

Friends and Enemies

MARY DYER



Mary Dyer Led to Execution

The search for religious freedom was one reason that some colonists came to America. This was true of the Puritans who began settling in Massachusetts in the 1630s.

The Puritans objected to the Church of England. They wanted to "purify" the Church of England by ridding it of its rituals, the special clothing worn by the clergy, and other features they disliked.

In England, the Puritans had not been free to practice their religion without penalty. They were insulted, jailed, and sometimes beaten because their beliefs were unpopular. Finally they received permission to set up a colony in New England.

In Massachusetts the Puritans intended to set up a society based on their religious beliefs. Many of them hoped their system would become a model for others to follow. People who opposed or questioned the Puritan religion were seen as a threat to their ideal society and not permitted to stay in Massachusetts. Roger Williams, for example, had to leave Massachusetts. He later founded the colony of Rhode Island. Anne Hutchinson was sent from the colony because she questioned some of the teachings of the Puritan ministers.

Anne Hutchinson was expelled in 1635. At the meeting in which the officials formally sent Anne away, a young woman named Mary Dyer rose, took her hand, and walked from the building with her. The officials and others were shocked at Mary's defiance of authority.

Mary and her husband William were forced to leave Massachusetts. They went to Rhode Island where there was greater religious freedom. William held a number of important jobs there and eventually became attorney general of the colony.

In 1652, Mary and William accompanied Roger Williams on a business trip to London. When business was completed, William returned to Rhode Island, but Mary stayed in London for a few more years.

In England, Mary became a convert to the new religion of the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. Her new religious beliefs would eventually lead to a dramatic and tragic encounter with the Puritans in Massachusetts.

Puritan leaders despised the Quakers. For one thing, the Quakers believed in an idea called the *Inward Light*. According to this belief, God's will was written in the hearts of all people. If people sincerely examined their consciences, they could discover the true wishes of God. The Puritans did not accept this idea. They believed that

ministers had to interpret the Bible and explain God's will to the people. Not just anyone could discover God's truth. This difference in belief was at the heart of the growing conflict between the Quakers and the Puritans.

Because each Quaker's conscience could reveal the word of God, obedience to conscience was more important than obedience to society's laws. If the laws of society conflicted with a person's conscience, then that person was to follow his or her conscience rather than the law. For the Puritans, the ministers determined God's will and, therefore, their rulings were the ones that the people were obliged to obey.

Puritan leaders feared that the Quaker beliefs would disrupt the order and purpose of the Massachusetts colony. The leaders also felt the Quakers would undermine proper religious authority. These seemed like genuine possibilities because many Quakers were eager to spread their beliefs and gain converts to the Society of Friends.

In October 1656, the Massachusetts General Court passed its first anti-Quaker law. According to this law, Quakers entering Massachusetts were to be whipped and jailed until they could be sent away. Any ship's captain who brought in Quakers would be fined 100 pounds. Finally, Massachusetts citizens who helped the Quakers would also be fined.

In July 1657, Mary Dyer and Ann Burdern, both Quakers, arrived in Boston. Mary was on her way back to her husband in Rhode Island. Neither woman had heard about the new law. Because of this they were not whipped. Ann was sent from the colony and Mary placed in jail until her husband could come for her. Before Mary was set free, William had to promise he would take her directly to Rhode Island and not permit her to speak to people along the way. William made the promise and they returned to Rhode Island.

In spite of the law and the brutal whippings, some Quakers continued to come to Massachusetts to spread their beliefs. In 1657 a tougher law was passed. According to this law, any male Quaker who returned to Massachusetts a second time would have his right ear cut off. If he returned a third time a hole would be burned through his tongue. Women Quakers were to be whipped but, after the third offense, they would be treated like the men.

In the following months, three Quaker men lost their right ears. One man, William Brend, was given 117 lashes with a thick rope that

had been soaked in tar. Many Massachusetts residents were shocked by these mutilations, and some offered help to the Quakers. Nonetheless, an even stricter law was passed—but just barely. By a vote of 13 to 12, the General Court decided that Quakers who returned to Massachusetts after being banished would receive the death penalty.

The Puritan leaders believed it necessary to defend the new law, because many people thought it was too harsh. In defending the law the Puritan leaders made two points. First, they said the Quaker religion was incorrect and violated the central beliefs of Puritanism. Second, they said the death penalty was a form of self-defense. They said that Massachusetts residents were like a family and the colony was their house. If anyone broke into a house to do harm he or she could be killed in self-defense. In their words, "And if such person shall offer to intrude into the man's house amongst his children and servants, can any doubt but that in such a case the father of the family, if otherwise he cannot keep them out, may kill them?" The Puritan leaders believed that they had the right to decide who could enter the colony and, in the case of the Quakers, that they had made all possible efforts to keep them out. Thus was the death penalty justified.

Some Quakers, moved by the Inward Light, were not deterred by the new law. Mary Dyer and others came back into Massachusetts to protest the law. Not only did they believe the law was unjust, but also they said that, as British citizens, they had the right to travel freely through the colonies. The Puritan leaders did not agree, and Governor Endicott sentenced Mary and the two men, Marmaduke Stephenson and William Robinson, "to be hanged on the gallows till you are dead."

On October 27, 1659, Mary and the men were led to the hanging tree on Boston Commons. Mary watched as first William and then Marmaduke climbed the ladder and were hanged. Mary was next. She was blindfolded and made to climb the ladder. The noose was placed around her neck. There was a pause. The executioner did not kick away the ladder. Mary was brought down from the ladder and told she would not be hanged if she returned to Rhode Island within 48 hours.

The authorities had decided days before she was led to the tree that she would not be hanged. Governors from two other colonies had written protests and one of Mary's sons had begged she be set free.

She had been taken to the gallows to give her a frightful warning. Mary objected to being singled out, but she was put on a horse and returned to Rhode Island.

Over the winter Mary thought deeply about what had happened. She had probably been set free to calm public opinion against the hangings. As she thought about it she became even more convinced that the laws against Quakers were wrong. In the spring, apparently without discussing it with her family, she returned to Massachusetts.

In May 1660, she was again sentenced to die. She said to the governor: "I came in obedience to the will of God . . . desiring you to repeal your righteous laws of banishment on pain of death." The officials would not change the law.

Her husband, who was not a Quaker, begged the governor to set her free. In his letter he said she had returned secretly to Massachusetts without his consent. He wrote passionately: "I only say that yourselves have been and are or may be husbands to wife or wives, so am I, yea to one most dearly beloved: Oh do not deprive me of her." He was not to have his way.

On May 31, 1660, Mary was again taken to the hanging tree. Captain Webb, commander of the military guard, told her she was responsible for her own death because she knowingly broke the law. Mary replied that she was trying only to get an unjust law repealed.

Once again on the ladder Mary was told she would be set free if she promised to return to Rhode Island. Mary refused the offer and, this time, the ladder was kicked away.

King Charles opposed the hangings. He ordered that anyone accused of a crime which led to the death penalty would have to be sent to England for trial. In response to the King's order and increasing public resentment, the Puritans repealed the hanging law.

The major sources for this story were:

Hodges, George. *The Apprenticeship of Washington and Other Sketches of Significant Colonial Personages*. New York: Moffat, Yard, 1909.

Rogers, Horatio. *Mary Dyer of Rhode Island: The Quaker Martyr*. Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1896.

Smith, Don. "Mary Dyer: Conscientious Dissenter." *Annual Editions Readings in American History*. Guilford, Conn.: Duskin Publishing Group, 1972, pp. 50-57.

ACTIVITIES FOR "FRIENDS AND ENEMIES"

Write all answers on a separate sheet of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. Why did the Puritans come to Massachusetts? What did they want to accomplish?
2. What did religious freedom mean to the Puritans?
3. What was the idea of the *Inward Light*? How did it conflict with Puritan belief?

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. What were the provisions of the first anti-Quaker law? The second?
2. How did the Puritan leaders justify the death penalty? Why did they feel it was necessary to write a justification?
3. Why did Mary and other Quakers go to Massachusetts in spite of the laws that had been passed? What happened to Mary after she received her first death sentence?
4. What did Captain Webb say to Mary before she died? How did she reply?
5. How did King Charles react to the hanging law?

Analyzing Ethical Issues

In this story there are a number of incidents involving the following values:

AUTHORITY: a value concerning what rules or people should be obeyed and the consequences for disobedience.

LIBERTY: a value concerning what freedoms people should have and the limits that may be justifiably placed upon those freedoms.

LIFE: a value concerning when, if ever, it is justifiable to threaten or take a life.

In some incidents these values were in conflict and a decision was made to choose one over another.

For example:

DECISION	VALUE IN CONFLICT	VALUE CHOSEN
Mary returned to Massachusetts after being warned.	Her liberty versus Puritan authority.	She chose her liberty.

Find another incident in which two values were in conflict and a decision was made to choose one over the other. Following the above example, write out the decision, the value in conflict, and the value chosen.

Expressing Your Reasoning

1. Mary Dyer had many warnings not to return to Massachusetts. Should she have returned? Why or why not?
2. Were the Puritans right in passing the first anti-Quaker law? Why or why not? When the Quakers kept returning, were the Puritan leaders right in passing harsher laws? Why or why not?
3. When the death penalty was passed, a self-defense argument was written as part of the justification. If you believe it was wrong to pass the death penalty against the returning Quakers, write a paragraph explaining why the self-defense argument was not a good justification. If you believe they were right in passing the death penalty, write a paragraph explaining why you agree with their decision.
4. Captain Webb said that Mary was responsible for her own death because she knew she was breaking the law. Do you agree with Webb? Why or why not?
5. *Seeking Additional Information.* In making decisions about such

questions as those above, we often feel we need more information before we are satisfied with our judgment. Choose one of the above questions about which you would want more information than is presented in the story. What additional information would you like? Why would that information help you make a more satisfactory decision?