

History: New England Early Puritans “Did not All Dress in Black Clothes”

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The image New England residents have of the early Puritans as a stern people who dressed all in black and were ruled by intolerant and authoritarian ministers appears to be inaccurate, new historical research suggests. While historians have long known that the Puritans had a fun-loving side, the textbook image of them as stern and serious persists in the minds of many Americans.

Clothing for both sexes was every color of the rainbow and by using vegetable dyes, rather than chemicals, the shades were soft and muted. Men might have a colored hatband as a decoration in their best hats.

Dress codes existed that were linked to status but as the colonies' population grew they became impossible to enforce. Plymouth did not have such a formal, legal dress code, but social sanctions initially worked to the same effect. Overall, colorful clothing was often seen.

Social sanctions were also effective in holding down the crime rate. There was surprisingly little crime in 17th Century New England. Legal records show the total number of felonies and serious crimes don't add up to much given the growing size of the population in the colonies. Family members and a town's residents were constrained by a net of social sanctions, often personal and informal, but effective and real in their impact.

The Puritans knew how to have a good time , too, and often did. Drinking in moderation was allowed and the Puritans often indulged in physical love both before marriage and outside of marriage. Some young women in Concord, Mass., got pregnant to sway parents to allow them to marry. It was much the same in early Plymouth. Babies would come 6 to 7 months after the wedding to couples like the Delanoy's, the ancestors of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

As for the power of the church, ministers did not run for, nor could they hold political office, in the Puritan colonies of New England. Ministers usually had a great deal of influence and high social status but Puritan New England was not a theocracy and church and state were separated, unlike what the Puritans had fled from in England. Men did not have to be church members to vote in Plymouth colony, either.

Far from being subjugated, Puritan women had financial rights guaranteed by law, were protected from brutality, and, on occasion, even allowed to divorce. Divorce almost never happened but was allowed in rare cases for willful desertion or bigamy. A formal separation, but not a divorce, also was allowed for habitual, extreme cruelty, impotence by the husband, or violence or abuse so bad that the courts were unable to control or prevent it.

Women were respected and had significant rights by law. Husbands and fathers could not apprentice minor children to another household, nor buy or sell land, without the free voluntary consent of their wives. The wife would be examined separately, apart from her husband, and magistrates took pains to ensure that her consent was free and voluntary.

Women were so important that a husband might lose his liquor license for his inn or tavern when his wife died, courts ruling that he could not keep a decent establishment without a wife on the premises. By contrast, widows were frequently allowed to sell liquor, partly because they supported themselves with the profits and were less likely to become a burden on the town.

By law, a woman with the reputation of a dutiful wife and mother had to be left her widow's thirds in her husband's will or oral bequest. The courts broke wills that left women less than one-third of the real estate and full title to one-third of the personal property.

New views of the first New England settlers are emerging from David Hall's new "A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England" (Knopf). Hall, a distinguished scholar of colonial America at the Harvard Divinity School, rejects the grim view of life among the New England settlers in favor of a more balanced approach that sees the Puritans for what they were. Hall says the picture is wrong of Puritans as theocratic ogres—repressive, cruel and intolerant. Yet, neither were they precursors to Jacksonian democracy, much less like Americans of the early 19th century, let alone the 21st century.

Early New England residents were seeking, or trying to create, utopias, and to a considerable extent, though only for a relatively brief time in the 1640s to 1670s, they succeeded.

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