colony struggled to develop a form of government compatible with Puritan beliefs. Political and religious authority were often combined and voting was restricted to church members. This reinforced the Puritan belief that God sent them to cleanse the culture of what they regarded as corrupt, sinful practices. They felt that the government should strictly enforce public morality by prohibiting vices like drunkenness, gambling, and swearing. Even family life and the conduct of the home were subject to public scrutiny. There was no concept of individual “rights” to things such as privacy or freedom of thought and expression. The individual was expected to conform to the beliefs and practices of the community as defined by the elders.

Puritans felt that the beliefs and practices of the elect would carry over into their conduct of everyday life. They embraced the “Protestant work ethic,” which meant they were decidedly committed to working hard and to developing the community, in both material and spiritual ways. They enjoyed “worldly” pleasures like eating heartily, drinking, and singing, but they passed laws to make sure these pleasures did not get out of hand.

The Puritan way of life contributed greatly to the forming of American ideals. Some of the basic Puritan tenets that carried forward as society developed were those of self-government, community responsibility, the importance of education, a belief in moral excellence, and a focus on hard work and thrift. Eventually, the Puritan churches grew collectively into the Congregational Church.

Dissention in the Bay Colony

In the Puritan world view, everything worked according to a plan set by God, and an orderly society of people worked and lived out that plan. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was a tight-knit group, founded on the ideal of being a harmonious community of people who agreed to work together and abide by the wishes of the larger community.

Puritan theology gave weight to the idea that if people allowed God’s will to rule and guide the community, peace, harmony and prosperity would follow. If the community did not live up to that ideal, however, God’s wrath would come down and destroy the community. The Puritan elders, therefore, felt obligated to make sure that people conformed to the ideals of the community. To not conform suggested that a person was an “impostor” who was not predestined to be saved and did not really belong in the community.

As with any group, there were differences of opinion, but the leaders of the colony made sure that such differences did not stray too far from established ideals. Harmony and faith, not tolerance, were the guiding principles. When forced to choose between the harmony of the colony and banishing or executing dissenters, Governor Winthrop and the ministers did not hesitate to act against nonconformists to preserve what they felt were the best interests of the larger community.

One dissenter, Roger Williams, was a highly educated man who held a strong belief in an individual’s freedom of worship. He arrived in Massachusetts in 1631, after a short stay in Plymouth. Even by Plymouth’s standards, Williams was a radical Separatist, who came to be known as the purest of Puritans. He was troubled by the idea that the Puritans had not made a clean break from the corrupt Church of England.

Williams was elected minister of a church in Salem in 1635, where he found a forum for advocating his ideas. One of his more extreme ideas was that the English should respect the land rights of the Native Americans, and that it was a sin to take possession of any land without first buying it from the Indians. This notion was in direct conflict with the Bay Colony’s charter and the general opinion of many Englishmen.

Another idea that Williams held was that religious groups should be supported by voluntary tithes, not taxes as demanded by the Bay Colony leaders. When Williams went on to claim that magistrates should have no voice in spiritual matters, he went too far. He wanted a complete separation of church and state, asserting that “forced religion stinks in God’s nostrils.” His views proved to be too extreme for the radical church of Salem, which finally removed him. The Bay Colony General Court found Williams guilty of disseminating dangerous opinions and banished him from the colony.

Fleeing the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, Williams headed southwest where he settled at Narragansett Bay and established a Baptist church. He acquired land from the Narragansett Indian Chiefs and named his settlement Providence, in thanks to God.

In 1644, Williams secured a Charter from Parliament to oversee a colony made up of Providence and the other communities of Rhode Island. Williams was ready to practice what he preached, establishing a government based on the consent of the people, tolerating all religions, and rigidly separating church and state.

His endorsement of religious tolerance made Rhode Island most liberal settlement of its time. This colony served as a refuge where all could come to worship as their conscience dictated without interference from the state. Rhode Island provided a tolerant home for Quakers and was also home to the first Jewish community. The Puritan clergy in Massachusetts viewed Rhode Island as the “sink” of New England where the “Lord’s debris” rotted.

Williams was not the only one whose views challenged the authority of the Bay Colony elders. Anne Hutchinson was one of the more famous dissenters from Massachusetts. She was an articulate, strong-willed woman whose views developed out of the Puritan tradition but soon clashed with that same tradition and the authorities who preserved Puritanism.

Hutchinson challenged the Puritan views on salvation. She believed that all one needed to be admitted into Heaven was faith and God’s saving grace and that leading a holy life was not a guarantee of salvation. This simplified view of salvation raised questions about the status of who was “elect,” which raised awkward questions about the role of the community and its leaders. The Bay Colony’s leaders accused Hutchinson of “antinomianism,” or the idea that if you were saved you did not need to obey the laws of God or man. To most Christian groups, Puritan and non-Puritan alike, this idea was a rejection of the very institutions that God put in place and implied the equally uncomfortable idea that people could question civil and religious authority.

Hutchinson began hosting meetings in her home to review the weekly sermons and discuss the Scriptures. These discussions rapidly turned into forums for Hutchinson to assert her own interpretations of religious matters, specifically the idea that there was no direct relationship between moral conduct and salvation. She firmly asserted that good behavior was not a sign of being saved or one of the “elect.” Her meetings generated a good deal of interest and a larger number of colonists came to hear her speak each week.

Hutchinson’s increasing leadership began to worry Governor John Winthrop. He felt she was a threat to the authority of the Puritan leaders. Additionally, a woman leading a religious discussion struck the Puritan leadership as a rejection of what they viewed as the natural order of things. They believed that women should be content to be submissive to their husbands and the community. Hutchinson’s subversive gatherings led Winthrop and the Puritan leaders to take action against her. She was arrested and brought to trial in 1638 for challenging the clergy and asserting her view of the "Covenant of Grace," or the belief that moral conduct and piety should not be the primary qualifications for "visible sanctification."

The General Court quoted the Bible to make their case against Hutchinson, and she responded that she had come by her beliefs through direct revelations from God. The Puritan ministers felt this was blasphemy and banished her from the Bay Colony. Hutchinson, her children, and a few followers left Massachusetts for Roger Williams’ more tolerant Rhode Island and settled south of Providence. After her husband’s death in 1643, she moved to New York where she and all but one of her children were killed by Indians. Governor Winthrop and several other leaders in the Massachusetts Bay community saw this as God’s final judgement of a sinful and unsaved person. They felt the colony had escaped being contaminated by such an evil influence.

An expanding population and increasing levels of Puritan intolerance in Massachusetts led to the founding of several new colonies throughout New England. A group led by Reverend Thomas Hooker founded Hartford, along the Connecticut River, in 1635. Hooker helped to draft the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, a type of constitution created for the settlement in 1639. The Fundamental Orders were unique because they did not reference the King or any other government or power outside of Connecticut. They also established democratic control by all citizens and did not limit voting rights to members of the Puritan church. Connecticut was granted a royal charter in 1662.

North of the Massachusetts Bay Colony lay communities that emerged from the fishing and trading activities along the coast and eventually became Maine, New Hampshire, and Nova Scotia. The relationship between these areas and Massachusetts changed periodically during the seventeenth century. By the middle of the century Maine and New Hampshire had been absorbed into the Bay Colony. Then in 1679, the King separated New Hampshire from Massachusetts, making New Hampshire a royal colony.

Initially, the coastal Indians helped the English develop their economy in the new colonies, but as the settlers continued to spread inland it inevitably led to conflict with the natives. In 1637, the Pequot War erupted when a Massachusetts colonist accused a Pequot Indian of murdering a settler, and conflict erupted between the two groups. The English set fire to a Pequot village and as the Indians fled their huts the Puritans shot and killed them. During the war, hundreds of Pequots were indiscriminately killed, virtually eliminating the tribe.

The remaining Indians forged an alliance in hopes of resisting English encroachment on their land. Metacom, a Wampanoag Indian called King Philip by the English, led the coalition. In 1675 they attacked several English villages throughout New England, and within a year they were threatening Boston. In total, King Philip’s group attacked 52 Puritan towns and destroyed 12 of them completely. After about a year of fighting the Indians’ resistance wore down. Philip’s wife and son were sold into slavery and Philip himself was captured and beheaded. It is estimated that nearly 20,000 people were killed in this bloody war.

Those Indians who remained were drastically reduced in numbers. Many either fled to the west or were forced to settle in villages supervised by the English so they no longer posed a threat to the colonists. However, King Philip’s War did slow the westward movement of English settlers for several decades.

For a brief time in the late 1600s, the English government developed the “Dominion of New England,” which sought to bolster colonial defense in the event of war and bring the colonies under tighter royal control. King James II was becoming apprehensive about the New England colonies' increasingly independent ways, so the Dominion of New England was also designed to promote closer relations between England and its colonies. The Dominion of New England sought to stop American trade with anyone not ruled by England through Navigation Laws, therefore bringing England’s overseas possessions closer to the motherland. King James II felt that out of all of the colonies, Massachusetts was in particular need of supervision because of its expanding power in the New World.

Sir Edmund Andros, the president of the new Dominion, arrived in Boston with orders to stop the northern colonies from behaving like sovereign powers. He proceeded to abolish popular assemblies, institute new taxes, suppress smuggling, and enforce religious toleration. Then, in the late 1680s England experienced their “Glorious Revolution” and enthroned a new King, William III, which led to the collapse of the Dominion. When news of these events reached Boston, a mob rose up against Andros and shipped him back to England. Although Massachusetts was rid of Andros, they did not gain as much individuality from this change as they hoped. In 1691, the King made Massachusetts a royal colony and instituted a royal governor.

Many British officials' attitudes toward the American colonies were temporarily changed when the Dominion of New England failed and the Navigation Laws were no longer enforceable. Some officials believed England would gain more from encouraging mercantilism with the colonies than from meddling in their governmental affairs. This period of disregard in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries fostered the growth of self-government in America.

The New England colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island were founded as a part utopian experiment and part commercial venture. The Puritans felt it was their opportunity to start over, to build a new society according to Calvinist ideals, and to live freely from dissention and worldly influence. Over time, the prosperous small towns, farms, and seaports brought wealth to the region. The tradition of the village meeting enabled commoners to have an unusual amount of participation in local affairs, in spite of the firm control of Puritan elders.

As the colonies developed, a number of flaws in the plan were exposed. Although the colonies were set up by people looking for religious freedom they ended up punishing those who did not conform to their beliefs. Refugees from New England ended up establishing colonies in the middle Atlantic whose reputation for relative tolerance stood in sharp contrast to New England's theocracy. The passion of the founders of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay was hard to maintain in younger generations. By the 1700s, younger colonists maintained many of the structures of the seventeenth century society but were disillusioned with the rigidity of the old Puritan orthodoxy and with England's attempt to control a growing assortment of colonies.