

The New England Colonies

By Sharon Fabian

New England is a hilly, rocky place. It is situated along the northeast coast of the United States. The New England landscape was formed by glaciers millions of years ago. When European colonists arrived in New England, their first view of their new land would have been the sight of dense forests. When they began to settle in the 1600's, they had to develop ways of life suited to the landscape.

Towns grew up along the coast, where ships could bring more settlers, deliver supplies, and load up with export goods. In each town, craftsmen worked at their trades, providing necessities for the colonists and goods for export. Many of them worked in the shipbuilding industry, providing planks for building ships, spars to hold the ships' sails, and pitch for making the ships waterproof. Other New Englanders fished for a living, reeling in not only oysters, lobsters, crabs, and fish to eat, but money from the export of seafood as well.

Colonists had to grow their own food, and so they also had small farms. Many people lived and worked in town and also grew crops or raised a few animals on a small farm just outside of town. New Englanders did not live on large, independent farms like settlers in the middle and southern colonies because they did not have either flat land or rich soil.

New England colonies were small and closely knit. Often they were located at a great distance from the next town. So, the town itself had to be very self-sufficient. For New England colonists, the town was the center of government and the center of their church life. Schools and shops were also located in the town.

The center of town, where all of the activity took place, was known as the common. The town meeting hall was the main building. In the early colonies around Plymouth, Massachusetts, the meeting hall was where both church services and local government meetings took place. The men who owned land and were the heads of the households were also leaders of the church and the leaders of the government as well. The idea of separation of church and state had not taken hold yet. Later colonies, especially those established in Rhode Island, would develop that idea.

Among their other duties, the town hall leaders were in charge of hiring people for certain important posts. They hired the fence viewer, who made sure that the fences of the town were kept in order, and they also hired the tithing man, who kept worshipers awake during the long church services by poking them with a long stick when necessary.

Everyone in the town was required to attend Sunday worship services. A bell on the meeting hall would ring each Sunday morning to call everyone to church. The services were long, lasting most of the day with a break for lunch. Everyone sat on long wooden benches or in wooden pews listening to hours of preaching and teaching. With the tithing man always nearby, they tried to stay awake and pay attention to the whole service.

People's homes were located in town too. They could walk to the town hall, the shops, and school. They might only have had to hitch up their wagon when they needed to work on their farm.

The houses themselves were small and sturdy with a really large chimney. They were built to be safe from icy winter weather and safe from attacks. Fireplaces provided all of the heat and were also used for cooking. An average house may have had one main floor with maybe two rooms and a partial upper floor known as a garret.

Colonial life in New England had its own character, as did colonial life in each of the other divisions of the early colonies - the middle colonies and the southern colonies.

