Puritans, Quakers, and the Limits of Toleration

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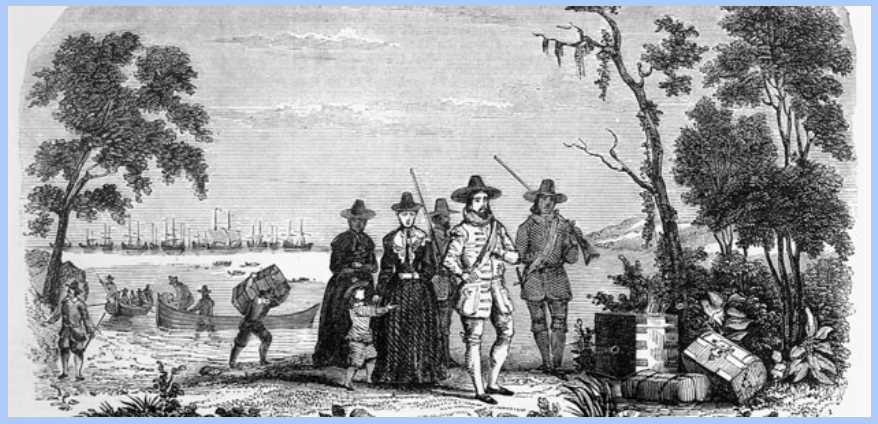
The Big Picture: Why This Matters

- **Between 1659 and 1661, four Quakers were hanged in Boston for civil disobedience.**
- **Massachusetts regarded the Quakers as vile heretics.**
- **Massachusetts passed a series of increasingly harsh anti-Quaker laws.**
- **Quakers countered with forceful protests.**
- **The conflict between orthodox puritans and radical Quakers eventually led to the downfall of the puritan government.**
- **And advanced the fundamental principles of freedom of conscience and expression.**

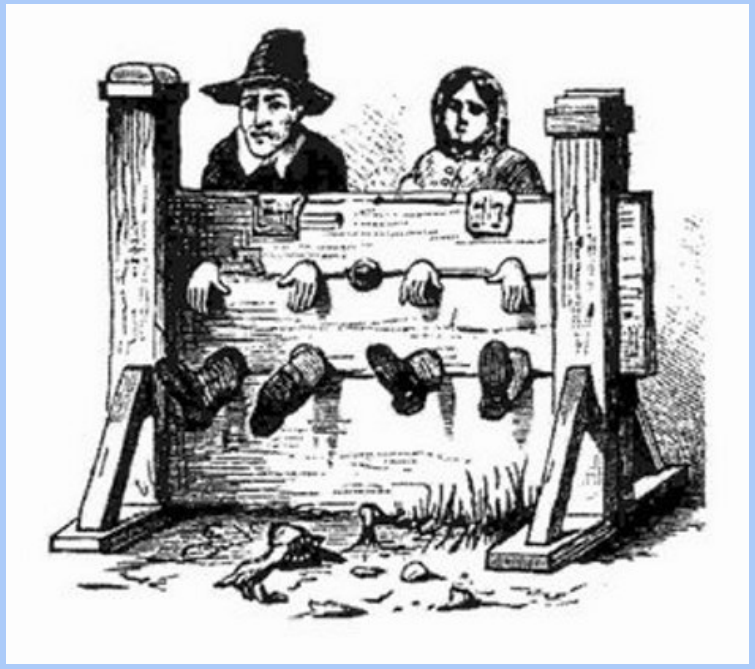
Massachusetts Founded By Puritans

- **Puritans were dissenters from the Church of England.**
- **Sought a return to primitive Christianity and simplicity in worship.**
- **Massachusetts founded in the wilderness by *radical* puritans in 1630 as both a refuge and exemplary society.**
- **A place to practice their faith as they saw fit, free of interference and persecution.**
- **Massachusetts intended as an *exclusive* commonwealth with rules made by those radical puritans.**



Popular View of Puritans

- **A dour, severe, intolerant, and straitened people.**
- **The people who did away with Christmas and made liberal use of the stocks and dunking stool.**
- **H. L. Mencken: "Puritanism [is] the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."**
- **Plymouth court records tell of Samuell Gorton, who was prosecuted for harboring a female servant in his house, of whom it was whispered that she had *smiled* in the congregation.**

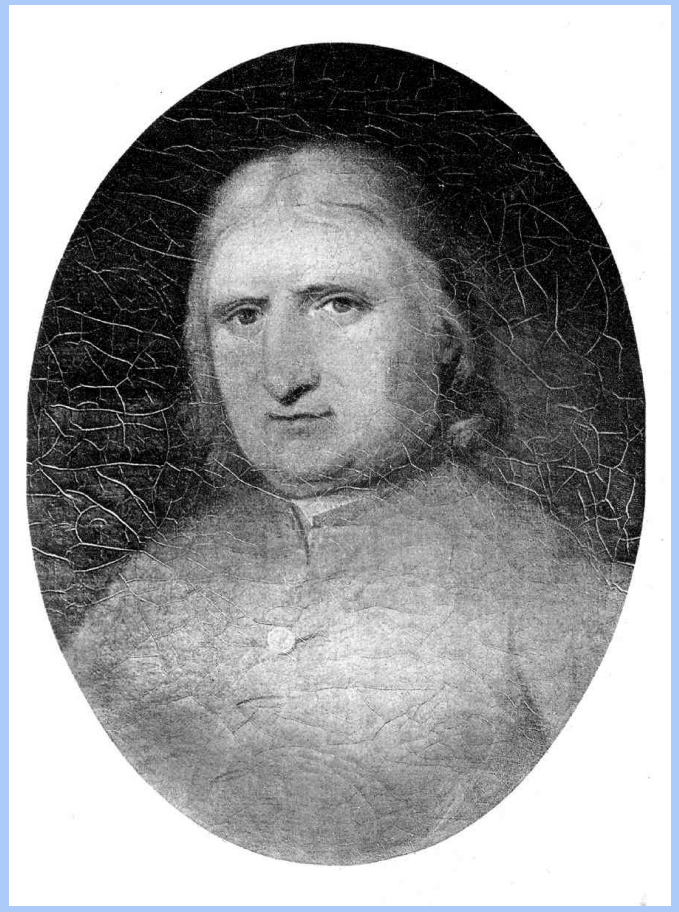


Another View of Puritans

- Winthrop called upon these covenant people “to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.”
- He enjoined them to “delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work.”
- Puritans were much more forgiving of private transgressions, less so of public matters.

Quakers

- Quakers arose in England about 1652 out of same reforming tradition as puritans: Protestant and Calvinist.
- Both held that the Church of England had remained too close to Catholicism.
- Both considered the Holy Spirit to be the divine power that led God's people.
- But Quakers more radical: they rejected predestination and offered salvation to all who accepted God's grace and lived godly lives.
- Quakers also held to to immediate revelation that could override biblical revelation and the authority of the learned ministers.



Quaker Missionaries to New England

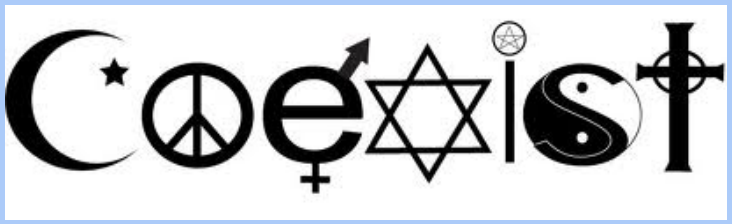
- Quakers determined to spread their faith.
- First Quakers arrived in Boston in 1656: two women, jailed, mistreated, then expelled.
- Eight additional Quakers arrived two days later.
- In 1657, eleven Quakers arrived on their own ship.
- Cotton Mather: the Quaker “invasion” had begun.

Toleration

- New England puritans of all stripes abhorred toleration. At root was the fear of disorder.
- Each side was certain of its own righteousness and adamantly critical of the religious beliefs and practices of the other.
- Religious toleration was a dangerous evil, “a concession to wickedness,” that admitted alternate interpretations and practices to the believer’s orthodoxy. It accommodated ignorance, error, and the ungodly.
- Even the venerated Anne Hutchinson was certain that she was right, certain of her salvation, certain that the orthodox ministers were wrong, and certain that there could be no room for toleration.
- Most Quakers firmly opposed the beliefs and practices of Catholics, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Ranters, and many others, and they could be harsh in correcting those whom they believed to be in error.

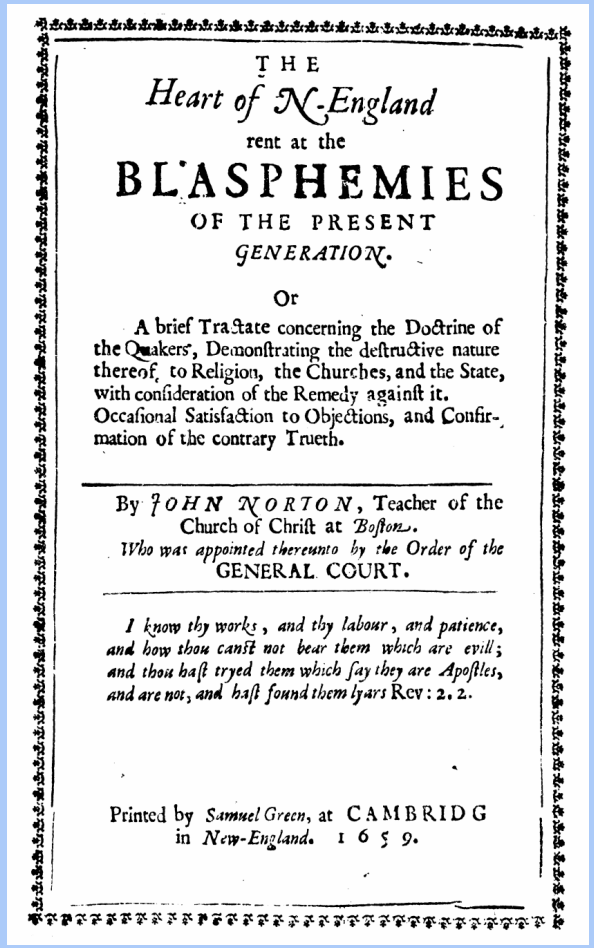
Few Advocates of Religious Toleration

- New England puritans generally distinguished between quiet dissent and outspoken dissent.
- Among early New England dissenters, only Roger Williams, Samuell Gorton, and a handful of others advocated religious toleration and liberty of conscience as broad principles, and then only because they saw the alternative as an ongoing source of conflict and suffering.
- When religious toleration did advance, it did so less as the product of high moral principle than as a pragmatic response to uncontainable heterodoxy and dissent.



Escalation of Conflict

- The magistrates passed a series of anti-Quaker laws: fines, whippings, and cropping of ears, and banishment.
- More Quakers arrived, not only to proselytize, but specifically to challenge the anti-Quaker laws.
- Quakers were outspoken, and some were disorderly, and turbulent.
- Quakers cast their suffering as a sign that they were of the "true" faith.
- Massachusetts finally resorted to executions as a last resort to which they believed they were compelled—to protect their religion, their church order, and their civil government from ruin.



THE
Heart of N-England
rent at the
BLASPHEMIES
OF THE PRESENT
GENERATION.

Or

A brief Tractate concerning the Doctrine of the Quakers, Demonstrating the destructive nature thereof, to Religion, the Churches, and the State, with consideration of the Remedy against it. Occasional Satisfaction to Objections, and Confirmation of the contrary Trueth.

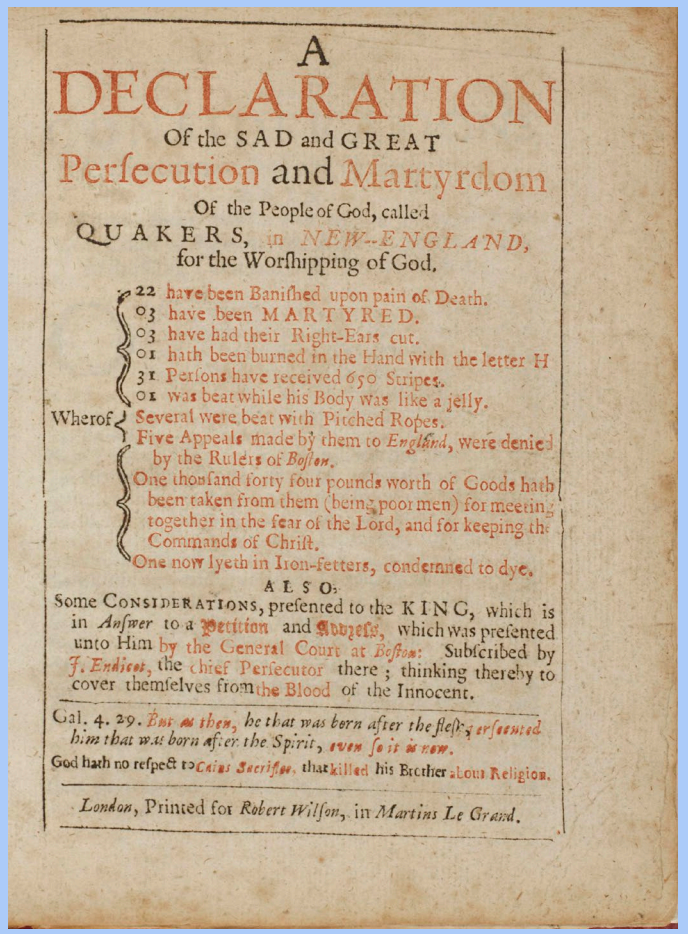
By *JOHN NORTON*, Teacher of the Church of Christ at *Boston*.
Who was appointed thereunto by the Order of the GENERAL COURT.

I know thy works, and thy labour, and patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evill; and thou hast tryed them which say they are Apostles, and are not, and hast found them lyars Rev: 2. 2.

Printed by *Samuel Green*, at CAMBRIDG in *New-England*. 1659.

Appeal to England

- With the execution of Quakers in New England, their leaders in old England appealed to the newly restored King Charles to stop the "vein of innocent blood opened in his dominions."
- But appealing most to the king's interests, they cast the prosecution of the Quakers as New England's defiance of royal authority.
- 1661 Charles II granted a mandamus that required those Quakers who were charged in Massachusetts with capital crimes, or who were facing corporal punishment, to be sent to England to be tried under English law.



A
DECLARATION
Of the SAD and GREAT
Perſecution and Martyrdom
Of the People of God, called
QUAKERS, in NEW-ENGLAND,
for the Worſhipping of God.

22 have been Baniſhed upon pain of Death.
03 have been MARTYRED.
03 have had their Right-Ears cut.
01 hath been burned in the Hand with the letter H
31 Perſons have received 650 Stripes.
01 was beat while his Body was like a jelly.
Wherof Several were beat with Pitched Ropes.
Five Appeals made by them to *England*, were denied by the Rulers of *Boſton*.
One thouſand forty four pounds worth of Goods hath been taken from them (being poor men) for meeting together in the fear of the Lord, and for keeping the Commands of Chriſt.
One now lyeth in Iron-fetters, condemned to dye.

ALSO:

Some CONSIDERATIONS, preſented to the KING, which is in *Anſwer* to a Petition and Addreſs, which was preſented unto Him by the General Court at *Boſton*: Subſcribed by *J. Endicot*, the chief Perſecutor there; thinking thereby to cover themſelves from the Blood of the Innocent.

Gal. 4. 29. *But as then, he that was born after the fleſh, perſecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even ſo it is now.*

God hath no reſpect to *Cains Sacrifice*, that killed his Brother about Religion.

London, Printed for *Robert Wilſon*, in *Martins Le Grand*.

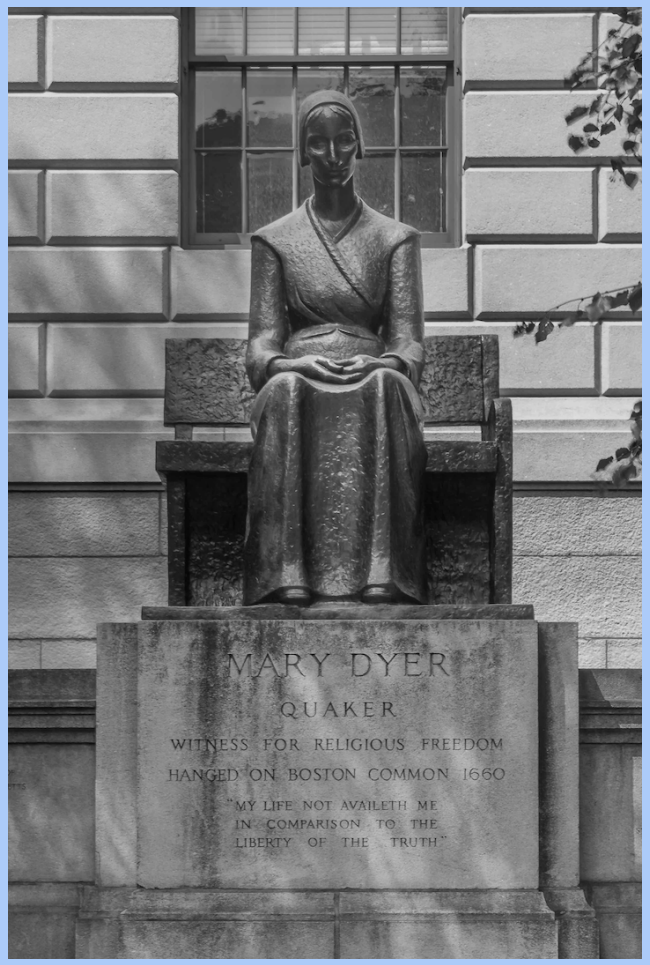
Consequences for Massachusetts

- In 1684, England revoked the Massachusetts charter.
- Two years later, Charles II dispatched a royal governor across the Atlantic to enforce English authority.
- In 1689, Parliament passed a broad Toleration Act, which allowed freedom of worship for most dissenters from the Church of England—but not yet for Catholics.

Maintaining Order

- **The struggle between orthodox puritans and the early Quakers in Massachusetts reveals the tension between individual liberties and the state's mandate to govern; between the right to protest and the right to enjoy the peace; between an aggressive invader and a defensive establishment that desired the Quakers' "[lives] absent, rather than their death present."**
- **More than three-and-a-half centuries later, the state continues to exercise its mandate to preserve the peace and social order, while also allowing the constitutional exercise of free speech and self-expression. The challenge, always, is to identify and then enforce the balance between the rights of an individual or group to practice their beliefs and the rights of others to likewise enjoy their liberties.**

Mary Dyer in front of the Massachusetts State House, Boston



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