

Puritan New England Life

US History - Unit 2: Colonial America

Learning Targets

- ★ Explain what Puritans wanted to build in New England, and why.
- ★ Describe how work, worship, and family shaped a Puritan week.
- ★ Explain how a town covenant and a meetinghouse held a town together.
- ★ Judge what Winthrop's 1630 covenant promised, and who it left out.
- ★ Tell Puritans and Pilgrims apart, and say where each one lived.

They Wanted to Fix the Church, Not Leave It

Puritans

- Stayed inside the Church of England.
- Wanted to purify its worship of Catholic leftovers.
- Sailed mostly to Massachusetts Bay after 1629.

Pilgrims (Separatists)

- Believed the church could not be fixed.
- Left it outright, an illegal act in 1620.
- Landed at Plymouth, not Massachusetts Bay.

Key Concept: Every Puritan wanted a purer church; only Separatists wanted a different one.

Two Words for Who They Were

Puritan

An English Protestant who wanted to purify the Church of England of leftover Catholic ceremony rather than break away from it

Goodwife

The everyday title of respect for a married woman of ordinary rank, shortened in speech to Goody

Tip: Puritan describes what these colonists wanted to do to the church - it was never a slur among them.

The Fleet of 1630

- John Winthrop led the largest fleet of the Great Migration in 1630.
- The Massachusetts Bay Company held a royal charter granted in 1629.
- Virginia's charter stayed in London; this one crossed with the settlers.
- That let the colony's own governing body meet in Massachusetts itself.
- Roughly a thousand people crossed to Massachusetts Bay that year alone.

Did You Know: Carrying the charter across the ocean let the colonists govern themselves from day one.

Two Words for a Promise

Covenant

A binding promise made before God that tied a congregation, a town, or a whole colony to live by terms they had agreed on

Congregation

The body of church members in one town, who chose their own minister and ran their own church without a bishop

Note: Covenant is the word that ties this whole lesson together - it binds a person, a church, and a colony.

A Town Began With a Signed Promise

Founding a Town

- Settlers signed a town covenant before anything else.
- The colony's General Court then granted them land.
- Everyone who signed agreed to live by its rules.

Laying It Out

- House lots ringed a shared central common.
- Farmland and pasture lay in the fields beyond.
- The meetinghouse stood at the center of town.

Warning: No covenant, no land grant - a town could not exist without both.

Two Words for Running a Town

Meetinghouse

The plain wooden building at the center of a New England town, used both for worship and for town business

Selectmen

The townsmen chosen at each town meeting to handle a New England town's ordinary business for the year

Tip: The full town gathered only a few times a year, so a small elected board handled the rest.

The Building at the Center of Town

No Altar, No Stained Glass

- Plain unpainted walls and clear window glass.
- No steeple on the earliest buildings.
- The pulpit, not an altar, was the focal point.

Seats Assigned by Rank

- Bench seating assigned by a family's standing.
- A family kept the same assigned seat year after year.
- A hierarchy visible to the whole congregation weekly.

Two Jobs, One Room

- The same room hosted Sunday gatherings.
- It also hosted the town meeting on weekdays.
- Most New England towns had no separate town hall.

Key Concept: One plain building did the job of a church and a town hall.

The Oldest One Still Standing



The 1681 room in a federal survey record; flag and lights came later.

Six Days of Work, One of Rest

- Farm and family labor began at first light, six days a week.
- Men worked the fields, tended livestock, and mended tools.
- Women managed the house, the garden, and the dairy.
- Children worked alongside parents as soon as they were able.
- Every one of those tasks stopped for a full day each week, by law and by custom.

Remember: Rest here was not a weekend off. It was a religious duty the town enforced.

Two Words for the Seventh Day

Sabbath

The weekly day of rest and worship, kept in New England from Saturday sundown to Sunday sundown

Tithingman

A town officer assigned a set of households to watch over, and charged with keeping order during worship

Warning: Skipping a service without a reason could mean a fine from the town.

What Sunday Actually Looked Like

In the Meetinghouse

- Two long services, morning and afternoon.
- A break between them for a cold meal.
- An hourglass on the pulpit timed the sermon.

What Made It Hard

- No heat in the room, even in January.
- Portable foot warmers were the usual relief.
- Seating marked exactly where a family stood.

Did You Know: Some sermons ran well over an hour, and the hourglass got turned more than once.

The Household Was the Unit

- One household held parents, several children, and often a bound servant.
- Fathers were the household's legal head and its religious teacher.
- Mothers ran the dairy, the garden, and the household's textile work.
- Servants and apprentices lived and worked inside the family, not apart from it.
- Labor inside a household split sharply by age and by sex.

Tip: A 'family' in this period often meant everyone under one roof, servants included - not just parents and children.

What the Town Records Show

What was counted	The number	Where the number comes from
English settlers who crossed during the Great Migration, 1630-1642	About 20,000	Modern estimate from ship and town records
Children born to a typical New England marriage	About seven to nine	Demographic studies of town and church records
People often living under one roof, family plus servants	About six to eight	Town and probate records
New England's population by 1700, most of them born there	Roughly 90,000	Modern estimate from colonial reconstructions

Warning: These are historians' reconstructions from scattered records, not a census anyone took at the time.

Two Words for Teaching the Young

Catechism

A fixed list of questions and set answers on faith that children were drilled to recite from memory

Dame school

A small class run by a woman in her own kitchen, where the youngest children learned their letters and prayers

Tip: A dame school came first; only later did a child move on to a town's reading school.

Reading Was a Religious Duty

- The 1642 Massachusetts law made reading a legal duty of every household.
- Its goal was Scripture: every soul should be able to read God's word.
- The 1647 law made towns pay for it directly.
- Towns of fifty families had to hire a reading and writing teacher.
- Towns of one hundred families had to open a grammar school.

Did You Know: Historians call the 1647 law the 'Old Deluder Satan Act,' after its opening line about keeping people ignorant of Scripture.

Inside the Covenant, and Outside It

Inside the Covenant

- Only full church members could vote for colony officers.
- Ministers and magistrates enforced one shared standard.
- Land was granted only to accepted proprietors.

Outside It

- Roger Williams was banished for challenging that standard.
- Anne Hutchinson was banished in 1637 for the same reason.
- Towns were laid out on land Native nations already held.

Warning: A covenant that included some people also excluded others, on purpose.

A City Upon a Hill

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.

— John Winthrop, *A Modell of Christian Charity*, 1630

Winthrop wrote this for the 1630 fleet. The colonists made a covenant with God, and the world would watch whether they kept it.

Key Concept: A city on a hill cannot hide its failures any more than its successes.

What This Sermon Can and Cannot Settle

What the Sermon Argues

- The bargain Winthrop said the colonists had struck with God.
- What he warned would follow if it broke that covenant.
- A plan for behavior, written before anyone had lived it.

What It Cannot Prove

- Whether colonists actually behaved this way afterward.
- Whether Winthrop ever spoke these words aloud at all.
- Whether the wording that reached the 1838 printing is exactly his.

Warning: Treat this sermon as a plan for behavior, not a report of it.

Key Takeaways

- ★ Puritans wanted to purify the Church of England, not leave it.
- ★ A signed covenant bound a congregation, a town, and the colony together.
- ★ The meetinghouse held both Sunday worship and the town meeting.
- ★ Work stopped every week at Saturday sundown for the Sabbath.
- ★ The covenant bound some in and left others - dissenters, Native nations - out.