

So How Literate Was Early New England?

Welcome to the lecture “So How Literate Was Early New England?” in this course! In this lecture I will discuss literacy among English colonists in early New England. While I have mentioned this topic in my other lectures, I will discuss it in more depth here. This lecture addresses a popular conception, amongst scholars and the public alike, that most people in early New England knew how to read and write, more so than in other colonies. This popular idea is that many Puritans received education in reading and writing and that they were a community of people who thought highly of being able to read and write. In this lecture I’ll describe this popular conception, then scrutinize it more closely. The learning goals are for you to be able to describe literacy in early New England, especially by taking into account the impact of the Puritans as well as distinct groups within the Puritans and outside of them.

We’ll start with the at one time dominant, strongly influential, scholarly perspective. This is that early New England was exceptionally literate. Not that *everyone* knew how to read, but that there seemed to be more people who knew there to read than in other places. Often this is attributed to the Puritan-dominated society which carried the Protestant Reformation focus on reading the Bible for oneself.

Several scholars have this influential perspective or contribute to it. David D Hall concludes after analyzing various 17th-century documents from Massachusetts, “...these records reveal a population of readers and, surprisingly, of more writers than at first we might suspect” (Chapter 1). A frequently cited historian, Kenneth Lockridge, wrote an entire study dedicated to discerning the rates of literacy in colonial New England- called *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West*. He writes of his findings, “It appears that New England experienced several generations of mass illiteracy before achieving nearly universal male literacy toward the end of the colonial period” (4).

One reason typically given for why the Puritans are said to have a high degree of literacy is because of the tenets of the Protestant Reformation. Let’s explore this. It is a common conception that the Reformation as a whole led to an increase in literacy and in people reading texts, particularly the Bible. One of the main principles of Martin Luther during the Reformation was summarized as “sola scriptura,” which means “only scripture.” It meant that the scriptures were the primary authority for Christians. In response to practices in which the pope and bishops’ interpretations of scripture were final, Luther showed the importance of turning back to scripture itself for examining these claims. As a result, it seemed to become important for each person to read the scriptures themselves. Thus, scholars have discussed the increase in people reading the Bible themselves in Germany and in other countries that experienced the Reformation. I’m going to discuss a few scholars on this topic and what they said. One scholar describes a perhaps caricatured impression that Germany at the time of Martin Luther was where “a flood of Bibles issued from the presses, where elementary schools were founded, and where the reformers encouraged men and women to seek God’s Word directly in Holy Writ, thus creating a condition of general literacy in the population” (Gawthorp and Strauss 31). Scholar Karl Holl wrote of education during the Reformation in Germany, “Everyone was to be put into a situation where at the very least he could read the Bible and without help take instruction from it” (Holl qtd in Gawthorp and Strauss 31). HG Haile in an article examining Luther’s impact on literary studies indicates that rates of literacy radically increased in Luther’s time, the 1500s, due to his influence. Lawrence Stone writes in his study of literacy in Reformation-era England, “By contrast [with Catholicism], Protestantism was a culture of the book, of a literate society. It

stressed reading of the Bible and the works of the Protestant Reformers, it whitewashed over the wall-paintings to replace them with the Ten Commandments, it smashed the glass and tore down the statues” (78). Protestantism’s focus on text is contrasted with their lesser interest in visuals—portrayed in a violent way by Stone. These scholars show how the Reformation seemed to have increased people’s reading the Bible themselves and literacy rates. Puritans in England planned for an educational system across the country at levels from primary to university (Stone 79).

It wasn’t only the focus on reading the Bible for oneself that impacted literacy, however. Protestant emphasis on catechizing—which means reciting short Q and As that summarized the main principles in their faith- and listening to weekly sermons seemed to have increased interest in reading texts, primarily the Bible (MacCulloch 588). There are some studies showing how Protestants owned more books than their Catholic neighbors and while the amount of books one owned doesn’t necessarily mean one was more literate, it still points to a greater probability or emphasis on literacy amongst the book owners. One study found that French Protestants in the city of Metz owned twice as many books as Catholics in the same city (MacCulloch 589).

Now that I have painted a general picture of literacy rates during the Reformation as well as how that could have impacted early New England, let’s examine this idea more closely. We are going to critique it, looking at any limitations or distortions within this conception. First, let’s just look at the conception of literacy that is assumed. Generally literacy means the ability to read and write. But when I talk about “literacy rates” in New England most of the time I am using data referring to people who had at least the ability to read. And not everyone who had the ability to read had the ability to write. There were many people we describe as “literate,” but they did not all know how to write. There were diverse ways that people engaged in literacy in the 16th and 17th-centuries.

A second limitation is that of the English colonists who did become literate in early New England, the majority were men. Not as many English women became literate. Other groups of people including Native people and African people had different literacy rates, and there is a lot of evidence of some Native people gaining literacy.¹ The Reformation might have impacted the rates of literacy of these different groups in New England in a different way by impacting English colonists more. There also would have been other factors that impact this rate—for example, the fact that literacy in English would have had a difference significance for Native people and was not as necessary for communicating with each other. Literacy for women did rise gradually through the colonial period, though, through the 1700s. Scholars have used the presence of signatures on documents to determine literacy rates—one scholar finds that about 60% of men signed their wills in the 1660s while about 31% of women signed their wills before 1670 (Lockridge qtd in Monaghan “Literacy Instruction” 18).

While not as many English women as men knew how to read in early periods of colonial New England, it was women who allowed for the maintenance and even rise of literacy levels in New England. There are several New England Puritans who tell us that their mothers taught them how to read. For example, Increase Mather, a prominent minister, says that his mother taught him to read (Monaghan “Literacy Instruction” 23). Mothers taught catechism to their

¹ For discussion of different early Native people gaining literacy, see Hilary Wyss, *Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America* as well as *Early Native Literacies in New England: A Documentary and Critical Anthology*, edited by Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss. In a chapter on the Natick Indians Bross and Wyss write, “Because of their close association with Eliot’s mission, Natick Indians were known from the beginning for their alphabetic literacy...Natick Indians learned to read and write as a requirement of their Christian faith, but they used their literacy for their own purposes” (105-6 “Early Native”).

children and through that, reading. Children also learned in “dame schools,” which were somewhat unofficial classes in which women invited different children into their homes and taught them reading, to varying levels. If a mother did not know how to read, it is possible that her children could still learn to read at these schools, receiving instruction from other women. The government of Massachusetts actually directed towns and families to help children gain literacy. In 1642 the government required parents to instruct the children “to read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country” (Hall Chapter 1). Sometimes women might have learned to read, but not to write—writing was taught more to boys than to girls at times. One example is that Increase Mather says that his mother taught him to read but his father taught him to write (Hall Chapter 1; Monaghan “Literacy Instruction” 24).

A second facet of literacy for New England Puritans is that reading and writing were closely linked to speech. Learning to read and write involved speaking out loud and hearing language spoken out loud. Children might have listened to sermons and read the printed version as they were learning to read and write (Hall Chapter 1). Some ministers published their sermons, the printed versions serving as reminders of the message that had been delivered. One scholar, David D Hall, states that “. . .people in New England perceived speech and writing as continuous and interchangeable” (Chapter 1). So Puritans saw speaking and writing as similar mediums in various ways. The written Bible was thought of as the voice of God speaking, too. Reading the Bible would be a parallel or similar experience to hearing God speaking to oneself. Reading the Bible could even be a mystical experience in which people experienced God at their side, speaking to them (Hall Chapter 1). One woman (Mary Rowlandson) describes turning to Bible verses and how she hears God speaking directly to her in her situation as she reads them.² Learning the catechism involved reciting it out loud. Before children were able to read it and even after they were able to read it, they would hear it and say it out loud. Imagine a parent teaching the catechism by asking the child, “What is the chief end of man?” The child was supposed to respond, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever” (“Shorter Catechism”). Speaking words out loud remained throughout the process of learning how to read.

Finally, an additional part of the literacy picture is that Bibles were not the only thing that Puritans read. An example of something else that people read is almanacs. Certainly, the Bible was core reading material and strongly promoted. Reading nonreligious material was not vigorously promoted by ministers and some kinds of nonreligious material was criticized. But Puritans were reading other things besides Bibles no matter what their sermons reflect or what was officially promoted. Many Puritans, even ministers, had copies of almanacs because they were useful as calendars. Almanacs displayed a calendar of each month, often with holy days noted. Some also used the Zodiac and astrology and contained humorous writings. As you might expect, almanacs in Puritan New England did come to be modified: later versions removed astrological predictions and markings of special holy days, which were seen as superstition and unnecessary tradition (Hall Chapter 1). There were discussions of what the most appropriate almanac was supposed to be. At some point the astrological statements re-appeared as well as the marking of special days in the calendar (Hall Chapter 1). Apart from almanacs, some Puritans read fiction, romances, and poetry. Granted, these nonreligious books were not bestsellers. But they were present in bookstores and at least some people consumed them—enough for one prominent minister, Cotton Mather, to warn people from reading them (Hall Chapter 1). There was some control from the government over what was printed and imported but the government did not completely ban all nonreligious books from being sold (Hall Chapter 1).

² In her narrative, *The Narrative Of The Captivity And Restoration Of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*.

In this lecture I have described the quantity and kinds of people literate in early New England as well as what reading and writing looked like specifically for these people. I started with the preliminary perspective that New England Puritans had high rates of literacy and then qualified it by probing into deeper facets of this perspective. I discussed how many more colonial men learned to read, yet also the fact that women played a major role in enabling literacy in society. I also discussed how literacy was linked to speaking, which had a prominence that did not fade. Finally I show how the colonists consumed various nonreligious books in addition to the Bible and devotional texts. What other facets of literacy in New England are you curious about and do you wish that I could have probed further? To what extent do you agree with the paradigm of high literacy rates in early New England and why? What other mediums besides reading and writing the English language would be important for Puritans to gain literacy in? How might you critique ways in which literacy is presented and described in society today? I look forward to reading your answers in the discussion forum.

Discussion question 1: Is the evidence that I have presented (particularly in the first part of the lecture) sufficient to justify the statement that early New England experienced high rates of literacy? Why or why not?

Discussion question 2: What other medium do I say that literacy was closely connected with in early New England? Why is this the case? Do you think this would have applied equally across the Puritans, or to other groups in early New England? Do you think literacy is as connected to speech today?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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