

The Puritans Revisited and the Arrival of Anne Hutchinson in America

By

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and

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This is the second in a series of articles on the Colonial and Revolutionary History of Eastchester

Anne Hutchinson is perceived as a feminist hero who made courageous sacrifices for the right to follow her own conscience. On the other hand, the Puritan ministers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony who persecuted Anne are viewed as members of an absolutist theocracy, intolerant bigots whose version of Christianity maintained an insular purity. The brilliance and courage of Anne Hutchinson cannot be denied. Likewise, it is wrong to cast the Puritans as simply unbending, joyless fanatics who imposed their will through strict laws and terrible punishment. Anne Hutchinson would be the first European to settle in the town of Eastchester but twenty one years after her massacre by indigenous tribes, it would be Puritan farm families that first settled and cast their imprint on our town.

It is imperative not to judge 17th century individuals and events in terms of our own perceptions and values. The truth about Anne Hutchinson and the Puritans who first settled the New England colony is not as simplistic as we have been led to believe. For the Puritans the desire to escape religious persecution in Europe did not lead to a belief in toleration for others. For those who came to America for religious reasons, their faith was central to their entire belief system and world view. For survival in the dangerous wilderness that was America, people like the Puritans could not conceive of another belief system being valid.

At that time neither religious toleration nor dissent were considered virtues. The Puritans left Europe to escape religious persecution. That did not lead to a belief in tolerance for others. The Puritans like all true believers felt that their way was the only way. Here in Massachusetts, the Puritans hoped to create a new Zion, a community of saints, a beacon on a hill for all mankind to see. Why else risk the journey across the Atlantic, establish a settlement in a frozen wilderness, and endure bloody conflicts with hostile Indians. The Puritans insisted on a tightly organized, homogenous community that ascribed to the individual a limited role. Harmony, not dissension, cooperation, not strife were encouraged. The true source of all truth was the bible. It would be the role of clergy to guide them to the paths of righteousness.

The Puritans of Massachusetts had only been there for only four years when Anne Hutchinson arrived. At first she was welcomed as the godly wife of a pious and successful merchant, blessed with fifteen children. In an age when more than half of the babies died before the age of three and one of every five women died of pregnancy related causes, the Hutchinson seemed preternaturally blessed.

But what was it about this 41 year old woman who in a short time would bitterly divide the fledgling Puritan settlement at Boston and threaten its survival? Anne was the third daughter of the Presbyterian minister, Francis Marbury. While imprisoned in England for his religious views, he not only taught Anne to read and write but infused in her a deep understanding of Lutheran and Calvinist doctrine. As one twentieth century historian adequately described her, "The tragedy of Anne's life was that she was born to be a minister, and a highly developed inspiration, to and guide others in religious matters...She was

born too soon or one might say, this great spirit was born in the body of wrong gender for that backward time."

Her intelligence and independence of thought marked her as unusual among the women of the settlement. Young women especially admired Anne because of her skill as a mid-wife, numerous healthy children, her wealth, along with a husband who allowed her considerable latitude. The trouble began when she began holding meetings in her home where the sermons of the ministers were criticized.

According to the Pulitzer Prize winning historian Edmund S. Morgan, Anne "broached a doctrine that was absolutely inconsistent for which the Puritans had crossed the water, the belief that the truth for man could be found in the bible... She began to affirm a new basis for absolute truth: immediate personal communion with the Holy Ghost."

This took tremendous courage to stand up to a government where the religious rulers were the leaders. To emphasize direct revelation with God, not the ministers interpretation of the bible, threatened the very reason why the Puritan colony had been founded. The situation was further complicated by the charge that many of Hutchinson's followers had refused to take part in the bloody Pequot War (16364-1638) that was threatening the colony with virtual extermination.

Anne Hutchinson was a courageous and brilliant visionary whose assertions that direct revelation from God, not merely a minister's interpretation of the bible, were far ahead of her times. But the divisions that her teachings created threatened the very reasons for the existence of the colony. The decision to question participation in a deadly Indian war was, to say the least, a questionable.

The Puritan theocracy placed compliance over independence of thought, harmony over disagreement. The Puritan rulers did not handle Hutchinson's attack on their ideals as a matter of a difference of opinion. John Winthrop, the elected governor of the colony, took Anne Hutchinson's teachings as an attack on absolute truth, an attack on the stability of the commonwealth that he had done so much to found. Winthrop did not want his colony rocked to its foundation by the seductive teaching of a clever lady, He could not help regarding this women as an enemy of God.

Please contact us at historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org about any comments or questions you might have about this column.

In the next article in this series, these tensions would clash during the controversial trial of Anne Hutchinson.