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Bradford and Winthrop: Different Approaches to Colonial New England

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Bradford and Winthrop: Different Approaches to Colonial New England

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

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Abstract

Environmental historians usually discuss American colonists as if they were all the same. Thus, the Puritan communities that grew rapidly after John Winthrop's arrival in 1630 often overshadow the earlier Separatist colony at Plymouth, which leads to the assumption that all settlers acted in similar ways with regard to land use and the environment. By analyzing Bradford and Winthrop, it becomes possible to see a different picture of colonization in New England. It becomes evident that deforestation happened over time, and in spite of early resistance. It is also clear that colonial settlers viewed resources in different ways. The authorities strictly regulated land use and ownership, but there were fewer restrictions on exportable resources like fur and later timber. Population change and the growth of a proto-capitalist market in the post-1630 Puritan communities as well as a gradual shift from communalism to individualism led to deforestation in New England.

Keywords: Environmental History, Winthrop, Bradford, capitalism, land, timber

Introduction

The Pilgrims and Puritans settled New England with different intentions in regards to land use. Their environments, along with the size of their respective colonies, forced the two groups of settlers to operate their colonies in different ways.

Environmental historians, however, have failed to distinguish between the settlers at Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay. They seem to perceive the colonization and the deforestation of New England as a pattern that went unchanged throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. William Bradford's actions in Plymouth controvert this analysis. By comparing Bradford and the Pilgrims with John Winthrop and the Puritans, a different picture of the New England environment emerges.

William Bradford (1590-1657) was the most famous of the Pilgrims who journeyed to Plymouth aboard the *Mayflower*. A member of an English separatist congregation that moved to Holland in 1607 and thence to the New World, he governed Plymouth Colony from 1620 until his death in 1657.¹ His book, *Of Plymouth Plantation* is the chief source of information about the Plymouth colony.² As the principle magistrate of Plymouth, Bradford was responsible for putting into place laws that protected the colony and helped it to prosper.

John Winthrop (1588-1649) was a Puritan who came to New England as part of the Massachusetts Bay Company. Winthrop came to England with a large Puritan contingent that desired to establish both a religious community and a successful economic colony in the New World. He became the governor of the Massachusetts Bay

¹ John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 3. See also Samuel Eliot Morison, introduction to *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, by William Bradford. ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), xxiv-xxv.

² Bradford Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth* (Philadelphia/New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1951), 9.

Company in 1629, shortly before his party left for New England. While Bradford had gone to Plymouth with only one hundred or so settlers, Winthrop brought over one thousand. Winthrop landed at Salem in 1630, and served as either governor or magistrate until his death.³

Historians have often criticized New England settlers and their attitudes toward the environment, but some colonial leaders took actions that actually limited deforestation and overuse of natural resources. When historians do not differentiate between the Plymouth colony and Massachusetts Bay, they make it appear that these colonies were the same, when in reality, Plymouth actually operated very differently from Massachusetts Bay. By analyzing and comparing the two settlements it is possible to see how environmental policy changed in seventeenth-century New England. Bradford governed a small colony with fewer resources that was by necessity forced to operate in ways that were actually less harmful to the environment. Winthrop governed a larger colony that did not have to face the obstacles the Pilgrims confronted.

Environmental History surveys tend to overlook Bradford and the Pilgrims, instead choosing to let the later Puritan communities speak for all colonists. Ted Steinberg, in *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History*, had little to say about Bradford or Plymouth. He noted that the early colonists were more concerned with getting enough food to survive than maintaining the health of their lands and forests, but did not discuss at any length how Bradford's settlement at Plymouth differed from the later settlements at Massachusetts Bay.⁴ In *American Environmental History: An*

³ Richard S. Dunn and Laetitia Yeadle, introduction to *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-164*, by John Winthrop (Cambridge/London: the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), ix-xii.

⁴ Ted Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 39-43.

Introduction, Carolyn Merchant noted Bradford and Winthrop's arrivals and discussed the economic goals that they had, but there is no mention of Bradford's laws regarding conservation or Winthrop's beliefs on the importance of community.⁵ Furthermore, Merchant did not differentiate between Bradford and Winthrop's different approaches to land use and community.

Other works in American Environmental history also seem to ignore the Pilgrims, as well as Puritans who opposed expansion and deforestation. Anthony Penna, in *Nature's Bounty: Historical and Modern Environmental Perspectives*, discussed seventeenth-century colonists' admiration of the New World, along with the "commodification of nature", but there is no mention of Bradford's policies regarding land use. There is no suggestion of a change, or even a difference, between the environmental policies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay.⁶ In *Voices in the Wilderness: American Nature Writing and Environmental Politics*, Daniel Payne opened his discussion of the New England colonists with Bradford's depiction of New England as a "hideous and desolate wilderness, full of beasts and wild men", but he did not mention any of Bradford's actual policies regarding land use. Likewise, in his reference of the Puritans, Payne did not point out Winthrop's fear of capitalism or his attempts at conservation.⁷

Unlike many other writers, William Cronon discussed Bradford at some length in *Changes in the Land*, but he tended to look more at the differences between the Indian

⁵ Carolyn Merchant, *American Environmental History: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 26-28.

⁶ Anthony Penna, *Nature's Bounty: Historical and Modern Environmental Perspectives* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999), 5-7.

⁷ Daniel Payne, *Voices in the Wilderness: American Nature Writing and Environmental Politics* (Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 1996), 9-19.

and English views of land and land ownership. Cronon noted Winthrop's limits on the amount of land owned by a person, but there is still no discussion of Bradford's laws and the way they contrasted to the reality of later New England.⁸ Cronon realized the difference between settlers who barely managed to survive and later merchants who were more intent on profiting from the New World, writing "Settlers who had actually to live in a New World environment were less likely than their merchant companions to view it as a linear list of commodities".⁹ However, he quickly moved on into a discussion of the market and later approaches to land use. While Cronon wrote that it is wrong to claim that colonial towns were subsistence communities, the fact is that Plymouth, for a few years, was by necessity a subsistence community.¹⁰ As a subsistence community, Plymouth took a different approach to land use than later market-driven settlements did.

While only one decade separated the arrival of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, their respective approaches to the environment were different. The proto-capitalist market that eventually arose in Massachusetts Bay came about because of a large population and a growing market for natural resources. William Bradford illustrates how it was possible for communities in the New World to operate in ways that were relatively environmentally friendly. John Winthrop reveals the later growth of the market and timber trade that developed. In Plymouth, a sparsely populated community with little trade and tight government control ensured that there would be little harm done to the land. In Massachusetts Bay, a heavily populated community with large-scale trade and loose government control allowed for the consequent "rape of the forests".

⁸ William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England*, 1st revised ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), 72-73, see also 56-58.

⁹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

Body of Thesis

When the colonists arrived on the New England Coast, they encountered an environment unlike anything they had ever seen in England, and in every account one thing remains constant: the settlers were awed by their new home. As one writer put it, “I did not think that in all the known world it could be paralleled.”¹¹ The abundance and beauty of the New England coast astounded many people, and soon it became an almost mythical place. Others told stories of millions of pigeons and fish in the rivers, along with plenty of other wild animals.¹² Such accounts led readers back in England to envision America as a place of unlimited natural resources. While the New World’s resources were not infinite, in comparison to England, America was a place of great wealth and opportunity. Although the descriptions were largely accurate, many embellished reports led to people believing that disease was absent in America, or that the fertile land produced unrealistically large harvests.¹³ There were even reports of lions roaming the forests in New England.¹⁴ The fact that Winthrop and Bradford actually attempted to conserve resources is notable when seen in this context.

From the beginning European powers viewed the New World as a source of natural resources. The English had always intended to use these resources, particularly timber, to replace their rapidly diminishing supply. As early as 1602, John Brereton remarked that New England forests would provide timber for building English ships.¹⁵

¹¹ Thomas Morton, *New England Canaan*, (Edited by John Dempsey. Massachusetts: John Dempsey, 2000), 53.

¹² Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 22-23.

¹³ Morton, *New England Canaan*, 92.

¹⁴ William Wood, *New England’s Prospect*, (Edited by Alden T. Vaughn. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), 42.

¹⁵ John Perlin, *Forest Journey: The Role of Wood in the Development of Civilization* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989), 279.

Over the course of the seventeenth-century this vision was eventually realized, and colonists cut down thousands of acres of forest throughout New England. The timber went to support both the early towns in New England and the English shipbuilding industry. Large-scale timber cutting was a process, however, that happened over time. In the 1620's, the timber trade was not a concern for the Pilgrims.

In order for the Pilgrims to get the financial support they needed to go to the New World, they joined with a group of “adventurers” who helped finance the voyage. The two groups made a pact to ensure the unity and success of the colony. Communalism was essential to the survival of the colony, and all had to act with the community in mind. There was no room for individual desires or wealth. According to the rules that were established, the colonial government assigned different people specific tasks to which they were best suited; some were fishermen, some farmers, others artisans, all focusing on making the community stronger and more successful.¹⁶ A license was required to fish, and the colony regulated virtually every element of food production and land use.¹⁷ Each person was obligated to donate some of his crop to the community, in order that no one would be rich, and no one would be poor.¹⁸ All profits made off one's land would be property of the community and used to support the colonial government as well as provide supplies to new settlers who came without the necessary provisions for survival.¹⁹ Colonial authorities could also restrict the building of large houses and other

¹⁶ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1952), 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

status symbols.²⁰ The Pilgrims were still in debt to their English investors, and the fur trade was the primary means of paying off this debt in the 1620's and 1630's.²¹

The Pilgrims intended to keep a measure of equality for everyone by not allowing anyone to become richer or more powerful than another. Preservation of the environment was not the primary goal of these laws, but they did inadvertently put a check on how much land the colony could use. Plymouth was, from the beginning, intended to be a communal society. This close community structure was important to ensuring the success of a colony that would barely survive. Of the one hundred and two pilgrims that came to New England aboard the *Mayflower* in November of 1620, only fifty-six remained alive in April of 1621.²² Clearly, survival was of far greater concern than expansion for Bradford.

Bradford was by no means a conservationist in the modern sense of the word, and the communal system that existed in the early days of Plymouth was brought about by necessity more than anything else. Lyle Glazier, in discussing claims made regarding the Pilgrims being communists, wrote “For them all—for all the others as well as for Bradford—it was an economic expediency, forced upon them by the English investors...who insisted that for the first seven years of the settlement all goods and all profits should be shared in common.”²³ The agreement made between the planters and the adventurers was to protect the investors by ensuring that the community would remain together. Bradford did not want these men to come along, and the conditions,

²⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

²¹ Bernard Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1955), 21-25.

²² Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth*, 18.

²³ Lyle Glazier, “Communism and the Pilgrim Fathers,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 6, #1, (Spring 1954): 72-75.

though established by mutual consent, were primarily designed to protect the adventurers who were investing in the colony. Over the years, however, Bradford continued to enforce some variation of these conditions with the strength of the community in mind.

The Pilgrims realized the opportunities for profit in the New World, and despite their leaders' attempts to promote the community over the individual, the desire for individual advancement eventually won out. Bradford's writings indicate the transition from communalism to individualism. The colonial government enacted a new law in 1623 that allowed each family a parcel of land for its own use.²⁴ However, the law still required each farmer to give an amount of their harvest to the community, largely to support the government as well as provide relief for poor settlers and incoming colonists.²⁵ While the community remained central, the shift towards individualism had begun. Now, instead of everything belonging to the community, colonists were only obligated to donate one bushel of wheat (or its worth) to the common store.²⁶

With the growth of the colony, a market in food developed, and farmers began to sell their produce, but typically only within the community. Bradford barred trade with Indians or people from other settlements.²⁷ By 1627, what had once been one acre per man had turned into 20.²⁸ Bradford allowed people to live in different places, although there were still requirements involving water use and location of the land. The colony assigned better houses or land to some, but there was still a focus on the community, and Bradford and the colonial government were still attempting to limit individualism.²⁹

²⁴ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 120.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

Despite this turn to individualism, there was still a strong effort to limit expansion and conserve the colony's resources. More land was being given out to individual farmers, but Bradford still insisted that "... no meadows were to be laid out at all, nor were not of many years after, because they were but straight of meadow grounds; and if they had bene now given out, it would have hindred all addition to them afterwards; but every season all were appointed wher they should mowe, according to the proportion of catle they had."³⁰ It is evident that while it was acceptable to use resources like fur for economic profit, land was a more precious commodity.

Interestingly, Bradford made a concentrated effort to conserve land, even though the colony was beginning to spread out. He realized that as more people settled, and the colony continued to grow, the conservation of land would be important for future generations. It would be wrong to paint Bradford as a modern environmentalist, but the fact that he attempted to conserve land indicates that he was thinking about the long-term interests of the community. Unfortunately, a large influx of settlers determined to use the land for personal gain, as well as the English government using America as a source of natural resources for themselves would overcome his concerns and attempts to regulate land use.

John Winthrop attempted to regulate the location of new settlements but did not discourage the growth of new towns throughout Massachusetts Bay. The charter placed no limits on the jurisdiction of the government or upon the size of the town.³¹ A different set of circumstances, however, faced Bradford in Plymouth. Because survival took precedence over everything else in the early years, more people simply meant less food

³⁰ Ibid., 188.

³¹ Daniel Howe, *The Puritan Republic* (Indianapolis: Bowen-Merrill Company, 1899), 32.

for everyone.³² Safety also required the town's borders to remain close. Winthrop did not have this problem to the same extent, as several settlements were already in existence upon his arrival. By encouraging the formation of new settlements, Winthrop was unintentionally opening the door for less government regulation in the everyday lives of the colonists, and particularly in the marketplace. While Winthrop certainly did not intend to originate a proto-capitalist market, he did allow the creation of new settlements, indirectly aiding this formation. Bradford, in some ways, actually worked against this idea simply because Plymouth was a smaller community.

Winthrop granted many people the right to set up towns throughout the area, but some were still concerned about spreading out too far. Thomas Dudley, his deputy governor, said in regards to instituting a new settlement outside of the already established town of Salem: "This dispersion troubled some of us, but help it we could not, wanting ability to remove to any place fit to build a town upon, and the time too short to deliberate any longer lest the winter should surprise us before we had builded our homes."³³ Location was crucial, as colonists wanted to settle close to water while maintaining access to the forests. Once they overcame the hardships of the initial settlement, however, the colonists looked at the land and realized the economic opportunities that it afforded them. By 1643, the settlers had already established successful international trade.³⁴ The attempts to limit expansion and use of resources may have only worked for a few years, and in retrospect may have had no chance of

³² Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 141-142.

³³ Alden T. Vaughn, *The Puritan Tradition in America 1620-1730* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 61.

³⁴ Vaughn, *The Puritan Tradition in America*, 67.

long-term success, but this does not change the fact that some colonial leaders did make attempts at conservation.

The Puritan government would typically sell land to proprietors who would then parcel their land out among the colonists, who in turn would convert it into several plantations.³⁵ Land ownership, then, was something that typically denoted status.³⁶ Land was the primary commodity that people had the ability to invest in in early New England. The central government in the colony understood its importance. Like Bradford in Plymouth, the Puritans initially portioned the land into smaller farms and reserved an area for communal livestock grazing.³⁷ However, in many situations the government actually sold land to people who intended to start businesses.³⁸ Here, the colonial government seemed to encourage the emergence of the marketplace.

Of course, Winthrop was concerned with keeping the community safe and successful. Initially, he wanted to limit the amount of land someone could possess, saying that “God gave the earth etc. to be subdued...a man can have no right to more than he can subdue.”³⁹ This quote illustrates Winthrop’s concern with limiting individual holdings. The Puritan governments maintained absolute control over land distribution.⁴⁰ In Winthrop’s writings, however, we can see an apparent justification for what would turn into a proto-capitalist market. The government remained in tight control over how much land a person could possess, but Winthrop says in *A Modell of Christian Charity* that “...a man cannot likely do too much, especially if he may leave himself and his

³⁵ Howe, *The Puritan Republic*, 131.

³⁶ Bernard Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

³⁹ Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 91.

⁴⁰ Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *The Puritan Oligarchy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1947), 46.

family under probable means of comfortable subsistence”.⁴¹ Comfortable subsistence is somewhat subjective and does not put a precise limit on what one could earn. Therefore, while there were strict regulations on how much land one could own, there were none on how much one could make.

Winthrop recognized in America an opportunity for economic profit, but, like Bradford, he believed that the community should always come before the individual.⁴² Winthrop favored a trading system that was limited to only Puritan settlements, but this proved to be impossible.⁴³ The Puritans were not opposed to “capitalism”, as this would have been a foreign concept to them, but they were against what they considered greedy merchants who charged exorbitant prices.⁴⁴ Economic regulation was very important to the Puritans, as is illustrated by the fact that out of forty excommunications between 1630 and 1654, eight were due to economic vice, typically for attempting to make too great a profit.⁴⁵ There were numerous attempts to put into place wage and price caps, but all of these proved to be unsuccessful in the end.⁴⁶ While he made efforts to control the economy, Winthrop was also trying to expand the community by building up other towns throughout Massachusetts. These endeavors worked against his attempts to control the market.

The question of how to regulate the economy while still allowing some measure of personal economic freedom was a paradox that the Puritans constantly found in encouraging the formation of a proto-capitalist market. In some ways, the Puritans were

⁴¹ Vaughn, *The Puritan Tradition in America*, 141.

⁴² Mark Valeri, “Puritans in the Workplace” in *The World of John Winthrop*, ed. Francis J. Bremer and Lynn Botelho (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2005), 160.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁴⁴ Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, 21.

⁴⁵ Valeri, “Puritans in the Workplace”, 163.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 168-169.

both for and against economic growth. As Mark Valeri put it, there was “a persistent tension in Puritan economic sensibilities between aspirations for commercial expansion (New Englanders “enriching themselves by their trades”) and fears of free economic exchange (the link between “sinful opinions” and “purses...filled with coyn”).⁴⁷ Valeri discussed the writings of Edward Johnson in 1654, in which Johnson celebrated the expansion of the Massachusetts colonies but also worried about the dangers of relative economic freedom. By 1654, Winthrop’s concerns regarding individuals trumping the community were realized, yet they continued to provoke anxiety.

While Winthrop was definitely for building up new communities as more people came over, he did not foresee the marketplace that would eventually emerge. In fact, Winthrop discussed in one journal entry the specific dangers of a capitalist market. In 1639, Robert Keayne was brought before the general court on accusations of attempting to make too much profit, and John Cotton, a religious leader, made clear some “false principles” and attempted to clear up any misunderstanding about what was right or wrong in the marketplace. A man was not to sell his product for the highest price he could, not buy it as cheaply as he could. He was not to use his own skills to take advantage of someone who was weaker or not as perceptive in the market. The Puritans considered it unethical to raise prices even if one had lost much of his inventory to an accident.⁴⁸

The Puritans strictly forbade ideas that many take for granted in a capitalist society. Cotton emphasized that man could not sell his product at a greater price than the going rate, thereby encouraging an equal playing field and opportunities for more

⁴⁷ Ibid., 148-149.

⁴⁸ John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal “History of New England” 1630-1649 Vol. 1.* (Edited by James Kendall Hosmer. New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1908), 315-319.

merchants. There was an emphasis on providence, as Cotton noted that if a man lost some of his supply by an act of God, then that was his problem. A man did not have the right to change prices and affect other people because of a personal problem.⁴⁹ This illustrates one dilemma of Puritan communities, the emphasis on the individual, but also on the community as a whole. Each man was responsible for his own product, yet the colonial government forced him to charge fair prices. In this way, he was bound to the community. While intent on maintaining a standard of fairness for all, individualism was a growing problem for colonial leaders.

The Keayne incident is important because it reveals the emergence of an early form of capitalism in the colonial settlements, as well as suggesting the very real danger capitalism posed to a communal society. Capitalism did not spring up suddenly on the Puritans, but was a continual, ongoing problem for colonial leaders who wanted to control the market as much as they could. The Puritans were not necessarily opposed to a market, but had questions regarding how much an individual could profit. They considered the desire for individual profit as an attack on the community.⁵⁰ While the Puritan emphasis on individual labor helped make establishing the settlements possible, it also opened the door for individualism to take root. This ideal of a strong individual work ethic had helped the colonies succeed, but it would also help erode that sense of community and lead to the beginning of a proto-capitalistic society. While the settlements attempted to regulate commerce, and the Puritans even opposed free-market ideas based on religious ideology, the New World was wide open for the emergence of a proto-capitalist market.

⁴⁹Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal "History of New England" 1630-1649 Vol. 1*, 315-319.

⁵⁰ Valeri, "Puritans in the Marketplace", 164.

Not only did the Puritan governments initially regulate land use and ownership, but they also controlled the market. In the early 1630's, the authorities banned selling commodities to other towns, as well as shipping across the ocean.⁵¹ They regulated market prices, and in only a few cases did they allow people to sell products above what the administration deemed market value.⁵² To survive, the colonies needed to conserve resources. Natural resources were limited to some extent and highly valued by the colonists. Thomas Dudley remarked "...we made laws to restrain the selling of corn to the Indians and to leave the price of beaver at liberty..."⁵³ Despite the fact that resources were very important to the colonists, they were also part of a larger world economy. The lack of wood in England led to higher prices for New England timber. Colonial foresters made up to five hundred percent profit on timber shipped to England.⁵⁴ The timber trade was too profitable for the colonial governments to control.

While large-scale timber trade had not yet begun in the 1620's, Plymouth was engaged in a profitable fur trade with the Indians. Fur, in fact, was the primary means of income that the Pilgrims used in their attempts to pay back their investors. By 1630, the Pilgrim exportation of furs was the largest business in New England. The Pilgrims set up trading posts throughout New England in order to carry out this trade. This fur trade was relatively short-lived, however, and the Puritans had essentially taken it over by the 1640's.⁵⁵

⁵¹ William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England 1620-1789, Vol. 1* (Massachusetts: Corner House Publishers, 1978), 118.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁵³ Vaughn, *The Puritan Tradition in America*, 63.

⁵⁴ Perlin, *A Forest Journey*, 272.

⁵⁵ Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, 20-26.

Twenty thousand settlers had come to New England between 1630 and 1640.⁵⁶ In 1640, however, emigration to New England came to a standstill. Without an influx of new settlers, the New England economy went into a recession. The fur trade along the coast was beginning to dry up, and this forced the colonists to find other ways to make money. This recession led to the beginning of the timber and fishing industries in New England.⁵⁷

Timber was crucial to the survival of people throughout the world at this time. Whether one was in New England or across the ocean in Europe, access to wood was essential for fire, housing, and metalworking. Wood was not only important to survival; it was also the driving force behind the economy. As already discussed, the timber used for shipbuilding was a major source of income for the colonists, but timber was also behind virtually every other economic structure. The settlers needed wood to make clothing, farm equipment, bridges, iron, weapons, or anything else.⁵⁸

There was opportunity, with far fewer risks, for personal gain. Timber was a huge resource in the economy. The White Pine, specifically, attracted interest, and the northern New England area of Maine and New Hampshire became the center for commercial lumber in America.⁵⁹ From 1630 to 1800, the colonists cut 260 million cords of wood. In the 90-year span between 1630 and 1720, they cleared 700,000 acres of land, an amount greater than the land area of Rhode Island.⁶⁰ This deforestation occurred because of the colonist's emerging business in local shipbuilding and fishing industries as

⁵⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁸ Charles Carrol, *The Timber Economy of Puritan New England* (Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 1973), xi.

⁵⁹ Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 109.

⁶⁰ Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*, 93.

well as English demand. Economically, both England and the colonies benefitted from the timber industry.⁶¹

The settlers cut much of this timber for the rapidly growing shipbuilding industry in Massachusetts. By the eighteenth century, Massachusetts was second only to London as a center of shipbuilding in the English-speaking world.⁶² There were hundreds of ships produced in the mid seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, and each large ship required about two thousand trees.⁶³ England was using the colonies as a source for much needed lumber, and the colonies were making so much money off their forests that environmental damage was not a pressing concern. Of course, in the seventeenth century, few people in Europe were concerned with the damage deforestation would cause America, and England realized the advantage of being able to import wood from its own colony, without having to clear any more of its own forests. Moreover, because of the great amount of timber available in New England, the colonial shipbuilders were able to build ships much cheaper than could the English.⁶⁴ Here again, the beginning stages of capitalism in America were becoming evident.

As early as 1637, Salem was already struggling from lack of timber.⁶⁵ The town even recommended that the townspeople only cut timber for their private use. Throughout many towns in New England, administrators put laws in effect to keep prices of timber low enough to make it affordable for the common person.⁶⁶ While it obviously took time for much of the forests to be cleared, the fact that the effects of exported

⁶¹ Ibid., 277.

⁶² Ibid., 272.

⁶³ Ibid., 275.

⁶⁴ Robert G. Albion, William A. Baker, and Benjamin W. Labaree, *New England and the Sea* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 25.

⁶⁵ Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England*, 62.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 63.

lumber were already being felt by the colonists in 1637 reveals that the colonists were not oblivious to the effects of international trade and a free market.

More people needing timber equals more demand for it. More demand equals greater prices which equals greater profits for those who have access to the forests. A rapidly growing population in New England, coupled with the urgent demand for timber from England and a relatively free, open market that was shifting towards full-scale capitalism, resulted in widespread deforestation.

By the mid-1680's, England was already beginning to move towards obtaining complete and direct control over Maine's forests (Maine was owned by Massachusetts at the time), making them the personal property of the King.⁶⁷ This had technically always been the case, but the colonists had essentially operated without much interference from England. Direct appropriation of the forests allowed the King to ensure that the best trees would be available for the English navy, and that they would be preserved "from all manner of waste and spoil by any of the inhabitants".⁶⁸ The growing population, and the proto-capitalist system that emerged with it, now made the forests and land more valuable not only to the King of England, but to the colonists as well. Farmers realized that their crops could bring them financial security, and would now focus on growing as much as they could in order to turn a profit.

As early as 1543, Parliament restricted the cutting of English timber. The price of firewood in England doubled in between the 1540's and 1570's. By the 1630's, it had tripled again.⁶⁹ England was certainly desperate for timber by then, making American land seem even more bountiful and expansive than it actually was. The English desire for

⁶⁷ Perlin, *A Forest Journey*, 186-287.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁶⁹ Charles Carroll, *The Timber Economy of Puritan New England*, 11.

American resources helped fuel the transition into a capitalist marketplace in New England. Demand in England was strong, and the colonies had the supply. Conserving natural resources was becoming an enormous problem for the colonies. Even though there had always been an understanding that the colonists were subjects of England and New England had always been seen as a potential source of resources for England, surviving and becoming economically successful in the New World put the colonists in opposition to the desires of England. Even at this early stage in the 1630's the makings of a future split with England were evident. It was becoming very hard to justify sending resources that were becoming increasingly less available across the ocean when the colonies needed those same resources.

Despite bans on trade, Massachusetts and Virginia engaged in business as early as 1631. Commerce would also spring up between the Massachusetts colonists and Portuguese and Spanish merchants, as well as the Dutch in New York.⁷⁰ The prospect of financial gain eventually trumped early attempts to keep the community small and self-sufficient. The fact that large-scale commerce emerged is not surprising given the economic recession that occurred around 1640. As immigration slowed from the boom during the 1630's, the market was producing more commodities than could be consumed. Recognizing the demand in Spain and other places, men began shipping goods out. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the colonies were providing wood to the West Indies.⁷¹ The town government even gave official encouragement to this business. The

⁷⁰ Howe, *The Puritan Republic*, 134.

⁷¹ Perlin, *A Forest Journey*, 263.

colonists shipped out many products, including timber.⁷² Governmental leaders were reacting to the problems they faced in a different era. Bradford, and Winthrop to a lesser extent, had earlier attempted to conserve resources, but now the market dictated trade, leading to farmers working larger tracts of land and cutting down more trees. In fact, the very survival of the colonies had to come to depend on foreign trade.⁷³

Pollen studies illustrate that most of New England, possibly as much as 95 percent of the land, was forested before settlement (by both the colonists and Indians).⁷⁴ When Charles Carroll notes that “The New England forest today would be almost identical to that of 1600 if men had not moved against it”,⁷⁵ he is right. However, much of the New England forests were destroyed or damaged not because of ignorance of the importance of natural resources, but because of a growing population coupled with massive exportation. Bradford and other colonial leaders understood early on the limited quantity of their resources and attempted to conserve them. They were not ignorant of the consequences of exporting timber, as they could observe the short-term results in the colonies.

The population in New England was growing substantially. In 1620, there were only around 100 settlers in New England. As the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies took off, this number grew to somewhere between 2,200 and 4000 by 1630. By 1650, there were between 22,452 and 26,820 European settlers, and by 1690, this number

⁷² Darrett B. Rutman, “Governor Winthrop’s Garden Crop: The Significance of Agriculture in the Early commerce of Massachusetts Bay,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 20, No. 3. (July, 1963): 400-402.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 412.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

had reached 81,050 to 86,011.⁷⁶ While the early colonial governments were well suited to handle a relatively small number of settlers, they could not govern this many people in the same manner as they continued to spread west and south.

Town expansion was an increasing problem for colonial leaders. The majority of growth occurred in Massachusetts Bay, but Plymouth was expanding as well. While Winthrop seems to have been willing to easily grant permission for the building of new plantations and towns, Bradford was more concerned with keeping his smaller settlement intact. Plymouth may not have developed as rapidly as Massachusetts Bay, but the colony was increasing in size throughout the 1630's and 1640's. In 1636, Plymouth incorporated the town of Scituate, followed the next year by Duxbury and seven others a decade later. Typically new towns would grow to the North and South of Plymouth, but they eventually moved west as well.⁷⁷

Population growth, of course, dramatically affects the environment simply by adding more people who will consume more resources. This influx of new settlers also made Bradford's original laws impossible to enforce. Winthrop, while attempting to maintain strict regulations regarding land ownership, does not seem quite as intent on conservation. This is due in part to the fact that Winthrop arrived several years after Bradford with a large group of colonists, and spreading out and forming new towns was always part of the Puritan agenda in America. Winthrop's central government influence lessened with each town that spread further out, but the idea to maintain strict local government regulation remained. Despite attempts to keep local governmental control,

⁷⁶ Terry L. Anderson and Robert Paul Thomas, "White population, labor force, and the extensive growth of the New England Economy in the 17th century," *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 33, #3, (September 1973): 636.

⁷⁷ John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 22, No. 2. (April, 1965): 264-265.

Winthrop never had the same amount of power in his community as Bradford did in Plymouth.

This population growth also reflects an important difference between William Bradford and John Winthrop. Bradford came to the New World in 1620, but Winthrop did not make it over until 1630. While ten years may not seem like a long period, the population in New England had grown from almost nothing to several thousand people. Winthrop would not have been under the same pressure simply to survive as had been Bradford and the Plymouth colony. For Winthrop, the people of Massachusetts Bay were establishing a settlement close to other already established settlements (such as Plymouth) that they could lean on for support. Many of these established settlements had not existed when the *Mayflower* arrived. This explains why Bradford was more concerned with regulating food distribution and taking care of everyone in the colony.

Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were close to one another, but both colonies operated in ways that were many times very similar and other times very different. They shared a common goal of establishing new settlements in New England, but their methods of regulating land use differed, as Bradford had to deal with problems that Winthrop, who came over several years later, did not. Initially, the danger involved in settling in a new place and the very real threat of death by starvation or Indian attacks led to the settlers adopting a strategy based on putting the community ahead of the individual. This strategy may have been successful in the early days, but would soon prove to be impossible as more colonists came over and the colonies began to expand. Despite this immigration, however, Bradford's focus on tight, communal living helped to postpone any serious change to the New England landscape.

The market had a direct affect on the way colonists approached land. In the early years, with a limited population and no large-scale trading, survival forced the colonists to rely on their community, thereby limiting the amount of land used and resources taken. As the population and settlements grew throughout the 1620's and 1630's, a larger market with trade between other settlements and even other countries developed. With the issue of survival no longer a central issue, the colonists turned to trade in order to have financial success. This opened the door for more people to use more land. In some ways, Winthrop and Bradford illustrate this change, as Bradford discussed life in Plymouth during the 1620's, and the measures taken to ensure survival. John Winthrop, however, arrived in 1630 to a different area that already had an established population. They did not hold directly contrary opinions on everything, however. Winthrop at times seemed to favor Bradford's small town ideal and Bradford later came to accept the growing communities. Taken together, they do tell the story of how what began as small communities became towns.

While New England seems to have been destined to become a major source of timber and other resources for England, and certainly ended up playing that role, Bradford's settlement went against it, while Winthrop's later settlements seem to have supported it. In reality, neither one of these men had any real control over the direction the economy in New England would eventually take nor any say in how England would choose to use the New England forests. They were both concerned with their respective settlements and how to ensure the success of these.

The different situations that Bradford and Winthrop faced dictated their courses of action in ways that they could not have entirely foreseen. While safety was still a

concern, there was no urgent need for the later colonists to follow Bradford's plans. As Bradford found out, it would become impossible to minutely regulate the activities of so many people. In Winthrop's case, a rapidly increasing population forced him to cede control of a settlement that was spreading farther and farther out. Their respective situations dictated the courses of action that they took.

It is possible to see the differences in Bradford and Winthrop's settlements as a change in ways of thought regarding the community and the environment. By studying both communities, it is evident that this shift happened because both colonies were reacting to their surroundings. Colonists such as Bradford had to forgo any attempts at large-scale land development or forestry in order to ensure that the community would survive. The recession due to a lack of immigration in 1640 forced the Puritans to use the New England forests as a source of income.

The transition from community-based societies to larger, individual-based ones required a large population as well as a large market (both local and international) for the resources in the colonies. It also required a level of security within the colonies as well as economic dependence, something that Bradford, under obligation to his investors, did not have. Deforestation happened as the population grew and a market for timber developed. With this new multitude of people, increasingly more began to realize the personal gain available in America. Without government intervention controlling their finances and land use, people could work and own almost anything they could control. As the population and wealth of the colonies grew, so did the rise of individual goals and desires, eventually leading to the emergence of a capitalist system in New England. The fast-growing population and the profit-driven system that would emerge quickly gave rise

to environmental damage on a scale that was not possible in the early days of the community.

By focusing on Bradford, and seeing how his actions in Plymouth differed from later actions taken by Winthrop, it is possible to see a different picture of how early colonists approached nature. While it is clear that England desired to use New England as a source of resources, Bradford illustrates that the needs of the colony could trump these intentions. Furthermore, by examining Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay over the first few decades of their existence, it becomes evident that leaders at both colonies were forced to adapt to their surroundings. In some ways, the question becomes not only “How did the colonists affect their environment?” but also “How did the environment affect the colonists?” While New England settlers certainly influenced their environments, their respective environments and situations also influenced their colonies.

The shift from fur to timber as the primary export of the colonies illustrates how the environment shaped the direction of the colonies. Initially, fur was the primary resource traded by the colonists. By the 1640's, however, the fur trade had grown smaller around the coast.⁷⁸ With fewer furs available, the timber and fishing industries emerged as the primary means of capital for New England merchants. The timber industry boomed as the colonists had to look outside of the fur industry for financial gain.

Historians discuss the obvious economic reasons that led companies in England to establish colonies in the New World, and then note the rapid growth of the market and exportation of goods from New England. Bradford's actions, however, stand in contrast to this. The colonization of New England, and certainly as it regards land use, was a process that developed over time. Bradford, and Winthrop as well, illustrate the changes

⁷⁸ Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, 24.

that took place in the colonial market gradually and after survival and sustainable communities had already been established. While Bradford and Winthrop may have had preconceptions about what their respective colonies should be like, the situations that faced them dictated their courses of action, at times forcing them to change their plans and adapt to challenges in the New World.

The colonist's survival, and later on wealth, would be dependent on using natural resources. However, the focus on community, most clearly illustrated by Bradford but also emphasized by Winthrop helped to curb any negative change to the land in the early days of the settlements. Over time, the laws put into place designed to keep the community together would become impossible to enforce and the communities turned into large towns and the amount of people became impossible to govern as minutely as before. As writings by some of these colonial leaders illustrate, the colonists did not make any attempt to destroy their forests and though perhaps not with the environment in mind, leaders like Bradford and Winthrop actually made attempts to conserve resources that they understood were not infinite.

In 1691, Plymouth colony merged into Massachusetts Bay.⁷⁹ By this time the economy of New England had shifted completely from subsistence-based communities like early Plymouth to large-scale exportation. Even by the 1660's the timber and fishing industries had been established as the future of New England's economy, something that would hold true up to the American Revolution.⁸⁰ Into the mid 1600's, some New England towns consisted of thousands of acres of land, and others even hundreds of

⁷⁹ George Langdon, *Pilgrim colony: A History of New Plymouth 1620-1691* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1966), 234.

⁸⁰ Bailyn, *New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century*, 86.

square miles.⁸¹ The colonists' approach to the environment changed dramatically over the course of the seventeenth century. The fur trade went from being the primary export to virtually non-existent. It was replaced by the timber and fishing industries. Larger towns that allowed more individualism among the colonists had replaced the small, community-based townships such as Plymouth.

⁸¹ Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth*, 306-307.

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