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The City Upon a Hill: Boston as God’s Bulwark against Piracy, 1630-1720

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Honors Thesis, Fall 2012
As the Reverend Cotton Mather sat face to face with William Fly in 1726, a sailor brought into Boston harbor on charges of high piracy, he contemplated not how Fly’s crimes were a detriment to the commercial activity of New England but only how to save the man’s soul from the fires of hell. To do this he would preach to Fly for two weeks; essentially begging him to seek redemption through God. Much to the esteemed Reverend’s surprise, however, Fly would have none of it. The fear of death and eternal damnation would not move the man to confess his crimes and accept God’s redeeming presence in the last few days of his life. Reverend Mather used every threat he could to induce Fly, but the pirate died as he had lived: obstinate and independent. According to historian Daniel Williams, in refusing Mather’s attempts to bring him back into the fold of religion and honest society, Fly made his own brazen statement to the citizens of Boston. In refusing redemption he refused Boston’s religious idealism and the minister’s authority.¹ To the Puritans of New England, this would have been shocking indeed. To prove the moral superiority of Puritan principles Reverend Mather set out to destroy Fly’s image in print. In The Vial poured out upon the Sea (1726) Mather transformed the seaman’s independence, courage and defiance into a foolish disregard for the status of his soul. With the culture of Massachusetts changing and Puritanism losing its hold on society the stakes were high in this game. Reverend Mather felt compelled to prove the moral superiority of Puritanism.² In doing so Mather faced several barriers. Piratical activity along the coast of North America was high and reports of pirates obtaining substantial riches filled Boston’s papers. At the same time in many colonies, Rhode Island and South Carolina in particular, piracy had been sponsored instead of punished. Reverend Mather sought to destroy any positive qualities the general public could attribute to piracy, and thus destroy any allure a citizen might find in joining the rogues.

² Ibid.
Fly was only one of several pirates Mather counseled in the last few days of their lives, and he used each as a chance to scare the public against engaging in and condoning the sins of piracy.³

To gain a full understanding of why an esteemed and educated man like Mather would sit in a stinking jail with men accused of such terrible crimes as murder and piracy, one must look at why piracy posed such a threat to Mather. Two themes emerge: the physical proximity of piracy to the port city of Boston as well as the socio-economic status of Massachusetts. Mark Hanna has theorized that pirates were successful due to the support of their endeavors by the elite of several North American cities, in particular Newport, Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina. At first glance this would seem an extraordinary contradiction, but in fact there were several factors that led to this arrangement. A distinct lack of effectual colonial administration from London assured that there would be no negative consequences for such open support of piracy. Also, a crippling currency drain forced merchants to look elsewhere for sources of revenue. Perhaps most telling was that by sponsoring pirates British subjects in North America could retaliate against the Navigation Acts which were seen as a method used by Parliament to hinder colonial prosperity. The pirates also gained from such an arrangement. North American port cities were convenient places to fence goods and launder money without the fear of imprisonment and death.⁴

The port city of Boston presents an interesting case. Colonial officials in Boston did not write extensively about pirates in their official correspondence. Many other cares occupied their attention – from colonial wars, to Native American uprisings to ensuring New England trees were kept for use in the production of naval vessels. Colonial correspondence between the New

³ Ibid.
England governors and the Colonial offices in London rarely relate stories of piracy other than to lament Newport’s openness to them or to relate stories of ships taken off the coast. One pirate did garner particular attention: Captain William Kidd. His trial and execution were discussed in great detail. Yet Kidd’s travails stand out as one of the very few references to piracy in these communications between New England governors and colonial officials between 1698 and 1723. Boston’s first publication, The Boston News-Letter treated piracy in the fashion - as stories of pirates off the coast or of ships taken in distant locations. This silence in both governmental records and newspaper accounts as to piracy in the Massachusetts region can lead to different conclusions: that the officials wished to keep piratical activity under wraps to avoid detection, or that there genuinely was little to discuss. Certainly Reverend Mather wrote extensively about Pirates; The Vial poured out upon the Sea being but one of his many publications on the topic, but does that mean that they were running amok in Boston? Or, perhaps, they were brought there from distant locales against their free will. From the records left behind by royal governors and newspaper editors it is difficult to determine if Boston was, indeed, a pirate nest. In solving this puzzle historians have overlooked the role of religion. It was religion, after all, that guided Reverend Mather’s hand as he wrote his diatribes against sin and eternal damnation.

Cotton Mather would have been aware that pirate nests flourished in North America – the colonies of Rhode Island and Massachusetts Bay shared a border and Massachusetts newspapers contained regular accounts of piracy in the region. Given that pirates flourished so close to home, Mather’s quest was especially important to him. He felt compelled to keep such sin out of

5 CO 5/860-868, Board of Trade and Secretaries of State: America and West Indies, Original Correspondence, New England.
6 <Examples>
7 <Examples>
Massachusetts to protect the religious sentiment of its Puritan elite. Piracy was a rebellion against society just as sin was the ultimate rebellion against the will of God. In *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* Perry Miller, the preeminent historian of New England’s religious history, argues that New England was colonized by Puritans who hoped to create an idyllic religious society out of heathen inhabited wilderness. To do so they joined their religious beliefs to economic activity: all work was undertaken to first glorify God and then to make a profit. Sinners of any type were punished as necessary to re-establish God’s will in society. 8

This is a simplified version of Puritan belief, of course, but it is illuminating. Mather’s work was to bring these sinners back to God for the protection of society as a whole. At the same time Boston was also a port heavily involved in Atlantic trade, in which Puritan merchants, ship captains, and seaman all participated. 9 Thus the struggle between Pirates and Puritans, as exemplified by Reverend Mather and Captain Fly, was both religious and economic.

One man does not constitute a colony. Did Reverend Mather’s views represent those of the Massachusetts’ merchant elite and did they keep piracy’s influence out of Boston? Was Boston a pirate nest? The contention of this thesis is that Cotton Mather’s struggle was not fruitless – Boston was not and did not become a pirate’s nest. While pirates flourished in the ports of Newport and Charleston they were condemned in Boston - it was a port where they were regularly punished. Captain John Quelch, the first pirate to be tried by an Admiralty Court in North America, was sent to Boston in 1704. The infamous Captain Fly was executed in 1726, and these are only two examples of the many pirates executed at Scarlett’s Wharf then hanged in chains. 10 Puritan religious beliefs were the driving force behind these prosecutions and

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10 Provide citation(s) to other piracy trial(s) in Boston.
subsequently Massachusetts’ anti-piracy sentiment. Just as political and economic forces shaped Newport and Charles Town into pirate nests; religion pushed Boston in the opposite direction.

This thesis will be set up in three inter-related parts. The first will explore how New England isolated itself religiously from England. The second will contend that isolationism caused religious ideals to radicalize and the third will argue that this radicalization caused Boston to resist piratical activity.

**Part I: Isolation**

Isolation is defined in the World English Dictionary as “a lack of contact between persons, groups, or whole societies.” This definition conjures an image of physical separation between two groups or people, but isolation does not necessarily mean that two groups disengage physically from one another. The isolationism studied in this chapter is the religious and mental separation of one group from another. The main goal Puritans had when crossing the Atlantic was to set up a new type of civilization centered on God’s divine presence. Their colony would become a “city on a hill.” Lodging themselves in the remote landscape of New England they intended to purge themselves of popery and European religious traditionalism. By doing this they would divorce themselves from the religious milieu of England and become a distinct confederation. The main issue that presents itself in this study is why Puritans would travel such a great distance to gain religious freedom. It is necessary to set the stage; to do this the history of non-conforming Anglicans will be established and the argument that immigration was critical to achieve their goals will be made.

The sect of Puritanism cannot be found in the historical record before the reign of Elizabeth I. During the interim between the reigns of Henry the VIII and Elizabeth I, the struggle for religious dominion of England had been especially hazardous. Hanging in the balance was the
fate of Catholic and Protestant alike, and all were aware that the winner would gain power and
the loser would face persecution. As Mary I burned Protestant heretics many prayed that
Elizabeth would finally bring an end to the carnage by placing one Church supreme above all
others. She did, but it was neither distinctly Catholic nor Protestant. Instead, the Church of
England became a hybrid church formed to serve a hybrid religion. Catholics bemoaned a loss of
sacred rites and Protestants grumbled that Anglican vestments were too fine. Dissenters formed
quickly. Desperate to worship freely Protestant radicals denied the authority of the Anglican
Church and contended that they had the right to decide their own religious issues. Elizabeth I
reacted by persecuting all who would not readily accept her Church’s authority. This trend was
continued by her successor, James I.\textsuperscript{11} Embittered by long years of persecution, murder and
religious intolerance one group of Protestant radicals took their hatred of Anglican officials as a
sign from God that they hated not only their enemies but his as well. Finding in the Old
Testament the Hebrew nation that was permitted to commit horrific crimes in God’s name, they
began to fashion their views in a supposedly Hebraic tradition. It became a sin to dress lavishly,
drink to a friend’s health or even play simple games.\textsuperscript{12} To distinguish themselves from other
reforming Protestants these early Puritans formed their identity by contrasting themselves against
“others.” These others were any group that did not believe the Reformation should be continued
in England until all vestiges of Popery had been completely eradicated. Not only did Puritans
desire to see churches and church officers stripped of fine adornment they also wanted to purge
society of frivolous entertainment. Thus, while they shared with many other Englishmen the
desire to rid England of Catholic influences and rituals, Puritans sought an absolute rather than

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
pluralist Protestant polity. Ancient traditions such as Maypole dancing, Churchales and Carnival were to be abolished. Many believed these activities to be pagan in origin and as such were unworthy of a Godly people. Papists were especially dangerous for two reasons: Puritans associated the Pope with the antichrist and that Catholics tended to favor ancient festivals. In this strict group we find the forefathers of New England.

Sensing that England would never align itself to their covenant, a small portion of Puritans fled England in search of a place to create an ideal society. In November, 1620 the first group landed at Cape Cod. During the next two decades over 20,000 English Puritan men, women and children left their homes for New England. The migrants believed they were going to create a new type of community in New England; one in which the civil covenant was also an agreement with God. The company would only survive if God blessed their holy actions. It is worthwhile to note that Puritans only chose New England because the land was uninhabited (by Europeans, that is). If the model was to be truly effective it had to be successful in New England. The reclamation of the homeland would then be attempted; no man sought to stay in the wilderness if it was possible to purge England of popery. Thus to achieve success in England they had to first be successful in the wilderness. Migration, then, was their only option to reclaim England from papists and neo-papists (the other).

Historian Perry Miller cites the failure of the English Civil Wars as the beginning of New England’s isolationism. Though the wars were a defining moment for New England, it is possible to pinpoint isolation prior to the Civil Wars. The very act of creating a city on a hill – a place ideologically distinct from the homeland was an act of isolationism. In England Puritans

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16 Ibid., 26.
were a scattered throughout the realm, but in New England they were one group, one voice, and one faith. As one they could better dictate how society would function and who belongs versus who does not. The civil wars did not start isolationism, but did complete it. That is, it forced Puritans to focus exclusively on New England as their sole holy community. In 1641 Hugh Peter and Thomas Weld sailed for Old England to beg help. Facing economic depression, the two men hoped that England would rally to the cause and send adequate aid. They found, however, that many in England felt alienated by New England’s reputation for narrow-mindedness and the persecution of non-conformists. As Hugh Peter noted in a letter to John Winthrop Jr., “None will come to you because you persecute. Cannot you mend it?”17 Ironically, both Hugh Peter and Thomas Weld were both dismissed from the colony.

England’s resistance to aid New England points to England isolating itself from New England. Why would no one aid the poor and hungry? Isolation from both sides fed into the issue: neither side believed the other was Godly. Puritan New England persecuted and was intolerant; Old England had fallen from grace. Both sides were adamant that the other was wrong, and thus the isolation was in full form before the Civil Wars. Interestingly, Puritans in England had never held any real hope that social and religious change could be made in New England. During the economic hardships faced by colonists in the 1630s and 1640s the providential meaning of Massachusetts was uncertain. Many on both sides of the Atlantic questioned whether New England was the final destination of God’s holy elect. Spurred by insecurity members of the Puritan elite in England formed the Providence Island Company in 1630. They sought to settle in the West Indies because they believed the economic advantages afforded by colonization in a materially rich region would spur economic change that would

eventually result in religious change. If a stronger economic situation allowed England to materially compete with the Spanish empire, England could stand on its own thereby weakening Spain and ending its Catholic influence in England.\textsuperscript{18} A small island off the Nicaraguan coast was chosen as an ideal location; it was located at the very nexus of Spain’s Central American empire. The English Puritan’s goal was threefold: first, to create a Godly community in the Caribbean; second, to weaken the Spanish empire through privateering campaigns; and third, to strengthen England by providing essential materials for manufacture. The first issue the organizers of the Puritan settlement of New Providence faced was a lack of religious Puritan men eager to migrate. Building a holy city required good men, but finding any willing to leave England or New England was difficult. Families were reluctant to travel because they feared Spanish aggression. Eventually some men were found. Many were Puritans, but others were adventurers from other Caribbean islands who did not hold fervent religious ambitions. Tensions arose. The governors and their councils were military men and were meant to also serve as religious figures. Unfortunately, many of the most qualified captains were of the adventurer type used to long stints free from civil restraints. The most significant issue was that the three goals were incompatible. Building a successful colony while fighting Spain and being holy all at once was not a logical goal for any small band of men. Farmers had to be ready for battle almost constantly, and the strain leaders faced weakened their religious resolve. Small personal grudges grew into paralyzing issues that had to be dealt with by the colony’s leaders in London. Many times these matters were only resolved by excommunicating members or even sending them to face Archbishop Laud to be prosecuted (as was the fate of Henry Halhead, a member of the governor’s council, and Hope Sherrard, a minister). That two of the colony’s leaders were sent to Laud, the man accused of returning England to Popery, for prosecution foretold doom and the

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 70-99.
eventual downfall of the colony. Internal strife and economic failure fueled the end of New Providence; the goals were just too incompatible. “The colony’s economic goals fed conflict between the civil and military leadership. Unfamiliar crops that required large plantations and large labor forces meant reliance on the expertise of foreigners and on men … who had spent their lives careering around the Indies…” A Godly community could not be built on such unholy foundations. Eventually the Spanish were able to take the island. New England’s leaders never sent a large contingent of men to New Providence. John Humphrey, a patentee of New England, had attempted to find men, but was stalled by misfortunes. John Winthrop and John Endecott, both of whom rejected New Providence, viewed each reversal as God’s judgment on both the new colony and those who populated it. Humphrey’s group did eventually land in New Providence, but were greeted by the Spanish who had just taken the island. Dejected, they returned to New England in disgrace. Winthrop wrote, “[they were foolish for leaving] a place of rest and safety, to expose themselves, their wives and children, to the danger of a potent enemy, the Spaniard.” His overall message explicitly stated that New England was a safe haven for reformed religion. Puritans would be safe only if they stayed in North America – no distant place, whether Old England or a Caribbean Island, could offer God’s elect safety and salvation. They colony had isolated itself from England and even Puritans who had remained there, Convinced that their city was chosen by God New England’s leaders rejected any relationship between themselves and New Providence. Not even the idea that the island was the final destination for God’s elect could budge them from their retreat in the wild. New England Puritan’s sense of isolation was thus in place before the Civil Wars.

19 Ibid, 80.
20 Ibid., 87.
Oliver Cromwell and the English Civil Wars played an interesting role in shaping the fate of Puritanism. Puritans viewed Cromwell as the embodiment of their dreams for a greater England. He sought only religious men for his army and stripped them of all ancient chivalric adornment. His army swept the land like the heavy hand of God; Royalists withered before the scorching heat of its divine mission. Many who had migrated to New England went home to join the cause, and all rejoiced at Cromwell’s victory. If the goal of Puritans in New England was to create a “city upon a hill” in the wilderness, then Cromwell was seen as their savior in England. Though Massachusetts Puritans had supported Cromwellian forces during the Civil Wars, Cromwell’s regime was hesitant to help Massachusetts. Believing that New England was only a way station of God’s holy mission, Cromwell’s council sent emissaries to recruit colonists for the retaking and populating of New Providence and Jamaica from the Spanish. New Englanders would not budge as they had heard reports of ill health and evil actions amongst those already in Jamaica. John Leverett, New England’s spokesman to Cromwell, begged him to withdraw his request. He wrote in a letter to governor Endicot,

Whilst his Highness was pleased to entertain me with these discourses, an honourable gentleman of his council came in, who hearing New-England’s rigidness and persecution; to which his Highness was pleased to answer very much in the favor of them, that they acted like wise men, and God had broken the designs of evil instruments, bearing witness with them against evil seducers which had risen up amongst them, mentioning one or two; to which that honourable gentleman replied, the miscarriage of particular persons proved not God’s bearing witness against the body of them that withdrew and departed from them for their rigidness; to which, with their favour, I replied, that if Rhode Island and those parts were intended, that then God had born witness against them in general as well as against particulars, which only declined christian religion but moral observations; to which the honourable gentleman was pleased to wave the credit thereof, and express, that if it were so, he thought his Highness ought to animadvert upon one and the other. Much more passed in discourse, and his

Highness broke off with this, that he would not impose any particular injunction upon me.\textsuperscript{22}

Cromwell only agreed to allow New Englanders to stay in their land because he was persuaded by their persecution that they were a holy community. It is telling that New England would fail to enthusiastically respond to Cromwell’s proposal – they were obviously convinced that their community was the sainted “city upon a hill.” Isolation was at play here as well.

Cromwell\textsuperscript{23} was in Old England and they were not; why rally to England’s call whether it be for Cromwell or the King? The Commonwealth became the realization of a dream, and when it fell after Cromwell’s death the Puritans were stunned. In the wake of Charles II’s restoration New England completed its isolation. They essentially gave up any hope of saving England and focused solely on their possibilities in North America.

New England’s largest rebellion against English authority occurred during the charter crises. The original charter had been issued to the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1623, and set the colony up for self-rule through popularly elected officials. The original charter governing New England was revoked by Charles II following his restoration to the throne. Charles, miffed that Massachusetts refused to accept his authority over their government and possibly driven by the fact that it was a Puritan colony, had the Board of Trade revoke the company’s charter to exert control over the colony’s economic activities. His successor, James II, had a new charter implemented in 1686 that resulted in the merger of Massachusetts into a new colony known as the Dominion of New England that incorporated all the land between the Delaware River and Penobscot Bay. This new charter replaced elected officials with an appointed governor, Sir


\textsuperscript{23}The historiography of this era has established that connection to England was crucial for the success of the North American colonies. Though this model is useful for understanding the southern colonies, New England stands apart. Growing resentment towards England, especially after the Civil Wars, plunged New England towards isolation. Religion here is the key to their isolationism.
Edmond Andros, and pushed all local officials from power. New Englanders split into two factions following the first charter crisis – the issue called Puritans to answer an important question, where they Englishmen or not? Should the colony respect the King’s authority even if it meant the end of New England’s religious hegemony and self-reliance? The question was clouded by the ongoing half-way covenant debacle and a growing interest to promote commercial interests over religious concerns; the younger generation rallied to the new charter as a way to promote civil liberties and the older fought tooth and nail to save their covenant. A new consensus was forming; many felt that Puritanism was hindering prosperity. Aligning with England would allow merchants to act outside of the covenant to pursue unbridled commerce while conservatives viewed the charter as a way England could force toleration upon them. This surge in anti-Puritan beliefs was short lived, however. Hugely unpopular in New England, the Dominion charter was broken in 1691 following the Glorious Revolution. Boston revolted when word of the revolution reached North America and Governor Andros and a surveyor named Edward Randolph were arrested. The elite were quick to revert back to the original charter. Elections were held and pre-Dominion governments again held power. Eventually they agreed to accept a new Royal charter because they lacked authority to rule on their own. William III worked with Increase Mather to create a Royal Charter that would satisfy both the crown and New Englanders. The Province of New England would stand until the Revolution.24 Though Puritans had no choice but to accept William’s charter, they held no great love for it. "They [the Puritans] accepted a royal corporate charter, yet immediately subverted its intent by using it as a basis for local government – a government they kept as independent as they possibly could. They kept ties to a corrupted England as weak as possible, reluctant even to fly the royal flag over

Boston’s fort (it displayed, after all, an idolatrous cross)."^25 It is important to understand that the surge of Anti-Puritan feeling in this era did not necessarily mean that the moderate party favored being completely beholden to England. Perry Miller cites this era as the beginning of a truly American attitude almost one hundred years before the revolution.^^26 Moderates still wanted to be separate from England but for commercial reasons – to gain prosperity on their own terms. The idea of isolation took hold in the imaginations of all New Englanders whether they supported strong Puritan religion or not.

**Part II: Radicalization**

As Puritans isolated themselves their religious views on behavior intensified. Left alone in the wilderness they created a social vacuum; their ideas were rarely questioned so the elite were never deterred from forming a radicalized religious theocracy. This section will focus on how the unquestioned, elitist theocracy formed radical religious laws and how those laws affected society. Puritans believed that honest work was part of salvation because it was God’s way of calling them from lives of sin. Covenant and calling defined Puritan religious and civil worldviews. Covenant theology was based on the original covenant of works made between God and Adam. God granted Adam eternal life in return for perfect obedience. Original sin broke the covenant, but God granted grace to humanity for the faithful. Puritans believed that works, grace and salvation were combined in both the individual and society. Societal covenants regulated interactions between the individual and government, the magistrate and government and between the people and God. All had to function properly for society to remain vital and holy. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 was once such covenant. It placed the covenant in the center of

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church governance and created a “visible political union among [church members].” Each member pledged through the covenant to meet regularly for church services and to submit to any discipline the church felt necessary to protect morality. Puritans strongly believed that without covenants the church and ultimately the colony would fail.

Vocational calling relied on a set of duties established by biblical tests. Any who defied these responsibilities opened themselves to scrutiny and punishment because that was viewed as going against God’s will. Vocations were divinely ordained and immutable. Ministers and magistrates were believed to be especially divine because their occupations were important to good governance. Magistrates were believed to have held five characteristics: wealth, piety, moderation, wisdom and justice. Wealth denoted social standing and political contacts as well as work ethic. Piety, moderation, wisdom and justice were crucial to good governance both within themselves and society. To be pious, moderate, wise and just denoted God’s favor upon the magistrate— it was He who gave a worthy man the ability to judge fairly in all matters. The main concern for a magistrate, however, was that he be in good standing with the Congregationalist church.1

Magistrates held two responsibilities: to safeguard orthodox religion against heresy and to enforce moral laws. Ministers acted as “‘faithful shepherds’ whose calling and duty were sound preaching of the word and diligent pastoral care for the elect.”2 Together ministers and magistrates were the building blocks of a faithful and successful society. In New England these men dominated all aspects of government, church, and society as a whole.3

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28 Ibid., 110-111.
29 Ibid.
30 Demos or Lockbridge
An analysis of criminal behavior and punishment in New England illustrates this. God’s elect had to follow certain codes of behavior, and if they failed to do so there were severe consequences. For this discussion crime and punishment will be analyzed. First, it will be argued that execution speeches were used as a means of social control. The punishment of crime was meant as much to control society as to punish the sinner. Second, crimes against religion will show that Puritans had a strong sense of the totality of their own beliefs. The elite truly believed that Puritanism was the only sect of Christianity that had a direct link to salvation. Quakers and non-dissenters were targeted with force and driven from New England. The larger issue at play was that non-conformists of any brand were not tolerated. This essay will not argue that crime was not punished severely in England or in other colonies, but that in New England these crimes were especially targeted for severe punishment. The holy doctrine of Puritan religion demanded it. Taken together an argument that such radicalized religious punishment required that piratical activity be quashed and driven from New England can be made.

**Execution Sermons as Social Control**

*God is wise and wonderfull in his Providences, and knoweth how to order the death of two or three so as to prevent the destruction of many thereby. Hence he hath appointed that Justice shall be executed in a solumn way, upon Capital Offenders, that others may hear and fear, and none may do any more so wickedly.*

-Reverend Increase Mather, *The Wicked Man’s Portion*, 1675

As Increase Mather states boldly in the passage above, capital punishment served as both a deterrent and to save society from God’s wrath. Ministers propounded time and again the virtue of death to cleanse society. Capital Punishment was, therefore, used not only to punish the offender but also to save New England. Biblical texts outline offenses God considered worthy of
death, and the Puritans largely followed this to write their criminal codes. For example, crimes such as adultery, blasphemy, sodomy and bestiality that were not made capital offenses and England were punishable by death in New England while other crimes (larceny, burglary and robbery) that were capital offenses in England were not in New England. In part, these capital offenses were due to Puritans’ preoccupation with “the beast within” and a desire for order and conformity.31 The crimes New England turned into capital offenses were all taken verbatim from biblical texts. It was important that ministers and magistrates have God’s blessing to execute sinners to avoid criticism; who would criticize God’s will? Avenging God for sins committed was paramount if society was to be saved from hell. Covenant here is extremely important; members of society swore to uphold virtue between themselves for the safety of all. Any who broke the covenant went against both God and New England and were punished accordingly. Increase Mather wrote in *Sermon Occasioned by the Execution of a Man* (1686), “Murder is a Sin so great and hainous as that whoever shall be found Guilty of it, must be put to Death by the hand of Publick Justice.” Here he cites the book of Numbers (35:16), “And if he smite him with an instrument of iron (so that he die) he is a murderer, the murderer shall surely be put to death.” This is not to say, however, that all criminals who committed biblical crimes were executed. Magistrates had a great deal of discretion when deciding who to execute and who to reform. Biblical text was, therefore, used as a justification on the occasion that a sinner was executed, but not necessarily the only deciding factor. Execution sermons were an important aspect of this. Ministers could use sermons to explain to the assembled crowd (and those beyond, if it was

printed) why this particular sinner was killed. Social control was key here – while propounding the circumstances surrounding this death ministers warned citizens how to avoid the same fate.  

Public executions were an opportune moment to spread religious messages. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people gathered to bear witness, and ministers recognized the opportunity. Increase Mather’s sermons were so well attended that on one occasion the meeting had to be moved for fear that the church gallery would collapse under the weight of the attentive audience. On another occasion Cotton Mather “could not get unto the Pulpit, but by climbing over Pues and Heads.” If anyone should be unable to attend the actual sermon or hanging they could buy the ministers’ sermons in print. New England, Boston in particular, had a large and diverse printing and bookselling market. In 1686 Boston alone had eight booksellers and another sixteen opened between 1700 and 1711. By 1719 the capital city also had five printing presses and nineteen bookshops. In addition to established shops traveling chapmen distributed literature to all areas of New England. Cheap prices (bound copies sold for five pence and unbound for two pence each) allowed all but the poorest to easily purchase the literature. Literacy was only a small barrier to wide circulation; it is estimated that half of all adult males were literate by 1660 and two-thirds were by 1710. Execution sermons dominated pamphlet sales during the era and did not largely exist outside of New England leaving these sermons as a largely Puritan invention. The content of execution sermons was fairly consistent. The minister would begin with a bible passage and then used the text to develop the thesis of his jeremiad. He would then explain how his thesis could be applied to life through a series of instructions and exhortations.

In addition to the minister’s sermon a confession by the condemned prisoner was also either spoken aloud at the gallows or printed (sometimes both). Puritan’s believed confession was the key to salvation, so they would gladly allow any repentant prisoner to either speak or transcribe his confession. Sometimes the prisoners would request certain ministers to speak; many actively contributed to the creation of their execution sermons.35

In 1690 Hugh Stone of Andover argued with his wife over the sale of land. As they were walking one night he slashed her throat in the presence of a neighbor. Indicted and found guilty, Mr. Stone requested that the Reverend Cotton Mather preach his last sermon on this earth. Reverend Mather’s sermon, entitled Speedy Repentance Urged, began with Job chapter seven, verse 21. “Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins? For I will soon lie down in the dust; you will search for me, but I will be no more.” From this verse Mather instructed the crowd that they should repent their sins now as death may shortly follow. He used Mr. Stone as his example; he urged the sinner’s repentance in the few remaining moments of life he had left. He exhorted, “Lord, if a morning or two hence, thou shouldest Look to find me on my Knees as I am now before thee, it will be too late; I shall be departed into that State, where in, I can make to Prayer to thee, and have no Pardon from thee, World without End.” Hugh Stone’s confession was added to the printed version of this sermon. He begged God, “let not my sins which condemn me here in this world, rise up to condemn me in the World to come though they have condemned me in this World, shew mercy, Lord, when I come before thy Judgment-seat.”

35 Ibid. The desire to have criminals make public confessions was not uniquely Puritanical or limited to the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century The Newgate’s Ordinary was replete with confessions of criminals awaiting execution in London. During the nineteenth century confession narratives were a regular feature of American life. Ann Fabian, The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 49-78.
Stone’s confession and request for divine mercy coupled with Mather’s discourse on salvation would have been a tremendously powerful address.36

Execution sermons and the print culture they inspired were powerful tools ministers had to preach to society at large. Timing and availability of the audience allowed a widespread discourse on sin and salvation – ministers recognized this and used it to their utmost advantage. Punishment of crime was only one motive; the larger agenda was to control society. By linking the condemned criminal to sin in society the minister could make his audience believe that good behavior was key to a successful society. If sin was allowed to pervade then society would fall. The sermons also usually included a history of the prisoner’s past crimes and narrated how he had escalated to the capital offense. By doing this they could warn against sin at any level.

Execution sermons helped the Puritan elite control sin in New England.

Religious Dissent

The first wave of religious dissent was the Quaker invasion of 1656-1669. Fleeing public persecution abroad Quakers moved into New England with one goal: to topple the Puritan regime. They began their crusade by proclaiming Puritan religion false and declaring God’s wrath on society. Mary Fisher and Ann Austin were arrested for declaring “Repent! A day of howling and sad lamentation is coming upon you all from the Lord!” They were carried to Boston Prison where their books and pamphlets were seized and burned. The two were scrutinized for signs of witchcraft and then sent to Barbados from which they had migrated.37 Puritan leaders viewed Quakers as dangerous because of their refusal to pay taxes or take oaths to protect the interests of New England. Also, Quakers did not believe in heirarchical systems, so they would not show proper respect to elites. Puritan leaders believed allowing Quakers in New England would lead to

36 Cotton Mather, *Speedy Repentance Urged*, (Boston: Samuel Green, 1690).
cultural chaos and the decline of traditional religious practice. In 1656 the Massachusetts General Court passed the following laws to fight “the cursed sect of heretics lately risen up in the world commonly called Quakers, who take upon them to be immediately sent of God … and do so speak and write in blasphemous opinions:” a fine of 100 pounds for any shipmaster knowingly transporting Quakers into the colony, and imprisonment if he did not carry them back to the place whence they had come; a sentence to the house of correction for the Quakers, where they were to be severely whipped, and by the master there be kept constantly to work and none suffered to converse with them; a fine for anyone importing, dispersing, or concealing Quaker books or writings concerning their devilish opinions; a fine on anyone defending the opinions of the Quakers and banishment for persistence in such defense; and a whipping or fine for anyone who shall revile the office or person of magistrates or ministers, as usual with the Quakers.  

Banishment was the most common form of punishment, but Quakers kept re-entering the colony. In 1657 the Court ruled that male Quakers would have an ear cut off and be made to do hard labor upon his first conviction for re-entry and then losing his second ear and branded with an “H” for heretic on his second. If he happened to be caught a third time he faced a hot iron being bored through his tongue. Though corporal punishment and banishment from New England were the most common punishments, a few Quakers were executed. Mary Dyer and her husband left New England with Anne Hutchinson in 1638. She returned in 1657 after having converted to the Quaker faith. She was arrested and banished. She returned again and was arrested. Originally sentenced to death by the General Court, her sentence was commuted to banishment. Her close call would not deter her, however, and she returned a last time and was

38 Ibid., 62.
executed on June 1, 1660.\textsuperscript{39} Ill-treatment of the Quakers proves both the fervor of Quaker Anti-Puritan sentiment as well as the Puritan’s desire to drive religious non-conformity from their colony.

Quakers were not the only religious dissenters banished from New England. In 1636, a group of Puritan discontents began arguing that the established covenant of salvation through works should be replaced by \textit{sola gratia} (salvation by the grace of God). The group, which included powerful Puritan leaders such as Reverend John Cotton, Reverend John Wheelwright and Governor Henry Vane, believed that God’s mercy was an unmerited gift given through the sacrifice of Jesus for mankind. Anne Hutchinson was an ardent follower of Reverend Cotton, and almost as soon as arrived in Boston she was encouraged by him and Governor Vane to set up weekly religious meetings to discuss sermons with her neighbors. Soon, however, she attracted a large following of both men and women.\textsuperscript{40} As her audience grew so did her confidence – she soon began to discuss the shortcomings of both the ministers and the conservatism of their faith. She named Reverend Cotton as the only pastor in New England that could teach the New Testament correctly.\textsuperscript{41} Hutchinson, Cotton and Wheelwright were examined by a group of ministers in October, 1636. When Cotton was questioned about his belief in \textit{sola gratia} he admitted that the believed works were also important to salvation. Wheelwright agreed and the court was kept from taking action. Cotton and Hutchinson’s adherents had a large following in the Church Of Boston, and were quite powerful (partly because the Governor was one of their members).\textsuperscript{42} The ministers met again in December 1636; shortly after Governor Vane attempted

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} David D. Hall, \textit{The Antinomian Controversy}, 6.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
to resign his office because he believed God would judge the colony for its dissension. He was deterred, however, and kept his post until the next election. To cleanse society a fast was scheduled for January 19, 1634. It is important to note that this controversy did not take place just between a small group of ministers and Anne Hutchinson. New England society was deeply divided on the issue. Hutchinson and Cotton had followers; indeed the Church of Boston leaned heavily in their favor. Thus far the ministers had been unable to purge the Grace covenant from New England, but their compulsory restraint was almost at an end. January 19, 1634 may have been deemed a day of atonement, but John Wheelwright took it as a challenge to stir the community into action. Invited to speak at Boston Church his message fueled the growing tension. John Winthrop described it as, "inveighed against all that walked in a covenant of works, as he described it to be, viz., such as maintain sanctification as an evidence of justification etc. and called them antichrists, and stirred up the people against them with much bitterness and vehemency." It worked. Hutchinson’s followers publicly questioned ministers; an unthinkable act. Wheelwright was found guilty of sedition and banished from New England. The election of May, 1637 hammered the nail into Free Grace’s coffin. Governor Vane ran against John Winthrop for the governorship but lost. Winthrop did not hesitate to maneuver events in his favor. A synod was held in August; the ministers in attendance drew up 90 Free Grace ideologies that they refuted to solidify their own religious standing. The Governor also had three of Wheelwright’s advocates (and Boston’s three members of the General Court), Aspinwall, Coggeshall, and John Oliver, examined and dismissed from service. Aspinwall and Cogeshall were exiled with Wheelwright. Winthrop’s justification for his actions was, "two so opposite parties could not contain in the same body, without apparent hazard of ruin to the

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43 Ibid., 7.
44 Ibid.
whole.” He believed the strife caused by this controversy would tear the colony apart from within.45

With the Court firmly in his favor Winthrop’s next move was to try Anne Hutchinson for her part in the controversy and for her weekly meetings. The accusation against her was for, “…promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble… [Speaking] divers things as we have been informed very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers… and maintained a meeting and an assembly… not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting your sex…”46 She was examined by the civil court where Winthrop acted as primary prosecutor. He also took pains to fill the Court with members unsympathetic to Hutchinson’s position. They questioned her for two days; arguing that she had dishonored the colony by encouraging dissenting opinions. It is interesting however, that Governor Winthrop’s main concern was that she allowed men into her meetings. He said, “For this, that you appeal to our practice [of holding women’s meetings] you need no confutation. If your meeting had answered to the former it had not been offensive, but I will say there was no meeting where women were alone, but your meeting is of another sort and there are sometimes men among you.”47 On the second day of her trial Hutchinson revealed that she received divine messages and that she had been warned that New England was cursed for their actions against her and her cohorts.

Reverend Cotton, who took part in her trial and acted as a witness for her, attempted to soothe the Court over Hutchinson’s divine revelations but failed to have any effect on their decision. She was convicted and sentenced to banishment after her ecclesiastical trial. Her church trial took nine hours, and Reverend Cotton was charged with admonishing her behavior. He said, “I would

47 Ibid., 74.
speake it to Gods Glory [that] you have bine an Instrument of doing some good amongst us...he hath given you a sharp apprehension, a ready utterance and abilitie to expresse your selfe in the Cause of God.”

The ministers then found Hutchinson guilty of all charges. Cotton continued,

"You cannot Evade the Argument...that filthie Sinne of the Communitie of Woemen; and all promiscuous and filthie cominge togeather of men and Woemen without Distinction or Relation of Mariage, will necessarily follow...Though I have not herd, nayther do I thinke you have bine unfaythfull to your Husband in his Marriage Covenant, yet that will follow upon it. Therefor, I doe Admonish you, and alse charge you in the name of Ch[rist] Je[sus], in whose place I stand...that you would sadly consider the just hand of God agaynst you, the great hurt you have done to the Churches, the great Dishonour you have brought to Je[sus] Ch[rist], and the Evell that you have done to many a poore soule.”

The Antinomian Crisis, as this series of events is now known, was a defining moment in the religious life of New England. A crisis of ideology, it split society in two and then pitted each side against the other. Winthrop’s conservative party fought against the Free Grace advocates to keep the Church’s covenant based on works instead of grace. This event shows how important religion was in New England; at least three high ranking men and one socially important woman were banished because they held a belief contrary to the accepted standard. Boston Church backed the Free Grace Advocates, but there was nothing they could do once Winthrop held the Governorship. This is an important idea – the hand that held the reigns of secular power also controlled the Church’s power to a large extent. Another important aspect of this event was who bore the brunt of punishment. Anne Hutchinson was a relatively small part of a larger group, but she was banished while leader John Cotton was left untouched. The locus of power resided in men, but, more importantly, to a few particular men. That Cotton had backed Free Grace did not matter if he was willing to see his error. Vane left New England in disgust, so an analysis of his importance cannot be gleaned. He was never indicted, however, so it is easy to imagine that he

48 Battis, Saints and Sectaries, 242.
49 Ibid., 243.
50 Ibid.
Intolerance marked Puritanism. Non-conformists were simply not welcome in New England. It would be illogical to assume that pirates would be more welcome in Massachusetts than Quakers – both broke traditional norms.

Part III: Resistance to Piracy

Piracy’s historical background can be difficult to transcribe. Not always notorious, English pirates had started as tools of the crown meant only to further political ends. Letters of Marque, documents giving ship captains the right to attack enemy ships and bring them back to port for a bounty, surged during Elizabeth I’s reign.\(^5^1\) Over time alliances formed and reformed leaving desperate sailors with one option: to plunder any ship capable of bringing a bounty. Elizabethan England’s use of privateering campaigns to weaken the Spanish empire had degenerated to villains capable of raiding ships of all nations – even England’s. When James I ascended in 1603 he resolved to “live at peace with all nations,” and recalled all Letters that had been previously issued. He also reduced the size of the navy driving sailors to desperation. “Some, because they became sleighted of those for whom they had got much wealth; some, for that they could not get their due; some, that had lived bravely, would not abase themselves to poverty; some vainly, only to get a name; others for revenge, covetousnesse, or as ill; and as they found themselves more and more oppressed, their passions increasing with discontent, made them turne pirate.”\(^5^2\)

Piracy was an alluring career: a man could make a fortune plundering ships. Colonial shipping

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\(^{5^1}\) Over four hundred known pirates sailed the seas during Elizabeth’s reign.

networks provided ample bounty – coin, cloth, wine, sugar and many other necessaries of life were shipped through the Atlantic and beyond. The contemporary Hollywood depiction of pirates shows men in search of gold, but pieces of eight were not the most valuable commodity in the Atlantic. Pirates could make a fortune from less glamorous materials. But in order to do so they needed ports that would allow them access to trade their plunder and attain materials crucial for their voyages. The historian Mark Hanna has argued that Newport, Rhode Island and Charlestown, South Carolina were welcoming to pirates and their trade. The cornerstone of Hanna’s thesis rests on a survey taken by Edward Randolph, surveyor-general of the American Colonies, in May 1696. Randolph wrote,

“I observed [pirates] fitted out vessels of 60 or 70 Guns a piece, very well manned whome they called privateers. [These ships sailed to the West Indies] where they committed all Acts of violence upon the Inhabitants, & brought home great quantities of Silver in Coine & Bullion, with Rich Copes, Church Plate & other Riches. [Eventually, many of the pirates] found out a more profitable & less hazardous voyage to the Red Sea, where they take from the Moors, all they have without resistance, & bring it to some of the Plantations on the Continent of North America or Islands Adjacent, where they are received & harboured and from whence also they fit out their vessels to the same place.”

In Hanna’s analysis piracy flourished because North American cities actively supported the pirates. These ports allowed pirates to trade their goods and supplied their ships for future voyages. Economic distress and a lack of authority from England pushed merchants and governors to work with pirates to alleviate conditions and to achieve prosperity. “They fostered a popular image of pirates as more than just ‘honest men’ but as heroes and patriots whose activities represented a real as well as symbolic challenge to the legal and commercial policies formulated by distant and ineffectual administrative bodies that hindered colonial financial

53 These were the port cities of Charles Town, SC and Newport, RI. Hanna, The Pirate Nest, 1.
54 Ibid.
prosperity and defense.” Which raises the question of whether Hanna’s thesis holds true for Boston and the larger New England colonies. It does not. New England certainly faced the same economic conditions of South Carolina and Rhode Island, but their religious convictions would not allow active support of criminals. Furthermore, New England had an economic advantage – the ability to mint coinage and control of timber used to make ship masts. If Charles Town and Newport’s elite used piracy as a way to rebel against England’s colonial administration, then Boston refused to even accept their authority. New England was separate from Old England religiously and that meant to Puritans that they were separate totally. In the previous section New England’s Puritan beliefs were outlined; in this section Piracy in the region will be analyzed to show that there are no reports of complacency with pirates but only of execution of these maritime criminals.

If piracy was anathema to Puritanism it is imperative to understand why the pirates posed such a threat to New England. Pirates, by their nature, went against social norms. They were typically poor men who lacked familial connections. Typically honest sailors turned pirate as the result of mutiny against merchant ship captains; usually claiming harsh discipline or poor treatment as the cause of their uprising. Discipline could include beatings with cats, ropes, canes; being kicked, punched and even threatened with knives and guns. Mutiny was a serious issue faced by merchant and naval ship captains. Rediker defines mutiny as a “collective effort planned or spontaneous, to curtail the captain’s power and, in the most extreme cases, to seize

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55 Ibid., 4.
56 Ibid.
57 Marcus Rediker, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seaman, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 58 Ibid, 211-222. Rediker admits that these were extreme examples and may have been exaggerated. It was common for merchant officers to use harsh discipline, however.
Sixty cases of mutiny were recorded in the years 1700-1750; half succeeded in taking the ship and one-third turned pirate. Murder was typical during mutinies because the fear of being caught caused would-be pirates to destroy witnesses. Piracy and murder carried the same sentence: death. Once pirate, bandits typically formed democratic societies onboard ship. The captain was usually elected and was held accountable to a council of peers. Pay was by occupation and not merit, so work was not as important as one’s social position. We find in pirates many characteristics that made them unsavory and unwelcome guests in New England. Every aspect of a pirate’s character went against the grain of the ideal Puritan: they had no connection with family (no social controls), their work was dishonest and they frequently committed such heinous crimes as murder. Puritans prized social control and honest deeds as the merits of salvation; pirates simply did not fit into their world. If Puritans allowed pirates in the colony their social disease would infect the community as a whole by turning it into a den of radical criminals.

Piracy was rarely discussed in letters between the government of Massachusetts and London. The few examples that exist are reports of piracy along the coasts of Maine and Cape Cod or are appeals to London for increased laws and navy ships. One such law was passed in November, 1668. The Colonial Board at Whitehall sent a list of acts that would allow Massachusetts officials to create laws. One such act was “An Act Against Pyracy and Robbery at Sea.”

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59 Ibid., 227-228.
61 Ibid.
62 CO 5/860, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and related bodies, “Correspondence, original – Board of Trade,” 1698-1699, Record #38.
Admiralty court in Boston questioned whether the Act gave Royal Navy captains the authority to try pirates at sea (without returning them to a Vice-Admiralty Court).


Pyracay grows every day in this part of the world, and the pyrates come and [commit robbery] on the coast here and the other plantations and there is no help for it unless your lordships speedily send two men of war to defend our shores and offend them and give me leave to say too, that if one of them be not a 4\textsuperscript{th} rate ship, I fear you will hear the pyrates will have taken them; for we are told of pyrate ships that have 30 guns and 150 men; and their men being all Generally choice men and desperate. I appeal to your Lordships whether a 5\textsuperscript{th} rate ship whose short compliment is but 95 men be a match for such a pyrate. I know a good 4\textsuperscript{th} rate would terrify the pyrates more than if there were three 5\textsuperscript{th} rates sent to the several plantations of the coast of the ships your lordship send hither and to N. York ought to be specially good sailors, and the command of them honest and stout and well loved by their men other wise you may chance to hear the commands are thrown over board and the men turned Pyrates: for it runs mightily in the hearts of the common sea men at thy time more than ever to become Pyrates; the vast riches of the red sea and Madagascar are such a lure for seamen that there’s almost no withholding them from that vile practice of turning pyrates.

Bellomont’s appeal stemmed from a lack of naval ships along New England’s coast. During the period from the founding of the colony through 1680s there were no ships in the area. After 1680 there was never more than one Royal Navy ship in the area at a time. The \textit{HMS Squirrel} was the only ship patrolling New England’s waters in this period, and it was a 5\textsuperscript{th} or 6\textsuperscript{th} rate sloop or ketch (between 20 – 40 guns). Lord Bellomont’s 1699 appeal, then, is instructive. He fears piracy in the area and feels the need for additional ships; they were never sent. Even as a Royally chartered colony New England could not depend on England for help in times of need. This one plea is one of the few records of piracy to be found in Bellomont’s letters. He wrote in great

\begin{itemize}
\item [64] CO 5/860, Records of the Colonial Office, Commonwealth and Foreign and Commonwealth Offices, Empire Marketing Board, and related bodies, “Correspondence, original – Board of Trade,” 1698-1699, Record #278.
\end{itemize}
detail about wars with the Native Americans and mast trees sent to London. It can be argued, then, that piracy was not as pressing as war and timber. If piracy was actively supported in Boston his letters do not bear witness to it. The records of the Vice-Admiralty Court in Boston do include many mentions of pirates, however.

Using the Vice-Admiralty records from Boston for the years 1700-01 it is possible to construct a picture of how many pirates were in Boston. In May, 1700 the Vice-Admiralty court in Boston sent a letter to London about a group of pirates being held there. They hoped to send the pirates to London for trial because the ships the pirates had robbed were English. They feared those merchants would not feel that justice had been done if the trials were held in New England.\(^65\) They also sent word to London that these prisoners had no money to pay for their care while in prison, so the court allowed six-pence per diem for their care.\(^66\) It is possible that these pirates were Captain Kidd’s crew because in another letter dated May 18, 1700 Edward Whitaker, Solicitor to the Vice-Admiralty Court in Boston, informed the Admiralty Board of James Kelly, one of Kidd’s crewmen, who was accused of killing a Captain of the East India Company.\(^67\) Through these letters we see the interaction between Massachusetts and London that occurred via the Kidd crisis. Massachusetts was wary of trying Kidd and his crew because they felt London had a better claim; or so they wrote. It could just as well been to nullify their own part in the affair – that is they sent them to London as scape goats. Much information about Kidd, his trial and the controversy’s aftermath flowed between London and Boston in 1700. An overwhelming percentage of communications contains Kidd’s name or that of one of his

\(^{66}\) Ibid., record # 10.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., record # 14.
crewmen. What remains is a picture of a few other pirates brought in for trial at the Vice-Admiralty Court.

On August 6, 1700 Whitaker informed the Admiralty Board of forty-four pirates in the Newgate jail. He claimed they had no cloaks or shoes and gives them four pence per diem for their care. One of these men, Robert Laickman, brought a writ of *habeas corpus* and was released with a bail of fifty pounds. When Edward Whitaker found out about Laickman’s writ (and many others that followed) he begged the Lords of the Admiralty to try the pirates, possibly fearing that they might disappear before they could be brought to justice. Later that year Whitaker informed the Admiralty Board of a Mr. Theophilis Turner, an informant who surrendered to the Governor of Maryland. He offered to testify against the pirate Robert Culliford. Whitaker begged the Board to send money for Mr. Turner’s keeping so he could be present for the trial of Culliford. In June 1701 a letter was sent informing the Admiralty Board of twenty-one captured pirates. Seventeen were French and four were English. A man named Gyles Shelly was indicted for selling arms to the pirates. The Vice-Admiralty Court recorded around 100 pirates in Massachusetts jails between 1700 and 1701. The lack of piracy records in Governor Bellomont’s letters taken together with the plethora of pirates recorded by the Court lead to the conclusion that piracy did exist, but that it was well controlled by the Court. Though Bellomont requested additional Navy ships, he did not write that they were in the area due to support by local merchants. When pirates were captured they were subsequently tried and often executed.

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68 The records include a full account of Kidd and his crews’ prison expenses in Boston, their transport to London, a full account of the trial and many letters detailing the goods found on Kidd’s ship.

69 Ibid., #23.

70 Ibid., #25.

71 Ibid.

72 The English pirates were John Ireland, Thomas Hitchman and John Brant. Ibid., 185.

73 Ibid.
It may be useful here to construct a history of Pirates known to have frequented New England. Dixey Bull, and his crew were the first Buccaneers to raid New England’s shipping in 1632. Bull was a tradesman, but after a French raid at sea he turned pirate to secure a fortune. He ransacked Pemaquid to loot the trading station taking a way over £500 in goods. He then set his sights on Virginia, but his captured pilot refused to take him hence.74 Word spread in New England and Bull and his raids, and by November Massachusetts Bay sent out the first hostile fleet fitted out in New England to catch the pirate. They were unsuccessful; Bull and his crew landed safely in England and were not seen in New England again. Another set of pirates appeared in 1672. The crew of the Antonio had staged a successful mutiny and turned pirate. They sought shelter in Boston with one Major Nicholas Shapleigh, a merchant. He shielded them for some time before they were apprehended and executed at Boston.75 Major Shapleigh was fined five hundred pounds for sheltering them. In 1673 a law was enacted that made piracy punishable by death (it had been a general understanding but not a law before). “The Court observing the wicked and unrighteous practices of evill men to increase some piratically seizing of shipps, ketches, &c. with their goods, and others by rising up against their commanders, officers, and imployers, seizing their vessels and goods at sea, exposing their persons to hazard, &c. for the prevention whereof, and that due witness may be borne against such bold and notorious transgressions… This Court doeth order, & be it hereby orderered and enacted, that what person or persons soever shall piratically or feloniously seize any ship…shall be apprehended, and, being legally convicted thereof, shall be put to death.”76 Another set of pirates

75 Cotton Mather, “History of some Criminals Executed in this Land,” 1672; reprinted in Dow, Pirates of the New England Coast, 25.
from the ketch *Elinor* which had ransacked merchant ships near Cape Cod were executed ca. 1690. The most infamous, but possibly innocent, pirate captured in Boston was Captian William Kidd. In 1696 Richard Coote, Earl of Bellomont and Governor of Massachusetts and New York secured for Captain Kidd a commission to hunt pirates. Governor Bellomont, with the aid of such noble men as the Lord of the Admiralty and Robert Livingston esq. hoped that Kidd would raid pirate ships and return with their booty, but the venture ended badly. By 1686 the East India Company complained to Bellomont that Kidd had turned pirate and demanded his capture. Once Kidd returned to Boston to speak with Bellomont he was arrested, his plunder worth £40,000 pounds was seized and he was sent to London for trial. The cornerstone of his case was two missing French passes that Kidd claimed to have found onboard Moorish ships that he had taken. As England was at war with France the passes would most assuredly have saved his life. “Lost” during his transport to London their absence was damning; Kidd was found guilty and executed. These passes can be found at the National Archives. Captain John Quelch and his crew mutinied against a merchant captain and threw him overboard. They plundered Portugese ships along the coast of Brazil during an armistice declared between Portugal and England (though Quelch may not have known that peace had been declared). The captain and his crew made the unfortunate decision to return to Boston where they were arrested and later executed at Scarlett’s Wharf in 1704. Quelch used his last words as a warning to “take care how they brought money into New England, to be Hanged for it. Gentlemen, I desire to be informed for what I am here. I am condemned only upon circumstances.” His fellow at the scaffold also complained that, “it is very hard for so many mens Lives to be taken away for a little gold.” Many other pirates lost their lives in New England: Samuel Bellamy and his crew, George Lowther and his crew,

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78 Please see images 3 and 4.
John Phillips and his crew and of course Captain William Fly and his crew. The overwhelming majority of known pirates in New England were hunted down, captured and executed. There is only one recorded case of a pirate being sheltered, Dixie Bull, and he was quickly captured as well. The evidence simply does not convey a colony that sheltered pirates from justice; it is the opposite. New England was a place where pirates were executed.

Religion alone does not fully explain Boston’s stance against piracy; the economic situation in New England differed from that of Charles Town. Unlike the Chesapeake and Southern colonies, New England had a diverse economy. Cash crops, like tobacco, did not readily grow in the rocky soil of Massachusetts, so to supplement merchants had to look abroad. Dependent on imports and with no stable crop to export, New England plunged into an economic depression. Driving the depression was the belief that natural resources such as furs, fish and timber products could carry the colony, but by 1640 it was clear that this would not happen. England could purchase these products more cheaply from Scandinavia (timber) and France (furs). Rocky soil combined with a cold climate prevented the Puritans from growing enough grain to export – they could barely produce enough to feed themselves. Fish, a reliable source of income for a coastal people, also would not make money since England had a thriving fishing community and had no need to import seafood. The colony only survived in the early years because immigrants brought money with them that was used to purchase imported goods. As immigration slowed during the civil wars, the economy fell deeper into depression. Finally the General Court stepped in. They provided incentives for domestic manufacture of goods normally imported. They did so by promoting the organization of enterprises through land grants, money, bounties, monopolies of local markets, tax incentives, freedom from military obligations for workers and relaxation of religious regulations. New England had the required resources needed for the production of
shoes, boots, clothing, ironware and glass. Though this policy was largely unsuccessful (domestic production never met the needs of society) it did help to reduce imports. As described previously exported fish were not needed in England, but in the post-civil war years meat prices rose sharply in England causing the price of fish to skyrocket. Coupled with a population boom the price of meat propelled an interest in alternative sources of fish. These new factors promoted New England fishery as a substitute for fish caught by English fishermen. New England could import fish at a lower price. Eventually, the fish monopolies in London were broken and fishy helped repair New England’s economy. Fishing also opened a new source of revenue – shipping. As early as the 1630s some Barbadian sugar, Virginian tobacco, and Dutch furs arrived at London via Boston. As Boston merchant vessels shipped fish to London they began to ship other cargoes as well “Once involved in such a trade, New Englanders began to serve the other demands of these markets. The residents of the Wine Islands needed foods besides fish; they need barrels for their wine; they needed other timber products as well. Operating on a smaller scale than Londoners and loading their ships with mixed cargoes, the New Englanders were engaged in trade with the Portuguese and Spanish islands by the mid-1640s.” According to Bernard Bailyn, “By the Restoration the New Englanders not only were in complete command of their own fishery but also had a fleet of locally owned and operated vessels playing steadily between their home ports and the southeastern Atlantic markets.” Coinage was also not an issue for New England. In 1652, Massachusetts challenged England's ban on colonial coinage by striking silver coins. The coins were produced for many years, but were always dated 1652. If New Englanders were caught producing the coins they could claim they had not produced any

82 See images 5 and 6.
since 1652. The Vice-Admiralty Court in Boston was another source of income. Ships were often brought in to be sold as prizes and their cargo was distributed (legally or illegally) throughout the port city. These sources of income allowed Boston to flourish while Charles Town and Newport floundered. New England did not need the income pirates brought; they were able to create wealth through enterprise.

Conclusion

Contemporary records include numerous accounts of pirates in jail and their subsequent trials. Only one man was named as an accomplice, Gyles Shelly, between 1699 and 1701. The Governors’ correspondence is almost void of piracy. Given the evidence it can be reasonably asserted that Boston was not a pirates’ nest. Religious conviction did not allow early Puritans to associate with piracy because their good works equaled ultimate salvation. Also, Massachusetts did not need the economic advantages that Charles Town and Newport received from working with pirates. Ultimately, it is impossible to argue that piracy was not supported at all in Boston, but the records indicate that it was not widespread if it did exist. Piracy in colonial New England is an opaque subject that can only be understood in terms of the social forces at play in the area. Though this subject deserves an in-depth analysis not presented in full here, it is the author’s hope that this thesis will open a discussion. Piracy is an important historical phenomenon and can be used as a window to view many areas of social and cultural life during this era (1600-1730) – Puritan religion is just one of many subjects we can better understand by looking at the relationship between piracy and society.

Images


Images 5 & 6: Images of the front and back of a Oak Tree Shilling minted in New England. Note the date, 1652
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