Life in the Puritan Colonies

We do have some records from which to draw a picture of the social and the experiences of the first-generation colonists of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth. We have Winthrop's Journal, Bradford's Diary, letters, and countless notations in town records. By 1650 the first considerable immigration ceased. Of the 59,000 settlers then living in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, probably 95 percent were small farmers or workers engaged in manual trades. The remaining 5 percent was comprised of ministers, lawyers, and some merchants.

All of these people quickly overcame the hardships and inconveniences experienced in every new settlement. In a few years the rawness disappeared, and the lifestyle they brought with them was duplicated in their 17th-century homes.

Most of New England was then miles and miles of hardwood forest. These woodlands nurtured the many lakes and streams that fed the rivers that flowed to the sea. The English had cleared large acres of forest and corn and other crops, and they had converted many more acres to pasture for cattle and sheep.

New England held some surprises for the settlers. John Josseley, a traveler who wrote about the natural history of the region, said the scent of one creature was so strong that if it "light upon anything, there is no abiding it." He was talking about the skunk. One day in 1636 while walking in Maine, he "chanc't to spy a fruit as I thought like a pine Apple" but of ash color. Although it was an odd looking fruit, Josseley had seen many strange things so he was not greatly surprised. When he tried to pick it, however, he was stung severely by a swarm of furorous hornets.

Pastor Higginson of Salem wrote enthusiastically of the natural abundance of grass that was not an house where is not one dead, and in their valuable skills to their sons. Many of these second-generation ironworkers went to other ironworks in New England. James Leonard was a foreworker at Hammersmith and became a farmer (landowner) in 1688, manager of Bromingum Forge. Joseph Jenks was a skilled craftsman at Saugus. His son, Joseph Jr., also worked at Hammersmith at the age of 16 in 1649. In 1672 he erected his own forge at Pawtucket, R.I. His son, Joseph Jenks III, was Governor of Rhode Island (1727-32) when in his seventies.

Failure of the Iron Works

Saugus was not to be described to any one as a factory town. Clearly mismanagement played a part, along with high production costs, the fixed price (320 per ton) for its products, and competition from imported iron. Although the works produced respectable quantities of bar iron, it could not return a profit to its shareholders.

Boston dominated the commerce of New England, largely because it was a fine seaport. Most of the Bay Colony's growing wealth came from the sea—fish from the depths and shell on the waves. It was not unusual for some of the more wealthy colonists, men such as John Winthrop II, to make trips back to England, usually on business. There was a brisk commerce by sea of raw materials in exchange for English goods, but only the wealthiest could afford to import fine clothes, armchairs, and books.

The New England Primer was just one of the books which were read in the New England colonies. It was first printed in the late 17th century. Strongly Protestant, the analogy was on religion and Puritan values. The two pages above taught the alphabet with allusions to Biblical characters.

The harshness of religious and secular law was ameliorated by the social mobility of the Puritan colonial society. A large proportion of men moved upward in their short lifetime, or fathers raised the social position of the women of his family, and of course the treatment of women varied according to their social position.

Young women were usually educated, sometimes as well or better than their husbands and brothers. Though it is true that only the boys of upper class families went to college, the stay-at-home girls often had time to read. New Englanders wanted their daughters to read the Bible, frequently and as much as a means of salvation. They were not, however, always taught to write any more than the simplest of communications. In 1647, Massachusetts Bay passed a law requiring every town of 50 families or more to choose a teacher from among the residents and pay him wages. The children of the ironworkers must have attended such a school. Towns of 100 families or more were to build a Latin grammar school to prepare boys for college.

The ironworkers found themselves in a society where the life expectancy at birth was 46; only one in ten lived to middle age.

Massachusetts Bay was great the Puritan experiment. Their "city upon a hill" was meant to show the world what they considered a better way of life. Religion was the most powerful private and public social force. Adherence to the Puritan ethic was expected. Church services was the principal event for many families, particularly for the women. Their men were employed in one occupation or another that brought them into almost daily contact with people. And even the men and boys on the farm now and again went by wagon to other settlements or, with great excitement, to Boston to sell their foodstuffs and to buy town goods and supplies.

Most towns had public taverns where beer and spirits were sold. Furthermore, the New England colonists drank beer and ale at home, an expensive custom they had brought from England, where the drinking of water was considered unhealthy. For all classes, readings from the Bible helped pass the leisure hours on dull days. Small children could play the age-old games that children always played, but not on the Sabbath. Records show that the Saugus ironworkers were frequent breakers of the Sabbath regulations.

Life was much less hard for those of the Better Class, especially in the matter of work, because all dirty, difficult, and hard work was done by servants. The ladies were shielded from those diseases and dangers that were the constant companions of less fortunate women. Even so, in the matter of pregnancy and childbirth, women of leisure suffered almost as badly as their lower-class sisters, because of the primitive state of medi­ cine in those days. At the age of 16 most was usual for women, and the death rates of both mothers and babies were very high. A woman who survived the primitive, superstitious, and unsanitary mid-wifery and lived to nurse as many as a dozen babies into childhood might live to see only two or three reach adolescence, live to see a daughter marry and embark upon the same dangerous cycle of conceiving life and witnessing death.

Under the economic system of private capitalism and personal effort, with a minimum of interference by the government and the church, the accumulation of wealth—the greater a man's means (property in land and money)—was considered unhealthy. For all classes, readings from the Bible helped pass the leisure hours on dull days. Small children could play the age-old games that children always played, but not on the Sabbath. Records show that the Saugus ironworkers were frequent breakers of the Sabbath regulations.

Early Americans had that kind of great courage that springs from unawareness and from fatalism about the vagaries of the natural forces ("Acts of God," to them) that affected all their days and nights. They worked hard from sunrise to sunset. This 10- to 12-hour workday was their lot. Their "city upon a hill" was meant to show the world what they considered a better way of life. Religion was the most powerful private and public social force. Adherence to the Puritan ethic was expected. Church services was the principal event for many families, particularly for the women. Their men were employed in one occupation or another that brought them into almost daily contact with people. And even the men and boys on the farm now and again went by wagon to other settlements or, with great excitement, to Boston to sell their foodstuffs and to buy town goods and supplies.

Of the hardships, however, Higginson makes small mention, for his aim in writing was to improve the guiding light behind Saugus. The force of one creature was so strong that if it "light upon anything, there is no abiding it." He was talking about the skunk. One day in 1636 while walking in Maine, he "chanc't to spy a fruit as I thought like a pine Apple" but of ash color. Although it was an odd looking fruit, Josseley had seen many strange things so he was not greatly surprised. When he tried to pick it, however, he was stung severely by a swarm of furorous hornets.
The economic crisis in the Massachusetts Bay Colony due to the sale of the colony to England caused much suffering in 1643. In the late autumn of 1643, the colony was in dire need of iron. Winthrop, at the urging of the General Court, sailed for England to obtain iron. The nearest iron sources were in the Saugus area, which was then part of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The colony was experiencing a severe shortage of iron, as the ironworks at Hammersmith, the colony's only source of iron, had been abandoned due to the high cost of shipping iron ore from England.

In 1641, Samuel Ball, a merchant, obtained a monopoly from the General Court to organize ironworks in the Saugus area. The company was formed by a group of investors from the colonies and England, and it was given a 21-year monopoly to mine and smelt iron ore. The company was called the Saugus Ironworks, and it was the first ironworks in the New World.

The Saugus River provided the waterpower needed to operate the ironworks. The water from the river was used to turn the waterwheels that powered the machinery in the ironworks. The river was also used to transport the iron ore and finished products.

The ironworks were divided into three buildings: the furnace, the forge, and the rolling and slitting mill. The furnace was where the iron ore was smelted into iron, the forge was where the iron was shaped into various forms, and the rolling and slitting mill was where the iron bars were turned into wrought iron.

The ironworks were a major source of employment for the surrounding area. The workers were paid a daily wage, and they were able to save a substantial amount of money. The workers were able to buy land and build houses in the area.

The Saugus Ironworks were a major source of iron for the colonies, and they played a significant role in the development of the iron industry in the New World. The ironworks were a source of pride for the colonists, and they were a symbol of the industrious spirit of the New World.

Ironworks on the Saugus

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