

Slavery in the North

“We shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of the world will be upon us,” John Winthrop announced to the Puritan passengers of the *Arabella*, as the ship began its journey to Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. The Puritans would be “knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection.” Their “Errand into the Wilderness,” where they would perfect, not only their religious practices but also their social and economic institutions, would show the English they were leaving behind, how to remake their own world.

What about the Native Peoples the Puritans encountered upon arrival? At first the Puritans played them off against one another. If they could, they used them as menial laborers, especially as the Great Migration of over 30,000 people continued unabated for over a decade. By 1636-37, the Puritans had already expanded into present-day Connecticut and were determined to open settlement in southern New England.

The most powerful Nation, the Pequots, stood in their way. After an eleven-month war, the Puritans destroyed their enemy by burning their chief village to the ground, murdering 500 people and selling into slavery any persons who had escaped. John Winthrop thanked God for the help, the deity had given his people in this victory.

After that tragedy, any Native Peoples, intent on living with the Puritans were assigned to Praying Villages where they could drink none of the alcohol the Puritans enjoyed (Beer and ale were good, drunkenness was bad.) These Indians were given only the most menial tasks and subjected to restrictive religious indoctrination. Because of their contacts with other Native groups, they often fled to them, proving themselves unreliable servants. Thus, it is not surprising

that the Puritans turned to replacing them with slaves from Africa, through the Caribbean, who, because of their skin color, could not easily disappear into Native communities.

The Puritans who founded Harvard College in 1836, emphasized learning, not only to shore up their Calvinist Theology, but also as people who valued learning through scientific inquiry during this age of Enlightenment. The most prolific scholar, as Ibram X. Kendi notes, was Cotton Mather who graduated from Harvard at 16, still the youngest ever to attain the baccalaureate from that school. When he entered the ministry, he, like the other ministers, received a slave in addition to a parsonage to live in. He named his slave after the Apostle Paul's adopted son, Onesimus. When the sea vessels landing in the Boston harbor brought in smallpox, Onesimus advised his master to counter the disease by cutting an opening in the skin and filling it with pus from an infected person. As Mather met with other ministers and doctors, he told them of his slave's ideas, and noted that Onesimus bore a scar on his arm that had purportedly saved his life in Africa. Although many of Mather's colleagues dismissed any advice coming from an African as useless, the Royal Society of London had recently published a paper on the value of this inoculation. Mather, assisted by a Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, tried it, and the results saved lives.

Unfortunately, this beneficial knowledge did not change the opinion of the Puritan community or the communities in the Atlantic colonies, concerning the innate ability of slaves. Mather clung to the idea of "The Great Chain of Being" in which people of color, especially those from Africa, were inferior to Whites. The only responsibility Puritans had was to Christianize Africans and African Americans born in the colonies. Slaves, unfortunately, did not welcome their capture and enslavement. Instead, they often tried to escape, and usually such attempts failed. These episodes stamped Blacks as inherent criminals in the Puritan mind and

opened them up to new forms of punishment and abuse, sufficient to inspire terror in the slave's mind.

The most serious slave rebellion with the most vicious retaliation occurred in New York City. There slaves conspired to revolt in large numbers in April 1712. When the English had taken the city from the Dutch in 1664, they had passed more restrictive laws governing slave rights to marry or have families, since African descendants were already 20 percent of the population.

The African descendants, living close together, took up arms they had stockpiled and murdered some Whites before they encountered much stronger forces. Some slaves committed suicide, but most participants were arrested. The Colonial authorities tried seventy and twenty-one received death sentences. One, a pregnant woman, perished stretched on a wheel (which would never have happened to her until *after* she had delivered her child in England). The authorities then burned the other twenty alive as horrific examples for other slaves who might consider entering such conspiracies again.