



CRIME AMONG THE PURITANS

... and the penalties therefor.

**public humiliation
: repentance*

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Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. You weren't afraid to walk the streets. Drugs and pornography hadn't yet become stylish, and the big overcrowded prison hadn't been invented. Some of us might long to return to that morally unambiguous, less violent age. But before giving in to such yearnings, let's take a closer look at law and order in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Puritan lawmakers and judges counted as criminal many things that might strike us today as simply good clean fun: playing cards, dancing in a pub, entertaining on Saturday night (the start of the Sabbath), daring to be idle, or swearing a little. You could get into trouble too for nagging, lying, insulting someone, talking dirty, taking the Lord's name in vain, or disobeying your parents. And that's just for starters.

Of course, more serious crime did occur. Although the colonists recorded few incidents of rape or murder, they did, like us, have their share of petty thievery, burglary, and assault and battery. But three particularly common violations were especially disturbing to the Puritans: drunkenness, contempt for authority, and illicit sex.

Drinking itself wasn't against the law. Many Puritans, in fact, considered beer to be healthier than water (as it probably was). Each village or town had its tavern, regulated by the government and selling spirits to townspeople and strangers. To be arrested for drunkenness you had to be seen out of control to the point of reeling, falling, or speaking in an improper way (even in your own home). Daniel Owls of Salem, for one, was hauled into court for staggering into a house

where he "eased his stomak in the Chimney." Then a witness, aptly called Mr. Pester, reported seeing Owls strangely leaping and dancing in his home. And over the years, that confirmed drunkard Robert Coles, who held his booze very badly, had to endure countless fines and humiliating punishments, such as wearing the letter *D* in proclamation of his crime.

Although thirsty Puritans had a less sophisticated assortment of drinks than we do, they had more than enough to do the job: homemade wine and beer, or beer from the Sedgwick Brewery; sack; hard cider that was a far cry from our pallid supermarket variety; and "strong water" (often rum made in Boston from West Indies molasses).

With a populace equipped with such resources and few opportunities for letting off steam, small wonder that the courts dealt with so many cases of alcohol abuse. Little wonder too that Cotton Mather devoted one of his most dramatic fire-and-brimstone sermons to the horrors of excessive drinking, haranguing in the name of the Lord: "Boston, Boston, take heed of this sin, lest I lay thee even with the ground."

But the Lord's fury against Bay Colony drunkards couldn't match the anger of ministers and magistrates confronted with another common offense—disrespect for authority—for *they* were the authority. Still, a surprising number of townspeople did voice contempt for established worthies, and many had to appear in court for picturesque and biting barbs aimed at their political and religious superiors. Ursula Cole, of Charlestown, convicted of reviling the ministers of her parish, declared she'd just as soon "heare a catt meauw as them preach." John Lee, arrested for saying that Governor Winthrop was nothing but a lawyer's clerk, maintained that the court made laws to pick men's purses. And the grand jury indicted George Nubo, of Lancaster, for dubbing the ministers "liars, drunkards, and whoremasters."

Today, of course, we would view arrests for such colorful



Governor John Winthrop

results as a rank suppression of our right to freedom of speech. But we would find even less tolerable the Puritans' attempts to wipe out illicit sex.

"A particular Crime . . . a shameful Sin, much increasing amongst us," wrote the Boston court in 1665 on the subject of fornication, or sex among the unwed. Along with adultery it became the most common of all offenses in the second half of the century and was perhaps the most difficult to control. Some of the objections to sexual misbehavior were economic; no town wanted to support the many illegitimate children appearing on the scene. But we may blame the Puritans' moral rigidity for the large number of married couples arrested, fined, and occasionally whipped when their all-too-premature babies proved that they had had sexual relations before marriage. Neighbors, constables, and selectmen were very good at counting months.

Indeed, an impressive number of civic-minded citizens seemed eager to help the courts stamp out wantonness. Since the law usually required two witnesses for a conviction, they resorted to an old-fashioned brand of neighborhood watch. Like the Brown family of Ipswich, for example. Daughter Mary reported having seen James Creeke kissing Luke Perkins's wife. Her father said he saw them "tickling one another about the ribs," after which father, mother, and daughter carefully watched them go out into the orchard for more serious business. At least no one could accuse the good Browns of blindness.

Puritan law and order would seem about as comfortable to us as a strait jacket. But let anyone not yet convinced heed the example of poor Captain Kemble. Returning home to Charlestown from a three-year voyage, he greeted his wife in front of their house and had the audacity to kiss her right there. Apparently the court sentenced him to two hours in the stocks for "lewd and unseemly behavior."

If the colonists' concept of crime strikes us as archaic and unreasonable, their idea of punishment may seem totally outlandish. The magistrates did their best to make the punishment fit the crime. If your dog killed someone else's sheep, they logically made you "hang your dog." If you were caught "swearing, railleing and reviling," they might have you stand for a half-hour or so with your tongue anchored by a cleft stick. And for petty thievery, lying, and disorderly behavior, they had a picturesque variety of punishments of humiliation inherited from Mother England.

Those quaint old stocks, for example, were not designed as tourist attractions. A petty thief or a habitual drunkard would sit on a bench, sometimes for several hours at a time, hands and feet securely fixed in holes cut out of sturdy oaken planks. Like the pillory, the stocks had the advantage of being transportable, but frequently one could be found near the First Meeting House, at the junction of present-day Washington and State streets. To leave no doubt in the minds of passersby, the prisoner often had to wear a sheet of paper on his back explaining to all what crime had been committed. And irony of ironies, it is truth, not fiction, that in 1639 Edward Palmer, who had the glory of being the first builder of stocks for the settlers, also had the dubious honor of being the first to try them out: he had overcharged the town for his services.

The pillory, also an English tradition, was a good sight more uncomfortable than the stocks and certainly more disgraceful. There the prisoner had to stand up on a platform, hands and head protruding through holes in a wooden board, the piteous target of overripe eggs, fruit, and the jeers of onlookers. The courts invoked this punishment rarely, reserving it mainly for forgers and counterfeiters.

Other types of punishments awaited those who ran on at the mouth. Scolds and shrews, guilty of "exorbitancy of the tongue," might be sentenced to a spell in the infamous ducking stool, which was placed near a convenient body of fresh or salt water. Strapped into a sturdy wooden armchair at the end of a long pole, the offender might be immersed thrice "over head and ears" in sight of the usual audience of curious friends and enemies. Sometimes, as an alternative to this unholy baptism, the court might offer the culprit the choice of being gagged at his or her front door in full view of the neighbors. In Springfield Goodwife Hunter could not or would not decide between the two humiliations, so Judge Pyncheon had her gagged, not ducked.

More disgraceful than such punishments were the letter penalties. For a designated period of time—sometimes a year, sometimes forever—a convicted person might have to wear a

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letter two inches long in a contrasting color on an upper garment: *T* for thief, *D* for drunkard, *R* for runaway servant, *V* for venery or lewdness, and so on. (Although people occasionally had to display the letters *AD* for adultery, Nathaniel Hawthorne's heroine Hester Prynne would probably not really have

worn an A, since that practice didn't come into use until the end of the seventeenth century. She would most likely have received a severe whipping but could also have been executed for the crime).

Besides all the humiliations, lawbreakers had bodily punishments to fear. Most common of all were the whippings, administered to countless fornicators, adulterers, and thieves. A whipping could not exceed forty stripes at any given time and usually consisted of from ten to twenty lashes a session. Whipping posts, like the stocks and pillory, were most often set up in public places: on the village green, by the watch house, near the meeting house, or in the marketplace. There, on Thursday, "lecture day," after the minister delivered some grandiloquent sermon before the townspeople, the constable took over—and cruel lashes made their mark on a naked back.

In 1638 John Bickerstaffe and Ales Burwoode (among many others) had their severe lashings, he for enticing her, she for yielding and not crying out. A number of couples managed to avoid that fate by paying a stiff fine, listening to a magistrate's moral admonition about their "uncleanness," and acknowledging their "great sinne and evill." A woman could also escape a whipping if she convinced the court that she had been "surprised" by a seducer—and there must have been quite a few surprised ladies back then.

The most fearsome type of whipping was the dreaded "cartstail," inflicted on bawds, prostitutes, and Quakers. The offender was stripped to the waist (including erring females—Puritan prudery notwithstanding), and tied to the tail of a cart. The victim was whipped as the cart rambled slowly through Boston, sometimes making the rounds of other towns such as Dedham or Roxbury. Again, the event was made as public as possible, adding humiliation to pain.

Bouts with the constable's lash were undoubtedly preferred to the branding and physical mutilation meted out by the courts. Some thieves and burglars, and a goodly number of indentured servants, were branded on the forehead with the letter appropriate to their offense. According to law, blasphemers might expect to have their tongues bored through with a hot iron, but few received that punishment outside of Joseph Gatchell, who refused to believe in God, the devil, or hell. Somewhat more frequently a judge would order an offender's ear partly or completely cut off. In 1631 a servant, Philip Ratcliffe, had both ears removed and was fined and banished for making scandalous speeches against the governor and the church of Salem. Later, in the case of certain Quakers, the severing of ears was only a prelude to a worse fate: execution on Boston Common.

The early Bay Colony laws listed fifteen crimes punishable by death, far fewer than England's long list of capital offenses. Of the fifteen, just nine earned execution in Massachusetts—witchcraft, murder, bestiality, adultery, rape, arson, Quakerism, piracy, and treason.

Until the Salem witch hunt of 1692 the colony sent only a few alleged witches to the gallows. Before then, a number of people called witches sued their accusers for defamation and got satisfaction. One such person was Widow Marshfield, of Springfield, who successfully sued Mary Parsons for having called her a witch. (Parsons, a rather demented woman, subsequently accused her own husband of witchcraft and was herself executed for killing her baby.) Not long after, many people testified against John Godfrey, who had the disconcerting habit of coming to them at night in the shape of a bear,

bewitching their cattle and vanishing into thin air. Godfrey apparently escaped the noose along with quite a few others. And Samuel Straiton and his wife were fined but not executed when they maintained that Margaret Jones, hanged for witchcraft in 1648, "died wrongfully and . . . she was noe witch." Such a statement would have been unthinkable at the height of the Salem witch hunts, when twenty accused persons were killed in one year.

Although the crime of adultery usually met with whippings and fines rather than death, some were indeed hanged for it. Eighteen-year-old Mary Latham might not have died so cruelly had not her lover confessed their secret. This is what hap-

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pened: The girl, rejected by a young man she loved, vowed to marry the first person who asked her. Her husband turned out to be an unlikable old wretch and Mary took a lover, James Britton. Unfortunately, the young man came down with a "deadly palsy" and, seeing it as a punishment for his misbehavior, began talking about their affair. They brought Mary back to Boston from her current home in Plymouth (where no one was ever executed for adultery). The court determined that the couple led immoral lives, and the lovers were hanged.

Like the ancient Greek drama and a modern football game, a hanging was at once entertainment and public catharsis. Crowds gathered for the occasion. In fact, the number of spectators returning from the execution of two Quakers was so great that the drawbridge over the canal separating the North End from Shawmut, the main town, fell through under their weight (at North Street, then called Ann Street). Later, in 1686, according to eyewitness John Dunton, people came to Boston from fifty miles away to attend the hanging of James Morgan, who stood convicted of murder. It was the first such execution in seven years, and Dunton reckoned that it drew a crowd of nearly five thousand.

The staging of such an event had the passion and pageantry of great showmanship. On lecture day the crowd would attend lengthy but vigorous sermons by preachers of renown. In Morgan's case, because of structural problems in Cotton Mather's church, the crowd moved to the Old South Meeting House on the site of the present church at Washington and Milk streets. There, three prominent and forceful lecturers—Cotton Mather, his father Increase, and the Reverend Joshua Moody—pronounced fervent hellfire-and-damnation speeches. Their main message: may the death of this sinner serve as a dire warning to others . . . *Repent* before it is too late.

The production culminated in the grand spectacle of the hanging. A gallows was set up about a mile outside of Boston, perhaps because the town itself could not have accommodated all who came to watch. Morgan dutifully did as Cotton Mather had coached him to do. He addressed the crowd in his last moments: "Have a Care of Drunkenness and ill Company, and mind all good Instruction, and don't turn your back upon the Word of GOD, as I have done." Morgan then made his final



The Reverend Cotton Mather

prayer, they pulled his cap down over his eyes, and with the rope around his neck he said; "O Lord receive my spirit; I come unto thee, O Lord; I come, I come, I come." At 5:30 p.m. he was "turned off," that is, they removed his ladder and he swung free in the noose. Dunton described the scene as "mournful" and wrote that he had never witnessed a "more serious nor greater compassion."

Hanging, the customary procedure for an execution, did not always come off smoothly. Governor Winthrop noted in 1646 that Mary Martin, aged 22, granddaughter of a mayor of Plymouth, England, and at the time servant to Mrs. Bourne of Boston, had an illegitimate baby and, fearing the consequences at the hands of the Puritans, killed the child. They discovered her secret, had her confess to it and to fornication, and sentenced her to death. But when they "turned her off," evidently the knot of the noose slipped forward, bungling the job. She swung for awhile and then spoke, asking what they meant to do. In answer, somebody turned the knot backwards, and she finally died.

Looking at such gruesome stories from our own perspective, we might well ask why the colonists didn't use jail as a general solution. They did indeed have jails, called bridewells or houses of correction, for drunks, idlers, runaway servants, prostitutes, disorderly persons, and even children (witness young Ephraim Gale, sentenced to the Cambridge jail in 1671 for "stubborne and wicked carriage towards his owne naturall parents"). And many of the towns had prisons for their more serious criminals. But these institutions served mainly as temporary holding places for arrested persons until the courts could decide on a fitting punishment. Besides, the structures were usually flimsily built. Escaping was child's play, and many did manage to get out.

Those prisoners obliged to spend any length of time in jail

found conditions insufferable. Men, women, and children were thrown together in one small room with no sanitary facilities. Although the Puritans are hardly remembered for their cleanliness, the stench of these quarters was too much for many of them, who begged piteously to be let out. Some prisoners (such as the supposed witches of Salem) had to wear bilboes—leg irons weighing about eight pounds—clamped firmly around the ankles and, in the case of at least one Quaker, around the thighs and neck.

How well did the colonists, with their stringent laws and punishments, succeed in their efforts to eliminate crime? In the first years, very well indeed. The Shawmut (inner Boston) area had begun with a population of 150, and a village atmosphere still prevailed; one knew one's neighbor, possibly even from the English days. The nightly watch was effective, less for nonexistent Indian attacks than for ferreting out suspicious offenders. In addition to its constables, the town enlisted ordinary citizens to make frequent Sabbath rounds and perform guard duty. Day and night, witnesses who stood ready to give testimony against wrongdoers abounded, occasionally motivated by vengeance, jealousy, or hatred but more often by duty and conscience (doubtless not by the paltry sum of two shillings paid them in court).

In no time, however, the population began to mushroom. In 1643 the colony counted thirty towns within its jurisdiction. By 1664 Boston's tiny community had grown to 14,300 inhabitants, and the city found itself in the midst of a building boom, commercial growth, and increasing urbanization. More and more strangers appeared on the scene. The ministers and magistrates felt that if they lost their homogeneity they would lose their integrity, and with it their grip on morality and lawful behavior. So, unlike agricultural Virginia, they refused to receive shiploads of convicts to help them work the land, they made laws discouraging the integration of strangers of any class, and they began issuing "cautions," warnings to potential settlers with criminal records or no visible means of support that the Bay Colony would not allow them in.

They were fighting a losing battle. After all, even among the original community a second generation did not necessarily accept the religious morality of the first Massachusetts settlers. And if the whole truth be told, very early on Satan had sneaked his way into the region. Witness the case of the irrepressible Thomas Morton. The first person recorded as punished by the Massachusetts General Court, he had settled in what is now Quincy a few years before the Puritans arrived. Notorious for his drunken orgies, his seduction of Indian squaws, his atheism and pagan bacchanals around the maypole at "Merie-mount" (Mount Wollaston), he appalled the sober-minded town fathers. In 1630 they banished him from the colony and ordered his house burned to the ground in sight of the Indians "for many wrongs he has done them from tyme to tyme." An even more serious offender, John Billington, came over on the Mayflower with his wife and two children. Soon discovered to be a rogue and a murderer, Billington became the first criminal to be hanged in Massachusetts and met his Maker in 1630.

But even without such blots on Pilgrim purity the inevitable had to happen: strangers did arrive and settle, criminals and

On the Punishment of Fractious Harvard Students

Early on, the College devised a thorough code for the punishment of unruly undergraduates.

Student offenses ranged from minor misdemeanors such as speaking their "mother tongue" instead of Latin, or feasting on plum cake at Commencement time, to crimes such as blasphemy and robbery. On the trifling end of the scale, the unseemly practice of wearing long hair apparently went unpunished and uncorrected—although the Reverend John Eliot and others condemned it as the sin that begat all other undergraduate evils. But breaking windows, a favorite student pastime, did result in fines for repairs. In fact, the fines became so numerous and frequent that a special "glazier" column appeared in the steward's billing book along with tuition and other costs.

When it came to absence from prayers, a tidy system came into play. It began with a light fine: one absence, one penny. A second truancy within a fortnight could lead to a public admonition. Then, for a third offense, if the erring student refused to make a public confession of his guilt, he could be stripped of the privileges of his seniority or class order. A senior of a certain rank, for example, would have to sit below his peers and "chuse after them at Meales." Finally, continued disobedience could mean expulsion from college.

Harvard did expel a good number of students, at least temporarily, but for more serious misdeeds than absence at prayers. In May 1666 three students were thrown out of Harvard, their names excised from the roster posted in the school buttery. They had been accused and convicted of hanging a dog (evidently another popular sport) with stolen rope, corrupting witnesses, and generally lying about their deed. And when hazing got out of hand toward the end of the seventeenth century, one Joseph Web was expelled and deprived of an allotted pension after allegedly sending freshmen on his private errands and striking them.

Still, expulsion seems to have been easily reversible. The three hangmen of 1666 all graduated, and Web was

readmitted after a suitably humble petition. It usually took a self-flagellating formal confession before a miscreant could be reinstated. This is evidenced in the plea of a student named Wade, accused of "abominable lasciviousness." Publicly admonished but unrepentant until expelled, Wade had to confess "these my heinous sins and desire to take Shame to myself" before finally getting back in good standing.

A less happy fate, corporal punishment, might befall students accused of blasphemy, robbery, repeated drunkenness, and other serious offenses. According to a 1656 order of the General Court, the President and Fellows of Harvard could punish any misdemeanor by a fine or "whipping in the hall openly . . . not exceeding tenn shillings or tenn stripes for one offense."

The early years especially furnish examples of such beatings. In 1644 two ministers' sons, James Ward and John Weld, robbed two houses, including Weld's uncle's, of around eleven pounds and were whipped by President Dunster himself.

But with student offenders coming from New England's first families, naturally whippings were not the ordinary form of punishment. In fact, one can conclude overall that discipline of Harvard students—norwithstanding the stern rules on the books—was administered with a velvet glove. A final example illustrates this.

On December 29, 1676, between late morning and mid afternoon, a seventeen-year-old freshman, James Alling, and two upperclassmen managed to down two to three quarts of hard cider and three pints of rum—for a start. Joined and abetted by friends from town and two females of scandalous reputation, Alling's party maintained its momentum through the evening. Later, Thomas Danforth, former treasurer of the College and justice of the peace, issued a warrant against the carousing students and their companions, and all wound up in court. But the students got off with only a minimal fine. And, booze or no booze, young Alling graduated third in his class.

nonconformists slipped in via other colonies, and the lid began to come off.

It was in the 1650s, with the sudden arrival of nonconformist Quakers, that the Puritans waged—and lost—their greatest battle to preserve the status quo. As radical protesters and the strongest opposition to the puritanical way of life, the Quakers posed a threat to everything the Pilgrims had tried to build. Not only did they refuse to take an oath of loyalty, pay taxes, or do military service, they had a most obnoxious practice of going into churches and making inflammatory speeches against the Puritans' style of worship, in front of ministers and congregations. In at least one case a Quaker contingent entered a meeting house led by a female protester who might have been the ancestor of a radical militant of our own era. Judge Sewall describes her as an apparition, dressed in canvas, her hair disheveled and "loose like a Periwigg," her face painted black. The Puritan authorities had no idea how to cope with such disruptive invaders. Like England, the Bay Colony

had laws against Jesuits, but there was nothing on the books for Quakers.

So the lawmakers got busy. Whipping, jailing, fines, and banishment now awaited those disturbing dissidents and whoever abetted them. But since none of that had a discouraging effect on the newcomers, obviously anxious to become a *cause célèbre*, stricter measures were needed. So the court ruled that a Quaker could lose an ear for a first offense (that is, persisting in Quakerism or disobeying an order to leave) and the other ear for a repetition of the crime. For a third offense his tongue might be bored with a hot iron. Some Quakers tried to test the law and lost an ear. Then two banished Quakers, William Robinson and Marmaduke Stevenson, decided to come back to Boston to see just how far the court would go in punishing them.

This brazen reentry, along with a lot of Quaker speeches ("frantick fury" according to the court secretary), settled the question. The dissidents were banished a second time, and



Judge Samuel Sewall

the legislators quickly went back to their books to add a new law: banished Quakers who returned would be executed.

The unfortunate lawmakers may remind us of frustrated sorcerers' apprentices desperately trying to get rid of brooms and buckets that unceasingly multiplied. Naturally the Quakers returned; as Voltaire said of them, "Getting persecuted is a great way of making converts." The authorities had to make good their threat: the casualty list included Robinson, Stevenson, Mary Dyer (reprieved but determined to die for her cause), and a fourth Quaker, William Leddra—all hanged on Boston Common.

For a brief while leaders and magistrates were able to watch over their community, to protect it from itself and to exercise control over it, as a patriarch governs an obedient family. But inevitably they had to face certain unsavory realities: they could no more suppress Quakerism than they could eradicate adultery, tobacco smoking, or an increasing delight in fancy clothes. And they would not be able to stop their villages from eventually turning into bustling, impersonal cities. In short, they had no legal machinery to check the flow of time and change, nor could they stem the course of human nature.

The Puritan lawgivers. Just how good or bad were they? We can tell only by discarding for a moment our narrow modern perspective to view them in the context of their own time. Their justice was not truly democratic. Products of a class system, they tended to give legal preference to the rich and powerful. But they made it a point to be fair where the lowly and poor were concerned, and generally tried to administer justice even-handedly. Moreover, though many Puritan judgments and punishments may seem cruel or barbaric to us today, they were more equitable than those of a colony like Maryland, where in cases of illicit sex, for example, the female often got a whipping while the male got off with a fine.

Some of their decisions would be unpardonable in any era.

Although they outlawed torture, they inflicted on the alleged witches of Salem a psychological and physical pain that was surely a form of torture. And in their blind righteousness they killed innocent victims there. Yet remembering the hysterical atmosphere of the McCarthy-era witch hunts, who, if any, of us would have dared protest the Salem executions—at the risk of our own lives? The wonder is not that such things occurred but that they didn't occur more often.

All in all, the governors, magistrates, and assistants didn't do too badly, in view of the times. Most of them were trained in religion rather than law and inevitably identified sin with crime; they dealt with a code based on the Old Testament and were convinced of the devil's reality. Besides this they worked within a system that was a commercial enterprise, a religious institution, and a political entity all rolled into one, a system in which those who governed drew up the laws and executed them too. On the whole, they carried it off.

It might be tempting to view the Bay Colony system of justice as simply quaint and paternalistic, to see it as a stern paterfamilias ordering all to go to church; directing clandestine lovers to marry and separated spouses to live together; fining jealous husbands; keeping flirtatious wives away from their suitors; making certain that parents punished disobedient children; ensuring that Harvard students weren't beaten too mercilessly and that colonists didn't sell booze to the Indians or cheat them; and admonishing one and all to *behave*. But to be fair we would also have to show that the Puritan lawgivers were generally conscientious and concerned. Despite their human failings, a good number of them, though not all, made an effort to be honest with others and with themselves.

Judge Samuel Sewall is a case in point. An important participant in the Salem witch trials, Sewall was convinced in his heart that the accused were possessed of the devil. On August 19, 1692, he witnessed the execution of five of the prisoners. One of them, the minister George Burroughs, A.B. 1670, made a sober, moving speech declaring his innocence. Apparently many, hearing him end with the Lord's Prayer, were so touched that they refused to discuss the hangings afterward. Sewall truly could not understand their silence, and he noted in his diary that Burroughs's "Speech, Prayer, protestation of his Innocence, did much move unthinking persons." But before five years had passed Sewall had lost five of his children, one after another, and was tormented by nightmares. By now he, like many others, had horrible doubts about the Salem hangings. After searching his soul, the distinguished judge went to church on January 14, 1697, a day of fasting and prayer in memory of Salem, and in sight of the whole congregation stood while the Reverend Mr. Willard read his confession to those present:

Samuel Sewall, sensible of the reiterated strokes of God upon himself and family; and being sensible, that as to the Guilt contracted . . . at Salem (to which the order for this Day relates) he is, upon many accounts, more concerned than any that he knows of. Desires to take the Blame and shame of it. Asking pardon of men. And especially desiring prayers that God, who has an Unlimited Authority, would pardon that sin and all other his sins.

We need not glorify the Puritan authorities in order to give proper credit to a Judge Sewall or a Governor Winthrop for the old-fashioned sense of honor such men brought to their self-imposed task. Not content with merely applying English laws to the American wilderness, they tried their utmost to forge a new justice, consistent with the word of God and in harmony with Puritan hopes and ideals.