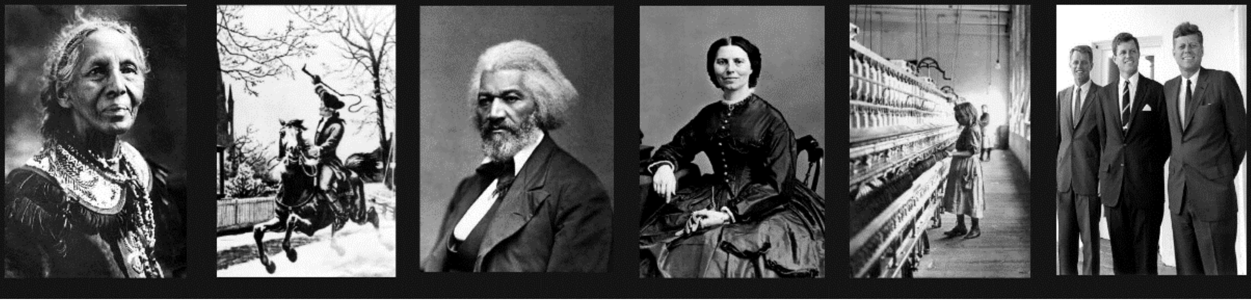
The Historical Journal of Massachusetts



“Dissenting Puritans: Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer.”

Author: Francis J. Bremer

Source: *Historical Journal of Massachusetts,* Volume 46, No. 1, Winter 2018, pp. 22-45.

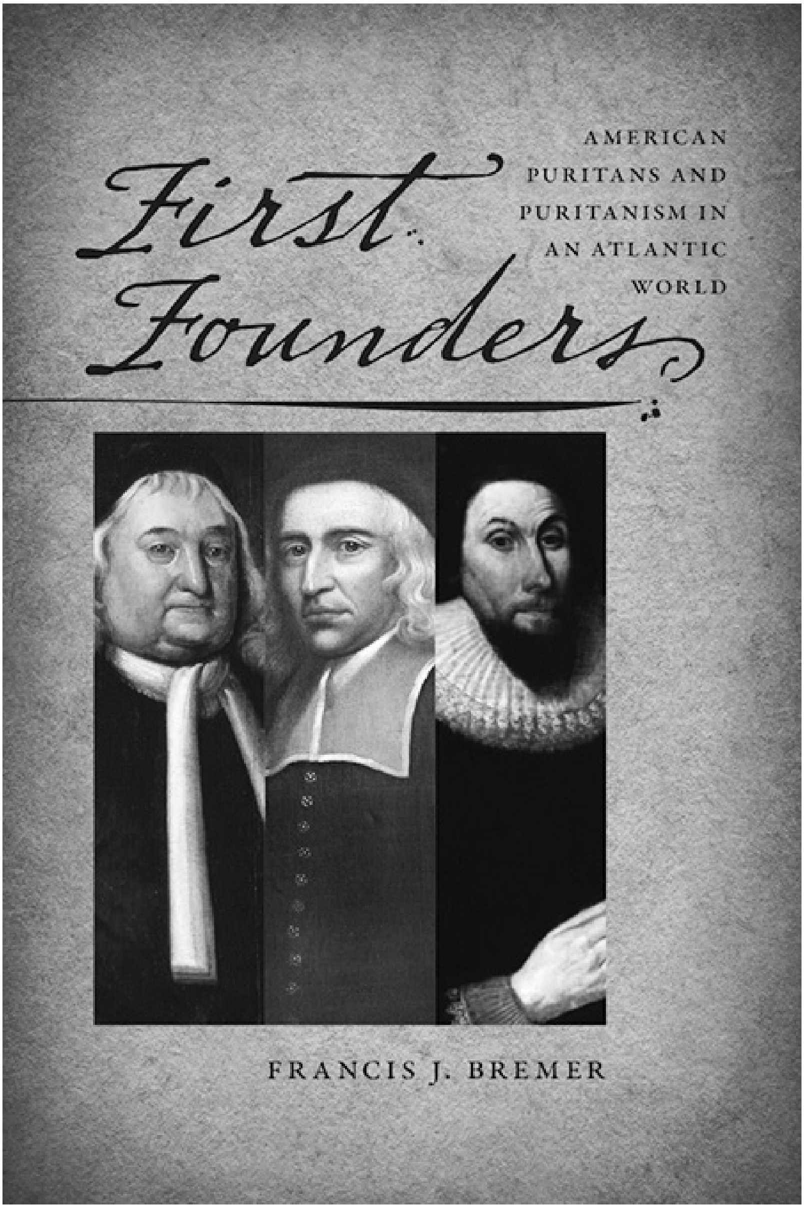
Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

* * *

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work: masshistoryjournal@westfield.ma.edu

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.

Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/number/date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at http://www.westfield.ma.edu/historical-journal/.


First Founders
AMERICAN PURITANS AND PURITANISM IN AN ATLANTIC WORLD
FRANCIS J. BREMER

*First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in the Atlantic World* was published by the University of New Hampshire Press (2012).

EDITOR'S CHOICE

# Dissenting Puritans:

## Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer

FRANCIS J. BREMER

**Editor's Introduction:** HJM *is proud to select as our Editor's Choice Award for this issue Francis J. Bremer's superb biographical collection,* First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in the Atlantic World *(2012) published by the University of New Hampshire Press. Bremer, a leading authority on Puritanism and author of over a dozen books on the subject, takes a biographical approach to detail how Puritans' ideas and values ultimately contributed to the forming of our American government and institutions. In this collection he offers mini-biographies of eighteen Puritans, including well-known figure John Winthrop. These characters challenge and expand popular notions and stereotypes about Puritanism. As the book jacket explains:*

> *With its cast of magistrates, women, clergy, merchants, and Native Americans,* First Founders *underscores the breadth of early American*

© Institute for Massachusetts Studies, Westfield State University

> *experience and the profound transatlantic roots of our country's forebears. Bremer succeeds in bringing little-known figures out of the shadows, while allowing us to appreciate better known figures in an entirely new light.*

*Both scholars and the general public will appreciate Bremer's engaging writing style and his ability to bring alive the complexity, richness, and diversity of the colonial world and the worldviews of its inhabitants. At the same time, he succeeds in conveying a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of the broader philosophical, political, economic, and social foundations of puritan experiments in the Atlantic world.*

*In this issue,* HJM *offers an excerpt from Bremer's fifth chapter, titled "Four Strong Women," which explores the lives of Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) and Mary Dyer (c. 1611-1660). The outlines of Anne Hutchinson's life are known to many. Her name appears in both elementary and high school textbooks, while Mary Dyer's story is far less familiar. Yet, although Hutchinson was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for her unorthodox religious views in 1643, Dyer was hanged in Boston in 1660 for repeatedly defying a Puritan law banning Quakers from the colony.*

*While Dyer's memory barely registers in the nation's popular historical consciousness, Hutchinson remains a contentious figure that has been lionized, mythologized, and demonized. After her death, Reverend John Winthrop referred to Hutchinson as "this American Jezebel," an epithet associated with the most evil woman in the Bible. In 1830 Nathanial Hawthorne wrote a "sketch" about her; some literary critics trace the character of Hester Prynne in* The Scarlet Letter *to Hutchinson's persecution. Historians and popular writers have interpreted and re-interpreted her life within various frameworks. As to her historical impact, one historian has written that "Hutchinson's well-publicized trials and the attendant accusations against her made her the most famous, or infamous, English woman in colonial American history."*[1]

*This selection is reprinted from* First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in the Atlantic World Women *(2012) with permission from the University of New Hampshire Press. The first paragraphs provide background on puritanism and are excerpted from pages 3-4. The editors have provided additional explanatory sections and endnotes which did not appear in the original publication.*

*A further note to our readers: In this selection the term* puritan *is not capitalized. Dr. Bremer explains that a growing number of American historians and virtually all English historians use the uncapitalized form. Unlike Calvinism, Lutheranism, or other such denominations that had a definable* *doctrinal statement and organizational structure, puritanism had no such well-defined parameters (unlike denominational forms of puritanism such as Congregationalism and Presbyterianism). With no such defined limits scholars can disagree over whether a particular individual was even truly a puritan. Puritanism was more a movement or temperament (often called the hottest sort of Protestants), the character of which evolved over time.*

* * * * * * *

## PURITANISM DEFINED

What exactly was puritanism, and what brought many of these men and women to America in the seventeenth century? These are questions that provoked different answers in the seventeenth century and that have continued to challenge historians. Part of the difficulty comes from the fact that for most of the movement's history there was no institutional identity that defined puritanism. Whereas other religious movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Lutheranism, Catholicism, Calvinism, and others—were or became institutionalized, producing official statements of faith and formal membership in churches, puritanism never achieved that type of clear identity. It was a movement defined in part by the self-identification of men and women who referred to themselves as "godly" or "professors," and partly by their enemies, who scorned them as "precisians," "puritans," and "hypocrites." Some scholars have come to look at puritanism as a temperament and to talk of the "puritan character."

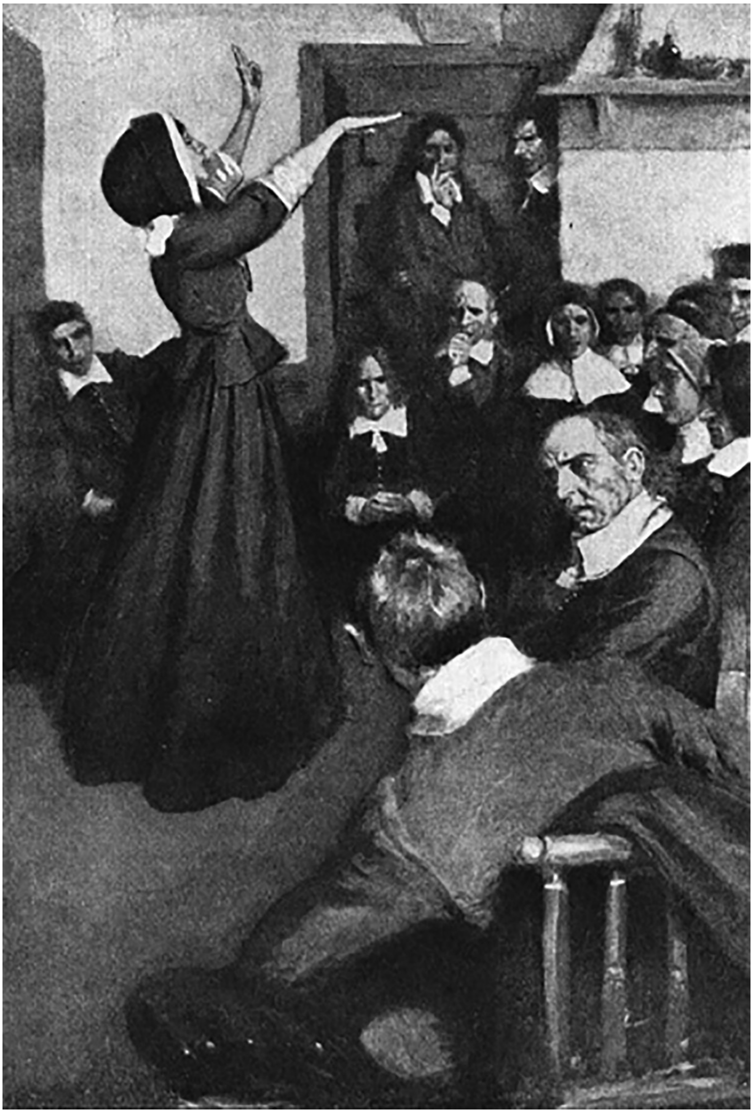
Puritans were members of the Protestant Church of England, created by Henry VIII and Edward VI and restored by Queen Elizabeth following the Marian persecutions of the mid-1550s.[2] Those identified as puritans were reformers committed to raising that church to a high level of holiness. At the simplest level, puritans were men and women who sought to reform themselves and their society by rejecting the remnants of Roman Catholic teachings and practice to be found in post-Reformation England. Over the years, their positions emerged as an intense version of Reformed Protestantism, drawing inspiration from Calvinist sources. Puritans were particularly concerned that individual believers had access to the scriptures, the word of God, in a proper vernacular translation. This required a commitment to teaching all to read. They agitated for the placement of university-trained preachers in every parish. They believed that England as a political nation must be committed to opposing the forces of Rome throughout Christendom. While Englishmen who were labeled as puritans might support some or all of these objectives, those who did bear the label were seen as most committed and most fervent in advancing them.

Puritans were dedicated to raising the kingdom of God, but the nature of what that kingdom would be was never completely spelled out. It was always an ideal just beyond their reach as they journeyed on a pilgrimage toward an unattainable perfection. They were attempting to build a better society, the best that human effort could achieve. The starting point for making the Earth truly God's kingdom began with the individual's struggle to subject him or herself to the divine will, a struggle that could not succeed without the blessings of God's grace. Having transformed oneself into a "shining light," the puritan sought to bring others into the kingdom by persuasion and the example of a godly life. Communities of saints, often united by formal or informal covenants, would gather to reinforce each other's faith while also seeking through dialogue to enhance their understanding of God's way…

One of the challenges [in New England] faced by the first colonists was how to determine the precise nature of a godly order and how to discern between free discussion that promoted their goal and ideas that threatened it—in short, how and where to position the perimeter fence dividing what was acceptable from what was not. Much of the history of the seventeenth century Bible Commonwealths (as the New England colonies are often referred to) was shaped by debates over where to draw the line between beliefs and behaviors that would enhance the pursuit of the kingdom and those that threatened to erode the foundations of their city on a hill. The task was made more complex by the fact that New England brought together men and women of different temperaments from different parts of England who disagreed in their precise understanding of what the kingdom of God would look like. While they may all be called puritans, there were many different voices engaged in this debate. Each man and woman made sense of the puritan tradition in his or her own way…

## ANNE HUTCHINSON IN ENGLAND (1591-1634)

Thus far in *First Founders*, all of the characters we have examined have been men. This is partly attributable to the fact that the public role of women was strongly restricted in the early modern world, and partly to the fact that relatively few women left a record of their experiences and beliefs. But Protestants believed that all men and women should have the opportunity to engage with God's word directly in the scriptures. This meant that they believed it important for all girls as well as boys to learn to read. Wives were expected to lead their families in worship and catechize members of



**Anne Hutchinson Preaching in Her House in Boston, 1637**

Illustration by Howard Pyle, published in *Harper's Magazine* of February 1901 (Vol. 102), p. 356. No contemporary portrait or sketch exists of Hutchinson. This fanciful depiction is extremely popular and can be ordered as a poster from many venues. However, given that Hutchinson was a 45-year old mother of fifteen in 1637, it is unlikely that she appeared as such a slim and youthful figure. Source: Library of Congress.

the household when their husband was absent. While women were not allowed to attend grammar schools or to study at the universities, many men taught their daughters Latin and modern languages and encouraged them to discuss matters of faith so that they would be better prepared as wives and mothers. John Winthrop's mother had a French Bible and theological works in German. Winthrop's correspondence with his wife Margaret shows her to have been well educated and thoughtful. Anne Bradstreet's broad education is revealed in her poetry. While both Margaret Winthrop and Anne Bradstreet accepted the orthodox teachings of early New England and supported their magistrate husbands, other women interpreted scripture in ways that led them away from orthodoxy and behaved in ways that challenged the New England Way.[3]

Anne Hutchinson was the daughter of the reverend Francis Marbury, a clergyman in the Church of England who had been sharply critical of the failures of the church to adequately serve its members, on one occasion stating that "the bishops of London and Peterborough and all the bishops in England are guilty of the death of as many souls as have perished by the ignorance of the ministers of their making whom they knew to be unable."[4] Having been suspended from his living for a time, in 1580 Marbury was named to serve the small Lincolnshire parish of Alford. It was there that Anne was born in 1591. Shortly after this, Marbury was again suspended from his ministry. Clearly, Francis was willing to speak truth to power, and this was a characteristic that Anne would also demonstrate. Francis devoted himself to the education of his children, all of whom were girls. Restored to his ministry in 1594, a decade later he moved to a London parish. The teenaged Anne was exposed to the vitality of the nation's largest city and the diversity of its religious life, with her father there to encourage her inquiries about the political and religious disputes of the time.

Francis Marbury died in 1610. Two years later Anne married William Hutchinson of Alford, whom she had known since her childhood. The couple settled in that Lincolnshire town, where the clergyman who had succeeded her father in Alford was a moderate typical of the conservative religious scene in that region of England. While there is no direct contemporary evidence to support the claim, the abundance of reports that attest to it make it likely that the Hutchinsons journeyed occasionally to the Lincolnshire town of Boston, twenty-four miles away, to listen to the preaching of John Cotton. After 1623, they would occasionally make the shorter journey to the nearby town of Bilsby, where John Wheelwright was a powerful puritan preacher. Both Cotton and Wheelwright emphasized the role of the spirit in directing the faithful. This may have particularly resonated with Anne, who, unable to regularly travel to hear such clerical counselors, relied on her own interpretations of the scripture to chart her course.

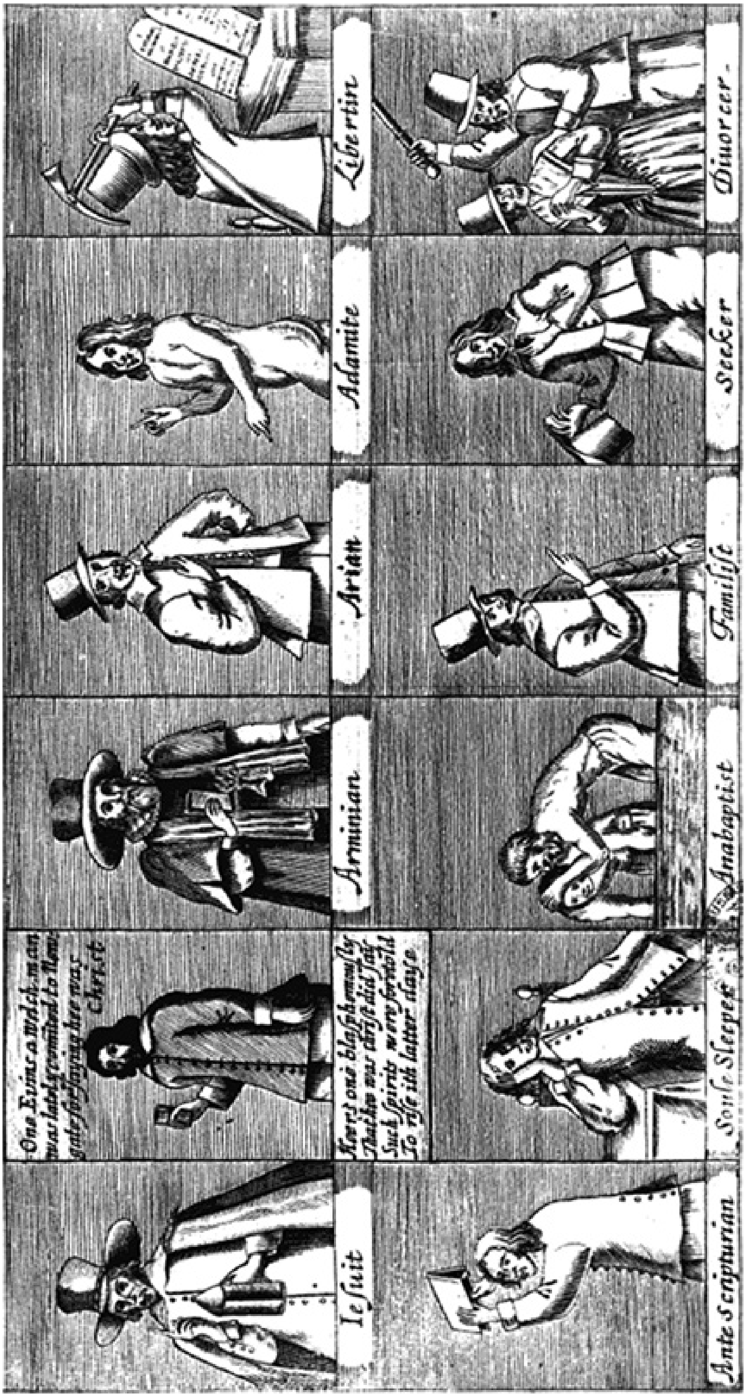
In 1632 John Wheelwright, who had married Anne's sister Mary in 1629, was removed from his ministry for selling his church living back to his patron.[5] Pressured by the authorities, John Cotton resigned his ministerial living in 1633. Anne was thrown on her own resources and those of other puritan laity in the region, joining with them in sessions where they shared their views and reinforced one another's faith. When Cotton immigrated to America, the Hutchinsons decided to follow.

They settled in Boston and soon became respected members of the community. William was chosen one of the town's deputies to the General Court in May 1635. He was named a magistrate in 1636, and also served as a Boston selectman (in essence, one of the town council). In November of 1636, the church elected him to the office of deacon. Anne earned a reputation as a caring mother and a devoted comforter of the town's sick, and also served as a midwife. It is likely that she participated in the prophesying session during worship. She also reviewed sermons in her home with other women, and her religious insights soon prompted male neighbors as well to engage her in discussions.

## BOSTON'S "FREE GRACE" CONTROVERSY

Reports of the dynamic religious discussions in Boston soon spread throughout the colony, and some of these excited the suspicions of the newly arrived Thomas Shepard. Shepard was particularly concerned about teachings that emphasized the role of the spirit in guiding believers as opposed to measuring one's progress to grace by reference to obedience to God's laws. He feared that John Cotton was encouraging, if not himself preaching, dangerous opinions and wrote a letter challenging Cotton to explain what was going on.

Cotton felt no need to justify himself, and a meeting of clergymen gathered for the October 1636 session of the Massachusetts General Court initially appeared to clear suspicions about what might be going on in the Boston church. But then Anne Hutchinson was asked to join the gathered ministers. One of those present later recalled that Anne had asserted that "there was a wide and broad difference" between the teachings of Cotton and John Wheelwright (who had recently arrived in the colony) on the one hand, and the rest of the clergy on the other, and that she accused the other ministers of not being "able ministers of the new testament" and of preaching a Covenant of Works as opposed to a Covenant of Grace.[6]


Iesuit
One Evins a welch man was lately comited to Newgate for saying he was Christ
Heere one blasphemously Saith our christ did fail Such spirits were foretold To rise ith latter dayes
Arminian
Arian
Adamite
Libertin
Ante Scripturian
Soule Sleeper
Anabaptist
Familist
Seeker
Diuorcer

[Editor's Note: Dr. Bremer added the following paragraphs to explain this controversy for HJM readers.] Puritans believed that God had entered into an agreement with Adam, called the Covenant of Works, whereby Adam and Eve would live in happiness forever if they obeyed God's will. Adam and Eve broke the covenant by their sin and thereafter all men and women would be born with the taint of original sin and in their lives would themselves break the Covenant of Works, thereby becoming deserving of damnation. However, as a result of Christ's sacrifice, salvation was offered through the Covenant of Grace.

Individuals differed on the details of the Covenant of Grace – most believed that God offered this salvation only to a limited number of those predestined, who were entirely passive in the process; a few believed that this Covenant was offered to all men; others believed that those offered the Covenant of Grace had to accept it (and presumably could reject it).

Virtually all believed that the grace of salvation was transformative. Most believed that this meant that the recipients were enabled to live a life in accord with God's laws and that holy behavior could be seen as evidence (as opposed to a cause) of one's salvation. Others denied that any such measure could be relied upon, asserting that there was absolutely no correlation between the grace of salvation and the way an individual led his or her life. Pushed to the extreme this could lead some to assert that the "law" – the Covenant of Works – was irrelevant to those who were saved, since the Spirit alone would provide guidance as to how God wished them to behave. This rejection of the Covenant of Works was termed "Antinomianism." This was a belief associated particularly with a Protestant sect called the Family of Love, Familists, who were believed to be libertines, men and women who claimed the permission of the Spirit to indulge in all sorts of deviant behavior (especially sexual promiscuity).

**"A Catalogue of … Sects and Opinions in England" 1647 (left)**

A broadsheet or poster depicting various sects and groups who disagreed with the practices of the Anglican Church. The first row depicts a "Jesuit," followed by "One Evins a Welch-man" (Arise Evans), an "Arminian," an "Arian," an "Adamite" and a "Libertin" (portrayed breaking the tablets of the Law). The second row depicts an "Ante Scripturian," a "Soule Sleeper," an "Anabaptist" (in the act of an adult rather than an infant baptism), a "Familist," a "Seeker," and a "Divorcer" (shown beating his wife). This image, titled "A Catalogue of the Severall Sects and Opinions in England and Other Nations: With a Briefe Rehearsall of Their False and Dangerous Tenents," was published in 1647.

Many puritans believed that with the help of the Spirit it was possible for believers to achieve a better understanding of such matters and encouraged men and even women to study the Scripture and exchange views on its meaning. In early Boston the church was noted for the fervor of such discussions, both in the church itself and in groups hosted in private homes, including that of the Hutchinsons.

In 1636 Anne's accusation prompted Shepard to continue his public assault on those whom he viewed as dangerous enthusiasts, and other ministers joined him in raising the alarm about Familist and other heretical influences. Church meetings — and not just in Boston — became "full of disputes" as men and women whose views were being questioned began to "grow bold, and dare to question the sound and wholesome truths delivered in public by the ministers of Christ."[7] In the Boston church, those who saw themselves as disciples of Cotton had become critical of John Wilson (the minister of the First Church of Boston 1630-1667). When he rose to preach or pray, "many of the opinionists, rising up and contemptuously turning their backs" upon him, left the meetinghouse.[8]

In an attempt to heal the growing divisions, at its December 1636 session the General Court appointed a day of fasting and prayer to be held in all of the colony's churches to seek God's aid in reconciling those who were drifting apart. In what may have been a conciliatory gesture, John Wheelwright was asked to preach on the occasion. After Cotton preached in the morning on the need for peace and reconciliation, in the afternoon Wheelwright delivered what can only be described as an inflammatory sermon. He announced that Christ had recently withheld his presence from Massachusetts because of the actions of an anti-Christian people who advanced a Covenant of Works. It was time for the true believers to "prepare for spiritual combat," "to show themselves valiant," "have their swords ready," and "fight and fight with spiritual weapons." They must "kill" their anti-Christian enemies "with the word of the Lord," but also "be willing to be killed like sheep" if that was the Lord's will. Warning against indulging in behavior that might "give occasion to others to say we are libertines or Antinomians," he branded their enemies as being the ones who were "the greatest enemies of the state that can be."[9]

The extremity of Wheelwright's sermon strengthened the resolve of the orthodoxy party, and the General Court charged him with sedition. In the May 1637 colony elections John Winthrop was chosen governor, replacing Henry Vane, who was identified with the Hutchinson faction in the Boston church. Recognizing the ascendancy of those who viewed his opinions as dangerous, Vane soon left the colony. The General Court called upon all of the churches to send representatives to a synod that, meeting in Cambridge in August 1637, identified a list of eighty-two religious errors.

John Cotton acknowledged that he "esteemed some of the opinions to be blasphemous, some of them heretical, many of them were erroneous, and almost all of them incommodiously expressed."[10] It is to be noted that the synod sought not to precisely define what had to be believed, but pointed to views that would not be tolerated. In November of that year the General Court banished the unrepentant John Wheelwright and a number of prominent members of the Boston church who had petitioned aggressively on his behalf.

## CHARGES AGAINST HUTCHINSON

The same session of the General Court called Anne Hutchinson to answer charges. The trial was conducted in accordance with English and Massachusetts precedents, with magistrates examining the accused as well as rendering judgment. This was a civil trial, and Hutchinson was accused of undermining the foundations of the society by her attack on the ministers. For two days the magistrates tried to get her to incriminate herself, with little effect until she asserted that her beliefs were based on immediate revelation and that it had been revealed to her that if the colony continued on its existing course the magistrates would "bring a curse upon you and your posterity."[11] She was convicted and sentenced to be banished. While her gender was an aggravating circumstance, it was not the cause of the actions against her, and to suggest that it was is actually to diminish the significance of her ideas.

The final episode of the story took place in the following spring, when Anne Hutchinson went on trial for her religious views before the Boston church. Because she was awaiting execution of her sentence of banishment, following her civil trial Anne had been placed under the supervision of Joseph Welde, brother of the clergyman Thomas Welde, in the town of Roxbury. Lodged two miles away from her home, she had little contact with her family over the months when heavy snows blanketed the path from Boston to Roxbury. Her husband, William, made the trek, but it is unlikely that her children — six of whom were ten and under— accompanied him. She was also largely isolated from the men and women whom she had counseled over the previous years.

Various clergy did visit her in efforts to persuade her to recant, Shepard himself engaging her on three occasions. Meanwhile, John Davenport, a prominent clergyman recently arrived in Boston, joined with Wilson and Cotton in trying to heal the divisions in the Boston church. On March 15, Anne appeared before the congregation to answer for various heretical views of which she had been accused. Robert Keayne took notes of the trial in his sermon notebook.

Wilson opened the proceedings by asking everyone to put aside his or her feelings as "father, mother, sister, brother, friend, enemy" and judge according to the "rules of God's word," yet to "proceed in love."[12] Winthrop seemed interested in engaging Anne in discussion. Davenport treated her with more sympathy than many of the clergy had, and for a time it seemed that she might be sent into exile in good standing with the Boston church. After a one-week adjournment, she in fact recanted the errors that she had been charged with.

But Shepard provoked her into new expressions of her earlier beliefs. Winthrop and Cotton both tried to remedy the damage, but Cotton himself eventually lost patience with Hutchinson, and that proved decisive. He acknowledged that many had profited from conferences with Hutchinson, but warned that they "not let the good you have received from her make you to receive all for good that comes from her."[13] The church found her guilty of lying and heresy and Pastor John Wilson passed sentence of excommunication upon her. As she exited the church, accompanied by her friend Mary Dyer, she was purportedly heard to say, "Better to be cast out of the church than to deny Christ"[14]

Those who try to interpret this controversy as a struggle pitting the forces of intolerance against toleration, and Anne Hutchinson as consciously promoting religious freedom are guilty of rewriting history to satisfy their own polemical purposes and advance their own values at the expense of truth. The fact is that neither side accepted the legitimacy of the opposing views. In calling the majority of magistrates and ministers anti-Christian, and prophesying that God would pass judgment upon them unless they abandoned their teachings, Anne Hutchinson was asserting that there was no place in a godly kingdom for such men as Wilson and Shepard and the doctrines they taught.

## BANISHMENT

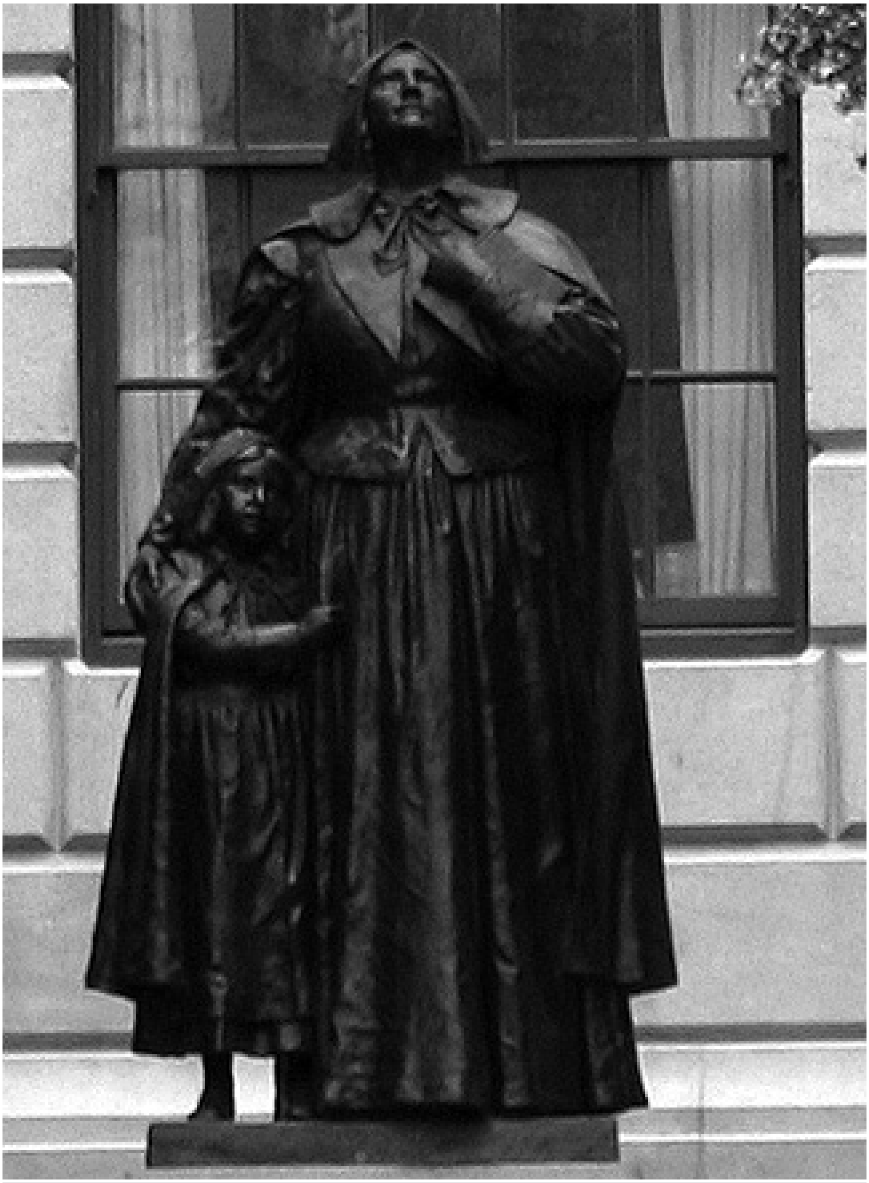
Because the civil sentence of banishment would have stood even if Anne had been exonerated by the church, William Hutchinson, William Coddington, John Clarke, William Dyer, and others who had been identified as her supporters had planned to move on from the Bay Colony. They set their sights on Aquidneck Island, in the territory that became Rhode Island, and signed a civil contract with William Coddington as their first governor.

Moving to the region, they purchased land they settled from the sachems of the Narragansetts.

Much of Anne Hutchinson's life had been spent in traveling to achieve spiritual comfort. It is likely that she made the long trek from Alford to Boston to listen to John Cotton. When the light of the gospel dimmed in England, she immigrated to the new England. Now her convictions were responsible for moving again. Following her trial she and her family, including her younger children, journeyed overland to the Narragansett Bay. Their possessions loaded on horse-drawn carts, the family crossed the largely unsettled regions to the south of Boston, at times trudging through the snow that remained on the ground, struggling through mud where the snow had begun to melt. There were no inns or homes to break their journey. After a week of travel they reached Roger Williams' Providence, and from there sailed to Aquidneck. Whereas the Hutchinsons had arrived in Boston at a time when substantial homes had replaced the primitive shelters of the first years, now they were to find out what carving a new home from the wilderness was all about.

We know little about Anne Hutchinson herself during the early years of this new settlement. The settlers named the town they settled Portsmouth and created a political entity that they declared to be under the kingship of Christ, with William Coddington as "judge," a position akin to the type of chieftain identified by that name in the old Testament. Within a short time some residents began to chafe under this system and to assert the types of rights and processes that they were familiar with from England and from Massachusetts, causing political friction in the settlement. In the spiritual sphere, there was no organized church. John Clarke, one of the settlers, appears to have preached on occasion, and it is likely that lay men and perhaps women shared their religious beliefs freely when the community was gathered. It was said that Anne preached more than she had in Boston, but this may have been primarily in domestic settings.

The Massachusetts authorities gathered news and rumors from the south. When Anne miscarried toward the end of her sixteenth pregnancy in May 1638, news of the "monstrous birth" — likely a mass of tissue with separate transparent lumps now known as a hydatidiform mole— was viewed by the orthodox as a visible manifestation of the horrendous errors she had birthed, and the providential sign was widely broadcast by Winthrop and others as a vindication of the righteousness of her excommunication. At the same time, however, excommunication was seen as the ultimate effort of the church to chastise erring brothers and sisters in the hope of bringing them to their senses and eventually reuniting them to the church. Therefore, in 1640, the



**Anne Hutchinson Statue**

The Anne Hutchinson Memorial Association and the State Federation of Women's Clubs commissioned this bronze statue of Anne Hutchinson, sculpted by artist Cyrus Dallin, in 1920. Hutchinson is posed looking towards heaven with her left hand clutching a bible to her heart and her right arm holding her daughter, Susanna, close to her side and protected by her cloak. Susanna was the sole survivor of the attack by Native Americans who killed Hutchinson and her family. The plaque reads, in part, "A Courageous Exponent of Civil Liberty and Religious Toleration." In 1987, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis officially pardoned Hutchinson, thereby revoking the order of banishment by Governor Winthrop 350 years earlier.

In 1643 the reaction to news of Hutchinson's death had been harsh. Concord Pastor Peter Bulkley wrote, "Let her damned heresies, and the just vengeance of God, by which she perished, terrify all her seduced followers from having any more to do with her leaven." Similarly, Reverend Thomas Weld proclaimed from London in a pamphlet descriptively entitled *A short story of the rise, reign, and ruin of the antinomiams: familists & libertines that infected the churches of New-England*:

> The Lord heard our groans to heaven, and freed us from our great and sore affliction... I never heard that the Indians in those parts did ever before this commit the like outrage upon any one family or families; and therefore God's hand is the more apparently seen herein, to pick out this woeful woman.

Governor John Winthrop delivered an equally pitiless epitaph: "Thus it had pleased the Lord to have compassion of his poor churches here, and to discover this great imposter, an instrument of Satan so fitted and trained to his service for interrupting the passage [of his] kingdom in this part of the world, and poisoning the churches here." Further, he added, "This American Jezebel kept her strength and reputation, even among the people of God, till the hand of civil justice laid hold on her, and then she began evidently to decline, and the faithful to be freed from her forgeries."

---

1. Quoted in Eve LaPlante, *American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans* (NY: Harper Collins, 2004), 243.
2. Thomas Weld (1590?–1662), "How the Heresies Came to an End," from the 66-page pamphlet "A short story of the rise, reign, and ruin of the antinomiams, familists & libertines that infected the churches of New-England: and how they were confuted by the Assembly of ministers there . . . together with Gods strange and remarkable judgements from heaven upon some of the chief fomenters of these opinions, and the lamentable death of Ms. Hutchison. . . " (London, 1644).
3. Quoted in LaPlante, 244.

Boston church sent three emissaries to Aquidneck in an attempt to bring their "wandering sheep" back into the fold of orthodoxy. Anne refused to acknowledge the church that had sent them as a true church and rejected their overtures. But it should be noted that her eldest son, Edward, did return to Massachusetts and made his peace with the authorities there. He would serve in a variety of civic functions over the following decades.

Without a common enemy to unite them, the religious zeal that had animated these men and women and divided the Boston church drew members of the group in different directions. Some began to preach under what they claimed to be the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Embracing the experience of being possessed by the spirit, many would later join the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Others seemed to have moved toward a true antinomianism in which they claimed that their actions were directed by God and not subject to the judgment of men. The divisions in Portsmouth led Coddington to leave the town and settle on the southern part of the island, at a place he called Newport. Drawn perhaps by the greater commercial potential of the new settlement, many of those with mercantile backgrounds followed him there. In Portsmouth the remaining settlers chose William Hutchinson as judge.

New divisions soon arose over land distribution. William Hutchinson died around the turn of the decade, the exact date being unknown. Coddington was able to gain control over Portsmouth as well as Newport, making Aquidneck something of an island republic for a brief period. It proclaimed itself "a democracy or popular government," on the basis of the right of freemen to elect their leaders and approve all laws (though only about half of the male residents and no women were freemen). The "republic" did vote for a form of religious liberty, which was probably the only course for a society with so many fragmented and distinct religious groups. At the same time, Coddington and a small group of fellow elders were regularly chosen to the top positions in the government, making the "republic" more like an oligarchy.

In the meantime, following the death of her husband, Anne Hutchinson decided to move one more time. She had again been visited by representatives of the Boston church, who commiserated with her loss and hoped yet to bring her back to orthodoxy. She rejected these overtures as she had the earlier ones. She was not yet ready to settle for other people's faith, and it is likely that a growing dissatisfaction with the religious and civic affairs of Portsmouth led to her leaving. She sought and received permission from the Dutch authorities to settle in New Netherland, along what is now known as Pelham Bay in the New York City borough of the Bronx. In the summer of 1643, she and the members of her household were killed there by Native Americans. Again, her former enemies interpreted her personal misfortune as a providential judgment.[15]

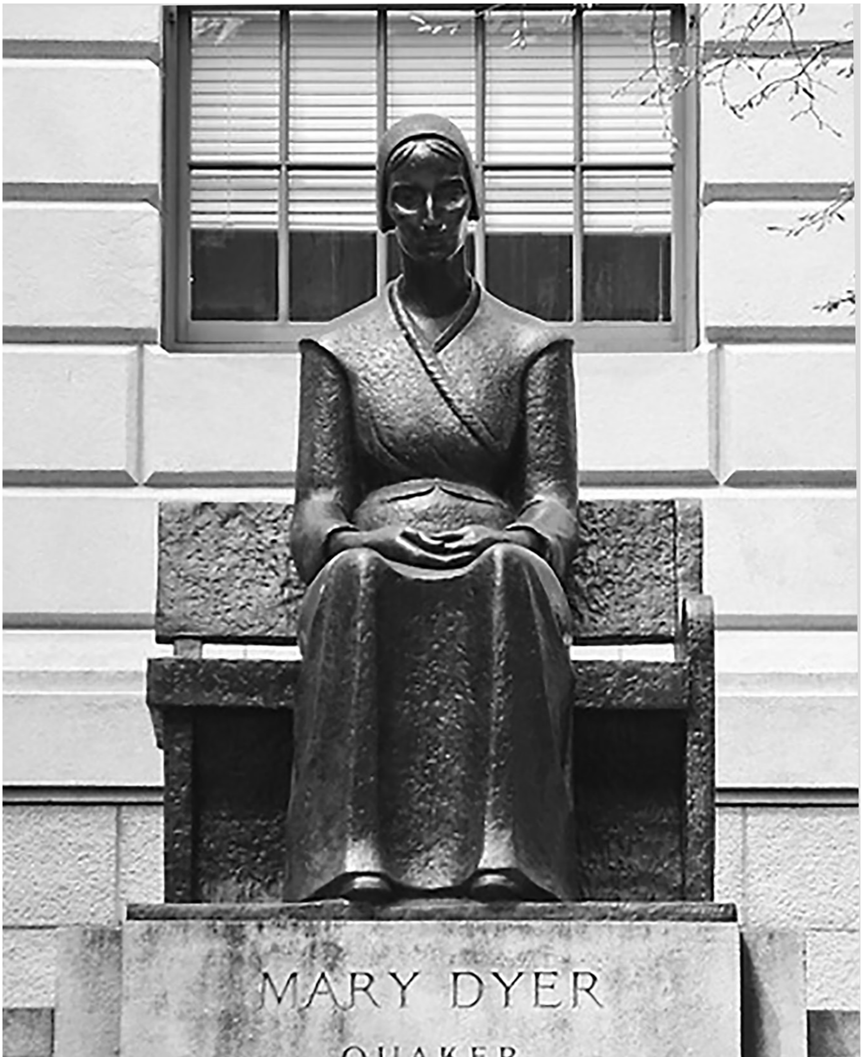
## MARY DYER

Anne Hutchinson's friend Mary Dyer and Mary's husband William had left the London parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields and travelled to New England in 1635. London at the time was a hotbed of new religious ideas, many of which emphasized the role of the spirit in the lives of the saints. William was a milliner and member of the Fishmongers Company and set up trade in Boston as a merchant. An educated man, William served as clerk for the development of the fortifications on Fort Hill. During the controversy that divided the Boston church in the mid-1630s, John Winthrop had identified both William and Mary as having "a piercing knowledge in many things" and being very active in the faction that questioned the teachings of John Wilson.[16]

Mary Dyer had been particularly close to Anne Hutchinson, took her friend's hand when Hutchinson was sentenced to excommunication, and accompanied her out of the Boston church. The attention this drew to her led to an exhumation of a child of hers that had been stillborn about a year earlier and quietly buried. Upon examination, the infant was found to be grossly misshapen, and — as would later be claimed in reference to Anne Hutchinson's 1638 stillbirth — her enemies saw this as a manifestation of the monstrous opinions she had embraced.

Moving to Rhode Island, the Dyers first settled in Portsmouth but then moved on with William Coddington to Newport. When the towns of the region became organized as the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in 1644, William served the colony in a variety of capacities. In the 1650s Mary returned for a time to England, perhaps accompanying her husband. There she found an affinity between the spiritist views she had long espoused and the teachings of the Society of Friends, or Quakers, who taught that the inner light of God was within all men and women. She became a Quaker and returned to New England determined to witness to this truth.

In 1657 she arrived in Boston with a fellow Quaker, Anne Burden. Dyer was not the only supporter of Hutchinson who was drawn to the teachings of the inner light, a fact that led the Massachusetts magistrates to make a connection between the threat of this new movement and that of the old. Legislation had been passed in 1656 stipulating that Quakers were to be banished. When Mary arrived with Anne Burden, the Massachusetts


MARY DYER
QUAKER
WITNESS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
HANGED ON BOSTON COMMON 1660
"MY LIFE NOT AVAILETH ME
IN COMPARISON TO THE
LIBERTY OF THE TRUTH"

authorities committed the two women to prison. After a few months, Burden was sent back to England. Dyer, who claimed ignorance of the 1656 statute, was released to her husband.

It soon became clear that the effort to keep the sect out of New England actually stimulated Quaker efforts to pierce the walls of the kingdom. John Hull made a perceptive observation when he wrote, “In those parts of the country where they might with freedom converse (as in Rhode Island . . .),

**Mary Dyer Statue (left)**

In 1945 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts accepted a bequest of $12,000 from Vermont banker Zenos H. Ellis to support a memorial to his ancestor, Mary Dyer. The Fine Arts Commission of Massachusetts announced a design competition but no suitable entries were received. At last Sylvia Shaw Judson, a Quaker sculptor, was invited to submit a proposal and she received the commission. The memorial was unveiled in 1959. The inscription reads: Mary Dyer, Quaker Witness for Religious Freedom, Hanged on Boston Common 1660. “My life not availeth me in comparison to the liberty of the truth."

This quote comes from Dyer. The day after she had been pulled from the gallows in 1659 and her two fellow Quakers were hanged, she wrote a letter to the General Court, refusing to accept the provision of their reprieve. She explained that, "My life is not accepted, neither availeth me, in comparison with the lives and liberty of the Truth and Servants of the living God for which in the Bowels of Love and Meekness I sought you; yet nevertheless with wicked Hands have you put two of them to Death, which makes me to feel that the Mercies of the Wicked is cruelty; I rather chuse to Dye than to live, as from you, as Guilty of their Innocent Blood."

Sculptor Sylvia Judson portrays Mary Dyer in a quiet moment, sitting on a bench during a meeting, her hands in her lap and her head lowered. “Courage, compassion, and peace” are the qualities Judson intended to convey. The simplicity of style reinforces the aura of quiet determination. Judson noted that the figure should seem to be “solitary and exposed, as though the only safety was within.” Dyer is depicted in a reserved pose with no adornment. These qualities echo the value Quakers place on simplicity in speech, dress, and other aspects of everyday life. A copy of the sculpture stands outside the Friends Center in Philadelphia. Source: Penny Balcan Bach, *Public Art in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992).

they take no pleasure to be." Instead they came to Massachusetts, where "they seemed to suffer patiently, and take a kind of pleasure in it."[17] Over the following years Quaker men and women threw themselves into the assault, many returning after having been banished.

## INCREASING PERSECUTION OF QUAKERS

The Massachusetts authorities responded to this behavior by ratcheting up the penalties to be imposed on Quakers. In October 1657 fines were increased for harboring members of the sect, and offending enthusiasts who returned from banishment were to have an ear cropped. Yet another appearance would lead to the loss of the other ear. Returning yet again from banishment would lead to the offender's tongue being bored. The last two penalties were never imposed as the law continued to change. Previously, when dissenters had been cast out from the godly kingdom they had accepted their exile and stayed away. But this was different. The General Court passed a law imposing the death penalty on Quakers who persisted in returning after banishment.

In the summer of 1659, the Quaker Marmaduke Stevenson, hearing of the Bay's latest legislation, felt the call of God to travel to the Bay. He was joined there by William Robinson, Nicholas Davis, and Mary Dyer. The four were arrested and banished. Within weeks of their departure, Robinson, Stevenson, and Dyer were back and were arraigned before the General Court. They were quickly sentenced to death.

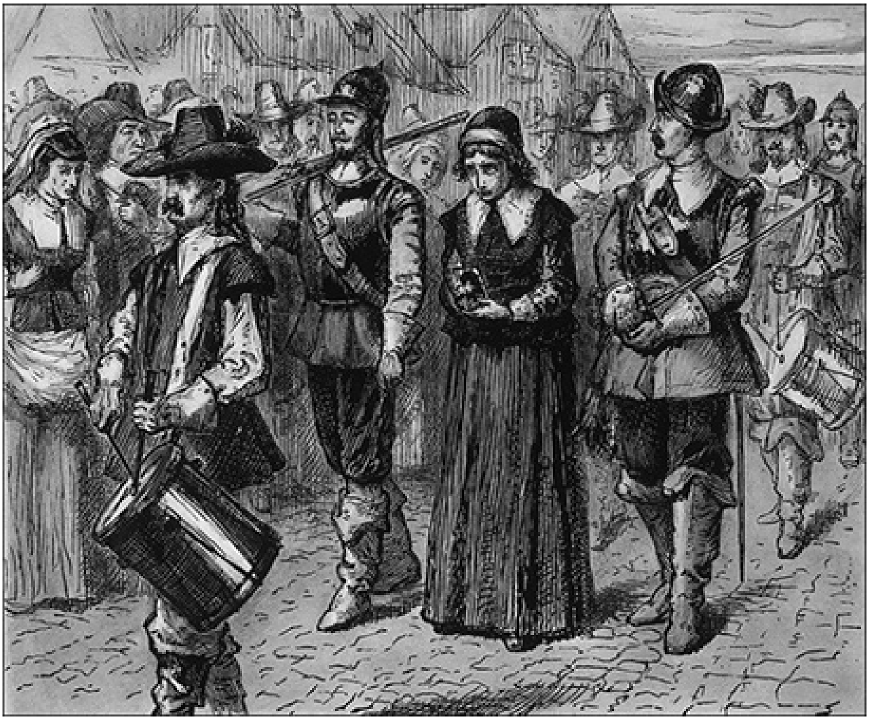
On October 27 the three were brought to the Boston Common, Mary Dyer holding the hands of her two friends. Stevenson and Robinson were hanged and buried beneath the gallows. Dyer, whose husband had again interceded on her behalf, was reprieved and was dismissed into the custody of her son, who brought her back to Rhode Island. So great was the crowd that had gathered to witness the executions that the drawbridge over Boston's Mill Creek collapsed under the weight of those returning home, with some killed and others injured in the accident.

The following spring saw Mary Dyer return yet again to Massachusetts. The merchant John Hull saw her "come audaciously through the town at high day." Urged by some to leave, "she answered she had a strong power to go forward, but no strength to go back." Hull commented parenthetically, "He must needs go whom the devil drives."[18]

Arraigned before Endecott and the General Court, Dyer denied the authority of their law and claimed to have returned to bear witness against it. Once again she was convicted, and once again she was brought to the gallows on the Common. Offered yet another reprieve if she would swear never to return, she declined, saying, "In obedience to the will of the Lord I came, and in his will I abide faithful unto death."[19]

Mary Dyer's execution prompted many to rethink the policy that had been adopted toward the Quakers. Yet Dyer wasn't the last Quaker to be executed in Massachusetts. William Leddra was hanged in March 1661. At the foot of the gallows, he said, "All that will be Christ's disciples must take up the cross."[20] Like Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer had found her own understanding of God and his will and was willing to speak up for that view. Also like Hutchinson, she had no doubt that the light she had acquired was the truth and that she was compelled to spread that message to all.

This selection is reprinted from *First Founders: American Puritans and Puritanism in the Atlantic World Women* (2012) with permission from the University of New Hampshire Press. The excerpt on Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) and Mary Dyer (c. 1611-1660) is from the fifth chapter, titled "Four Strong Women" (pages 79-91).



**Mary Dyer Led to Execution on Boston Common, 1660**

(Artist unknown, c. 1800s)

## Notes

1. Michael Paul Winship, T*he Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 1.
2. The Marian Persecutions" were the series of religious persecutions that took place after Mary I ("Bloody Mary") became Queen of England in 1553 after her brother, King Edward VI, died when he was only sixteen. Mary was a devout Catholic. From the outset of her reign, she was determined to restore the Catholic faith in England. This had been widely suspected and had worried many of the nobility. Some had become wealthy as a result of the Reformation, having gained land from the dissolved monasteries, convents and friaries. The Protestant faith had also secularized certain aspects of local government, and officials had no desire to lose their influence and prestige to the church. Mary replaced the Protestant clergy with Catholics and imprisoned prominent Protestants. The Parliament of 1553 repealed most Protestant legislation. The persecutions began in January 1555.
3. There have been numerous works dealing with Anne Hutchinson. The most recent biography is Eve LaPlante, American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson, the Woman Who Defied the Puritans (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2004), though in my opinion it downplays religious issues and makes the protagonist see more modern than she was. Less detailed but more grounded in the context of the period is Timothy D. Hall, Anne Hutchinson: Puritan Prophet (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2009). The documents of the controversy are published with excellent commentary in David D. Hall, The Antinomian Controversy, 1636 -1638, 2nd ed., (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990). The best treatment of the controversy is Michael P. Winship, Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). There are no comparable works for covering the lives of Mary Dyer, Lady Deborah Moody, or Ann Eaten. John Hulls' diary provides insight into the events of his time, and particularly the Quaker presence. See: The Diaries of John Hull, Mint-master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay (Boston: J. Wilson and Son), 1857.
4. Francis Marbury, quoted in LaPlante, American Jezebel, 23
5. Many benefices (church ministerial positions) had been acquired by lay patrons as a result of the dissolution of monasteries, etc. The lay individual who controlled the benefice could appoint a licensed clergyman of his choice. Selling that benefice back to the patron was considered simony (selling of church livings) and was a crime.
6. Trial Transcript, Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton, 1637.
7. Edward Johnson, Johnson's Wonder-Working Providence, 1628-1651, ed. By J. Franklin Jameson (New York, NY, 1910), 131-132.
8. Winthrop, "Short Story," in Hall, Antinomian Crisis, 210.

9. John Wheelwright, “A Fast Day Sermon,” in Hall, Antinomian Crisis, 153-172.
10. John Cotton, The Way of the Congregational Churches Cleared (1648), 408.
11. “Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson,” in Hall, Antinomian Controversy, 338.
12. “Report of the Trial of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson before the Church in Boston,” in Hall, Antinomian Crisis, 350-351.
13. John Cotton, quoted in Winship, Times and Trials, 88.
14. Anne Hutchinson, quoted in Winship, Times and Trials, 89.
15. Editor’s Note: The Native American Siwanoy were a tribe of the Wappinger Confederacy, in what is now the greater New York City area. By the mid-17th century, their territory had become hotly contested between the Dutch and English. Today they are primarily known for the death of Anne Hutchinson and her family during Kieft’s War. In August 1643, a group of Siwanoy, led by the sachem Wampage, massacred Hutchinson’s household near Split Rock, an ancient landmark. The attack was in revenge for New Netherland Governor Willem Kieft’s massacres of Wappinger refugees the previous winter. Anne Hutchinson became the most famous victim in the bloody reprisals which characterized the two-year conflict. The attack killed Hutchinson, six of her children, and nine others. The only survivor was her nine-year-old daughter, Susanna (1633 - c. 1713), who was taken captive and held for several years before her release.
16. Quoted in Ruth Talbot Plimpton, Mary Dyer, Biography of a Quaker Rebel (Boston, MA, 1994), 155.
17. John Hull, The Diaries of John Hull, Mint-master and Treasurer of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay (Boston, MA: J. Wilson and Son), 1857, 182.
18. Hull, quoted in Malcolm Gaskill, Between Two Worlds: How the English Became American (New York, NY, 2014), 220-221.
19. Mary Dyer, quoted in Adrian Chastain Weimer, Martyrs’ Mirror: Persecution and Holiness in Early New England (New York, NY, 2011), 100.
20. William Evans, ed., Piety Promoted in a Collection of Dying Sayings of the People Called Quakers (Philadelphia, PA, 1854), 45