

## Massachusetts Colony, Henry David Thoreau, and Walden Pond

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As detailed in the book *Mayflower* by Nathan Philbrick, the first permanent settlers in the Massachusetts area were the Pilgrims, who arrived in Plymouth in 1620, after a long, exhausting journey. Led by Captain Miles Standish and William Bradford, among others, the Pilgrims suffered huge losses during their first winter, with only 44 of 102 surviving.

A few years after the Pilgrims arrived, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was chartered, and settled by Puritans. Three hundred families arrived in 1630, and John Winthrop was named governor of the colony. Declaring that the colony would be “a city upon a hill”, Winthrop and his followers settled in the Massachusetts area, with Boston as their center. These colonists also suffered losses during their first year, as over 200 settlers died from disease, hunger, and the effects of harsh weather. Colonists struggled to find food. Many of their shelters were not built to withstand the unexpected conditions in winter. Interactions with American Indian tribes were unpredictable and dangerous. In spite of these initial challenges, the colony eventually thrived and became a successful economic center.

The Massachusetts Colony was known for its emphasis on education. In 1647, the Old Deluder Act required that any township with 50 households must provide a teacher to instruct students to read and write. New College, later named Harvard University, was established in 1636.

According to historian Perry Miller, as quoted in *Founding Faith*, “the government of Massachusetts...was a dictatorship, and never pretended to be anything else” (Waldman). The Puritans wanted to keep their community spiritually pure, so there was no tolerance for any dissent. The most well-known conflicts involved Roger Williams, in 1635, and Anne Hutchinson, in 1638. Williams spoke openly about his belief that there should be a complete break from the Church of England. Hutchinson, who was a member of John Cotton’s congregation, claimed that everyone could know the true will of God. In her trial she claimed that she had received revelation from God. Both were banished from the Massachusetts Colony. The Quakers, who arrived in 1655 were persecuted for their religious beliefs, and eventually fled to Rhode Island.

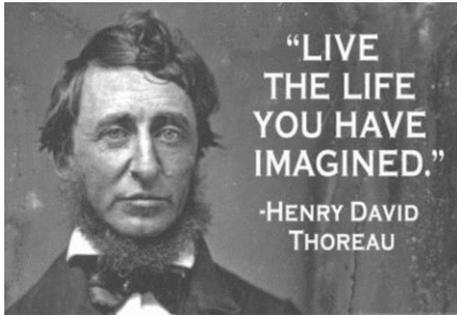
In 1643, the Plymouth Colony, Connecticut Colony, and New Haven Colony joined the Massachusetts Colony to form the New England Confederation. In 1691, a new charter united Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, and Maine into one colony.

One of the most famous residents of Massachusetts is the author and thinker Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was born July 12, 1817, in Concord. He graduated from Harvard in 1837, and tried several different paths, including teaching (which he abandoned because he did not support the idea of corporal punishment for students), and working with his father in the family pencil making business. Nothing really seemed to suit him. He met Ralph Waldo Emerson, also a resident of Concord, and was

“For we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.” John Winthrop



introduced to transcendentalism. With Emerson as a mentor, Thoreau began to explore the



transcendentalist ideas. In 1845, Thoreau built a cabin near Walden Pond, on land owned by Emerson. For over two years, Thoreau lived at Walden Pond. As he says in the introduction of *Walden; or, Life in the Woods*, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived" (Henry David Thoreau). Thoreau spent his days perusing a simple life, writing, speaking to neighbors, and spending time alone. When *Walden* was published, it was somewhat successful, but later became very popular with environmentalists and naturalists. Today, Walden Pond is protected by the Massachusetts Forest and Parks System.

Thoreau is also known for his political views. He was an abolitionist, and wrote an essay defending John Brown, calling him "an angel of light" and "the bravest and humanist man in all the country" (Henry David Thoreau). He was arrested for refusing to pay a tax, claiming that since he did not support government actions, including slavery and the war with Mexico, he would not pay a tax that would support the government. He spent a night in jail, and later wrote an essay titled, "Civil Disobedience" based on his experience. This essay would later inspire many activists, including Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

When Thoreau died in 1862, his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson stated, "No truer American ever lived." Louisa May Alcott, daughter of Thoreau's friend Bronson Alcott, wrote a poem titled "Thoreau's Flute" in his honor. The final stanza contains the lines, "O lonely friend! He still will be / A potent presence, though unseen," Alcott's words have proven to be true, as Thoreau continues to influence writers and thinkers around the world.

### Teaching Strategies

It is often difficult to get students interested in people and events from yesterday, much less over 300 years ago. One of the best ways to engage students is to go directly to the source. The history of the Massachusetts colony is rich with primary sources, including journal entries, drawings, and maps, that students can use to interpret, discuss, and debate the actions and reactions of the colonists.

The transcript of the trial of Anne Hutchinson is available, and students can read portions of the trial out loud to get a feel for Anne's determination and frustration with the accusations against her. There are also several connections to issues today that can be discussed with portions of the trial.

The ideas of transcendentalism and the writings of Thoreau can be daunting for students of all ages. There is a great series of children's books by D.B. Johnson that are excellent resources to introduce Thoreau and his ideas. Another good strategy is to use quotes from the writings of Thoreau—they are relevant and applicable for students today, and students will be able to make connections using brief passages from his writings.

### Works Cited:

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