

Standards Focus: Historical Context

Puritanism

The term *Puritan* was first used in the 1500s to refer to a religious and social movement that called for the reformation of the Church of England. The Puritans proposed that the reforms made in the Church of England during the Protestant movement be even more “purified,” so that people would be governed mostly by the Laws of God, as stipulated in the Bible.

While Puritans continued to fight for how they believed their government should be run, they found that they were faced with more and more opposition during the rule of the Stuarts, King James, and King John in England. Puritans wanted to focus church services on reading the Bible, prayer, and preaching, and also believed that achieving religious virtue came from self-examination and pure devotion. Although King James did attempt to calm relations between the Puritans and the Church of England, he would not change the Church as drastically as the Puritans requested. Instead, he simply agreed to a new translation of the Bible, which is known today as the King James Version.

As the Puritans came to the realization that the Church of England was not going to meet their needs, they knew that they needed to make a dramatic change in their own lives. They had two choices: leave the Church or revolt against it. Those who revolted were led by Oliver Cromwell in 1649 in what is remembered as the English Civil War. Eventually, the Puritans gained control of government and made many unpopular changes. However, Puritan glory in England would end with the death of Cromwell, and in 1660 the Stuarts regained power. Puritan ideals did not disappear, however, and in the 1700s these ideals were revived with the rise of the Methodist Church.

Those Puritans who did not wish to engage in revolution simply left England and headed for America to begin a new life in the New World. They settled along the New England coast and shaped their lives according to their ideals: “a nation under God.” Shortly after arriving, they signed the Mayflower Compact, a document which unified their hopes and dreams for the new society they were determined to establish, binding the Puritans to each other and to God. Shortly after arriving in America, they established schools and government based upon the teachings of the Bible. The schools established a standard for educational instruction, and universities like Princeton, Yale, and Harvard were established so that the proper study of Scripture would be available to the future ministers of their church. Government and religion were inescapably intertwined because the societal norms ran in conjunction with the moral codes. The Puritans also believed that government should be ruled through contracts with the people it governed, which became the bedrock of American democracy. The Puritans worked hard to build a new home in America that could support itself and withstand the test of time.

Community life in the American Puritan society was challenging because they depended only on each other and on God. Establishing their own new world in America was rough, as they had to start from the very beginning in unfamiliar territory. Often, a husband came to America first to build a home for his family; his wife and children would join him later. Towns were built so that the church was in the center of each community. The church served as a meeting hall where the men would gather to make laws, establish taxes, and assign specific tasks to members of the community. All the homes had a farm, and every member of the family who was able to work had chores to complete every day. While men caught food and did the planting, the women tended to the children, the cooking, and other chores such as making candles, clothes, and soap. Every individual depended on one another because they held firm in their belief that as a unit they could survive, but alone in the unknown wilderness, they were doomed. If one person’s farm was accidentally burned, the others would help rebuild and recuperate what was lost. Life was centered upon religion, and every Sunday the entire community would gather at the church for an entire day of worship.