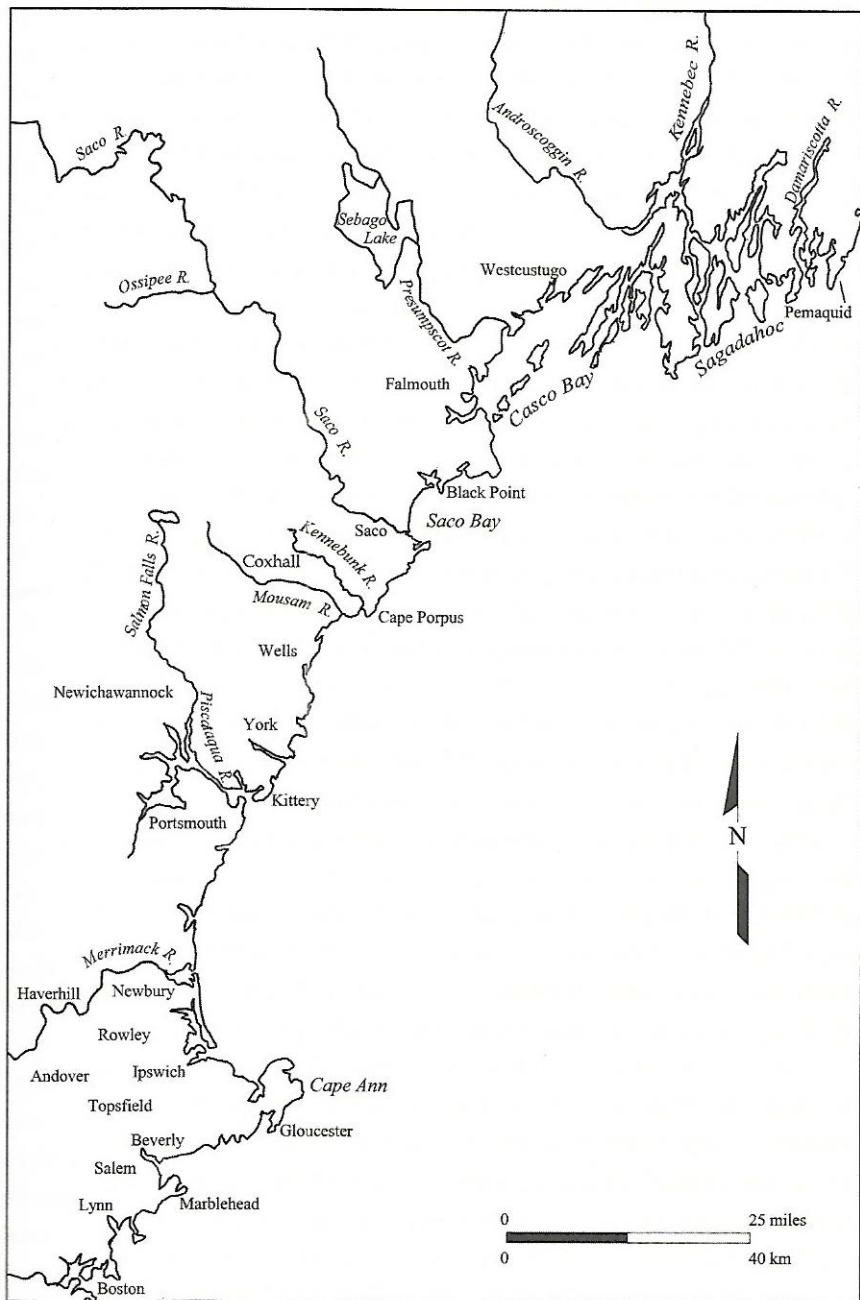


The founders of Massachusetts were part of what some have called the “Puritan diaspora,” a substantial migration out of England between 1620 and 1640 of Puritans who fled the growing oppression of King James I and his successor, Charles I, and what they saw as the corruption of the Church of England. In his famous sermon “A Model of Christian Charity,” Governor John Winthrop had proclaimed “that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.” Massachusetts would be a shining example of what the world should and could be, once everyone had adopted the Puritan faith. The new colony was to be a place where the Puritans could worship in peace and build their “Bible commonwealth.” Winthrop noted that the people of Massachusetts Bay had entered into a covenant with God. In return for this special relationship, the Puritans would make extraordinary efforts to demonstrate their religious zeal and purity. The governor warned of the dire consequences if they let God down: “If we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”²

The Puritan movement began in England in the latter part of the sixteenth century. Its adherents believed that the creation of the Church of England (or Anglican Church) by Henry VIII had not been a strong enough reform of Catholic corruption. Indeed, they viewed the Anglican Church as far too close to the Catholicism it had supposedly replaced. The church was still tainted and full of excess. Inspired by Continental reformers such as John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli, these “puritans”—a pejorative term used by their detractors—desired a return to what they conceived to be the simplicity and piety of the church at the time of Christ and his apostles. Unfortunately, there was far from universal agreement on what constituted that original austerity, so rather than sharing a unified faith, English Puritans had a range of views on the church and its problems. Some, such as the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, were separatists. They believed the church was so corrupt that they had to break with it completely and start again. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay did not share the extreme view of the separatists. Rather, they believed that the church could be saved—but the best way to do so was to leave England and her corrupting influences and reform the church in America.

While not all Puritans would have agreed on the specific reforms for the church, all would have agreed on some points. First and foremost, Puritans



Coastal New England from Boston to Pemaquid in the seventeenth century. Drawing by the author.

were Calvinists, believing that because of the fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, all people were born as sinners into a life of total depravity. Only God, with his awesome and unlimited power, could determine who was going to go to heaven. He made this decision even before a person's birth, predestining that individual for heaven or hell. While Catholics believed in the importance of performing good deeds and leading a moral life in achieving salvation, Calvinists thought that nothing one did in this life could change God's decision. The only thing people could hope for was that God would reveal himself in some way to them, to let them know they were among the "saints"—those predestined to go to heaven. Puritans also believed in the importance of reading the Bible for oneself and living one's life according to the example it provided. So strong was this belief in reading that by the eighteenth century, New England had one of the highest literacy rates in the history of the Western world—higher than it is today.³

With a steady stream of immigrants from England during the 1630s, Massachusetts Bay quickly prospered. The colony began as a joint stock company, essentially the forerunner of a modern corporation, where stock-owning individuals shared in the company's risks and rewards. The corporate charter, signed by King Charles I, included the grant of land in New England. Soon many of the shareholders as well as the charter moved to Massachusetts, and Boston became the corporate headquarters of the company and the colony. A string of settlements rapidly circled the bay and extended inland. In 1643 the colony established four counties to help administer its growing territory, particularly its courts and the militia. Eight towns to the north of Boston would constitute Essex County, with Salem serving as the county seat. Yet amid these successes a series of challenges arose to threaten this prosperity. First, Massachusetts Bay had to establish religious doctrine. This would prove a difficult task, since no such body of codified beliefs existed in England. In the 1630s and 1640s, there would be numerous disagreements over how to interpret orthodoxy. Reverend Roger Williams, the minister of Salem, was expelled from the colony in 1635 after being convicted of sedition and heresy, both for his religious views and for his belief that the Native Americans were the actual owners of New England. Williams would go on to found the colony of Rhode Island as well as the Baptist faith in America. The next year, the prominent minister Thomas Hooker led a group of about one hundred Massachusetts Bay colonists westward to found Hartford, the first settlement in what would

be the new colony of Connecticut. Hooker left in part due to his disagreement with John Cotton, a Boston minister. Shortly after, Cotton became a central figure in the Freegrace Controversy (also called the Antinomian Controversy). Cotton's followers Anne Hutchinson and Reverend John Wheelwright led a movement that threatened to split the colony over interpretations of the Bible and in particular how to achieve salvation. The controversy ended in 1638 with the banishment of Hutchinson, Wheelwright, and many of their followers.⁴

Whatever the religious differences, Massachusetts had a firm economic basis. As early as 1623, Plymouth colonist Edward Winslow had referred to New England as a place “where religion and profit jump together.” A prosperous fur trade with the Native inhabitants helped to spur the economy of the region in the first decades of settlement, and the rich cod-fishing grounds of coastal New England became the backbone. Indeed, a large carved wooden replica of a codfish has hung in the Massachusetts seat of government since the early eighteenth century, a constant reminder of the fish's importance in the prosperity of the colony. Cod was a particularly important foodstuff in Catholic southern Europe, to which large quantities of the salted fish were shipped; this was ironic, as the Puritans considered Catholics to be their great spiritual enemies. The Puritans also unwittingly helped enslave Africans, as the lower-quality cod it produced fed slaves on the English sugar plantations of the Caribbean.⁵ And New England's raw materials kept the sugar economy going by transporting slaves and goods.⁶