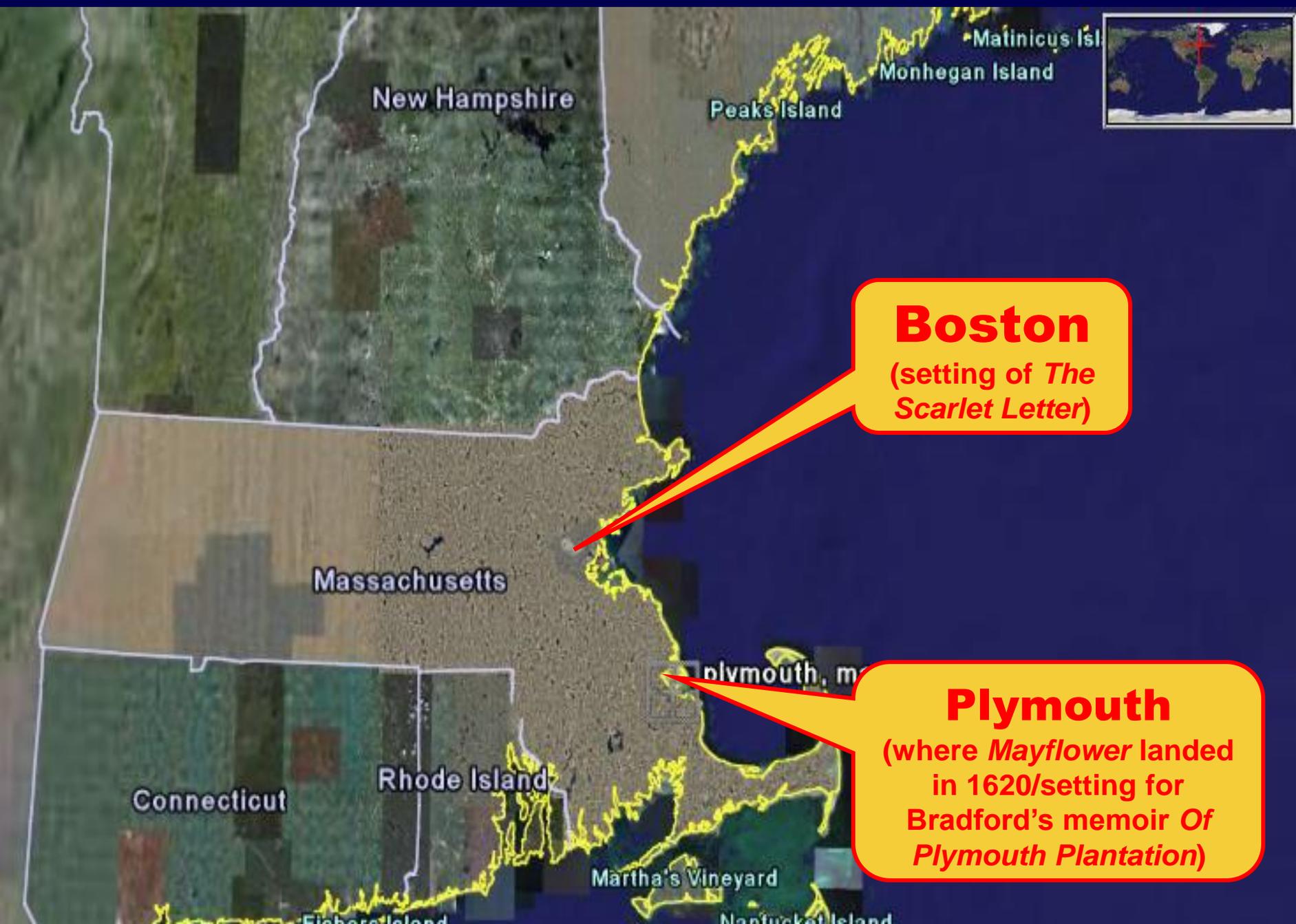


The Scarlet Letter



- novel (notice title is italicized)
- written by Nathaniel Hawthorne (b. 1804)
- written about 1850
- set in Boston, Mass. about 1690



New Hampshire

Peaks Island

Matinicus Isl
Monhegan Island



Boston

(setting of *The Scarlet Letter*)

Massachusetts

Plymouth, m

Plymouth

(where *Mayflower* landed
in 1620/setting for
Bradford's memoir *Of
Plymouth Plantation*)

Connecticut

Rhode Island

Martha's Vineyard

Nantucket Island

Fisher's Island

Setting: *The Scarlet Letter*

- The setting of Hawthorne's novel is critical to the plot of the novel.
- 1690's Boston was a Puritan village
- Like other Puritan settlements in New England, the local and colonial governments were theocracies.

theocracy

- word comes from Greek
- *theo* = God
- *cratos* = rule
- a *theocracy* is a government where the civil laws are based (in whole or in part) on religious laws; civil leaders in theocracies are probably also important religious leaders

theocracy, cont.

- In Afghanistan before 2001, the Taliban controlled religious and civil laws. Besides having to wear *burqas* in public, women in Afghanistan were not allowed to attend school or drive cars.
 - In Saudi Arabia, women cannot drive or vote. Because Islam forbids it, no place in Saudi Arabia sells alcohol or pork.



Theocracy as Extremism

Ironically, it is largely because of the Puritans – who themselves established a theocratic government in the New World – that we in America tend to view most theocratic governments as extremist.

Puritanism

- Began in England in the mid-1500's
- A sect of Calvinists
- Calvinism named after Swiss theologian
John Calvin
- Calvinism =
 - predetermination
 - no religious authority BUT Scripture

“Puritans”

- “Puritans” intended as a derogatory term
- “Puritans” usually referred to themselves as “the Godly” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritanism>)
- Puritans fell quickly out of favor in England, where the king was the head of the Church of England.
- They recognized neither the king’s secular or religious authority, and so quickly became enemies of civil and religious leaders.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character

- In 1600, the Puritans left England for Holland, which even in the 17th century was a very liberal society.
- It was too liberal for the Puritans, though, who disliked the government’s permissiveness and tolerance of behaviors/attitudes they found unacceptable.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character, cont.

- In 1620, the Puritans left Holland for the New World.
- Established Plymouth Plantation in the “savage wilderness” of New England.
- Retained those aspects of European society they liked; created new laws, policies, etc. to replace the elements of society they did not like.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character, cont.

- Because Scripture was central to religion and government, scholarship was a highly valued right (reserved, of course, to men only).
- The role of religious leaders was to present Scripture and guide other church members in its understanding and application.
- Puritan religious leaders were NEVER seen as intermediaries or intercessors.

The Puritan Role in Development of “American” Character, cont.

- “Puritan leaders were highly trained scholars, whose education tended to translate into positions that were often authoritarian.”
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PURITAN/purhist.html>
- “There was a built-in hierarchism in this sense, but one which mostly reflected the age.”
<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/PURITAN/purhist.html>
- Very Important: Anybody (theoretically) could rise to the same level of authority.

So...

The Puritan emphasis on:

- self-reliance
- independence
- individual achievement
- individual responsibility
- personal accountability
- power through ability
(education)

- All of which were discouraged in the Old World become the basis of “American Rugged Individualism”
- This is probably why most Americans disagree so strongly with theocracies

Puritan “Crime and Punishment”

- Because Puritan Boston *c.* 1690 was still a theocratic society, crime against church (or God) was the equivalent of a crime against another person or against “the State.”
- Yes... it was illegal to miss church on Sabbath days. It was also illegal to sleep during sermons that could run 3 or more hours long – during each session (morning and afternoon) on a Sabbath.

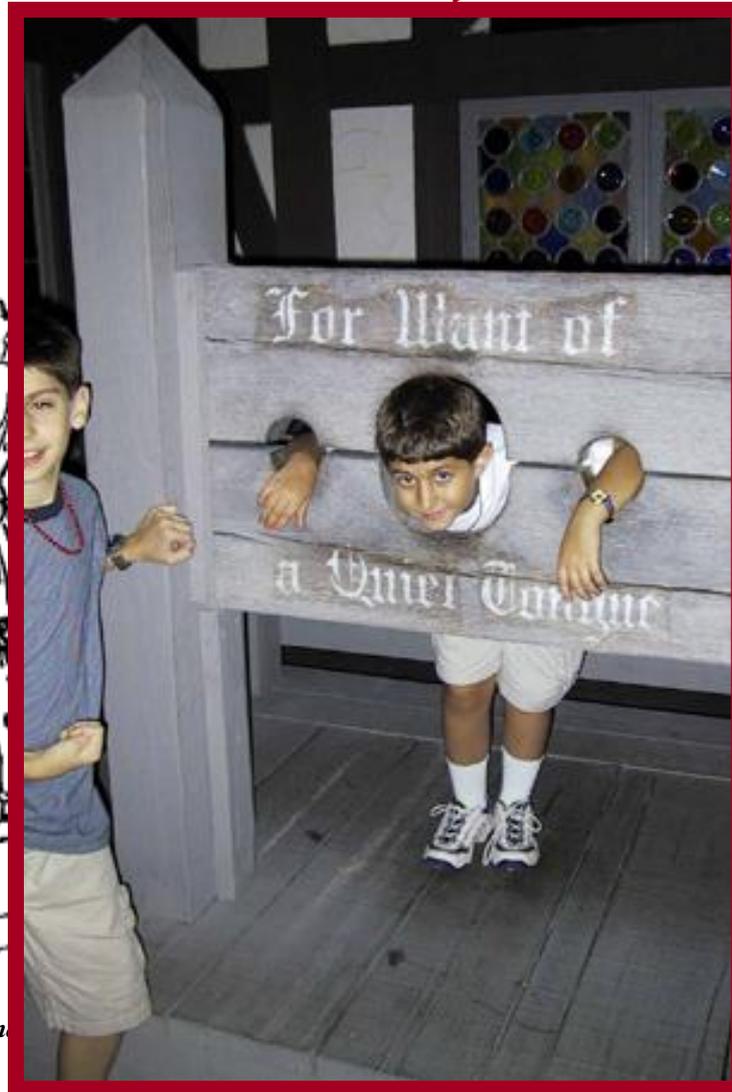


Puritan “Crime and Punishment”, *cont.*

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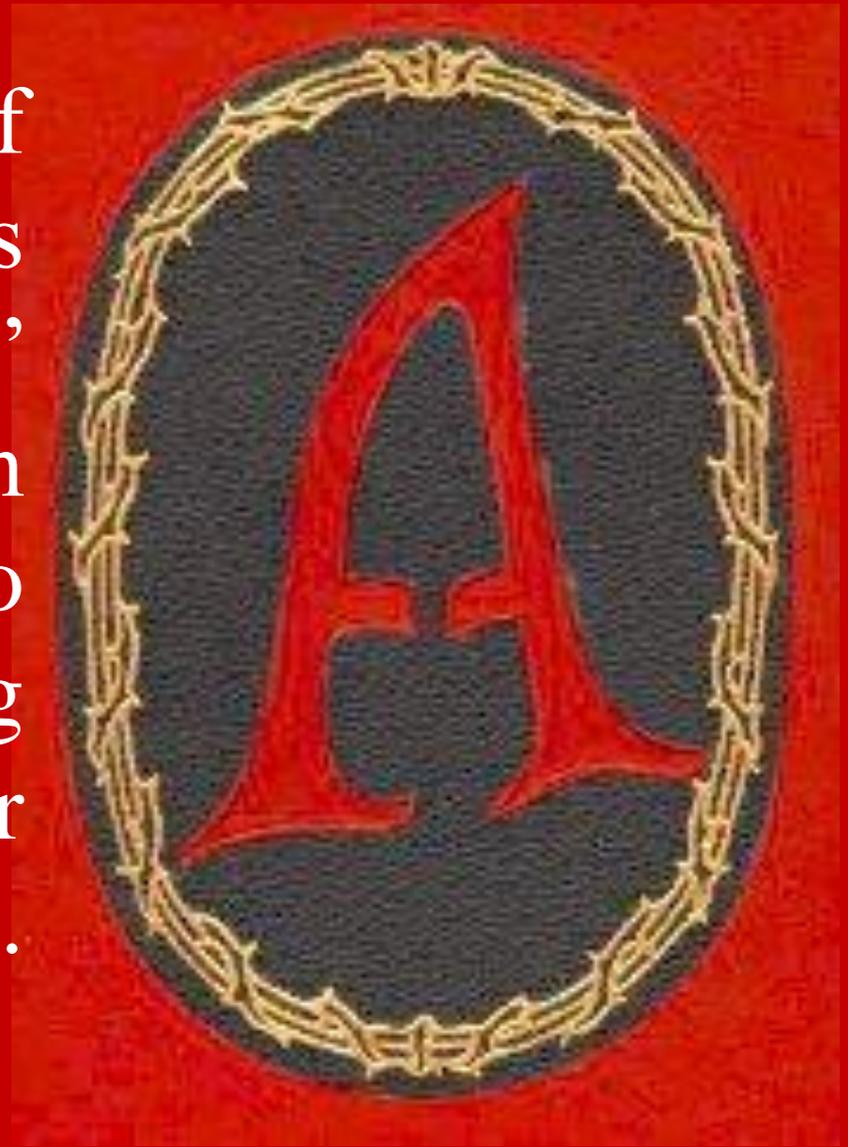
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Puritan “Crime and Punishment”, *cont.*



- After serving time in a jail and then on the pillory, a convicted criminal would often be required to wear some outward sign of his or her offense.
- In 1637, as punishment for writing an essay that criticized the archbishop, William Prynne (no relation to the central character in *The Scarlet Letter*) – after being put in the stocks – had the letters “SL” (for “seditious libeler”) branded onto his cheeks.

The “scarlet letter” of the novel’s title refers to a scarlet letter “A” that the novel’s main character is made to wear on her clothing as punishment for her crime of adultery.



“The Custom House” and *The Scarlet Letter*

- The introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter* is called “The Custom House”.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne tells of his time as a clerk in the Salem, Mass. Government Custom House.
- He claims to have found a letter written by Hester Prynne (the novel’s main character) and an embroidered scarlet A. The letter tells of Hester’s experiences, which Hawthorne relates in the novel.
- The novel is NOT based in historical fact, but Hawthorne uses “The Custom House” to give his story credibility.
- Hawthorne’s family came from Boston. He was descendant of a judge in the Salem witch trials (named Hathorne). Hawthorne changed the spelling of his name to distance himself from his relative’s unsavory reputation.