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What's a Puritan, & Why Didn't They Stay in Massachusetts?

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How do we in the 21st century come to honest understanding of the Puritans, those influential culture shapers from the 1600s? Answering two questions helps us not only get at the heart of Puritan beliefs but also understand why Puritanism in Connecticut differed in at least one important way from its ideological cousin in the Bay Colony.

What Was a Puritan, Anyway?

The word "Puritan" usually conjures up a host of associations; these days, mostly unpleasant ones. Puritans have been cast as mean-spirited (Nathaniel Hawthorne), priggish (H. L. Mencken), sexually repressed (Arthur Miller), pathologically superstitious (Marion Starkey) folk who liked nothing better than to mind other people's business and to hang their neighbors (especially women) for no apparent reason.

To be sure, the few 17th-century artists who painted Puritans helped reinforce these images by depicting their subjects as dark-fashioned, arched-eyed, pursed-lipped people you wouldn't want to meet at a cocktail party or, worse still, in an alley off of Gold Street

But the frosty forbear image of the prudish Puritan competes with other, more appealing images: bold builders of Ronald Reagan's (well, actually John Winthrop's) "City on a Hill;" persecuted refugees who risked their all to find religious freedom; rugged egalitarians whose founding documents (the Mayflower Compact and Connecticut's Fundamental Orders) laid the foundation for American democracy. These images, usually hauled out in civics classes or commemorated with scissors and construction paper at Thanksgiving, are generally no more accurate than the negative stereotypes.

In truth, a Puritan was someone for whom religion was the most important single aspect of life--more important than



In the Ancient Burying Ground in Hartford, gravestone of Richard Wrisley, who emigrated with Thomas Hooker in 1633 and settled in Hartford in 1636. The gravestone was erected by his descendants in 1936. Photo: Hog River Journal

the self, family, friends, wealth, and status. Moreover, Puritans saw the hand of God's providence permeating every aspect of daily living and sought to read divine instruction in ordinary occurrences. Did it rain on the garden? A sign of God's blessing. Were there worms in the cheese? A warning to avoid Satan's snares. The most important thing a Puritan could do was get religion right; this was a lifetime pursuit, engaged in while milking the cow as well as while reading the Bible.

Puritans believed the reforms of the Church of England initiated by Henry VIII in 1533 had not gone nearly far enough. To their minds, the Anglican Church remained encumbered with liturgies and rituals that cast a Catholic shadow over God's Protestant glory. Puritans rejected these practices and pushed hard for further English reformation.

This stance complicated their tenure in England. The monarch, as head of the English church, was naturally prone to view the Puritan push for reform as an expression of disloyalty. James I, upon ascending the throne, said of the Puritans, "I will make them conform [to Church of England rituals] or I will harry them out of the land." Which, gradually, he and his son Charles I did.

Royal and ecclesiastical persecution led to what has been called The Great Migration, which saw some 20,000 Puritans leave England for New England between 1620 and 1640. Most of them landed in Massachusetts.

Did they come seeking religious freedom? For themselves, yes. But for Catholics, Jews, or even Anglicans, not in the least. Now that we've finally perfected Christian practice, most Puritan migrants reasoned, why should we allow others to blaspheme in our presence? That hard-line stance led to problems among the godly in America almost from the beginning.

Few things unite people more than a common opponent. As long as the Puritans stayed in England, their focus was on what was wrong with the Anglican Church. But having risked their lives to come to New England, far from the reach of king or archbishop, the émigrés could now concentrate on perfecting their own religious practices. This led to almost immediate internal conflict over a range of issues. How did one know if he or she was one of Christ's chosen people? How did others know if a professed "saint" really was a saint? Who should be admitted to the congregation, and on what grounds? These were fundamentals about which many New England Puritans disagreed, and, since getting religion right was the most important thing in the world, they disagreed with vigor.

Why Didn't They Stay in Massachusetts?

One person caught in the crossfire of this religious controversy was the Rev. Thomas Hooker, the celebrated English minister who arrived in Boston in 1633 with the equally celebrated minister John Cotton. Almost immediately, both men were called upon to help resolve a number of religious conflicts that had arisen in the new colony. But Hooker and Cotton frequently had opposing views, which led to increased factionalism. One issue over which they strongly clashed was the standards for admission into the church: Hooker argued for more inclusive membership, Cotton for more restrictive. Hooker believed that achieving assurance that one was a Puritan saint came through a long and arduous process of living a Christian life and that people should be admitted as church members as soon as they had achieved

“some hope” of their salvation. Cotton disagreed. He believed membership should be open only to those who could persuade the membership that they had fully received God’s grace.

Over time, these disagreements, combined with other factors such as scarcity of good pasture land near Boston and fear of royal intervention (because of a widely trumpeted incident in which a Puritan zealot had cut the cross of Saint George out of the Bay Colony’s royal flag), helped convince Hooker to remove to Connecticut. The early New England historian William Hubbard wrote that “Two such eminent stars, such as were Mr. Cotton and Mr. Hooker, both of the first magnitude, though of differing influence, could not well continue in one and the same orb.”

On May 1, 1636, Hooker and his assistant, the Rev. Samuel Stone, left Newtown (later Cambridge) Massachusetts , with about 100 members of their congregation and 160 head of cattle, on an overland journey to a place the Indians called Suckiaug. Stone, who had originally ministered in Hertford , England , had led an advance contingent to the area the year before. There, by the banks of the Little (later Hog) River, the company founded Hartford . Hooker’s and Stone’s new church was to follow the congregational model established in Massachusetts (in which the congregation selects its own ministers), but under Hooker’s leadership, the people of Hartford proved more tolerant in terms of church admissions than their coastal peers.

This bent toward tolerance among Connecticut Puritans was later expressed in Connecticut’s more lenient treatment of Quakers (whom Bostonians occasionally executed), Connecticut’s acceptance of the oath of religious tolerance imposed on New England colonies by Charles II in the 1660s, and Connecticut’s cessation of witchcraft executions a full generation before the trials at Salem . These relatively progressive positions were further mirrored in Hooker’s sermon on May 1, 1638, wherein he expressed the view-- remarkable for its time--that the foundation of governmental authority rested in “the free consent of the people.” [1]

This is not to imply, however, that the Puritans of Connecticut were advocates of religious freedom for all. Far from it. Quakers, though allowed to live, were still run out of the colony, and in the early 1660s Hartford hanged more than its fair share of witches. And as Connecticut grew, people still managed to squabble over the details of Puritan practice with almost as much fervor as their cousins to the north. Ultimately, even Hartford’s first church was torn by controversy. But the fact remains that Hartford in 1636 was founded by a minister who thought the Bay’s practice of Puritanism was harsher than it ought to be. And he thought so with enough intensity that he and his congregation pulled up stakes and headed west for the promise of a kinder, gentler, and better, life.

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1. William Hubbard, *A General History of New-England, from the Discovery until 1680*, in *Massachusetts Historical Society 2nd . Ser 5* (1848), 173.



French army campsites in Connecticut have yielded British, French, and Spanish coins. This one is inscribed, in Latin, "Louis XV by the Grace of God King of France and Navarre."

Photo: Hog River Journal



*Detail of a plaque at the main entrance of the Wadsworth Atheneum, 600 Main Street, Hartford, depicting Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth.
Photo: Hog River Journal*

