

The Church and the State

Freedom in America has meant many things: freedom of speech; freedom from unfair, autocratic government; freedom to strive after personal dreams. But in the eyes of many, the fundamental American freedom has been the right to worship or not worship in any way a person chooses. It was supposed to have been that way from the beginning, Thomas Jefferson believed. He wrote: "Our forefathers left their native land to seek on these shores a residence for civil and religious freedom."

Back in seventeenth century England, religious freedom didn't exist. You had to belong to the Church of England or suffer persecution. King James I, speaking about religious dissenters, said, "I will make them conform themselves, or else I will harry them out of the land."

In 1620, 102 brave souls clambered aboard a little ship—named the Mayflower—and began their sail westward to the new world. Some of them called themselves "Pilgrims," because they were on a religious journey; they hoped to build a new society in America more perfect than any on earth. Theirs was a terrible voyage, sixty-six days long. The ship was small, wet, and foul. The smells were awful. Fresh food ran out. Finally, they sighted land. It was Cape Cod, in Massachusetts. The Pilgrims had planned to go farther south, to Virginia, but they were exhausted. One of them, a weaver named **William Bradford**, described what they saw: "A hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and men."

So they sailed the Mayflower around the Cape to a place that their map called Plymouth. There they dropped anchor. Bradford described what happened next: "Being thus arrived in a good harbor, and brought safe to land, [we] fell upon [our] knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought [us] over the vast and furious ocean."

Once arrived in this land that they called a "new" world, this shipload of diverse people had to find ways to live together peacefully. Not all of them were religious pilgrims or "Saints," as they described themselves. Some, who were called "Strangers," had left England for adventure, or because they were unhappy, or in trouble. All of them wanted a better life. There had been tension between the Strangers and the Saints. It needed to be settled. They had to be able to live together peacefully, with rules and laws and leaders. So before landing they drew up a plan of government, the **Mayflower Compact**. It read in part like this: "Having undertaken ... a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts ... [we] covenant ... ourselves together ... to enact ... laws ... for the general good of the Colony; unto which, we promise all due submission and obedience."

The Mayflower Compact is one of the great documents of American history. Here was a group of settlers able to govern themselves; reasonable people who agreed to live together under a government of laws.

William Bradford predicted great success for the colony when he wrote, "As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled [shall shine] unto many."

Religious Tolerance

The tiny Plymouth Colony soon heard reports from England that were not good. Under the new king, Charles I, things were even worse for the religious dissidents—who called themselves "Puritans." They hoped to "purify" the Church of England. But the king wouldn't let them. So between 1630 and 1640, 20,000 Puritans sailed for New England. They wanted to practice their religion in peace. They wanted to build a holy community where people would live by the rules of the Bible. They expected their Massachusetts Bay Colony to be an example for all the world. One of the colony's governors, **John Winthrop**, explained: "We must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."

The Puritans were seeking freedom, but they didn't understand the idea of toleration. They came to America to find religious freedom—but only for themselves. They had little tolerance or even respect for the Pequot Indians, who lived in nearby Connecticut and Rhode Island. They called them heathens. As more and more Puritan settlers moved into their land, the Pequots got angry and resisted. In 1637 war broke out, and the Puritans, helped by Mohican and Narraganset Indian allies, massacred 600 Pequots in their fort, burning many alive. William Bradford, who was there, wrote, "It was a fearful sight to see them ... frying in the fire ... but the victory seemed ... sweet ... over so proud ... an enemy."

Ministers like the **Reverend John Cotton** preached that it was wrong to practice any religion other than Puritanism. Those who did would be helping the devil. They believed they followed the only true religion so everyone should be forced to worship as they did. "[Tolerance is] liberty ... to tell lies in the name of the Lord," said John Cotton.

But one Puritan minister named **Roger Williams** disagreed. He said, "Forced worship stinks in God's nostrils."

Roger Williams didn't believe in forcing others to believe as he did. He thought that killing or punishing in the name of Christianity was sinful. He respected the beliefs of others, including the Native Americans. He said that church members should pay the bills for their church instead of taking the money out of everyone's general taxes. Then he started preaching that land shouldn't be forcibly taken from the Indians. He said, "[It is] against the testimony of Christ Jesus for the civil state to impose upon the souls of the people a religion.... Jesus never called for the sword of steel to help the sword of spirit."

Those were strange ideas in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Williams was arrested and banished. He fled south, bought land from the Indians, and started a colony called Providence. It would become the capital of Rhode Island. In Roger Williams's time it attracted many who were not wanted elsewhere, especially those who were searching for "freedom of conscience"—the freedom to believe and worship as they wished. Williams welcomed everyone, Quakers and Catholics, Jews and atheists, even when he disagreed with their religion. Centuries later, a biographer named Edmund Morgan wrote this about Williams's ideas: "We may praise him ... for his defense of liberty and the separation of church and state. He deserves the tribute ... but it falls short of the man. His greatness was simpler. He dared to think."

Witch Fever

It was one thing for a man in those days to stand up to the church; it was something else for a woman. Women were expected to be seen but not heard. They belonged to their husbands; they were property—chattel. A husband could sell his wife's labor and keep the wages. If she ran away, she was accused of stealing herself and her clothing.

But some people, especially those known as the Quakers—or Friends—had different ideas. Quakers called their church services "meetings." In a Quaker meeting everyone is equal, there are no ministers, and anyone may speak out—including women. Like the Puritans they were convinced they followed the "true" religion, and they wanted to spread the word to others. Some Quakers seemed determined to be martyrs, and a woman named **Mary Dyer** was one of them. Even when the Puritans shipped her off to Rhode Island, she broke the laws and returned to Boston to preach her religion anew. Finally, in 1660, the Puritans hanged her. Her last words were a final refusal to save herself by leaving Boston. She said, "In obedience to the will of the Lord God I came and in his will I abide faithful to death."

Most Puritans thought they had done everything they could to be fair to Mary Dyer. It was a different world then, a world just leaving the Middle Ages. The whole world believed in witches in the seventeenth century. People thought that if you wanted to make a bargain with the devil you could do it, and then torment people and fly through the air on a broomstick, or become invisible and squeeze through keyholes. People often blamed witches for inexplicable natural disasters. Those accused of being witches were sometimes whipped, hanged, or drowned. But what happened in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692, was different from that, as the **Reverend Cotton Mather** described: "An army of devils is horribly broke in upon ... our English settlements: and the houses of the good people ... are fill'd with the doleful shrieks of their children and servants.... We have with horror seen such witchcraft."

In 1692 the community of Salem, Massachusetts, was engulfed in a series of witchcraft afflictions, accusations, trials, and executions. During the course of the year, more than a dozen persons claimed to be afflicted by spells of black magic and sorcery that had been allegedly cast by men and women who had enlisted the supernatural powers of the devil. Most of the persons claiming to be afflicted were teenage girls.

Those persecuted for allegedly practicing witchcraft included Salem residents who deviated in some way from Puritan religious, cultural, or economic norms. Other victims of the witch craze were perceived to be enemies of the largest family in Salem. A few victims were simply weak and sickly people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The legal institutions offered little protection for those accused of witchcraft because the primitive Massachusetts judicial system was still governed by superstitious rules of evidence permitting testimony about malevolent apparitions and broomsticks capable of flight. Although some ordinary Salem residents doubted the credibility of the witchcraft accusations, it was not until they were joined by authorities from Boston that the witch-hunt came to a close.

In February 1692 the Reverend Samuel Parris returned home from his congregation one evening to discover his nine-year-old daughter, Elizabeth Parris, her 11-year-old cousin, Abigail

Williams, and their 12-year-old friend, Ann Putnam (the daughter of Thomas Putnam Jr. and Ann Putnam) gathered around the kitchen table with the Parris family slave, Tituba, who was helping the girls experiment in fortune telling. Realizing that they had been caught attempting to conjure up evil spirits, the girls soon became afflicted by strange fits that temporarily deprived them of their ability to hear, speak, and see. During these episodes of sensory deprivation, the girls suffered from violent convulsions (see picture on the following page) that twisted their bodies into what observers called impossible positions.

Nearly 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft in Salem during the summer of 1692. Twenty accused witches were executed, 15 women and 5 men. Nineteen were hanged following conviction, and one was pressed to death for refusing to enter a plea. Four prisoners, three women and a man, died in jail. The trials began in June and continued for four months, the final executions taking place on September 22. In October the governor of Massachusetts, William Phipps, dissolved the tribunal that had been established to preside over the witchcraft prosecutions. The following spring the governor ordered the release of all the accused witches who remained incarcerated upon payment of their fines.

These cruel episodes—the witchcraft crisis in Salem, the hanging of Mary Dyer, the expulsion of Roger Williams, and the persecution of many who were thought to have "sinned"—seemed to clash with goodness and purity at the heart of puritanism. Their children and grandchildren began asking questions for which there were no good answers. The old, intolerant ideas would not survive in the new land.