

Pilgrims and Puritans — Thanksgiving and Harvard

As we approach Thanksgiving, and as we value Harvard, let's take a moment to think about the Pilgrims and the Puritans.

Both groups were Protestant, sailed from England, and settled in what would become Massachusetts. The Puritans were substantial leaders in business and the professions, and many served in Parliament. They were educated at Oxford and Cambridge and financed their own journey. Not so the Pilgrims.

The Pilgrims came in 1620 but did not own a ship. They were financed by a group known as the "Merchant Adventurers." The investors in England expected profits from the bounties of the New World and the labor of the Pilgrims. That never happened. The Pilgrims were not very good at making money and never repaid their debt. With no way to return to England, they stayed. Half died that first year, but the following fall, in 1621, they enjoyed a bountiful harvest. That was the first Thanksgiving.

Six years later, the Puritans began to arrive—and they came in great numbers. The Pilgrims were Separatists, while the Puritans were establishment. The Puritans sought to "purify" the Church of England, making it less Catholic and less "high church."

When Charles I became king in 1625, he ruled as a "high church" Anglican, levied taxes without Parliament, and believed in the divine right of kings—especially his own. He encouraged and approved Puritan emigration. During the 1630s, thousands of Puritans sailed to New England, while others remained in England. Eventually, civil war broke out. Parliament and the Puritans won. Charles I not only lost the war but was found guilty of treason and executed—he quite literally lost his head.

The Puritans were Calvinists. Like the Presbyterians and the Dutch Reformed of today, they valued an educated clergy. They founded Salem in 1626 and Boston in 1630. Concerned about "an illiterate ministry to the Churches, when our present ministers shall lie in the Dust," they established a college in 1636 to train ministers.

That college was poorly funded until 1638, when clergyman John Harvard (1607–1638) left all of his books and half his estate to the new institution. In gratitude, the college was renamed Harvard.

As people, we can admire the Pilgrims. But as Unitarian Universalists, we are spiritual heirs of the Puritans. In the early 1800s, the Puritans themselves divided—and the more liberal Unitarians prevailed at Harvard. In 1805, Harvard became Unitarian in spirit and leadership.

Later in that century, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote:

"All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian. All the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians."

(Quote courtesy of Warren R. Ross, *The Premise and the Promise*, Skinner House, Boston, 2001, pp. 15–16.)

— John A. Keohane, Texas-based longtime Unitarian Universalist