

“The American Puritans”

VOCABULARY:

theocracy – a government that is controlled by religious leaders and based on religious law

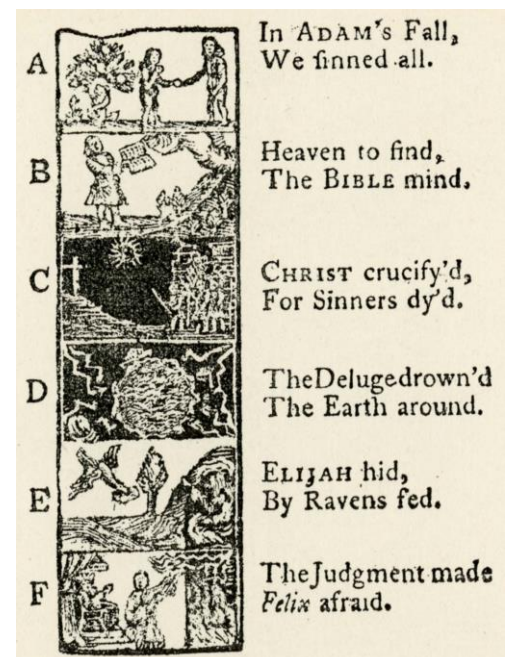
INTRODUCTION

The Puritans were among the first Europeans to establish a colony in North America at Massachusetts Bay in 1630. They came to this harsh New England wilderness over a vast, lonely sea to set up a society that would be dedicated to work for God’s glory and for the prosperity (wealth) of His chosen people – the Puritans themselves! They would establish social customs reflecting their society’s dedication to God. To accomplish this, they would establish one true set of laws, one true church, and one true authority to rule them. The Puritan way of life dominated New England (a region along the northeast coast) culture for more than a *century* and some of their ideals and practices are still found in the United States today.

CALVIN, GOD, AND ORIGINAL SIN

The Puritans believed in the religious ideas of a French theologian (one who studies religion) named John Calvin. Calvin’s basic belief was that God was a stern judge who, knowing all and seeing all, ruled man (whom He had created) with swift and absolute justice. This justice was based on the belief that all humans are sinful because Adam and Eve, the first parents, had violated God’s law and passed their sin on to their children – all of mankind. The Puritans believed that this original sin – the satisfying of desire for sensory pleasure (“doing whatever makes you feel good”) – interfered with man’s chief purpose on earth: to glorify God with an individual’s life work. In his book *The First Frontier*, John C. Miller describes how this belief affected the Puritan’s daily life:

The transgressions (breaking rules) of one individual, it was believed, endangered the success of the entire Puritan experiment. For not only were sins of one generation visited upon the next generation, but the sins of one individual might be the cause of the downfall of the entire community. Provoked by the delinquency (failings) of one reprobate (an immoral person), the Almighty (God) was believed to vent His wrath upon whole cities, nations, and even upon the world itself. Since every disaster that befell New England was traced to some private or community dereliction (failure or neglect), the Puritan scrutinized (closely examined) his own conscience and that of the members of his social group with almost equal anxiety (worry). In Boston there was no such thing as “snooping;” it came under the heading of “doing the Lord’s work.” Every Puritan had been commissioned by God to be his brother’s keeper, and his own salvation (to be delivered from evil) might depend upon how thoroughly he did his job.



PREDESTINATION, WORK, AND CHARACTER

Another belief of Calvin's that strongly influenced the Puritan way of life was that all persons were predestined (one's fate is already set), even before birth, to go to heaven or hell after death. Although an individual could do nothing to change his eventual fate, he could look for signs of God's favor or disfavor and could then determine what his chances for reaching heaven were. Hence, the Puritans believed that an individual – or society – that could endure extreme hardship and still prosper (make money) was obviously among God's chosen ones. Because of their dedication to hard work for the glory of God, the Puritans often prospered. They interpreted their prosperity and material well being as a natural sign of God's favor – they were indeed God's chosen group. As a result, what came to be known as the "Puritan work ethic" became deeply rooted (established) in the developing American society based on the following three basic principles: first, the belief that hard work improves moral character ("work is good for you"); second, that hard work will, eventually, result in prosperity ("hard work will pay off"); and third, the belief that Americans, because of their hard work, moral character, and prosperity were the chosen people of God to be models for the rest of the world.

DEMOCRACY AND *THEOCRACY*

Since the criminal (law) and civil (social) authority of England's king was far away, the Puritans established town meetings to maintain local control over local affairs. However, it is a mistake to assume the Puritans practiced democracy (everyone has a vote) as we know it today. Women were excluded from town meetings and could not vote. Town officials were selected only from men who were members of the church. Once elected, these officials assumed the position of "God's spokesmen" as they interpreted laws in accordance with "God's law" – the Bible. Since God's law could not be disputed, those who interpreted His laws – namely the elected town leaders – were not to be disputed. This form of democracy in early Massachusetts Bay Colony, where the local government was controlled by the leaders of the Puritan Church, is an example of a *theocracy*. Unfortunately, even men who are called upon to "play God" make mistakes. This was a circumstance (situation) the Puritans were unwilling to accept until after they had executed 19 of their own group for the crime of practicing witchcraft following the infamous (famous in a bad way) Salem Witch Trials of 1692.



EDUCATION AND THE BIBLE



The Puritans also began America's first public school systems. Because the Puritans believed that each person must find his or her own salvation (to be saved from sin or evil), it was necessary for every individual in the community be able to read the Bible. Consequently, all villages in the Massachusetts Bay Colony were required as early as 1647, to set up elementary schools for all children. Beyond this level, they established, with the generous donation of a man named John Harvard, a "university" to train the brightest pupils to become ministers. This career was only open to men. This first "public secondary school" in America has now become the oldest and one of the most honored colleges in the United States, Harvard University.