

Name: _____ Class: _____

Puritan Laws and Character

By Henry William Elson
1904

Henry William Elson (1857-1935) was a historian best known for his comprehensive work on the complete History of the United States of America, from which this excerpt is taken. In this passage, Elson discusses the Puritans: a group of English Reformed Protestants who notably founded Massachusetts Bay Colony and other New England settlements in the 1600s and who were known for their religious and legal severity. As you read, take notes on how the Puritans influenced colonialist America.

- [1] During the seventeenth century the combined New England colonies formed practically, if we except Rhode Island, one great Puritan commonwealth. They were under separate governments; but their aims and hopes, their laws, for the most part, and their past history were the same.

The people as a whole were liberty-loving in the extreme, but the individual was restrained at every step by laws that no free people of today would tolerate for an hour. Paternalism¹ in government was the rule in the other colonies and in Europe, but nowhere was it carried to such an extreme as in New England.



"Hey Pilgrim" by Thomas Hawk is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

Here the civil law laid its hand upon the citizen in his business and social relations; it regulated his religious affairs, it dictated his dress, and even invaded the home circle and directed his family relations. One law forbade the wearing of lace, another of "slashed cloaths other than one slash in each sleeve and another in the back." The length and width of a lady's sleeve was solemnly² decided by law. It was a penal offense³ for a man to wear long hair, or to smoke in the street, or for a youth to court a maid without the consent of her parents. A man was not permitted to kiss his wife in public. Captain Kimble, returning from a three-years' ocean voyage, kissed his wife on his own doorstep and spent two hours in the stocks⁴ for his "lewed and unseemly behavior."

In the matter of education the Puritans stood in the forefront. Many of the clergy were men of classical education, and through their efforts Harvard College was founded but six years after the great exodus⁵ began. Before the middle of the century Massachusetts required every township of fifty families to employ a teacher to educate the young in reading and writing, while every township of one hundred families must maintain a grammar school. The other colonies soon followed with similar requirements.

-
1. a system of governing in which the governing authority restricts the freedoms and responsibilities of those subordinate to them in the subordinates' supposed best interest, as a parent (specifically, a father) might treat a child
 2. **Solemn (adjective)** very serious or formal in manner, behavior, or expression
 3. a crime or offense that can be legally punished
 4. "Stocks" refers to a device used in colonial America in which a person's legs, arms, and/or head would be
 5. **Exodus (noun)** a mass departure of people

[5] But the most striking feature in the life of New England is found in its religion. The State was founded on religion, and religion was its life. The entire political, social, and industrial fabric was built on religion. Puritanism was painfully stern and somber; it was founded on the strictest, unmollified Calvinism;⁶ it breathed the air of legalism rather than of free grace, and received its inspiration from the Old Testament rather than the New.

There was a gleam of truth in the charge of Mrs. Hutchinson⁷ that the Puritans lived under a covenant of works.⁸ This was because they had not yet fully grasped the whole truth of divine revelation. No further proof of the legalistic tendencies of Puritan worship is needed than a glance at their own laws. A man, for example, was fined, imprisoned, or whipped for non-attendance at church services. He was dealt with still more harshly if he spoke against religion or denied the divine origin of any book of the Bible. Laws were made that tended to force the conscience, to curb the freedom of the will, and to suppress the natural exuberance⁹ of youth — laws that could not have been enacted and enforced by a people who comprehended the full meaning of Gospel liberty, or had caught that keynote of religious freedom sounded by the ancient prophet and resounded by St. Paul and Luther, “The just shall live by faith.”

Nevertheless there is no more admirable character in history than the New England Puritan of the seventeenth century. His unswerving devotion to duty, his unlimited courage based on the fear of God, his love of liberty and hatred of tyranny¹⁰ — these are the qualities that have enthroned him in the memory of the American people. We deplore the narrowness and intolerance of the Puritans; but they were less narrow and intolerant than the English and most of the Europeans of that day. They committed errors, but they were willing to confess them when they saw them. They banished Roger Williams¹¹ as a disturber of the peace, not for his opinions; but they bore witness to his spotless character. They executed a few Quakers,¹² but confessed their error by repealing their own law. They fell into the witchcraft delusion, which was prevalent throughout Christendom at the time; but they were first to see the dreadful blunder they had made and they were not too proud to publicly confess it. Judge Sewall¹³ made, before a large congregation, a confession of his error as only a hero could have done; and he begged the people to pray “that God might not visit his sin upon him, his family, or upon the land.” Such was a trait of the Puritan character that leads us to forget his faults and to admire rather than censure¹⁴ him.

-
6. the Protestant religion of John Calvin and his followers, which develops Martin Luther’s doctrine of justification by “faith alone” and emphasizes the doctrine of predestination – that is, God predestines the salvation of some and not others, which cannot be changed by human will or action
 7. Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643) was a Puritan spiritual adviser whose strong religious convictions put her at odds with the Puritan clergy. In 1637 she was involved in a religious-political conflict that led to her banishment from Massachusetts.
 8. “Covenant of works” is the Calvinist idea which refers to the covenant made between God and Adam in the book of Genesis, before humanity’s fall and the establishment of original sin. Before Adam broke it, the covenant supposedly promised blessings for perfect obedience and judgement/punishment for disobedience.
 9. **Exuberance (noun)** the quality of being full of energy, excitement, and life
 10. **Tyranny (noun)** cruel and unfair treatment by a powerful person, group, or government
 11. Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683) was an English Protestant who supported religious freedom and the separation of church and state, but disapproved of the confiscation of land from Native Americans; all of which earned him the ire of the colony officials. In 1635 he was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and helped settled Providence, Rhode Island.
 12. “Quakers” refers to a Christian sect known for both their conservative and liberal ideals, as well as their personal study of religion and lack of hierarchal structures within their church.
 13. Samuel Sewall (1652–1730) was a judge and businessman of Massachusetts Bay, best known for his involvement in the Salem witch trials, for which he later apologized, as Elson points out.
 14. **Censure (verb)** to officially criticize strongly and publicly

New England developed steadily throughout the colonial era. The people were chiefly of the stanch yeomanry, the great middle class, of England. Many of them were men of fortune and standing in their native land. The people of Massachusetts were slow in reaching out from the seaboard; not till about 1725 did they begin to colonize the Berkshire Hills. The Connecticut Valley was more productive than other parts of New England, and the people of Connecticut were more purely agricultural in their pursuits than were those of any other portion, except New Hampshire. The chief industry of Rhode Island was trade, while Massachusetts was divided, agriculture and commerce holding about equal sway. Six hundred vessels plied between Boston and foreign ports, while the number of coasting vessels was still greater.

Manufacturing was carried on, but not on any great scale. Sawmills and gristmills were numerous along the rivers, and they did a large business in preparing timber and grain for transportation. Hats and paper and other commodities were made on a small scale; but the most extensive manufacturing was carried on by the farmers and their families, who made many of the utensils for their own home use, as will be noticed in a subsequent chapter.

- [10] The stern Puritan customs were gradually softened, more rapidly in Massachusetts than in Connecticut, owing to the many Crown officers residing in Boston. The first attempts to introduce the Episcopal form of religion were sternly resisted, but at length it found a footing, though not in Connecticut till well into the eighteenth century. About 1734 a religious revival, started by Jonathan Edwards¹⁵ and carried on by George Whitefield,¹⁶ the evangelist, spread over parts of New England, and to some extent revived the waning Puritan religious fervor.¹⁷

The population at the opening of the Revolution reached nearly 700,000, about 300,000 of which was in Massachusetts, including Maine. Connecticut contained about 200,000 people, New Hampshire some 75,000 and Rhode Island some 50,000.

All colonies had negro slaves, but very few in comparison with the southern colonies. Probably there were not more than 15,000 slaves in all New England, of whom Massachusetts and Connecticut had the majority. Indentured servants were slow in coming to New England, and when they came, their rights were guarded by salutary laws.

"Puritan Laws and Character" from History of the United States of America by Henry William Elson (1904) is in the public domain.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

-
15. Jonathon Edwards (1703-1758) was a Protestant theologian and a revivalist preacher in the Great Awakening, which was an evangelical movement that swept Protestant Europe and the American colonies from the 1730s-1740s.
 16. George Whitefield (1714-1770) was an English Anglican cleric who helped spread the Great Awakening in Britain and in the American colonies.
 17. **Fervor** (*noun*) an intense enthusiasm or passion

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the author's main purpose in the passage?
 - A. to expand upon Puritan religion, culture, law, and its historical impact on the American colonies
 - B. to compare the restrictions of colonial Puritan society to the freedoms of modern American society
 - C. to better understand how the character and laws of colonial Puritans led to the Salem Witch Trials
 - D. to provide the reader with an in-depth analysis of the structure of Puritan government in New England

2. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes the relationship between religion and law in Puritan New England?
 - A. The law restricted religion and religious freedoms, dictating when and how Puritans should worship.
 - B. Law and religion were closely tied, as religious law heavily influenced legal practices and governing.
 - C. Law and religion were separate, later inspiring the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.
 - D. Puritan religious officials often administered and oversaw local government, bringing their own personal views into the law.

3. PART B: Which TWO of the following quotes best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "During the seventeenth century the combined New England colonies formed practically... one great Puritan commonwealth." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "the individual was restrained at every step by laws that no free people of today would tolerate for an hour" (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "The length and width of a lady's sleeve was solemnly decided by law. It was a penal offense for a man to wear long hair, or to smoke in the street" (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "The State was founded on religion, and religion was its life. The entire political, social, and industrial fabric was built on religion." (Paragraph 5)
 - E. "Puritanism was painfully stern and somber... and received its inspiration from the Old Testament rather than the New." (Paragraph 5)
 - F. "No further proof of the legalistic tendencies of Puritan worship is needed than a glance at their own laws." (Paragraph 6)

4. How does paragraph 7 contribute to the development of ideas in the excerpt?
- A. It explains how, despite their rigid laws and character, Puritans had some positive characteristics and should be viewed favorably in American history.
 - B. It points out that the Puritans were actually more open-minded than other Europeans settlers and regrets their fall into obscurity.
 - C. It argues that the Puritans admitted to their own mistakes and tried to make up for them, which is a value the author believes Americans still practice today.
 - D. It emphasizes the Puritans' mistakes, such as executing innocent Quakers and those accused of witchcraft, and argues that the dark side of history should not be forgotten.

5. According to the text, what happened to the Puritans' influence in New England over time?
