

Puritans

The Puritans were Protestant reformers who originated in England. Later they spread to the American colonies of New England. Their goal was to "purify" religion and politics of corruption. They were first called Puritans by their enemies. But eventually they adopted the name for themselves as a badge of honor.

The Puritans in England

The Puritan movement began as a part of the Protestant Reformation in England. In the early 1500's, King Henry VIII had broken ties with the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church. His daughter, Queen Elizabeth I, continued to move the country toward Protestantism. However, some reformers felt that Elizabeth's measures were not extreme enough to rid the country of Catholic influences. These reformers came to be known as the Puritans.

The Puritans emphasized the importance of an individual's personal relationship to God and to the Bible. They wanted to eliminate all frivolity and decoration from the church. This included organ music, stained-glass windows, incense, and fancy religious robes. They forbade anything that drew attention away from one's inner spirituality.

The Puritans also wished to improve the quality of the ministry. They encouraged ministers to write their own original and inspiring sermons, rather than simply quoting from *The Book of Common Prayer*.

The Puritans were highly critical of England's established church. As a result, they were severely persecuted by England's king Charles I and his archbishop, William Laud. Numerous Puritans went into hiding in England. Others fled into exile throughout Europe. Others escaped to the New World. Eventually, the Puritans who remained in England engaged in a civil war. They were led by Oliver Cromwell. The Puritans executed King Charles I, and Cromwell briefly took control of England (1649–60).

Migration to the New World

In 1630, John Winthrop (1588–1649) led the first group of English Puritans to Massachusetts Bay in New England. They sailed on a ship called the *Arbella*. They were among the first immigrants to come to America in search of a better life. But they were not the "poor, huddled masses" known to later generations. Most were well-educated ministers, lawyers, merchants, and farmers. Many enjoyed connections to religious and political leaders back in England. The Puritans thought of New England as a place to experiment with new structures of church and state governments. They hoped to serve as models for reform in England and other parts of the world.

Winthrop was a founder and four-term governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He believed in **theocracy**. This form of government combines the laws of church and state. It emphasizes the greater good of the community over personal gain. Winthrop envisioned "a city upon a hill" that could serve as "a model of Christian charity." Other early Puritan leaders embraced Winthrop's beliefs. Among them were the ministers John Cotton, John Harvard (founder in 1638 of Harvard College), Richard Mather, Richard's son Increase Mather, and Increase's son Cotton Mather. They and their followers established churches in towns throughout New England. Sites included Boston and Newtown (present-day Cambridge), in Massachusetts, and Hartford and New Haven, in Connecticut.

Religious Beliefs

The Puritans of the 1500's borrowed many of their religious doctrines from the writings of the Protestant reformer John Calvin. Calvin also influenced the Huguenots, a group of French Protestants whose beliefs were similar to those of the Puritans. Calvin believed in predestination. By this he meant that God had long since decided who would and who would not go to heaven. Good Puritans had to have faith that they would achieve salvation. And they had to examine their daily lives for signs of God's disfavor. When the poet Anne Bradstreet's house burned down, she took it as a message from God to be stronger in her faith.

To help them develop their faith, the Puritans relied on three books. *The New England Primer* taught them the alphabet as well as moral lessons. *The Bay Psalm Book* offered English translations of the Psalms to be sung at church services. And last but not least was the Bible. To help them understand and decode the Bible, the Puritans listened to sermons at least twice each week. Ministers spent hundreds of hours explaining how scripture should be used both as a guide to daily living and as a way to predict future events.

The Puritans believed that the simple way was the quicker and better way to God. Ministers wrote their sermons in what is called the **plain style**. They wrote and spoke without using complicated words, distracting references to unknown books, or quotations in foreign languages. They also favored plain, black garments over the fancy, colorful robes of the Catholic Church. They held services in small white chapels instead of in elaborately decorated churches.

Controversy and Dissent

The Puritans of New England experienced many conflicts almost from the moment they arrived in the New World. Several notable Puritan dissenters, were ordered out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were exiled because

they would not conform to the strict codes of the Puritan leaders. Some others who failed to follow the rules of religion and society were put on trial as witches. Some were executed. The most infamous examples were the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

It is one of the great curiosities of history that the Puritans—who had fled persecution in England—would themselves establish a rigid and intolerant society in New England. They warred almost continuously with Native Americans.

Puritan Legacies

Strict Puritanism died out in the mid-1700's. But by then many Puritan ways and beliefs had become a permanent part of the American culture. For example, the Puritans' resistance to centralized authority in favor of locally ruled towns and churches foreshadowed American democratic principles. Today's immigrants still share the Puritan dream that life will be better for those who come to America. The Puritan work ethic continues to teach that hard work and discipline will earn both spiritual and material rewards.

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