

Massachusetts

During the religious upheavals of the 16th century, a body of men and women called Puritans sought to reform the Established Church of England from within. Essentially, they demanded that the rituals and structures associated with Roman Catholicism be replaced by simpler Protestant forms of faith and worship. Their reformist ideas, by destroying the unity of the state church, threatened to divide the people and to undermine royal authority.

In 1607 a small group of Separatists -- a radical sect of Puritans who did not believe the Established Church could ever be reformed -- departed for Leyden, Holland, where the Dutch granted them asylum. However, the Calvinist Dutch restricted them mainly to low-paid laboring jobs. Some members of the congregation grew dissatisfied with this discrimination and resolved to emigrate to the New World.

In 1620, a group of Leyden Puritans secured a land patent from the Virginia Company, and a group of 101 men, women and children set out for Virginia on board the *Mayflower*. A storm sent them far north and they landed in New England on Cape Cod. Believing themselves outside the jurisdiction of any organized government, the men drafted a formal agreement to abide by "just and equal laws" drafted by leaders of their own choosing. This was the Mayflower Compact.

In December the *Mayflower* reached Plymouth harbor; the Pilgrims began to build their settlement during the winter. Nearly half the colonists died of exposure and disease, but neighboring Wampanoag Indians provided information that would sustain them: how to grow maize. By the next fall, the Pilgrims had a plentiful crop of corn, and a growing trade based on furs and lumber.

A new wave of immigrants arrived on the shores of Massachusetts Bay in 1630 bearing a grant from King Charles I to establish a colony. Many of them were Puritans whose religious practices were increasingly prohibited in England. Their leader, John Winthrop, openly set out to create a "city upon a hill" in the New World. By this he meant a place where Puritans would live in strict accordance with their religious beliefs.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony was to play a significant role in the development of the entire New England region, in part because Winthrop and his Puritan colleagues were able to bring their charter with them. Thus the authority for the colony's government resided in Massachusetts, not in England.

Under the charter's provisions, power rested with the General Court, which was made up of "freemen" required to be members of the Puritan Church. This guaranteed that the Puritans would be the dominant political as well as religious force in the colony. It was the General Court which elected the governor. For most of the next generation, this would be John Winthrop.

The rigid orthodoxy of the Puritan rule was not to everyone's liking. One of the first to challenge the General Court openly was a young clergyman named Roger Williams, who objected to the colony's seizure of Indian lands and its relations with the Church of England.

Banished from Massachusetts Bay, he purchased land from the Narragansett Indians in what is now Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636. There he set up the first American colony where complete separation of church and state as well as freedom of religion was practiced.

So-called heretics like Williams were not the only ones who left Massachusetts. Orthodox Puritans, seeking better lands and opportunities, soon began leaving Massachusetts Bay Colony. News of the fertility of the Connecticut River Valley, for instance, attracted the interest of farmers having a difficult time with poor land. By the early 1630s, many were ready to brave the danger of Indian attack to obtain level ground and deep, rich soil. These new communities often eliminated church membership as a prerequisite for voting, thereby extending the franchise to ever larger numbers of men.

At the same time, other settlements began cropping up along the New Hampshire and Maine coasts, as more and more immigrants sought the land and liberty the New World seemed to offer.

Source: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Country Studies/Area Handbook Series sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Army between 1986 and 1998.

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