

Colonial Challenges and Dangers

by George Appleton

We are so far removed from the world of **Ralph Blaisdell**, shipwrecked at Pemaquid Point less than 400 years ago, that life then is as impossible to imagine as life 100 years from now. Their world changed less in 100 years than ours does in 100 weeks, but when catastrophes happened, they somehow lived through them and carried on — the reason we're here now.

Ralph, his wife, **Elizabeth**, and young son, **Henry**, after living through a hurricane on shore and losing most of their possessions, “went to York,” which, by the shortest route, is more than 70 miles. Was that on foot, carrying what they could, along a rocky coast, in a strange countryside? Boston had been reached by the first Puritans only five years before. Plymouth was reached by a Separatist group of only 15 souls.

And when they arrived in York, what? Most families grew their own food, hunted their own meat (if they didn't have chickens or rabbits), and feeding a family of four or five was a full day's work for a wife, even with the help of an oldest daughter. So the Blaisdell family didn't just stroll into town, put up at an “ordinary” for room and board, and go job hunting. They faced a daunting challenge with and faith.

Religious Freedom, Land and Opportunity

How about the people of York and elsewhere? The myth is that everyone came here for religious freedom — to “purify” or “separate from” the established Church of England. But the reality is that's only part of it. Here was land and the opportunity to own some and be your own person — not possible for most folks in any part of western Europe.

Still, religion was the guiding force for most, who were certain that theirs was the right and only road. So much so that they knew that those chosen to rule over common folk did so by Divine Right. Others were to know their place and follow directions.

Conform or be Banished

All those who came to Boston, especially, were given religious freedom — the freedom to believe as the Puritans believed, or to leave the colony and go elsewhere (as **Roger Williams** did, to found Rhode Island).

Churchgoing was not an option but a responsibility that fell on the head of the household. Sunday preaching (usually a morning and an afternoon session of some three hours each) fell right in with the countryside around them. Woods everywhere inland. Hard work always.

Danger from Indians who at first welcomed (or at least were interested in) these new people, but by now were realizing they hadn't come for a visit, but to take their land.

Dangers Lurking in the Dark

Dark nights, when strange animal noises sounded, and your fireplace was likely your only source of light. Both danger and the Devil were just outside your walls, the latter just waiting for these, God's chosen ones, to slip up, the way they'd slip on mossy seashore rocks or an icy hillside.

In the forest there were animals that would eat you, Indians that might kidnap or kill you (certainly would steal from you), thick darkness at night where you couldn't see the moon through the canopy of leaves, and if you got lost, you might never be found. And always, too, the danger of witchcraft, of spells put upon you by someone "on the Dark Side" who had it in for you. God was a hard taskmaster, but Satan was worse.

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

A famous sermon from 100 years later uses the same idea in terms Ralph would easily understand. By then, candles were more in use for light, but the fireplace was still the main focus of most homes. It was not uncommon to see a spider descending from the ceiling on a thread of web, but an easy way to get rid of it was simply pinch the web, carry it and dangling spider to the fire, and open your fingers to drop it in.

"Sinners in the hands of an Angry God" by **Jonathan Edwards** has just that theme--that the only reason *you* did not die last night is that God did not...yet...open his fingers. Google the title (using the quote marks) and you can get all 14 pages of what many of our early ancestors sat through every Sunday.

Hard work, heavy labor, hot summers and frigid winters, rain coming through a leaking roof or snow sifting in from a howling blizzard--those people, my heroes, did not have easy lives, but we are here because of them.

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