

Life in the New England Colonies

Even though there are now six New England states, there were just four New England colonies: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Hampshire. John Winthrop founded Boston Mass for the Puritans. The New England colonies were dominated by the Puritans, reformers seeking to “purify” Christianity, who came over from England to practice religion without persecution. Puritans followed strict rules and were intolerant of other religions, eventually absorbing the separatist Pilgrims in Massachusetts by 1629. Their lives revolved around work and prayer. The Puritans worked very hard and were very serious. They did not have parties, play music, or celebrate holidays. They believed in living plainly- plain and simple clothes and homes. They went to church often and created their villages around the Meeting House where they held church, meetings, and school. Free white men who owned property were allowed to vote. It was important for children to learn to read so they could read the Bible. The Puritans believed in education and founded Harvard in 1636. Even women learned to read and played an important role in the Puritan household.

Colonists in the New England colonies endured bitterly cold winters and mild summers. Land was flat close to the coastline but became hilly and mountainous farther inland. The land was covered in dense forests. The soil was rocky, which made farming difficult. The New England colonies had very harsh winters and mild summers. This made the growing season only about five months long. However, the cold winters helped to reduce the spread of disease.

All manufactured goods, like cloth, pots and pans, any metal goods, and firearms, were imported from England. Colonists sent back furs, lumber and other raw materials that were available. In the early days, most colonists were farmers who needed to grow food in order to survive. New England is hilly and the soil is rocky because of the retreat of ancient glaciers left granite stones and boulders behind. It was difficult soil to farm plus the growing season in New England is quite short compared to colonies that were further south. A short growing season in summer also means a longer winter. Settlers in New England had to contend with a long, cold and snowy winter. Another part of New England’s economy was largely dependent on the ocean. Fishing was most important to the New England economy, though whaling, trapping, shipbuilding, and logging were important also.

The infamous Salem witch trials began during the spring of 1692, after a group of young girls in Salem Village, Massachusetts, claimed to be possessed by the devil and accused several local women of witchcraft. As a wave of hysteria spread throughout colonial Massachusetts, a special court convened in Salem to hear the cases; the first convicted witch, Bridget Bishop, was hanged that June. Eighteen others followed Bishop to Salem’s Gallows Hill, while some 150 more men, women and children were accused over the next several months. By September 1692, the hysteria had begun to abate and public opinion turned against the trials.

Though the Massachusetts General Court later annulled guilty verdicts against accused witches and granted indemnities to their families, bitterness lingered in the community, and the painful legacy of the Salem witch trials would endure for centuries.

Each Colony set up their own government, however, the English Monarch was to be the ultimate ruler. Many colonies set up a system of representative government. However, only white, land owning males were able to vote. In many of the New England Colonies, a voter also had to be "Church Going".