



# *English Colonists and their Quest for Structured Family Life in America*

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## *The Colonial Family*

Between the years of 1620 and 1690, the population of the Plymouth colony and surrounding settlements grew very slowly, from 50 persons (the original surviving settlers), to only 3,055 people. This minor growth took place over a 70 year period (Deetz and Deetz, 2000, Para. 1-22). The Pilgrims, as well as the additional English settlers who arrived thereafter, knew that the family was the essential foundation to survival and adaptation in the New World. Colonizers made great strides to develop stable marriages, and establish religious, patriarchy, and commonwealth practices. These foundations would help to sustain and strengthen the family.

There were no outside resources on which the pilgrims could rely after arriving in the vast New World. Therefore, the colonial family unit was solely responsible for raising food, producing furniture, making clothing, teaching children to



(American colonial era artist, 1710-1775).

worship God, to read, and to care for the sick and the elderly. Although the infant mortality rate was exceptionally high, Puritans were deeply attached to their

children, of which only half survived past age two. Puritans believed that all children were born naturally sinful and that the parents' chief responsibility was to overturn a child's innate wickedness. Therefore, as a child grew, his or her father dutifully responded to child rearing by controlling behavior through intervening in the child's life on all levels. If offspring survived to adulthood, the head of the household exercised the right to take an active role in selecting a suitable spouse. The patriarch of the home possessed the legal right to decide who could and could not court a daughter, and to which

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young man he would extend the permission to marry. One exception was the case of an ardent Quaker by the name of

Arthur Howland Jr., who fell into forbidden love with the daughter of a staunch Puritan colonist. Marriage seemed inevitable, but marriage without parental consent was illegal and punishable by law. As a result, Arthur was brought to court and fined five pounds with the order to cease and desist in pursuing matrimony with his intended. At length, the couple *did* marry, and lived happily ever after, producing four sons and one daughter. This case however, was very rare (Heinsohn, 2014).

These virtually arranged marriage practices within the colonies, stemmed from the belief that the success of the colonies was based on effectively functioning families. Strong colonial marital unions were vital to producing resilient offspring, which was crucial to the survival of the colonies. Even the church was organized by family groups, and voting rights were

extended to just one vote per household (Mintz and Kellogg, p. 1-6).

Based on the significance of familial success, the Puritans believed that the larger community possessed a general duty to ensure that family units performed and functioned properly. Consequently, the courts appointed authorities called “tithing men,” who would oversee a dozen households to safeguard order. These tithing men ensured that marital relationships were harmonious, and that parents were appropriately disciplining their children. Puritan churches exercised the authority to admonish, censure and excommunicated men and women who failed to maintain properly peaceful households. The belief was that neglected familial duties were not only wronging the family, but could also evoke the wrath of God, bringing punishment to the entire commonwealth (Mintz and Kellogg, p. 7).

In conclusion, the colonial family unit provided the foundation for maintaining social order and stability. The colonial home necessarily functioned as a place of worship, a workplace, a vocation training agency, and a schoolhouse. America’s first settlers sought to establish unshakeable bonds within the family, because if the family failed, so did the commonwealth. Therefore, the achievement of early New

England society was crucially based on the success of each individual family. And the colonies *did* succeed in this endeavor (Mintz and Kellogg, 1).

## References

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