

# ANNE HUTCHINSON: MIDWIFE OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Anne Hutchinson was a Puritan colonist in Massachusetts Bay Colony. She was banished from the colony as punishment for challenging theocratic rulers and went on to co-found Rhode Island with Roger Williams. The vigorous defense that she mounted in both her court and church trials was an important forerunner to the development of the constitutional notion of separation of church and state.

## Migration to New England

From her earliest age, Anne Hutchinson was no stranger to religious controversy. Her father, Francis Marbury, was a minister in the Church of England and a Puritan reformer himself.

Puritanism was a religious movement focused on “purifying” the Church of England. Puritans wished to free the church of any vestiges of old Roman Catholic practices, which they viewed as contrary to authentic Christianity.

Marbury’s outspoken dissent from the orthodox views of the Church of England led to his arrest and trial for the crime of heresy. Marbury was convicted and sentenced to house arrest, and he was unable to preach in church or leave his home.

The time Marbury spent at home allowed him to make sure that his many children, including Anne, had the education that he wanted for them. For Anne, this meant that she received a much more thorough and robust education than she otherwise could have hoped for as a middle-class girl in 17th century England.

Anne Marbury married prominent Lincolnshire wool merchant William Hutchinson in 1612. They raised a large family together, and Anne became a highly respected midwife. Anne and William shared a commitment to Puritan theology and quickly became part of Puritan minister John Cotton’s inner circle.

The Hutchinsons were persuaded by Cotton to emigrate from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634. The colony had been recently established by John Winthrop and the Massachusetts Bay Company to be a Puritan utopia, a “shining city upon a hill.” In New England, Puritans would be free to establish new churches and worship in the way that they thought best, free from the Roman Catholic imagery and practices that they had found objectionable in England.

Because the Hutchinsons were respected and wealthy members of the merchant class, the journey to the New World for Anne, Will, and their



Edwin Austin Abbey (1852-1911) created this famous illustration of Anne Hutchinson on trial in 1901. What character traits of Hutchinson do you think Abbey was trying to convey in this artwork?

twelve children was fairly comfortable. They sailed aboard the *Griffin*, a ship that had previously transported John Cotton and his family. Before leaving England, the Hutchinsons secured materials for a large house.

Anne believed that she had prophetic gifts; that she could foretell the future and determine whether a person was “among the elect.” In Puritan theology, if one is “among the elect,” it means one is destined to go to heaven.

On the passage over, Anne got into a theological argument with minister Zecharia Symmes. Hutchinson declared that she could tell that Symmes was *not* among the elect. Symmes was livid. He found Anne’s claims to prophecy (especially about his own salvation) theologically suspect. But he also thought it illegitimate for a woman to question a minister’s teachings. ▶

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To make matters worse, in Symmes's view, Anne had developed a significant following among the passengers aboard the ship sympathetic to her theological views. Anne's claims to prophecy were buoyed by the fact that she had correctly predicted the date the ship would land in Massachusetts, although it was several days ahead of schedule. Upon arriving in Massachusetts, Symmes brought his complaints against Anne Hutchinson to deputy Governor Thomas Dudley.

### Hutchinson in Massachusetts Bay Colony

When they arrived in Massachusetts, Anne and William built their home in the Shawmut peninsula area of Boston. They happened to be right next door to Governor John Winthrop. This meant that Winthrop was familiar with the Bible-study groups that began to meet in the Hutchinson home.

Anne's work as a midwife made her well-known among the families of the colony. She had a good reputation for her intellect and skills. Anne knew the Bible and had a theological mind to rival any of the ministers.

But, as a woman, there was no chance that Anne could preach as an official minister of the church. What she *could* do, and was even expected to do as a prominent, older woman of the community, was to lead younger women in Bible-study groups.

As a rule, Puritans placed a high value on reading the Bible and understanding church doctrine for oneself. (This was contrary to the Roman Catholic practice of receiving information about the Bible from ordained priests reading it in Latin.) But women typically received no formal religious instruction. This made it difficult for them to be able to read the Bible and know the necessary doctrines.

Home study groups, known as "conventicles," were a way for women to help one another in religious instruction. The conventicles in Anne's home became very popular. At times as many as 60 people were in attendance. A second weekly meeting was added, which included men as well as women.

The second weekly meeting was the beginning of trouble for Anne Hutchinson. It violated a tenet of Puritan theology that says that women should never be the teachers of men.

In addition, Governor Winthrop worried that Hutchinson's conventicles were trouble for *him*. Not only were they popular and well-attended, but one of the men who attended was Henry Vane, an English lord and chief political rival of Winthrop's at that time. Because Governor Winthrop lived next door, he was able to see just how popular Anne's meetings had become.

While Winthrop may have been threatened by the popularity of the meetings, he was also concerned about their contents. One of the key tenets of Puritanism is the idea of "predestination." This is the view that God has perfect knowledge of the future. And if God knows what will happen in the future, it has already been determined. Consequently, the question of whether one is going to heaven or hell has been predetermined.

Among the utopian Puritan colonists there was disagreement about whether one's predestined salvation was due to the "free grace" of God, or whether one had to *prepare* one's soul for God's grace through good behavior while on earth. Hutchinson, John Cotton, and others took the "free grace" position, in which there is nothing that a person can do to affect their own salvation.

John Winthrop and John Wilson, pastor of the Boston Church, took the "preparationist" position, claiming that although salvation comes from God, it is each person's responsibility to prepare his or her soul to receive God's grace through his or her actions (works). The free-grace faction found preparationism to be too close to the offensively Catholic position that a person can "earn" her way into heaven by her good works.

Winthrop, Wilson, and other preparationists were concerned that Anne Hutchinson was winning over many members of the Boston Church to the free-grace point of view. They found this especially concerning because they were in positions of authority. If people believe that their actions — whether good or bad, law-abiding or not — have no effect on their salvation, then those people would not have sufficient reason to follow the law, or to be obedient to civil and religious authorities.

As Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop wanted to do everything in his power to ensure the success of the colony and to maintain the colony's royal charter (the king's permission to form an English colony in Massachusetts). They labelled Hutchinson as an "antinomian," someone who promotes lawlessness. (From the Greek: *anti* = against; *nomos* = law).

### Hutchinson on Trial

Although Winthrop was keen to force Hutchinson to stop her meetings and stop spreading her free-grace message, it was unclear that he had the legal means to do so. Anne's meetings were held in her private home. And, as a woman, she had no official role. Even so, Anne was arrested and made to stand two trials: a civil trial before the Boston court, and a church trial

## Excerpt from the Transcript of Anne Hutchinson's Trial

Mrs. Anne Hutchinson: ...You have power over my body but the Lord Jesus hath power over my body and soul; and assure yourselves thus much, you do as much in your lies to put the Lord Jesus Christ from you, and if you go on in this course you begin, you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

before ministers of the church in Boston.

Forty judges and magistrates from all over Massachusetts were present at the civil trial for slandering ministers and “troubling the peace” of the colony. Anne was questioned about her conventicles, and whether she had insulted ministers of the church. Even without the benefit of legal counsel, Anne answered questions clearly and concisely, with fluent citations from Scripture. She stated her positions and articulated her reasons for holding them. During her examination Anne made the bold claim that she experienced direct revelations from God. She also incorrectly predicted the destruction and downfall of the Massachusetts colony. Winthrop, speaking on behalf of the other judges, declared her to be “a woman unfit for our society.”

Commentators tend to agree that Hutchinson acquitted herself extremely well at trial. Ironically, her polished comportment may have contributed to her legal undoing. Due to her outspokenness on religious matters and her unwillingness to back down or blindly accept pronouncements of religious and civil authorities, she lost both her civil and church trials. She was sentenced to banishment from the colony.

## Banishment

William Hutchinson and others went with Roger Williams, himself a Puritan minister who had been banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony for preaching “dangerous opinions,” to establish a colony in what is now Rhode Island. After her church trial in April of 1638, Anne and her younger children went with about 60 people sympathetic to Anne’s cause to the Rhode Island colony. The Hutchinson group walked for six days. Anne was 45 years old and pregnant for the 16th time. Once in Rhode Island, she was reunited with her husband.

After William Hutchinson’s death in 1642, Anne and her seven youngest children moved to what is now New York State (then, New Netherlands). Unfortunately, they were caught up in the war between New Netherlands colonists and the Siwanoy tribe. Anne and most of her household were killed in a Siwanoy raid.

## Legacy

Hutchinson, her trial, as well as her “heresy” have had a lasting impact on American history. This is most



This illustration shows the landing of Roger Williams in Rhode Island after assisting in the purchase of land from the Narragansett people.

easily seen in the importance that America’s founders placed on religious freedom and holding religion as a matter of individual conscience in some of America’s foundational documents. The Royal Charter for Rhode Island (1663) established that colony as a place where each citizen could follow the religion of his choice.

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Thomas Jefferson in 1777, outlawed requiring citizens of Virginia to support a certain church financially and outlawed religious tests for holding office. Jefferson reasoned that “Almighty God hath created the mind free.”

Just a few years later, Virginians were faced with legislation establishing public financial support for Christian churches. In response, James Madison published the “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments” in 1785, in which he argued against state funding for religion. Madison forcefully argued that religion is a matter for an individual’s private conscience. Madison also recognized the possibility that state funding for religion would cause people to leave the state, having “a like tendency to banish our citizens.” Madison’s choice of language calls to mind Hutchinson’s banishment, along with that of Roger Williams.

The Founders’ commitment to religious freedom is notable in the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” These first words opening the Bill of Rights emphasize the importance of freedom of conscience with respect to religion. Anne Hutchinson and other early religious dissidents left a legacy that guaranteed individual

religious freedom in what would become the United States of America.

Harvard College (later Harvard University) was founded in Massachusetts in 1636 but had no buildings or professors, yet. Two weeks after Hutchinson's civil trial ended in 1637, the General Court of Massachusetts — which included John Winthrop — issued funds to actually build the college. The purpose seemed to be hastening the training of new ministers who would defend Puritan orthodoxy. In 2002, *Harvard Magazine* referred to Anne Hutchinson as the “midwife of Harvard.”

Anne and William had 15 children, many of whom went on to have large families of their own. Hutchinson's descendants include Supreme Court Justices Melville Weston Fuller and Oliver Wendell

Holmes; several presidential aspirants including Stephen A. Douglas, George Romney, and Mitt Romney; and three U.S. Presidents: Franklin D. Roosevelt, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush.

## WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. How did Anne Hutchinson's childhood experiences prepare her for her life as a Puritan leader in Massachusetts?
2. Why did the Puritan authorities feel particularly threatened by Anne's activities in Massachusetts Bay Colony?
3. In what ways did Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and Madison's “Memorial and Remonstrance” reflect the values or beliefs preached by Anne Hutchinson?

## ACTIVITY: The Life of a Shaker

*Women like Anne Hutchinson played an important role in the history of American religion. Below is a description of the life of another well-known religious non-conformist and leader, Mother Ann Lee who led the Shaker Christian sect. With a partner, read and discuss the following biographical sketch of Mother Ann Lee. Then, compare the **lives, beliefs, and legacies** of Mother Ann Lee and Anne Hutchinson.*

Ann Lee was born in Manchester, England, in 1736. She was the eighth child of a poor blacksmith. Her parents were too poor to give her an education, so she had no schooling. As a child, she worked in a textile factory.

As a young adult, she became part of a sect from France called the Shaking Quakers, or simply the Shakers. In their worship, they danced and shook themselves, based on their interpretations of passages in the Old Testament. The shaking, they believed, was sin working its way out of their bodies.

Ann tried to avoid marriage, but her father saw to it that she married Abraham Stanley in 1762. They were married in the Church of England. She and her husband had four children, none of whom lived past infancy. Ann believed their deaths were God's punishment of Ann for the sin of getting married.

She devoted herself even more to Shaker worship and started to lead worship among them. Local mobs began to persecute Shakers, sometimes violently, for their unorthodox worship. Civil authorities also jailed Ann and other Shakers for breaking the Sabbath by dancing, and Ann was often accused of blasphemy.

In 1770, when Ann and other Shakers were again jailed, Ann had a vision. She claimed to have seen Jesus Christ who revealed to her that all people must be celibate in order to achieve God's salvation. When she revealed her vision to the Shakers, they followed her and called her Mother Ann.

Through another series of visions, Mother Ann came to believe that the Shakers should relocate to America, which they did. They sailed to New York, arriving in 1774, and settled there. Since they were pacifists, like the Quakers, the Shakers were neutral during the American Revolution.

They established several communities in New York and other states. In a Shaker community, men and women lived separately and did not marry. After a few years, Shakers came to believe that Mother Ann was the second coming of Christ, or God's second incarnation on earth after Jesus Christ himself.

In the 19th century, Shakers were known for their creativity, especially in architecture and design, including the still commonly used Shaker broom and distinctive wooden furniture. Because Shakers did not procreate, their numbers could only grow through converts. By 2017, there were only two remaining Shakers, who lived in a community in Maine.



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## Standards Addressed

### *Anne Hutchinson: Midwife of Religious Freedom*

**National U.S. History Standard 4:** *Understands how political, religious, and social institutions emerged in the English colonies.* **Middle School:** (5) Understands the role of religion in the English colonies (e.g., the evolution of religious freedom, treatment of religious dissenters such as Anne Hutchinson, the concept of the separation of church and state). **High School:** (3) Understands characteristics of religious development in colonial America (e.g., the presence of diverse religious groups and their contributions to religious freedom; the political and religious influence of the Great Awakening; the major tenets of Puritanism and its legacy in American society; the dissension of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, and Puritan objections to their ideas and behavior).

**California History-Social Science Standard 8.2:** *Students analyze the political principles underlying the U.S. Constitution and compare the enumerated and implied powers of the federal government.* (5) Understand the significance of Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom as a forerunner of the First Amendment and the origins, purpose, and differing views of the founding fathers on the issue of the separation of church and state.

**California History-Social Science Standard 11.3:** Students analyze the role religion played in the founding of America, its lasting moral, social, and political impacts, and issues regarding religious liberty. (5) Describe the principles of religious liberty found in the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment, including the debate on the issue of separation of church and state.

**Common Core State Standards:** SL.8.1, SL.8.3, RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.10, WHST.6-8.10, SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.3, RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.10, WHST.11-12.10.

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## Sources

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