

# Puritans at Play

by

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The first settlers in Massachusetts Bay were no different in that all had the natural drive for “play.” The journey across the Atlantic and life in the new world, while changing the environment, could not alter their instincts. A number of these early residents of the bay settlement were Puritans who were destined to take on responsibility for the leadership of that colony. In at least one respect, however, these Puritan leaders were in conflict with non-Puritans or the less zealous of their own number. Recreation, particularly “idle” recreation, came under the close scrutiny of the Puritan leaders who considered only “seasonable merriment” in line with the edicts of their faith.

In the Puritan “way,” idleness and pastimes which hindered one’s life as a working member of society, were frowned upon; and idle recreation met with prohibitive legislation and/or public scorn which was fostered by the Puritan controlled government. All attention was directed to doing God’s will. But, the Puritans were realistic as well. They recognized the need for recreation as a basic part of man’s makeup and, therefore, accepted the place of work related “seasonable merriment” such as training days, corn huskings, and barn raisings, in their view of useful and responsible life.

Seasonable merriment was, however, not enough recreation for the non-Puritans. They carried on the idle amusements including dancing, games, gambling and the like,

brought with them from England, through the end of the seventeenth century when the original form of Puritanism had started to disintegrate. A major form of this disintegration was a loss of religious fervor for many of the colonists when prosperity and security came to Massachusetts. It has been said that the Puritan "way" carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. Begun as a quest for purity, it didn't consider its own purification and change. Nor, did it accept the possibility of diversity in the social, political, and religious aspects of colonial life.

As concerns recreation, Puritanism did not succeed in erasing the colonists' natural urge for play. The Puritan's insistence on general conformity to their principle of "detestation of idleness" inevitably resulted in revolt against attempted suppression of man's need for recreation. Seasonable merriment was not enough and, as economic affluence provided luxury, comfort and security, sports and games as well as other recreation continued their development in Massachusetts Bay with increasing acceptance amongst all but the purist "elite" members of the population. Nevertheless, it would seem that Puritanism did leave its mark on American recreation. The dogma of work related or purposeful recreation can be followed from seventeenth through twentieth century where we can still find people insisting that amusement should, at least, attempt to serve useful ends such as school sports for educational values and popular entertainment for higher cultural standards.