

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PILGRIM AND A PURITAN?
BY ROCKWELL STENSRUD ON 11/26/15 AT 10:19 AM (Newsweek 2015)

An elderly man I knew in Newport, Rhode Island, relished social gamesmanship. At dinner parties, after exhausting insignificant chatter, he would lean conspiratorially to his table companion and ask, "Can you tell me the difference between a Pilgrim and a Puritan?"

One night I eavesdropped when he posed the question. A benign smile filled his face as the woman to his right, a successful business executive, suddenly found herself in a predicament similar to that of the lepidopterist's mounted butterfly.

Her eyes sought the ceiling. She squirmed and, after a moment, sputtered: "They're both English, aren't they? Big black hats with broad brims. Buckle shoes. Thanksgiving. Right?"

My friend said, "It's a bit more complicated than that."

Pilgrims and Puritans were Protestants who differed in degree. While both followed the teaching of John Calvin, a cardinal difference distinguished one group from the other: Pilgrims were Puritans who had abandoned local parishes and formed small congregations of their own because the Church of England was not holy enough to meet their standards. They were labeled Separatists.

Their desertion was an ecclesiastical insult to the king as head of the Anglican Church and a crime punishable by jail or death. Around a hundred Separatists left England in 1607-08 in search of religious freedom in the Netherlands; many of them later migrated to America in 1620 aboard Mayflower.

The far larger group, those we know as Puritans or Nonseparating Episcopalians, reluctantly retained attachment to the English Church but were determined to cleanse it of remnants of Roman Catholicism. These Puritans remained at home during the 1620s and, through participation in Parliament, tried to prod the Stuart kings toward toleration. They failed.

In 1630, John Winthrop led some 1,000 English Puritans in the initial wave of the Great Migration to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, north of Plymouth. They were fleeing the royal wrath of King Charles I and Bishop William Laud, who were escalating persecution of dissidents.

For those who believed in simple Sunday services based on the Bible, without the intrusion of Roman rituals, it was time to leave. Fear of further repression quickened decision-making and, by 1640, New England colonies would be home to nearly 20,000 mostly Puritan immigrants.

Despite doctrinal differences, the two communities were not hostile to one another because, with boatloads of the godly arriving, the Bay Colony was steadily becoming more Separatist (even though Winthrop denied it) by the year. The Pilgrims' basic tenets prevailed.

Nevertheless, Puritans were infinitely more influential in providing the pitch and tenor for the colonies than the Pilgrims: more numerous, more literate, more controlling. Intent on creating a City upon a Hill

and a New Jerusalem in North America, Bay Colony leaders demanded strict conformity in religious belief and practice. That was just the beginning.

Massachusetts Puritans set the intellectual tone of the country for three centuries. They branded the land with the Protestant Ethic. They introduced New England to a lingering burden of guilt and existential angst.

They overwhelmed the same Native Americans so helpful to Mayflower survivors. They established towns around Boston and forged a theocracy of magistrates and Congregational clergymen to control the growing population. They hanged dissenters.

This ruling elite carried piety on their shoulders and paranoia tucked into their high stockings, distinctive for their pinched lips and the injustices they inflicted on others.

In the maw of American myth, Pilgrims and Puritans have melded and congealed in memory; they endure, branded in the strands of our cultural DNA. Together, they have been marketed with such persuasive repetition that we have ceased to doubt their importance or make a distinction between them.

But there were genuine differences in how they viewed the world. The Pilgrim Saints were forgiving toward others. The Bay Colony Puritans believed in their God-given superiority and that they could do with New England as they pleased.