

## Readings in American History

Fifth Edition

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# American Experiences

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## Readings in American History

Volume I To 1877

*Fifth Edition*



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## **To Our Families**

# Preface

American History instructors enjoy talking about the grand sweep of the American past. Many note the development of unique traditions such as the American political tradition and the American diplomatic tradition. They employ the article *the* so often that they depict history as a seamless garment and Americans as all cut from the same fabric. Nothing could be further from the truth. America is a diverse country, and its population is the most ethnically varied in the world—white and black, Indian and Chicano, rich and poor, male and female. No single tradition can encompass this variety. *American Experiences* shows the complexity and richness of the nation's past by focusing on the people—how they coped with, adjusted to, or rebelled against America. The readings examine these people as they worked and played, fought and made love, lived and died.

We designed *American Experiences* as a supplement to the standard textbooks used in college survey classes in American History. Unlike other readers, it covers ground not usually found in textbooks. For example, instead of a discussion of the political impact of the Populist movement, it explores the *Wizard of Oz* as a Populist parable. In short, it presents different slants on standard and not-so-standard topics.

We have tested each essay in classrooms so that *American Experiences* reflects not only our interest in social history but also student interests in American history in general. We have selected essays that are readable, interesting, and that illustrate important aspects of America's past. For example, to show the nature of the class system in the South and to introduce the topic of southern values, we selected one essay on gambling and horse racing in the Old South and another on gouging matches in the southern backcountry. As an introduction to the conventional and medical view of women in the late nineteenth century, we selected an essay about Lizzie Borden. Each essay, then, serves at least two purposes: to tell a particular story well, and to help illuminate the social or political landscape of America.

This reader presents a balanced picture of the experiences of Americans. The characters in these volumes are not exclusively white males from the Northeast, whose eyes are continually focused on Boston, New York, and Washington. Although their stories are certainly important, so too are the stories of blacks adjusting with dignity to a barbarous labor system, Chicanos coming to terms with Anglo society, and women striving for increased opportunities in a society restricted by gender. We have looked at all of these stories and, in doing so, we have assumed that Americans express themselves in a variety of ways, through work, sex, and games, as well as politics and diplomacy.

## Changes to the New Edition

During the past three years, we have solicited a variety of opinions, from colleagues and students, about the selections for volume 1 of *American Experiences*. Based on that feedback, we have made a number of changes in the fifth edition, always with the intent of selecting articles that undergraduate students will find interesting and informative. The new articles for the first volume of this edition are:

- Thomas A. Foster, "Deficient Husbands: Manhood, Sexual Incapacity, and Male Marital Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century New England"
- Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village"
- Lois Green Carr and Lorena S. Walsh, "The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland"
- Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "A Midwife's Tale"
- Peter Quinn, "The Tragedy of Bridget Such-A-One"
- Stephen B. Oates, "God's Angry Man"
- Jennifer Lynn Gross, "'Good Angels': Confederate Widowhood in Virginia"
- Larry McMurtry, "A Road They Did Not Know"

*American Experiences* is divided into standard chronological and topical parts. Each part is introduced by a brief discussion of the major themes of the period or topic. In turn, each individual selection is preceded by a short discussion of how it fits into the part's general theme. We employed this method to give students some guidance through the complexity of the American experience. At the conclusion of each selection is a series of study questions and a brief bibliographic essay. These are intended to further the usefulness of *American Experiences* for students as well as teachers.

Randy Roberts  
James S. Olson

# **American Experiences**

# Contents

Preface	xi
---------	----

<b>Part One</b>	<b>New England Life</b>	<b>2</b>
-----------------	-------------------------	----------

<b>1</b>	<b>ALFRED W. CROSBY, Jr.</b>	<b>4</b>
	God . . . Would Destroy Them, and Give Their Country to Another People . . .	

<b>2</b>	<b>THOMAS A. FOSTER</b>	<b>13</b>
	Deficient Husbands: Manhood, Sexual Incapacity, and Male Marital Sexuality in Seventeenth-Century New England	

<b>3</b>	<b>CORNELIA HUGHES DAYTON</b>	<b>26</b>
	Taking the Trade: Abortion and Gender Relations in an Eighteenth-Century New England Village	

<b>4</b>	<b>MARCUS REDIKER</b>	<b>41</b>
	Under the Banner of King Death: The Social World of the Anglo-American Pirates, 1716 to 1726	

<b>Part Two</b>	<b>Southern Life</b>	<b>56</b>
-----------------	----------------------	-----------

<b>5</b>	<b>WINTHROP JORDAN</b>	<b>58</b>
	Englishmen and Africans	

<b>6</b>	<b>ALEXANDER FALCONBRIDGE</b>	<b>71</b>
	Treatment of the Slaves	



7	T. H. BREEN Horses and Gentlemen	79
8	LOIS GREEN CARR and LORENA S. WALSH The Planter's Wife: The Experience of White Women in Seventeenth-Century Maryland	90
<b>Part Three    The Revolutionary                          Generation</b>		<b>108</b>
9	JAMES KIRBY MARTIN A Most Undisciplined, Profligate Crew	110
10	FORREST McDONALD Establishing a Government, 1789	122
11	JOHN MACK FARAGHER But a Common Man: Daniel Boone	139
12	JAMES S. OLSON Wounded and Presumed Dead: Dying of Breast Cancer in Early America	152
13	LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH A Midwife's Tale	161
<b>Part Four    Adjusting to America</b>		<b>178</b>
14	BARBARA WELTER The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860	180
15	SUSAN G. DAVIS Making Night Hideous: Christmas Revelry and Public Order in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia	195
16	PETER QUINN The Tragedy of Bridget Such-A-One	206

- 17 ARNOLDO DE LEON and SAUL SANCHEZ 219  
Folklore and Life Experience
- 18 JoANN LEVY 231  
Forgotten Forty-Niners

**Part Five      The Age  
                    of Imagination      242**

- 19 WILLIAM A. DeGREGORIO 244  
The Choice: The Jackson-Dickinson Duel
- 20 PAUL ANDREW HUTTON 251  
The Alamo: An American Epic
- 21 MAURY KLEIN 268  
From Utopia to Mill Town
- 22 MORRIS BISHOP 278  
The Great Oneida Love-In
- 23 ELLIOTT J. GORN 289  
Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch

**Part Six      Americans Divided      308**

- 24 STANLEY S. IVINS 310  
Notes on Mormon Polygamy
- 25 HARRIET BEECHER STOWE 319  
The Slave Warehouse from  
*Uncle Tom's Cabin*
- 26 HENRY F. TRAGLE 330  
The Southampton Slave Revolt
- 27 STEPHEN B. OATES 340  
God's Angry Man

<b>Part Seven</b>	<b>Civil War and Reconstruction</b>	<b>352</b>
<b>28</b>	BELL I. WILEY Johnny Reb and Billy Yank	354
<b>29</b>	JAMES W. CLARKE John Wilkes Booth and the Politics of Assassination	362
<b>30</b>	JENNIFER LYNN GROSS 'Good Angels': Confederate Widowhood in Virginia	377
<b>31</b>	LARRY McMURTRY A Road They Did Not Know	389
	Photo Acknowledgments	399



# PART ONE

## New England Life

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts Bay, was charged with a sense of mission. He and his Puritan followers braved the North Atlantic to establish a society in which the will of God would be observed completely. Aboard the flagship *Arbella* in April 1630, Winthrop explained their "errand into the wilderness." They were a unique people, for they had been given "a special commission" by God, and "He looks to have it strictly observed in every article." By working together, defeating selfishness, and keeping the Lord foremost in their thoughts, they would help create a kingdom of God on earth and blaze a trail for the future of all people. As Winthrop said, "Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us."

The Puritans' Lord was a stern master, and their religion was as uncompromising as the cold rocky shores of New England. At the heart of Puritanism was the doctrine of predestination. Since humanity was too sinful to deserve salvation, God simply gave the gift of salvation to select individuals, while condemning the rest to eternal damnation. There was nothing an individual could do to alter this decision. Nor could an individual ever know absolutely if he or she was saved or damned.

The ultimate mystery of predestination created an underlying tension in Puritan society. Puritans searched constantly for some sign that they had received God's gift of salvation. In their diaries, they scrutinized their actions and thoughts, examining their lives for evidence of the sin that was inherent in all people. Puritans believed that sin could be as passive as an envious thought or as active as a violent deed. Occasionally, however, they found reason for hope.

The Puritans' deep religious belief influenced every aspect of their lives. They believed that God and the devil intervened constantly in daily affairs. The devil lurked in the New England forests and the Indian tribes, and stood ready to claim those with weak hearts and bodies. In addition, God punished those who disobeyed His laws. A bolt of lightning or debilitating disease might very well be a sign of God's disfavor. The epidemic diseases that devastated the Indians were, in the Puritan mind, afflictions imposed by God.



Nevertheless, the Puritans should not be viewed as one-dimensional people. Their sins, excesses, and great accomplishments were the actions of humans. The following selections of essays present the world of the Puritans at its best and worst. The common thread in these essays is the Puritans' commitment to their religion and the way in which they used that religion to interpret and determine the course of their lives. Ultimately, the history of American Puritanism is the unfolding of a religious idea.

Not all of New England was Puritan, however. As the northern colonies matured, many people moved away from the stern religion of the earliest settlers. Some were more recent immigrants who had never followed the Puritan faith; others were children or grandchildren of Puritans in whose hearts the fire of faith did not burn as strongly. Certainly Boston and Massachusetts Bay retained something of its Puritan heritage, but its economic position in the British empire also exerted a powerful influence. By the eighteenth century, images of zealous Puritans and shrewd Yankees mixed to form the popular conception of the New Englander. If Sunday remained God's day, trade and commerce ruled the rest of the week. Tied to England and the West Indies by economic bonds, Boston—like Philadelphia and Charles Town—became part of the Atlantic community.

## READING 1

# **GOD. . . WOULD DESTROY THEM, AND GIVE THEIR COUNTRY TO ANOTHER PEOPLE. . .**

Alfred W. Crosby, Jr.

In 1616 or 1617, several years before the Pilgrims and later the Puritans ever arrived in Massachusetts, the local Indians suffered from catastrophic epidemics of disease, probably from a malignant form of typhus left behind by some sick Europeans whose ships anchored temporarily along the coast as a refuge from bad weather. The Indians had no immunities. They had been separated geographically from the European and Asian landmasses for thousands of years, leaving them unprepared for the variety of diseases the Europeans brought—typhus, bubonic plague, smallpox, chicken pox, mumps, measles, influenza, diphtheria, and a host of other maladies. Europeans, with their dense urban populations and wide variety of domesticated animals, had already accumulated the necessary immunities. But the illnesses spread like a wildfire through the Indian villages, devastating whole tribes and whole regions, depopulating the area as Indians either died or fled. European germs were far more important than European weapons in explaining how so few conquered so many in the New World.

Indians found the plagues profoundly disturbing—a series of events inconsistent with their worldview. For them, disease was simply a manifestation of spiritual imbalances, which could be cured by medicine men who understood the balances of nature and the human psyche. When their own healers failed to stem the plagues, the Indians lost not only their lives but their faith and vision as well. Puritans interpreted the plague as the punishment of God. Indian idolatry could not be tolerated, and since they would not repent, God poured out his wrath upon them. In the process of destroying the Indians, God also gave “their country to another people”—the Puritans.

In December of 1620, a group of English dissenters who "knew they were pilgrimes," in the words of William Bradford, stepped ashore on the southern coast of Massachusetts at the site of the Wampanoag Indian village of Pawtuxet. The village was empty, abandoned long enough for the grasses and weeds to have taken over the cornfields, but not long enough for the trees to have returned. The Pilgrims occupied the lonely place and called it Plymouth.

It was pestilence that had cleared the way for this tiny foothold in New England, and the shadow of death would be a major factor in giving the settlement form and substance in the months ahead.

New England Indians and European fishermen and traders had been in intermittent contact for a century, and it was inevitable that more than other skins, beaver pelts, knives, and kettles would be exchanged. Disease was among the commodities, and in this trade the Indians would come off second best. Europe, with ancient contact by land and new ones by sea with the chief disease communities of the world, and with her relatively dense populations of often hungry and always filthy people, had all the advantages of her disadvantages: an arsenal of diseases.

Europe was in the midst of a golden age for infectious disease organisms, an era ushered in by the Black Death in the fourteenth century. To such old regulars as smallpox and consumption were added such new, or newly recognized, diseases as plague, typhus, and syphilis. Bubonic plague, the greatest killer of them all, smoldered continually and broke out periodically in consuming epidemics. Early in 1617 southeast gales drove whales ashore in the Netherlands. The fearful thought them a portent of plague, and sure enough, by August the plague was general throughout the land. London had full-scale epi-

demics of that killer in 1603 and again in 1625, and the plague—or something very like it—soon made its presence felt among the Indians of the Northeast coast of America. Innocent of immunity or experience, the Indians were helpless.

As Indian tempers rose, respect for Europeans fell in the second decade of the seventeenth century, particularly after the kidnaping of Indians for purposes of slavery began. Sometime in that period, a French ship was wrecked on the shores of Massachusetts, and some of the crew escaped alive. Possibly, in retaliation for a recent kidnaping raid by whites, the Indians eventually killed all but three or four, whom they reduced to slavery. According to what the Indians told the Pilgrims, one of these captives, angry and helpless, had struck at his captors with words, telling them that "God was angry with them for their wickedness, and would destroy them, and give their country to another people, that should not live as beasts as they did but should be clothed. . . ." The Indians laughed at him, saying that they were so numerous that the white man's god could not kill them. He answered "that though they were never so many, God had many ways to destroy them that they knew not." Within a year or so an epidemic struck the coast of New England, devastating the tribes like an autumnal nor'easter raking leaves from the trees.

When did this pestilence first appear in New England? Probably no earlier than 1616 and no later than 1617, and it lasted until at least 1619. What vessel brought it? It is improbable that we will ever know. What was the disease? Another difficult question. We know it lasted through winters, which suggests that it wasn't a mosquito-borne disease, like yellow fever. We know that the few Europeans who actually saw its victims did not identify it as smallpox, measles, mumps, chicken pox, or any of Europe's common diseases, which they certainly would have recognized. We know it spread along the coast no farther southwest than Narragansett Bay, nor farther northeast than the Kennebec River or possibly Penobscot Bay, nor did it penetrate inland more than twenty or thirty miles. The narrow geographical limitations of the epidemic suggest that

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"God . . . Would Destroy Them, and Give Their Country to Another People . . ." by Alfred W. Crosby in *American Heritage* 29 (October/November 1978), pp. 39-43.

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the disease was not one of the breath-borne maladies, like smallpox or measles, which normally surge across vast areas. A flea- or louse-borne disease like typhus or plague seems more likely.

We know that the disease produced spots on its victim's skins; and we know by hearsay that some Englishmen in New England at the peak of the epidemic slept in huts with dead and dying Indians, but that not one of these whites fell ill or even so much as "felt their heads to ache while they stayed there." Spots certainly suggest typhus. The Europeans' freedom from infection suggests some disease so common in Europe that they all had acquired immunity to it at home, or that they didn't stay around long enough to get a proper dose of the disease—or that the account is in part or whole false.

Most of the seventeenth-century chroniclers called the disease the plague. "Plague" was and is a word often used to mean any pestilence, but these chroniclers often called it *"the plague."* Captain Thomas Dermer, one of the few Europeans actually to see Indians who were freshly recovering from the experience, called their infection in 1619 "the Plague, for wee might perceive the sores of some that had escaped, who described the spots of such as usually died."

Plague is certainly capable of doing what this pestilence did, and Europeans certainly knew it well enough to recognize it by sight or description. And it is true that plague was well established in Western Europe in the early years of the seventeenth century. Like some kinds of typhus, it is a disease carried by rats and their attendant vermin, rats which swarmed in the holds of the sailing vessels of that era. The disease travels readily by ship, as the European colonists in America knew. Many Britons fell ill and died on the vessels of the Third Supply sailing to Virginia in 1609, and a rumor was that one of the vessels had plague on board. In the 1660's, during London's last great siege of plague, Virginians fled from their ports for fear of the disease coming across on the ships from England.

Fear was justified because ship rats were coming across and establishing beachheads in Amer-

ica. Captain John Smith tells us that they already numbered in the thousands in Jamestown in 1609, when the rats almost starved out the colony by eating its stores of food. They were present and prospering in New England by at least the 1660's, and probably a great deal earlier. It is likely that they found living in the layered bark walls of the Indian wigwams warm and comfortable, and the Indian food-storage practices and eating habits conducive to good diet. Once the rats were established, the transfer of their plague-ridden fleas to the Indians would have been almost automatic and perhaps not even noticed by the new hosts. Body lice were even more common among New England Indians than among white settlers, and the natives commonly passed the time by picking lice and killing them between their teeth.

It is disturbing, though, to those who diagnose the pestilence as plague, that Dermer described its chief signs as sores and spots, rather than the terrible buboes or boils of the groin and armpits that are impossible to overlook in typical victims of the plague. And it is even more odd that the plague-infected fleas did not establish themselves and their bacilli permanently among the wild rodents of New England, as they did in those of the western United States at the end of the nineteenth century. A diagnosis of typhus is tempting, but the historian is reluctant to contradict firsthand witnesses.

Whether plague or typhus, the disease went through the Indians like fire. Almost all the seventeenth-century writers say it killed nine of ten and even nineteen of twenty of the Indians it touched—an incredible mortality rate. But if it was, indeed, plague, it could well have killed that proportion. In the fourteenth century, plague killed one-third of all the people in Europe and a much higher percentage than that in many towns and districts. Further, the Indians knew nothing of the principle of contagion and had an ancient custom of visiting the sick, jamming into extremely hot little huts with them, assuring maximum dispersal of the illness. Their methods of treating illness, which usually featured a stay in a