The Puritan Church

Although those who called themselves Puritan were as diverse as the Catholics and Church of England they opposed, there are several general characteristics which can be discussed. Believing that each congregation should be free of taxes and indoctrination from an established priesthood heirarchy, many as early as the 1500's petitioned for a Congregational Church. They believed in simplicity of religion and worship, shunning priestly vestments, ornate buildings, statues and other costly decorations. In fact the term 'Puritan' can be traced to the efforts of some to purify the established religion. Many of them even followed the strict religious principles of John Calvin, modeling their church on the Bible and early Christian organization.

Hence, their church buildings were functional and plain, at first only rough wooden buildings with low benches facing the pulpit. Seldom were these buildings heated and men and women sat separately. Pilgrims or Separatists are recognized today from pictures of their plain, unornamented style of clothing.

Because Puritanism was, in many ways, a democratic movement aimed to free the common people from domination of a governing church, the rising movement was to blame for oppression, persecution and a civil war in England. The fall of Oliver Cromwell and the Commonwealth in 1660 was a death knell to Puritan ideals in the English government. Resolved to find a place where both their civil and religious beliefs could have greater liberty, Separatists fled first to Holland in 1608 and in 1620 to Plymouth, Mass.

Other Puritans who were less radical in their doctrine later settled Boston and Salem. Roger Conant and a group of colonists from Cape Ann first came in 1626. Later groups came from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This put differing groups in conflict because of varying degrees of strictness. Eventually Roger Williams was banished from the colony for preaching doctrine they considered too far from center. Religious freedom, long a principle the Puritans had championed, became nothing more than the freedom to believe as the majority voted.

Eventually Salem took on the aspect of intolerance. By 1692, barely 63 years after the first colonists came, their narrow-mindedness produced one of the most frightening periods in American history. The Salem witch hunts lasted no more than a year or two before popular opinion turned against them and free thinking citizens refused to tolerate it. But in that year more than 20 persons lost their lives for being different enough to cause discomfort in the more ordinary citizens.

Eventually sons of these early Pilgrims, taking with them the idea that each congregation should be controlled by its own members, established Congregational Churches throughout New England. For six generations the Cooks affiliated with this church, producing a family love of the Bible and of God.