

The First Decades of the Massachusetts Bay; or Idleness, Wolves, and a Man Who Shall No Longer Be Called Mister



Scholars of colonial New England are familiar with the dramatic literary narratives of the Antinomian Controversy, the Salem witch trials, and King Phillip's War; although fewer scholars have explored the full archival records from this era. In 1853, volume 1 of [*Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay*](#) was printed from Nathaniel Shurtleff's transcriptions of the original seventeenth-century manuscripts. These records offer insights into the quotidian of the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay and of the lives of the indigenous tribes who dwelled there long before 1628.

Reading through patterns of legal action over the first decades of the colony offers new perspective on the lives in one small bay in the larger Atlantic world. The crimes committed are numerous (playing cards or dice, selling "strong water" to the Indians, allowing rams to graze among ewes, seditious writing, idleness, and many, many instances of drunkenness); and peppered among them is a persistent anxiety of relations with indigenous tribes. We must remember the mediation inherent to all archives and take caution in bringing stories of disenfranchised or oppressed people into current discussions. Nonetheless, in the case of the *Records of the Bay Colony*, the mediation may be

precisely what allows us to comprehend how the “free men” (white males with suffrage) perceived the women, servants, and indigenous people who lived alongside them.

Scholars are likely most familiar with the version of Puritan history published in John Winthrop’s *Journal*. However, that record has troubling elisions when compared to other historical documents—such as its omission of Anne Hutchinson’s fiery defenses during the Antinomian trials. Too often, it seems like authors with literary credibility, like Winthrop, are included in popular American Literature anthologies while alternate records that may give voice to women or people of color are dismissed as merely historical sources. Studying the *Records of the Governor and Company* opens other narrative spaces for research. The transcripts do not include direct quotes (except a two-page narrative by John Winthrop inserted without explanation); yet they offer rich content for use across many fields of study.

The first volume covers the colony’s first decades of struggling existence (1628-1641), and the government edicts reveal the budding community’s frustrations. Some seem inconsequential, such as dozens of fluctuations regarding the wages for essential workers like bricklayers, carpenters, and thatchers. Other pronouncements, though, may horrify us in their intensity. In November 1630, John Baker was “whipped for shooteing att fowle on the Sabbath day”; and in June 1631, it was ordered that Phillip Ratliffe should be whipped, have his ears cut off, and be banished “for vttering mallitious and scandalous speeches against the goumt. & the church of Salem.” In these punishments for transgressions against the church or its morals, it appears that the Puritan identity was far removed from our more-familiar American idealization for freedom of speech and action. In fact, deviations from *moral* norms receive some of the harshest punishments, such as in October 1631, when the court determined that to copulate with another man’s wife was punishable by death.

This capital punishment juxtaposes with the casual handling of abuses against indigenous people. When James Woodward burned down two wigwams, the court determined that “7 yards of cloath” sufficed to “satisfie the Indians for the wronge done to them.” Overall, the records prove a constant privileging of Puritan interests over those of their indigenous neighbors. This alone will not come as a surprise, yet the colonial history seems more disturbing when the records indicate that the Puritans *knew* an organized society already existed in the area, and yet they continually disregarded the indigenous presence. For example, on July 3, 1632, the Court of Assistants devotes itself to granting land to its members and their heirs to have “for euer.” To Sam Skelton, they grant a 200-acre “necke of land . . . called by the Indeans Wahquack, bounded on the south vpon a little ryv[er] called by the Indeans Conamabsqnooncant; vpon the north abbuting another ryver, called by the Indeans Pouomeneauheant.” To grant a plot of land to a colonist *while using indigenous names* to dictate the boundaries seems particularly pernicious, more so because there is no record that the court of assistants ever “purchased” the land from its original inhabitants before declaring it in eternal ownership of a white man.

Although indigenous people appear often in records (sometimes by name, sometimes tangentially), women appear in court generally only when family structures or sex are involved. Mrs. Freeman was punished for having an affair, Mary Ridge and Elizabeth Marson were both whipped for fornication, Joyce Bradwicke was fined for promising marriage without having her father's consent, and Weybro Lovell was "seriously admonished" for "light & whoarish behavior." Even "the wife of Mr. William Hutchinson," for all her significance in the history of the colony, receives only a few lines in the record: "for traduceing the ministers & their ministry in this country . . . [Anne] therevpon was banished."

The inattention paid in the official record to women or indigenous land compels us to force open gaps and bring alternative narratives to light. Without this work, John Winthrop's will be the only story told in textbooks about this country's colonial history. Instead, the *Records of the Governor and Company* allow us to teach other realities, like that of the unnamed Indian woman who was coerced into sex by John Dawe. The Puritan freemen may have the loudest voices in the archive, but theirs are not the only narratives being told.

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