

Women's Roles in Puritan Culture



Time Line overview

- 1630 • It is estimated that only 350 to 400 people are living in Plymouth Colony.
- 1636 • Roger Williams founds Providence Plantation (Rhode Island)
 - It is decreed that colonial Puritan women can not speak in church.
- 1637 • Anne Hutchinson put on trial and exiled from Massachusetts Bay Colony
- 1643 • United Colonies of New England is formed, one of the first notions of a collected governmental body
- 1650 • Population within the colonies of Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, and New Haven total about 1,500 persons.
- 1652 • Providence Plantation abolishes slavery within its colony

February 1692 / May 1693

- Witch Trials in Salem Village, Ipswich, Andover and Salem Town.

Population

Breakdown of the New England Population:

Patricia Scott Deetz and James Deetz report in their essay, “Criminal Justice in Colonial America, 1606-1660,” **between 1620 - 1630** roughly 350 - 400 people lived in Plymouth Colony.

- They were scattered in several small and isolated settlements.

These authors later quote Bradley Chapin who estimates that in the year **1650**, among the colonies of Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, and New Haven all had a total population of about 1,500 persons.

Women's Roles

As can be guessed, men and women had separate roles in Puritan society.

- They have in-place a hierarchal system; women served as secondary subjects to their husbands. Women intellectually were placed beneath male-children.
- Despite the fact everyone is stained with original sin, women carry a heavier burden due to the depiction of Eve's actions in the Garden of Eden from the Old Testament. Her actions were a corruption extended to all women.
- As of 1636 colonial Puritan women officially could not speak in church. They had to be silent throughout the service.
- Furthermore, women could not lead discussion on matters of theology—except in cases of all-female prayer groups.
- On a positive note, women were taught to read and allowed to read scriptures.
- The Puritans believed everyone and anyone should be able to read from the books of the *Bible*. Their views of education were somewhat progressive in this area.

Anne Hutchinson

In 1637, Plymouth Colony Governor John Winthrop placed Anne Hutchinson on trial for preaching doctrine contrary to the Puritan beliefs.

- Her case was a major conflict in the settlement; generally it is agreed she fell victim to the expectations of the Puritan community surrounding the role of women in their society.
- She mainly promoted the right for women to interpret and speak their feelings regarding biblical matters. In particular, Hutchinson challenged the standard interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve. Her proposal runs counter to the notion that women are the cause of original sin; this is the cornerstone of Puritan beliefs.
- In Massachusetts she assumed the role as an *unauthorized* minister of a church discussion group. Originally it included only women, but a few men began attending her talks. This is where she began to become more noticed.
- Her home study group gathered as much as 80 people according to historian Robert Ellsberg.

Anne Hutchinson

- Hutchinson spoke her mind freely within the context of a male hierarchy unaccustomed to outspoken women. The extent to which she was persecuted was perhaps proportional to the threat the rulers saw in her, considering the many people who were willing to listen to and follow her and the threat that she may have posed.
- She was an avid student of the Bible which she freely interpreted in the light of what she termed her “divine inspiration.”
- She actually adhered to the principles of Puritan orthodoxy.
- However, it is the slight changes she proposed which got her in trouble—she held enormously progressive notions about the equality and rights of women, in contradiction of both Puritan and prevailing cultural attitudes.
- Perhaps her situation was more volatile to the Puritan elders: a woman preaching was more a sin than a man like Williams preaching his opposing views.

Salem Witch Trials

Ironically, she was lucky she avoided similar consequences of the infamous Salem Witch Trials which occurred between February 1692 and May 1693:

- over 150 people were arrested and imprisoned
- nineteen of this group were executed on the grounds of felony of witchcraft:
 fourteen women and five men were hanged
- one man refused to enter a plea and was crushed to death
 under heavy stones in an attempt to force him to do so
- at least five more of the accused died in prison

Although labelled as Salem, the trials included individuals from four small villages surrounding the Salem area.

Salem Witch Trials

To take it into another context, to put it into a better perspective, it is important to realize the Puritans believed

- God and His angels interacted with the living world, sometimes in invisible forms, sometimes in disguised human forms.
- Likewise Satan and his devils tried to intervene in the natural world, with illicit means.

God punished those he found sinful whenever He felt inclined:

- loss of crops
- sickness in livestock
- early death in children
- bad weather
- *all were typically examples of the wrath of God.*

Writings of Cotton Mather

A minister from Boston, Cotton Mather, wrote about the incidents in his book:

The Wonders of the Invisible World: Observations as Well Historical as Theological, upon the Nature, the Number, and the Operations of the Devils (1693).

- A firm believer in the supposed powers of witches, in this text Mather goes to elaborate retelling of reports in the New World.
- In another document published previously: “Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions (1689),” Cotton Mather describes strange behavior exhibited by the four children of Boston mason John Goodwin and attributed it to witchcraft practiced upon them by an Irish washerwoman, Mary Glover.