

# Settling the Northern Colonies

*by Sophia*



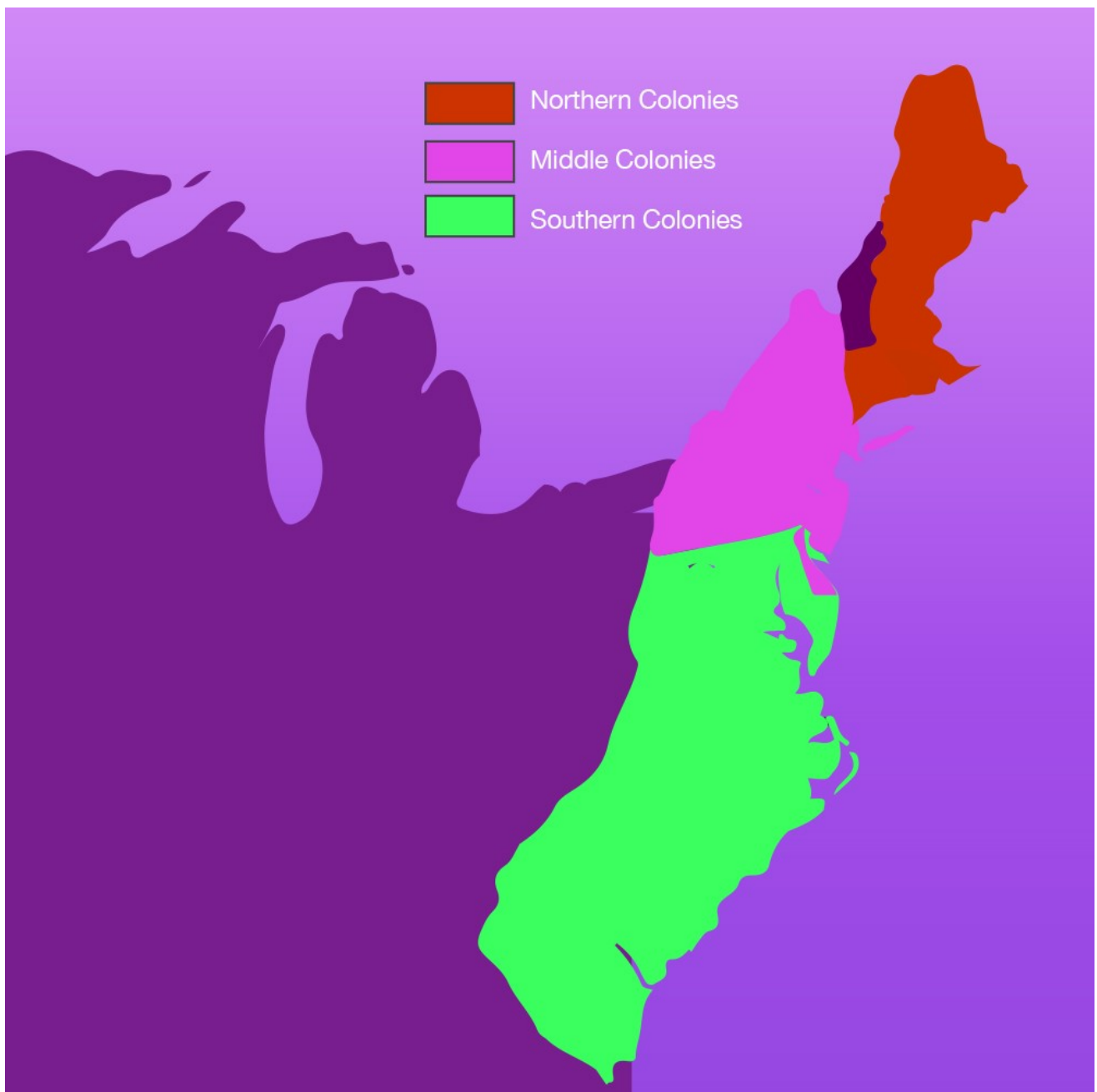
## WHAT'S COVERED

The colonization of the Northern colonies, specifically New England, presented unique opportunities and challenges that were different from those in the Southern colonies. This tutorial traces this history of the Northern colonies.

Our discussion will break down like this:

## 1. New England Culture and Governance

England's colonies in America slowly expanded throughout the 17th century. Despite being subjects of the same Crown, the colonial settlements began to develop along different economic, social, and political trajectories.



Map Depicting Regions Claimed by the Northern, Middle, and Southern Colonies in the 17th Century

One particular difference between the colonization of the Northern and Southern regions was the religious motivations behind the Puritans' settlement in Massachusetts Bay, which contributed to important problems. The Northern colonies were also set apart by creating an abundant society that relied on an economy quite different from the cash crop, plantation-centered economies common in the Chesapeake region and the Southern colonies. However, Puritan religious doctrine and governance also contributed to a volatile religious and social environment in which dissent was not tolerated and hierarchy was strictly enforced.

One way to examine culture and governance in colonial New England is to look at the celebration of Christmas. Contrary to popular contemporary belief, the celebration of Christmas has always been difficult to Christianize.

During the 17th century, lower classes in Europe and in colonial North America celebrated Christmas by **wassailing**. For much of the year, the poor owed goods and labor to the rich. But, starting on Christmas Eve, the tables turned.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Wassailing

Public celebration of Christmas by the lower classes during the 17th century; entailed marching on the houses of the well-to-do to demand gifts.

Beginning on Christmas Eve, the poor (most often boys and young men) gathered in the streets and marched on the houses of the well-to-do. Once there, they demanded that homeowners open their homes and provide gifts of food, drink, and sometimes money. If the homeowner responded to the mob's request, the wassailers would toast to the individual's well-being and move on. If the homeowner did not open their door, the mob could respond by breaking in. "We've come here to claim our right/And if you don't open your door/We will lay you flat upon the floor," one wassailing song went.

To prevent such actions from occurring in New England, Puritan leaders in Massachusetts Bay passed town ordinances that forbade people from gathering in public on Christmas Day. In a sense, Puritan leaders forbade New Englanders from celebrating Christmas! Why did they do this?

Puritan settlements in New England reflected a desire for orderliness and Godliness. All members of a township signed a **covenant** in which they promised "in the presence of God, to walke [sic] together in all his waies [sic], according to how He is pleased to reveale [sic] himself."



## TERM TO KNOW

### Covenant

Agreement signed by all members of a township in Puritan New England.

The leaders within each township, who called themselves a "congregation," assumed the right to determine the spiritual qualifications of all others to participate in baptism and Communion. Dissent, including public displays such as wassailing that challenged hierarchy, was not tolerated.

The Puritan "church" within New England communities, meanwhile, was more than a building. Everyone in the community was required to attend church services, even if they were not considered among the "elect," or those predestined for salvation. To become a member of the Puritan church, one had to convince the congregation that you were a member of the elect, or a "visible saint."

According to Puritan theology, no one but God could know for certain who was predestined for salvation. Nevertheless, if an individual could convince others of their conversion experience, that person could be looked upon as a visible saint and become a member of the local church.

In the same manner that church members oversaw religious affairs, they also managed community affairs as municipal officials during **town meetings**. As the ban on wassailing shows, Puritan leaders made sure that each community conformed to God's ordinances. In this endeavor, leaders such as John Winthrop and others worked hard to keep the church free from the influences of municipal politics (keeping the church separate from the state), but they made sure that religion influenced community affairs.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Town Meeting

A style of government focused on local participation; in Puritan New England these meetings centered around a central religious building and were often attended by the men of the surrounding community.

At town meetings, decisions were made about local taxation and local rules and regulations, and town

representatives were chosen. Most adult men in Puritan communities were able to attend town meetings as voting members, regardless of their economic circumstances. This stands in contrast to the Southern colonies, where men who owned no land were often excluded from the political process.

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## 2. The New England Economy

Different labor and economic systems also distinguished early Puritan New England from the Southern colonies. Many Puritans sought comfortable independence after immigrating to New England. To achieve that, labor and trade centered largely on the **household economy**. Puritan elders expected young people to work diligently at their calling, and all members of their large families, including children, did the bulk of the work necessary to run homes, farms, and businesses.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Household Economy

System of labor centered around the family and a religious call to work, particularly in Puritan New England; large families were encouraged, and the entire family unit was expected to do the work necessary to run homes, farms, and businesses.

Agriculture, including the ownership of livestock such as cattle, sheep, and pigs, was central to the success of many household economies in New England. Livestock was essential for everyday colonial life as a source of power, food, and wealth. Oxen and horses were essential for farm labor and travel. Cattle, pigs, and sheep created protein that could be consumed in the form of meat or dairy products. Farm families could also exchange livestock for other goods and services. For instance, families could sell animals at a market in exchange for luxury items.

Household economies centered around farming and livestock production contributed to a world where there was plenty of food. Fertile soils and a suitable climate, along with the combination of Old- and New-World plants and animals associated with the Columbian Exchange, allowed colonies up and down the coast of most of New England to produce food surpluses by the end of the 17th century.

These surpluses were sold and gathered by merchants who dealt not only with England (which had no need for agricultural surpluses) but also with other regions and powers within the Atlantic World. Thus, New England's household economy contributed to the emergence of a powerful **maritime-based economy**, with scores of oceangoing ships and the crews necessary to sail them. New England mariners sailing New-England-made ships transported Virginian tobacco and West Indian sugar throughout the Atlantic World. Lumber, foodstuffs, cattle, hogs, and other goods from New England also moved up and down the Atlantic seaboard as well as to Europe and the Caribbean.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Maritime-Based Economy

System of labor and trade that comprised ships and crews from New England transporting regional and foreign goods throughout the Atlantic World.

The combination of household and maritime-based economies enabled New England to establish connections with the rest of the Atlantic World. In turn, these economies and connections sustained prosperous colonies in New England.

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## 3. Religious Dissent and Persecution

Puritan New England was also an incredibly literate society as well as a relatively prosperous one, which further distinguished the region from the Southern colonies and from much of Europe. Similar to other Protestants, Puritans emphasized literacy so that everyone could read the Bible. This attitude was in stark contrast to that of Catholics, who refused to tolerate private ownership of Bibles in languages besides Latin.



#### DID YOU KNOW

The Puritans' commitment to literacy and reading scripture led to the establishment of the first printing press in English America in 1636. Four years later, they published the first book in North America, the *Bay Psalm Book*.

As Calvinists, Puritans adhered to the doctrine of predestination, whereby a few “elect” would be saved and all others damned. No one could be sure whether they were predestined for salvation, but through introspection guided by scripture, Puritans hoped to find a glimmer of redemptive grace. Church membership was restricted to those Puritans who were willing to provide a conversion narrative telling how they came to understand their spiritual estate by hearing sermons and studying the Bible.

However, such emphasis on literacy and the individual conversion experience contributed to widespread debate, dissent, and even persecution in Puritan New England. This was especially the case when certain ideas and individuals challenged the civic and religious authority of Puritan leaders such as John Winthrop. For instance, when Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson challenged Governor Winthrop during the 1630s, they were banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Roger Williams arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1631. For a time, he bounced around from one town to another. During this time, he developed a concept known as **soul liberty**. This concept emphasized that individuals should be allowed to follow their consciences, wherever they might lead.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Soul Liberty

A concept advocated by Roger Williams, according to which individuals were allowed to follow their consciences and tolerate all religions.

Williams was also an advocate of religious tolerance. After all, if individuals should be allowed to follow their consciences, Williams believed, they should be allowed to practice whichever religion they chose. This was in sharp contrast to the views of Puritan leaders, who believed that there were certain religious truths that could not be questioned.

Williams also dared to challenge the Puritans' taking of Native American land. This stance, along with his ideas about individual liberty and religious tolerance, placed him in direct opposition against Winthrop and other Puritan leaders.

In late 1635, these leaders banished **Roger Williams** from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He was supposed to be placed on the next ship bound for England, where he likely would have been jailed or executed for his beliefs. Rather than condemn him to that fate, however, Winthrop allowed Williams to escape. Williams traveled south and ultimately established a town called Providence, in what we now refer to as Rhode Island. There, Williams would write favorably about native peoples, contrasting their virtues with Puritan New England's intolerance.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Roger Williams

Member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who questioned the Puritans' treatment of Native

Americans and rejected the practice of punishing nonbelievers. After being banished from the colony, he went on to found Rhode Island as a colony that sheltered dissenting Puritans.

**Anne Hutchinson** also ran afoul of Puritan authorities for her criticism of the evolving religious practices in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In particular, she held that Puritan ministers in New England taught a shallow version of Protestantism that emphasized hierarchy and actions—a “covenant of works”—rather than a “covenant of grace” in which God’s salvation was available to all, with no mediation from Puritan ministers required. Hutchinson went on to insist that God could speak directly to individuals rather than through ministers and the Bible, which was a direct violation of Puritan doctrine and a complete revocation of Puritan hierarchy.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Anne Hutchinson

Member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who was banished for questioning the authority of the Puritan leadership of the colony. Her claim of direct religious revelation was seen as heresy.

That a man like Roger Williams could advocate for soul liberty was one thing. That women such as Hutchinson could express similar ideas was quite another, and it alarmed Winthrop and other Puritan men. During her trial, Hutchinson claimed that she had experienced direct religious revelations from God, which negated the role of male ministers. By making this claim, Winthrop and other leaders believed that Hutchinson was professing powers that verged on the magical, or perhaps diabolical.

In 1637, Hutchinson stood trial in a civil court for her ideas. During this time, Winthrop and other male leaders examined Hutchinson’s beliefs. Hutchinson held her own for the most part, but when she continued to insist upon her claim of direct religious revelation, Winthrop convicted her of holding false beliefs. In 1638, Hutchinson was excommunicated and banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Hutchinson and many of her followers moved to Rhode Island. Later, in 1642, Hutchinson sought safety among the Dutch in New Netherland. The following year, Algonquian warriors killed Hutchinson and her family. When Governor Winthrop received word of Hutchinson’s death, he noted it as the righteous judgment of God against a heretic.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

How did Puritans’ own experiences with religious persecution affect colonial life in New England? What explains the Puritans’ response to dissenters such as Williams and Hutchinson?

This discussion of Williams and Hutchinson, along with the extreme measures that Puritan leaders took to silence them, reveals the profound divisions and tensions that existed within Massachusetts Bay by the mid-17th century. Clashes between colonists and church members continued in Massachusetts Bay, and, by the 1690s, culminated in widespread accusations of witchcraft in towns such as Salem.

For instance, many in Salem used the famous **Salem Witch Trials** as an opportunity to incriminate rivals (real or potential) within the community. Many of the accusers who prosecuted suspected witches had been traumatized by wars on the frontier with Native Americans and by political and cultural changes within New England. Such events appeared to be a sign of God’s mercy or judgment, and people believed that witches



**Popular Representation of Hutchinson Standing Trial, by Edwin Austin Abbey (1901)**



allied themselves with the Devil to carry out evil deeds and deliberate harm, such as the sickness and death of children or cattle and other catastrophes. Relying on their belief in witchcraft to help make sense of their changing world, Puritan authorities in Salem executed 19 people and caused the deaths of several others.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Salem Witch Trials

The 1692 accusations, trials, and executions that swept through the town of Salem, Massachusetts. Women made up the vast majority of suspected witches. Men perceived women as being more susceptible to the Devil's influences because of their supposedly weaker constitutions. Such suspicions also stemmed from women's place within a colonial hierarchy dominated by males. For example, men attributed miscarriages or deformed births to God's judgment and blamed women for failing to uphold their primary gender role of bringing healthy children into the world.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Puritan leaders treated religious dissenters in a severe manner. If they did not leave the colony immediately, dissenters were embarrassed publicly. If dissenters ever came back to the colony after being banished, they were executed.



"Trial of George Jacobs, August 5, 1692," by Tompkins H. Matteson (1855). George Jacobs (in the lower right) was among the few men tried for witchcraft in Salem. Jacobs' granddaughter, Margaret (in the center) accused him in an attempt to save her own life. Two individuals in the lower left are suffering from convulsions, which they blamed on Jacobs.

## Additional Resources

Visit the [Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project](#) to learn more about Salem Village, Puritan society and religious culture, and the events of 1692.



## SUMMARY

In this tutorial, we discussed the unique history of the Northern colonies. English colonization in North America took on many forms during the 17th and 18th centuries. Religion played a central role in both the culture and governance of the Northern colonies. Puritans settled in Massachusetts Bay and elsewhere to create a “city upon a hill” and live an idealized Christian life. They were remarkably successful in certain respects, as many Puritans worked within household economies that produced a variety of agricultural products that contributed to food surpluses and maritime trade.

However, the very nature of Puritan theology and colonial governance contributed to several pronounced religious debates within Massachusetts Bay. Such debate, dissent, and persecution reflected a society in turmoil. John Winthrop and other Puritan leaders were unsuccessful in creating a religious utopia. They also did not celebrate liberty or tolerate competing ideologies in ways that many American citizens appreciate today.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Covenant

Agreement signed by all members of a township in Puritan New England.

### Household Economy

System of labor centered around the family and a religious call to work, particularly in Puritan New England. Large families were encouraged, while the entire family unit was expected to do the work necessary to run homes, farms, and businesses.

### Maritime-Based Economy

System of labor and trade that comprised ships and crews from New England transporting regional and



foreign goods throughout the Atlantic World.

### **Salem Witch Trials**

The 1692 accusations, trials, and executions that swept through the town of Salem, Massachusetts.

### **Soul Liberty**

A concept advocated by Roger Williams, according to which individuals were allowed to follow their consciences and tolerate all religions.

### **Town Meeting**

A style of government focused on local participation; in Puritan New England, these meetings centered around a central religious building and were often attended by the men of the surrounding community.

### **Wassailing**

Public celebration of Christmas by the lower classes during the 17th century; it entailed marching on the houses of the well-to-do to demand gifts.



## **PEOPLE TO KNOW**

### **Anne Hutchinson**

Member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who was banished for questioning the authority of the Puritan leadership of the colony. Her claim of direct religious revelation was seen as heresy.

### **Roger Williams**

Member of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who questioned the Puritans' treatment of Native Americans and rejected the practice of punishing nonbelievers. After being banished from the colony, he went on to found Rhode Island as a colony that sheltered dissenting Puritans.



## **DATES TO KNOW**

### **1620**

Pilgrims found Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts.

### **1630**

Puritans found the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

### **1635**

Roger Williams is banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for religious dissent.

### **1636**

Roger Williams travels south and founds Providence and the colony of Rhode Island.

### **1638**

Anne Hutchinson is banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for challenging Puritan leadership.

### **1692**

The Salem witchcraft trials take place.

