

Boston, Massachusetts -1660

THE SILENCING OF MARY DYER

The early colonists in Massachusetts Bay managed to escape religious oppression in England only to be confronted by a new brand of tyranny: a church whose leaders governed both their public and private lives. In the 17th century, the Puritan Church was the law, and anyone who dissented from its orders was punished without mercy. ¶ Like the other principles enshrined in our Bill of Rights, the separation of religion from government was not easily won. For Mary Dyer, it was an ideal worth dying for.



Mary Dyer left England in 1635 an outlaw — a Puritan whose religious faith was declared illegal by the national Church of England. Rather than change her religion, she, along with many others, chose to leave her home and start a new life on the strange and distant shore of Massachusetts Bay. It was the kind of choice Mary would face again and again,



and her decision each time would be the same. Her faith came first — even if it meant her death.

So much about life in the young Bay Colony was unknown and fearsome. Half of the first 700 colonists died of scurvy within the first two years. Crude heating in wooden buildings caused frequent fires. Men took their guns to church with them in case of Indian attack. Members of the colony relied on each other's labor and loyalty simply to survive. They found courage in their common faith and depended on the Church to keep that faith in focus.

The hardships of her new life only made Mary's faith stronger. As she sought a deeper understanding of God's plan for her, she came to believe that God spoke to every person, including herself, through the urgings of his or her conscience. It was this belief — that all people had free access to God's truth — that led Mary and her husband, William, to doubt some of their church's teachings.

The Puritan Church governed all aspects of life in the colony. Church leaders dictated what people could wear and how they should behave, both in public and inside the home. The Old Testament was the foundation of civil law. Anyone convicted of violating one of the Ten Commandments was punished by hanging. Anyone who questioned the official faith was treated as a criminal. Women in Massachusetts were not even allowed to discuss a sermon, much less voice their own ideas about religion. Mary and William soon recognized in their own church and government the same intolerant spirit that had driven them out of England.

For as long as she could, Mary maintained an uneasy silence, in keeping with church rules. And then she heard another woman speak.

The women of the Dyers' neighborhood, in what is now downtown Boston, gathered regularly to share certain chores, such as weaving and soap-making and gardening — and to share their thoughts. The neighbor Mary Dyer grew closest to

was Anne Hutchinson. To the astonishment of her peers, Anne openly opposed the rigid authority of the church leaders. She believed that no church had the authority to govern a society. In her view, God spoke to everyone, male and female, and gave each individual the ability to discern right from wrong. Hearing Anne say these things out loud filled Mary with both relief and excitement, as if her own mind had suddenly been freed from a cage.

Anne Hutchinson organized a weekly religious meeting, which Mary Dyer faithfully attended. The swelling crowd soon included members of the clergy and the local government. Anne's eloquence and her knowledge of the Bible impressed everyone who heard her. Her popularity continued to grow until John Winthrop himself set out to stop her.

A respected Puritan minister, Winthrop was elected the Colony's first governor in 1631 and eventually served 12 annual terms in the position. In 1637, after his own congregation turned to Hutchinson for spiritual guidance, Winthrop brought charges of slander against her in the general court. Many of her followers abruptly turned away from her. At the trial, she was banished from the colony. Knowing that the same thing could happen to her, Mary Dyer stepped to the front of the courtroom to take her friend's hand. For Mary, there was no choice. She had

risks her life before for the right to practice her faith, and she would do it again.

The new ideas that Anne and Mary and their friends had been spreading didn't just make Gov. Winthrop angry — they made him afraid. Amid so much physical uncertainty, Winthrop believed that a united spirit among the colonists was essential for their common survival. He feared that a loosening of Church control would endanger not only the colony's welfare but also its charter from the King. Division and controversy, Winthrop



Anne Hutchinson was banished for openly opposing church authority in Massachusetts Bay.

believed, were the Devil's business. When word came that Anne Hutchinson and her family had been killed by Native Americans on Long Island, Winthrop proclaimed it the work of the Lord.

In Anne's absence, Mary vowed to continue the struggle that her friend had begun, no matter what the consequences. She followed her conscience in defying the law and speaking out about her own convictions. Everyone, she said, had the right to believe and practice religion as he or she saw fit. William Dyer tried to work within the government to get the laws on religion changed. In response to their efforts, a court banished Mary and William from the Bay Colony in 1638. They moved to Rhode Island and helped to found the settlement of Newport, where their six children were born.

Thanks to the leadership of Roger Williams, the colony's founder, residents of Rhode Island enjoyed a religious freedom that did not exist in Massachusetts. Still, even in this liberal atmosphere, Mary Dyer felt that something was missing: the voices of women. Rhode Island's independent churches were still run exclusively by men. Like her friend Anne Hutchinson, Mary viewed the separation of church and state as a principle worth dying for, and one whose benefits should encompass all people.

On a trip to England around 1650, Mary met George Fox, the founder of the Quakers. Fox shared Mary's belief that the Puritans hadn't gone far enough in reforming Christianity. They had rejected the rituals and other remnants of Catholicism that they saw in the Church of England, but they had left all authority in the hands of a few. Like Mary Dyer, George Fox believed that God's revelation was freely available to every individual. He made his way from town to town, encouraging men and women to preach.

Mary followed where her spiritual path was leading her. She became a Quaker and stayed away in England for seven years.

During this time, John Endecott, the new governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was having his own trouble with people like Mary Dyer. Quakers had recently begun coming over from England to spread their radical ideas. They walked into Puritan church services and denounced the preachers. They told people to listen for the voice of God inside them. To Gov. Endecott and his fellow churchmen, this was not just heresy — it was blasphemy.

The Quakers also defied the law. They didn't approve of war, so they refused to serve in the militia. It was against their belief to take oaths. On the street, Quaker men declined to tip their hats to the magistrates and other government officials. They said they saw fit to bare their heads only when they prayed.

To the Puritan leaders, such open defiance of authority indicated a desire and intention to tear down the government. Gov. Endecott authorized a law requiring that all

DOCUMENTS

'THE CURSED SECT OF THE QUAKERS'

The General Court and Liberties of the Massachusetts Colony, issued in 1692, included an anti-Quaker provision.

Whereas there is a pernicious Sect commonly called Quakers, whose Actions tend to undermine the Authority of Civil Government, and to destroy the Order of the Church, and the same have been detoured from their impious and amercious underrunning of peace and justice in our said

For prevention thereof this Court doth Order and Enact, that every person or persons of the cursed Sect of the Quakers, who is or are found within this Jurisdiction shall come before the next Magistrate, who shall commit the said person or persons to close Prison, there to remain without Bail until the next Court of Assistants where they shall have a legal trial by Jury and being convicted to be of the Sect of the Quakers, shall be sentenced to banishment upon pain of Death.

1692

'THEIR OWN JUDGMENTS AND CONSCIENCES'

In its royal charter of 1644, the Rhode Island colony became the first government in America to guarantee religious freedom to every citizen.

No person within the said colony, at any time hereafter shall be any wise molested, punished, disarmed, or called in question for any objection to his opinion in matters of religion.

All and every person and persons may at all times lawfully, and at all times hereafter, freely and lawfully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences in matters of religious concernments throughout the tract of land hereunto annexed.

1644

Quakers be banished from the Colony, all Quaker books burned, and any Quaker arriving from England placed in jail.

Mary Dyer hadn't heard about the law when she decided to return to America, but as her ship sailed into Boston Harbor in 1656, she knew that life as she remembered it would never be the same. She and William still loved each other, but they had been apart a long time. The older children were grown now. And the sense of purpose that she had found on her journey was stronger than anything she'd ever felt before.

Captains of vessels sailing from England were required to put a "Q" beside the names of all Quakers on their passenger lists. This made it easy for authorities to arrest unwanted arrivals. (A later law set a steep fine for even transporting them.) Mary Dyer was taken to prison as soon as she stepped ashore. William didn't know his wife was back in the colonies until several months later when a messenger delivered a note asking him to come and get her. William brought her back to Rhode Island.

While Mary stayed in Newport with her family, the situation in Boston worsened. As the Quakers became more defiant, Gov. Endecott instituted harsher laws.

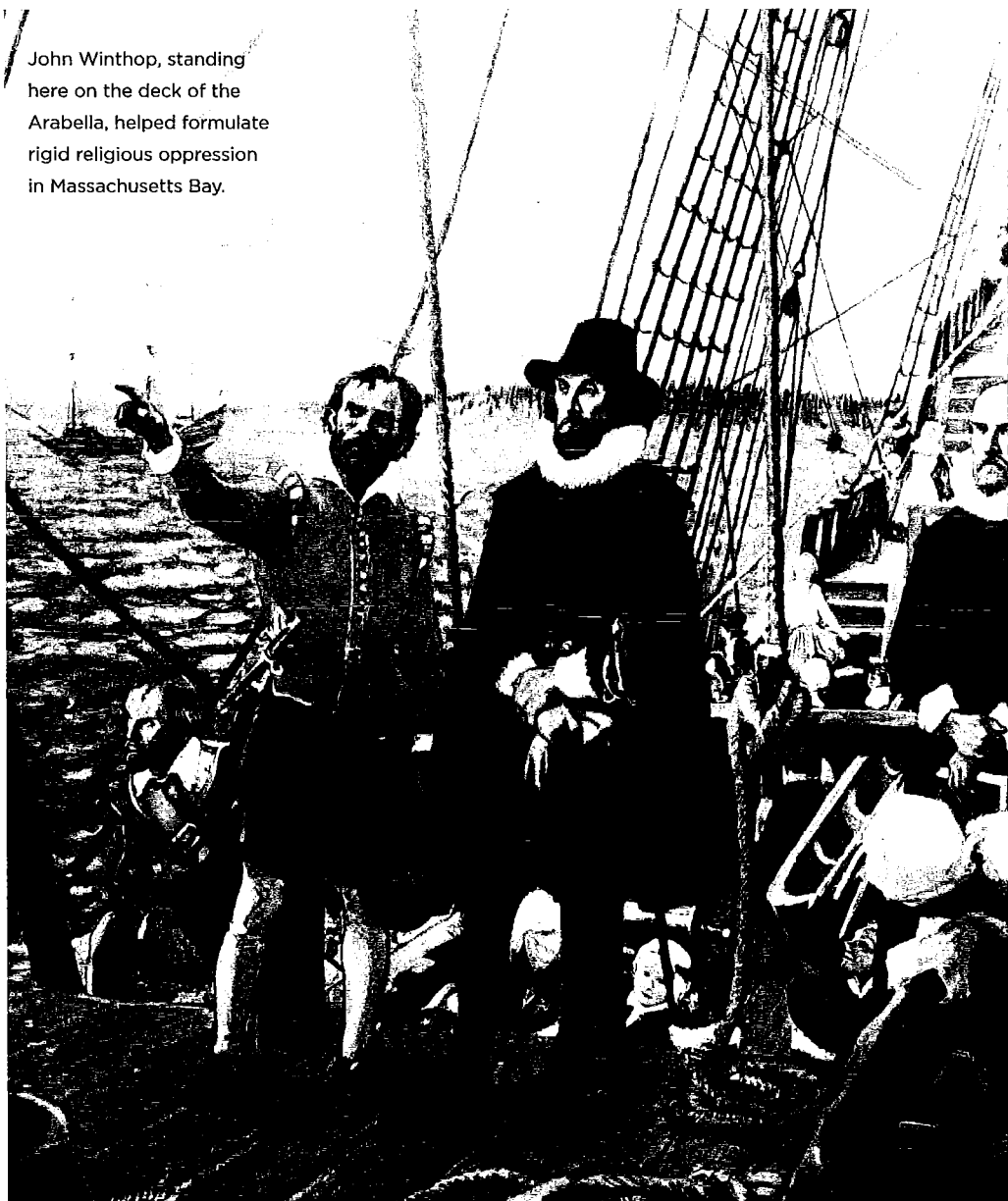
Now any man who declared himself a Quaker would have an ear cut off. If he refused either to leave the colony or to abandon Quakerism, he lost the other ear. Women received whippings for their first two offenses. The crime of blasphemy could get a person's forehead branded with the letter "B." Puritan officials pierced the tongues of some Quakers with hot irons to prevent them from speaking out any more.

Not even these extreme measures seemed to work. Quakers from the other colonies kept coming to support their brethren. Mary Dyer walked all the way up from Newport to visit kindred spirits in jail.

Gov. Endecott saw no way around it: He announced that any Quaker entering Massachusetts Bay Colony would be put to death.

On her third venture to Boston, in 1659, Mary Dyer and two friends, Marmaduke Stephenson and William

John Winthrop, standing here on the deck of the *Arabella*, helped formulate rigid religious oppression in Massachusetts Bay.



Robinson, were arrested and tried for their religious beliefs. They were given two days to leave the commonwealth, or else face the gallows. Mary went to Newport for a short time but returned and was seized.

Mary's son William traveled to Boston and convinced Gov. Endecott to withdraw her death sentence. Mary had already climbed the steps to the gallows when young William appeared on horseback. "Reprieve! Reprieve!" he shouted.

Although the governor had granted Mary amnesty, she was ordered to stand with the rope around her neck, her feet and hands still tied, while her two companions were executed.

The fire of her convictions now burned even stronger in Mary's mind. She lived in the freedom and comfort of Rhode Island for a year but was not content. She decided to return to Boston, prepared to accept the consequences. She was promptly arrested and jailed.

Gov. Endecott came to visit Mary in prison. He tried



An illustration of Mary Dyer being led to her execution.

to talk her into giving up her religion. Instead, she wrote letters to government officials insisting that they were the ones who ought to change.

Mary's hanging was scheduled for June 1, 1660, on Boston Common. This village green was a mile's walk from the prison. Fearing that Mary would preach to the crowds along the way, the governor stationed all of his troops — about 200 men — on horseback up and down the street. He ordered the militia drummers to drown out anyone who tried to speak.

The crowds broke through. People had come from all over the district to witness the spectacle. "Don't go!" they called out. "Go back to Rhode Island. Go back and live!" The drums got louder.

Mary's guards escorted her across the Common to an

elm tree next to Frog Pond. Standing there was the Rev. Wilson, who had baptized Mary's first child many years earlier. He begged Mary to save herself, to give up the ideas that had brought her to death's door.

She calmly refused, adding that she looked forward to life beyond the grave.

She climbed the ladder. The Rev. Wilson loaned the hangman his handkerchief to cover Mary's face. Mary Dyer did not protest, remaining silent as the ladder was pulled out from under her.

The crowd stood a long time without stirring.

"She hangs like a flag," someone said.

After he had removed the ladder, Edward Wanton, the hangman, walked over and vomited into Frog Pond. He went home and told his mother he had quit his job — "and now I'm going to become a Quaker." ♣