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## Teacher Background

### I. Unit Overview

Relying on primary sources, this unit explores the Puritans' attempt to create a utopian community in New England. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was in many respects remarkably homogeneous and cohesive, composed of Calvinist Protestants from the middle ranks of England. They shared common goals as well as a common background. The vision of a godly society, where people fit themselves to obey God's will as revealed in the Bible, was broadly shared by Puritans. Striving for individual salvation as they worked for the common good, Puritans tried to build a harmonious religious commonwealth which would be a model first for England and ultimately the world.

But the very loftiness of their goals bred dissension. Although Puritans relied on the Bible to guide them in building their "city on the hill," they had various interpretations of the Bible and different ideas about what kind of laws, institutions, and conduct a utopian society required. From the beginning, tension existed between communitarian notions of social good and the individual pursuit of spiritual salvation. The insistence on obedience to civil authority and adherence to a rigorous legal code was an irritant to both stiff-necked, self-righteous sorts who were convinced of their spiritual superiority and to those members of the colony, who, having migrated for adventure and fortune, were less than devout Puritans. As the colony became more firmly established, the individualistic quest for material well-being further hampered the creation of a community "knit as one."

Focusing on Winthrop's secular sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," the first lesson considers the values, goals, and political beliefs which animated the Puritan experiment. Special attention is given to the concept of the covenant as an organizing principle for Puritan society. The second lesson shows how beliefs affect daily life and studies the way children were raised. The third lesson studies the region's original inhabitants, the Narragansett, and their interactions with the Puritans. The final lesson introduces students to Puritan government. Emphasizing local government, town meetings, and the duties of citizenship, this lesson captures the way in which the Massachusetts Bay Colony provided an important antecedent for the representative government our nation would eventually achieve.

Of all the colonies, the Massachusetts Bay Colony is the one most people look back to for our nation's founding principles. The idea of a covenant, which in some ways anticipated Locke's social contract, was much imitated in other colonies, and even has obvious echoes in the preamble of the *Constitution of the United States*. Appreciating the utopian vision that drew Puritans to the New World is a primary concern of this unit. Their sense of their unique place in world history is a notion that has recurred with frequency in our history, inspiring some of our best and worst behavior as a nation.

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But the importance of the Puritans lies as much in their failures as in their achievements. Their attempts to sustain a homogeneous community of shared beliefs did not succeed. Students need to understand how the ideas that brought Puritans to the New World and sustained them in their early years of settlement led to strife rather than harmony. They need to consider the extent to which a community has the right to insist that all its members share the same beliefs and the extent to which regulating this ideal is possible.

This unit also introduces students to the important voices of dissent—to the alternative developed by Roger Williams—freedom of conscience. His innovative idea of religious tolerance ultimately became the basis for the first amendment of the Bill of Rights. The sharp division he made between church and state was unprecedented, but his reasons, like the Puritans' concept of the covenant, are the antecedents for important values in today's society.

A lesson on some of New England's original inhabitants is crucial. The varied relations between Algonkians and Puritans mark one of the more revealing differences between Williams and other Puritan leaders. But the most significant reason for introducing students to the Narragansett is to draw their attention to a rich and fascinating culture, whose ways of regarding nature are particularly worth appreciating. Their notions of how to work the land were a source of friction between natives and Puritans. Yet, their values may inspire us to a more temperate use of our natural resources.

## II. Unit Context

This unit should be taught after studying Pre-Columbian Indians and the Age of Exploration and prior to studying late colonial America and the American Revolution. Students should have a sense of what Native American cultures were like before European contact, with some appreciation of the rich and complex diversity of Native American cultures. From the study of European explorers, they also should have a sense that by the time the Puritans landed, the natives in the region had been in contact with Europeans for over a century.

Contrasting the colonization of the Massachusetts Bay Colony with Jamestown and the Quakers of Pennsylvania would be an excellent way to show that there were different approaches to colonization. Understanding how different these three regions were in their beginnings would help students understand the abiding regional differences that mark American history.

### III. Unit Objectives

1. To study historical documents in order to experience history as a dynamic discipline which studies, interprets, and debates the meaning of human artifacts and, through those, humanity's collective past.
2. To examine the way Puritan children were treated from a variety of perspectives and from this study of children to imagine the way ordinary Puritans lived.
3. To appreciate the rich culture of the Algonkians and the way the culture was modified by its contact with Europeans.
4. To consider the way Puritan forms of government anticipated later more democratic practices and yet differed from these practices in certain fundamental ways.
5. To experience the way different sources are used to provide historical understanding.
6. To experience the difference between primary and secondary documents.

### IV. Correlation to United States History Standards

**A** *Society Knit as One: The Puritans, Algonkians, and Roger Williams* provides teachers with extended lessons that address **Era 2** (Colonization and Settlement) of the *National Standards for United States History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles, National Center for History in the Schools, 1996). Specifically, students analyze the religious motives of Puritan colonizers (**Standard 1A**); examine how English settlers interacted with Native Americans in New England and analyze how Native American societies changed as a result of the expanding European settlement and how they influenced European societies (**Standard 1B**); examine the roots of representative government and how political rights were defined (**Standard 2A**); and, explain how Puritanism shaped New England communities and how it changed during the 17th century and trace the evolution of religious freedom in the English colonies (**Standard 2B**).

Lessons in the unit likewise provide students with the opportunity to apply a number of Historical Thinking Standards including an examination of multiple causation, consider multiple perspectives, examine the influence of ideas and interests, analyze cause-and-effect relationships, assess the importance of the individual in history, and reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration.

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### V. Introduction to *A Society Knit as One: Puritans, Roger Williams, and the Algonkians*

In 1629, just before King Charles I dissolved Parliament, he gave a company of prominent Puritans a royal charter authorizing them to settle the Massachusetts Bay region. Other corporations were granted similar patents to develop lands claimed by England, but they operated from English cities under the watchful eyes of the King and his men. Whether by accident or design, no one is certain, the Massachusetts Bay Company charter prescribed no meeting place for company officers. Bay Company officers interpreted this silence as permission to regulate their enterprise from New England. By moving company meetings to Massachusetts, the company's chief officer became the colony's governor and company members became its legislature and judiciary. In effect, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a self-governing commonwealth, independent and isolated from the King's authority.

Puritans regarded this advantageous charter as providential evidence of God's favor. The patent for the Massachusetts Bay Colony was not only a contract between business partners and the King, it was a covenant with God, a promise to Him which He had enabled. Besides virtual independence, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was distinguished by being a religious enterprise, rather than a merely commercial one. Company directors were less concerned with profit than with constructing a model community which conformed to the word of God. Laws for regulating the civil affairs of New England Puritans were drawn directly from the Bible. Disobeying parents was a capital crime for Puritans not because they were especially harsh, but because respect for parents was the Fifth Commandment in the Bible.

Although Puritans sought to build a society bound by Christian love, where individuals would be subordinated to the needs of the community, they resented the confusion between civil and clerical authority embodied in the religious hierarchy of the Church of England. They were opposed to bishops, regarding them as tainted remnants of Catholicism. Puritans regarded the king's authority to appoint bishops as an improper mixing of church and state. They felt members of each church should choose their own minister and regulate their own church affairs. However, for both practical as well as idealistic reasons the Puritans resisted separating from the Anglican Church. Not only were they dependent on the king's good will, they truly hoped that through their example they could reform the church. The Bay Colony sought to keep the church and state distinct by barring ministers from holding civil office. But given their intention to construct a holy commonwealth, authority between civil and religious institutions overlapped.

Convinced of the need for absolute conformity to the standards they were establishing, Puritan leaders limited voting to adult male church members. Puritans hoped such a restriction would help them avoid factional disputes and ensure that leaders and ordinary Puritans shared the same social vision. They also sought community harmony by vigorously enforcing adherence to community standards and obliging everyone to live within a community.

Realizing that people had not changed their essential nature by crossing the Atlantic, Puritans sought to uphold their covenant with God by rooting out sin whenever it appeared. To behave otherwise would have been to condone evil. Thus, Puritans felt themselves responsible for the good behavior of their neighbors. Compact villages were constructed with houses close together to facilitate watching one another. Most of the living in these houses was done in common areas and individuals seldom had their own rooms.

Families, not individuals, were the essential social and economic units. Just as the society was hierarchical so too was the family. Resolutely patriarchal, the family was “a little commonwealth.” Single adults were required to live in families where their behavior could be monitored and under the authority of a patriarch.

The proper rearing of children was as much for parents’ souls as for the well-being of children. Since knowledge of the Bible was the surest way to salvation, children were instructed in reading not so much to advance their material condition but to help their spiritual well-being. The community was also organized around biblical precepts, so understanding of the Bible would help to ensure strict obedience to community norms.

Those drawn to this utopian experiment were a remarkably close-knit and homogeneous group. Puritan leaders were among England’s best educated citizens. Ministers were typically college educated. Company leaders were members of the gentry or rising merchant class, experienced in decision-making and leadership. Unlike the recruits to Jamestown, Puritans were drawn from England’s middle ranks. Yeoman farmers, artisans, and small shopkeepers were actively recruited and were expected to bring their families. They frequently came from the same or neighboring villages and parishes and many doubtless had known one another in England. Religion, however, was the principal basis of their homogeneity.

As Calvinists, Puritans believed firmly in predestination. They accepted that most people were destined for damnation. Since Adam’s fall, they believed, people had demonstrated that they were too morally weak and fundamentally wicked to merit salvation and heaven. Yet, as a demonstration of goodness and power, God selected some people to join Him in heaven. There was no way to be certain of one’s own election. The elect made up the true and invisible church of saints. However, the visible church, like the Church of England, was open to all people—saints and sinners alike. The emotional pressure exerted by this system of belief was often enormous. Puritans constantly sought reassuring signs that they were among the elect. Their emphasis on congregational churches, where groups of believers formed themselves into churches of what they hoped were visible saints, was one way to deal with such pressure. They looked for signs of their spiritual destination. They believed that the capacity to behave morally and to prosper materially were indications of God’s favor.

Puritans took their success in establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a sign of their uniquely favored status. After the first harsh winter, when 200 of the original 700 settlers

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died and another 100 were so thoroughly discouraged they returned to England, the Puritan experiment met with such material success that by 1640 there were 12,000 settlers in New England. The diseases that decimated the populations of Native Americans, assuring Puritans abundant land with little need for armed conflict, were more evidence of God's love. Although perhaps all people and social groups put themselves at the center of their stories, the unique success that greeted the Puritans in their early years combined with their sense of mission is one source for our national tendency to believe in the exceptional role God and history has assigned the American people.

Puritan leaders, like Governor John Winthrop, were concerned that nothing be done to jeopardize the autonomy of their colony. Driving non-conformists from their community was essential to keep their mission uncorrupted. Moreover, their spiritual concerns had a practical aspect: they worried that religious zealots, like Roger Williams, who wanted to separate from the Church of England, drew the wrong sort of attention to the colony. Leaders already feared that migrating to New England with the charter looked like separation. If the king believed that they were attempting to evade his authority, he might revoke their charter.

Despite being thrown out of Massachusetts Bay Colony, Roger Williams was a Puritan. He is remembered for establishing a colony predicated on religious tolerance, a concept he called "soul liberty," but his religious convictions stemmed from a stiff-necked, utterly relentless pursuit of what he was persuaded were the true principles of Puritanism. He, too, was a Calvinist who believed in predestination and the essentially wicked nature of humanity, but he was much less confident that congregational churches, even if their membership were closely monitored, could be pure. Since true purity could not be found in any established church, the righteous should abandon the hope of finding it in any human institution. Williams was convinced that true sanctity had no need, nor any unique ability, to impose moral enlightenment on others. The outward forms of behavior could certainly be regulated, but it was beyond human ability to impose spiritual virtue. Only God had such power. For humans to believe their institutions could foster grace was presumptuous. Thus, when Williams upheld a separation of church and state, he was unconcerned with the peace of the state; his interest was to preserve the unhindered pursuit of individual religious experience.

His desire to acknowledge the Algonkians as the rightful owners of the land stemmed from the same inflexible self-righteous attention to pursuing truth ruthlessly. He saw that the land was not unworked territory and the Algonkians did have a sense of proprietorship. Consequently, he had no doubts that they were its legitimate owners. The assertion commonly made by Puritan leaders, called *vacuum domicilium*, that they were entitled to claim any land that appeared to them to be unused was flatly rejected by Williams.

The first years of Puritan and Algonkian interaction were relatively tranquil. Part of the reason for this apparently smooth meeting was that Algonkians had had regular contact

with Europeans for almost a hundred years prior to the arrival of Pilgrims and Puritans. Algonkian culture had already been affected by this contact and Algonkians had some understanding of European culture and people. They had begun to incorporate technological innovations brought by Europeans into their traditional cultural crafts. But the most profound effect of this early contact was the transmission of contagious diseases by Europeans. Thousands of native people, with no resistance to diseases like smallpox, measles, and bubonic plague, died. Just a few years before the arrival of the Pilgrims, there were about 72,000 Native Americans in the New England region; by 1690 these people had been essentially destroyed.

English settlers tended to be contemptuous and distrustful of Algonkians because of their seasonal mode of living. Coastal tribes had summer villages where they raised corn and fished, and inland winter settlements in sheltered valleys. Their summer residences were domed huts made of two layers of woven mats, while their winter dwellings were more substantial log dwellings which resembled modern Quonset huts. Indeed, the design for Quonset huts in the 1940s was based on a native form of housing from Rhode Island. This mobility was the source of two sorts of confusion on the part of Europeans: mobility was confused with rootlessness and the slash and burn agricultural practices done by women led Europeans to assume that Algonkian men were lazy. The effect of these misapprehensions fueled English ethnocentrism. The goal of bringing Christianity to Native Americans was at best pursued half-heartedly, despite being one of the principal aims listed in the Massachusetts Bay Charter. Regardless of their disdain, the English were initially interested in preserving sufficiently cordial relations so that they could engage with the Algonkians in the highly lucrative fur trade. They also sought to control those tribal groups responsible for manufacturing wampum, a medium of exchange. Once the fur-bearing animals had been hunted out, the English were interested in acquiring Algonkian land and less concerned in sustaining decent relations between people. Once the beaver were decimated and the Algonkian people were sufficiently weakened, preserving their autonomous existence proved impossible.

## VI. Lesson Plans

1. The City on the Hill
2. The Fifth Commandment: "Honor thy Father and thy Mother"
3. A Heart Sensible of Kindness
4. The Wisest Invention