

Pilgrims and Puritans

Not Plymouth but the Boston area knew the deep impress of the 20,000 Puritans who from 1630 to 1640 departed out of Old England for New England. Governor of Massachusetts Bay Company was wealthy John Winthrop, who sailed to Boston in 1630 with 800 colonists and with the Charter itself. Foremost theologian and teacher of the First Church in Boston was the Rev. John Cotton, who wrote a catechism, *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes*, and who first called the churches of New England "congregational."

Most of the ministers were Cambridge scholars, formerly Anglican priests, and "set apart" in America by the laying on of hands. Closely related, church and state formed an oligarchy, though the ministers did not hold office. The General Court, however, limited the franchise to church members, and the ministers decided whom to admit; the churches also regarded the civil authorities as their "nursing fathers." Thus, "town meeting" in church or "meeting house" was of great importance to the colonies. For the churches holding the "New England way," the most important early meeting was the Cambridge Synod of 1648, which drafted the *Platform of Church*

Discipline, defining Congregational polity. In matters of faith, the *Westminster Confession* was agreed upon, "for the substance thereof."

The Puritans provided for the higher education of "posterity" and for the perpetuation of a learned ministry; Harvard College dates from 1636, and Yale from 1701. Dartmouth, Williams, Amherst, and other New England colleges belong in the tradition of Puritanism. Andover Theological Institution was established in 1808 as a "protest," after the appointment of a Unitarian theological professor at Harvard. Other schools had started by 1647, being operated by the towns or by the ministers. Printing was introduced at Cambridge, the first publication, in 1640, being *The Whole Booke of Psalmes*.

In the earliest years, the carrying of the gospel to the Indians was of great importance in New England. Forming an epic in itself is the fifty-eight year ministry of the Rev. John Eliot of Roxbury, whose Bible translation (1661) was the first printed in the colonies.

Though Plymouth colony grew slowly and the Bay settlements rapidly, and though the former was poor and the latter wealthy, there was more tolerance at Plymouth. It was unfortunate that four Quakers were hanged in Massachusetts, yet, considering the times (1661), those in authority were unusually fair-minded as regards the administration of the laws. Similarly, as to the witch

episode at Salem in 1692: Judge Sewall stood up in church to admit the error of his way in sending twenty of these poor creatures to their deaths.

The "Great Awakening" in New England (1734) revealed the churches' greatest theological mind — the Rev. Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, later president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton). Prominent later (1769) and among the first to denounce the slave trade was the Rev. Samuel Hopkins of Newport, Rhode Island, who had learned from Edwards, and whose theology of "disinterested benevolence" and "general atonement" struck at privilege.

The Congregationalists were "patriots," serving with distinction both in the pulpit and in the army during the Revolution; but the country had reached low tide spiritually by the time hostilities were over. Though they formed the largest and most influential group in the United States, the Congregationalists had no central, unifying organization—a disadvantage at a time when thousands were settling west of the mountains. But they organized many missionary societies. Could they meet the competition from other denominations and hold their own in the West?