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# A New England Town The First Hundred Years

*Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736*

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Kenneth A. Lockridge

Expanded Edition

*With a New Afterword and an Updated Bibliography*



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*For Oksana,  
if it's any good.*

*For myself,  
if it isn't.*

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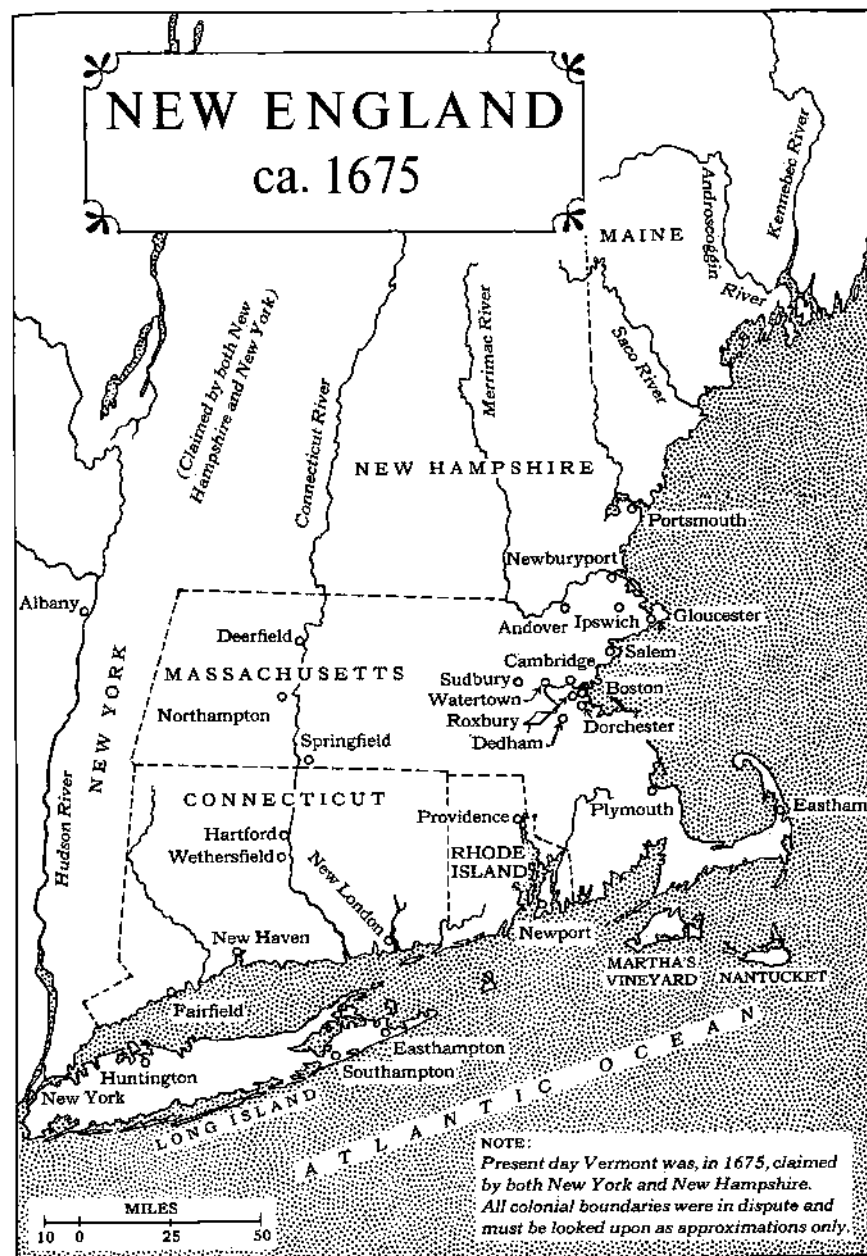
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## Acknowledgments

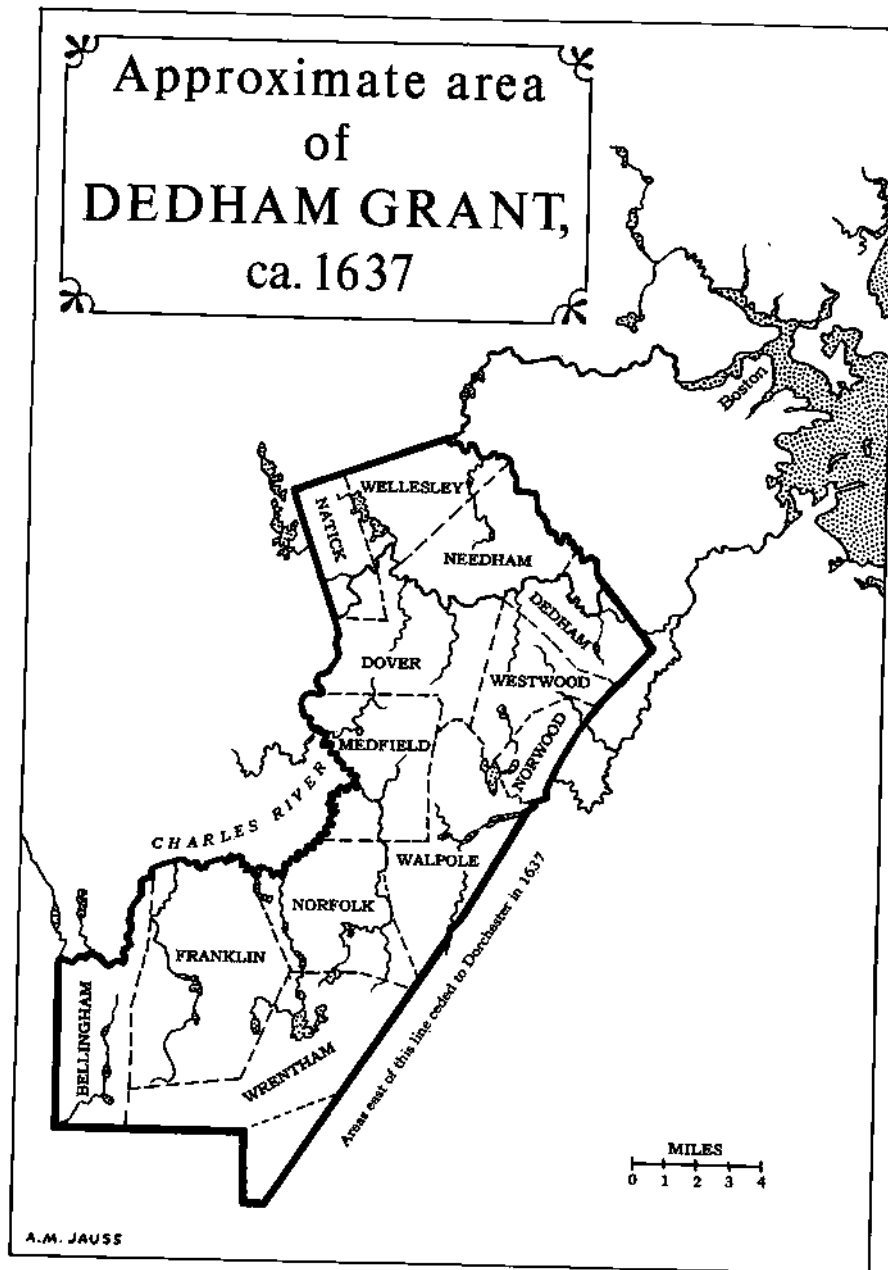
I OWE an indirect but great debt of gratitude to three French scholars whose desire to understand the rural societies of the past has opened new ways of viewing those societies: Marc Bloch, Louis Henry, and Pierre Goubert. The later work of their English counterparts Peter Laslett, E. A. Wrigley, and D. E. C. Eversley, has made possible fruitful comparisons with the English society of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Special thanks are due to Lawrence Stone, who encouraged me to apply the methods of European scholars to American history, and most of all to Wesley Frank Craven, who taught me to respect the history as much as the method. Among those who have given freely of their time to help me have been Lawrence Towner; Robert Remini; Samuel Hays; Darrett Rutman; Stephen Foster; Philip Greven, Jr.; Michael Kammen; Michael Zuckerman; Edward Cook, Jr.; Jack Greene; Harold Hyman; Peter Coleman; Leo Flaherty; Patricia Feeney; and the staffs of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, the Newberry Library, and the Department of History of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle. To these, and to my wife, sincere thanks. They deserve whatever credit this book may earn, I alone bearing responsibility for its errors and shortcomings.

*Evanston, Illinois, March 1969*

KENNETH A. LOCKRIDGE



Approximate area  
of  
**DEDHAM GRANT,**  
ca. 1637



## Introduction

THE NEW ENGLAND TOWN is one of the myths out of which Americans' conception of their history has been constructed, along with such others as The Liberty Bell, George Washington, and The Frontier. In the way of all men, Americans have needed their myths. In the way of all myths, these have become true by convincing Americans that their nation has always enjoyed universal democracy, honesty, and opportunity. It would probably be a hopeless task to try to shatter any of the legendary building blocks of our popular history. And it might be pointless. People like them, a few professional historians sense various parts of the reality which lies beneath each—why not leave it at that? Why not, then, be satisfied to let The New England Town continue to evoke the responses, "democratic," "enduring," and especially, "American"?

At least in this case there are, however, reasons for trying to lessen a little the gulf between the knowledge of the super-specialized scholar and the vague popular myth. For one thing, an account of the intricate historical evolution of even a single New England town is a fine way to bring home the lesson that the past is a mixture of often contradictory events whose meaning is sometimes ambiguous. This is not a lesson that should be left for a handful of expert historians. But the New England Town commands wide attention for another reason. In its original form it embodied a way of life which prevailed both in the Old World and the New in the years when the American character first took form—the life of pre-industrial,

rural, village society. As one English observer put it, this is "the world we have lost," lost in the tides of migration, mechanization, and urbanization which have since altered Western civilization.<sup>1</sup> It is a world which is in many respects irretrievable. It was too long ago, too different, its beliefs are too strange to be reconstructed with accuracy. Yet it is a world which made our world, in America just as much as in Europe. It was the world of William Bradford, of Jonathan Edwards, and of John Adams. We owe it the effort to understand.

Two previous layers of scholarly inquiry must be set aside in seeking an understanding of the underlying patterns of life within the New England Town. One is the basis of the myths which have so long prevailed. Both George Bancroft and Frederick Jackson Turner believed that the towns of colonial New England, together with the many settlements of the nineteenth-century frontier which adopted the same general form, had made an essential contribution to the American democratic tradition.<sup>2</sup> The fault of Bancroft and Turner lay not so much in the specific truth or untruth of this claim as in their tendency to point to some threads of town life while ignoring the whole social fabric; they took from the town those facts which tended to prove their point about the origins of American democracy without caring what the life of the town in its totality was or had been. The other, related layer of inquiry has dealt with the first formation of the New England Town as a study in institutional history. Where had the town, an independent and responsive institution with public meetings, elected executive board and whole panoply of locally chosen officers looking after local needs, originated? To Herbert Adams the origins lay within the customs of the tribes in the primitive German

1. Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965).

2. George Bancroft, *History of the United States* (10 vols., Boston, 1834-1874); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920).

forests. Most other scholars have passed over the Teutonic tribal gatherings, calling attention instead to the English village meetings and select vestrymen which were the obvious precedents for the New England Town. Still others have pointed out that English local institutions were modified by the settlers, abridged in the rough-and-ready conditions of New World existence into forms substantially new and distinctly American. Chief among these latter scholars has been Sumner Chilton Powell, whose *Puritan Village* is an exhaustive account of the cultural transmutations involved in the creation of a New England town.<sup>3</sup> Though this debate has had considerably more substance than the discussions by Bancroft and Turner, it too must be left behind in the search for the essence of life in the New England Town. Suffice it to say that the town institutions of New England were very similar to those which could be found in many villages of the mother country. The unique qualities of the New World towns manifested themselves in ways more varied and subtle than the overt modification of inherited institutions.

Having left so much behind, it may well be wondered what remains. But there is still more to be left behind. The student of the New England Town faces a difficult choice; he can either deal with many towns, asking few or shallow questions, or he can deal thoroughly with a single town, running the risk of describing an untypical example. The choice in this case has fallen on the side of portraying one town, Dedham, Massachusetts, in the years 1636-1736, though the narrative will also rest upon an unspoken knowledge of similar events in

3. Herbert B. Adams, "The Germanic Origin of New England Towns," *Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, vol. 1, (Baltimore, Md., 1882), 5-38; Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Village, The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Conn., 1963); some of Powell's concluding remarks overemphasize the uniqueness of the institutional framework of the New World town. Excellent general treatment of the issue will be found in George Lee Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts* (New York, 1962), and Anne Bush McLear, *Early New England Towns* (New York, 1908).

other towns which lends strength to its main features.<sup>4</sup> Taking this single community from its inception as a village of several hundred souls through the first century of its existence, as it grew into a provincial town of nearly 2000 inhabitants, makes it possible to gain a sense of the many parts of local life. It becomes possible to sense the unity of these parts and to understand the slow evolution of the whole as Dedham moved with all New England from the brief period of Puritan intensity into the long years of colonial existence preceding the American Revolution. Only from such knowledge, geographically confined but comprehensive in terms of human activity, can there emerge truly sophisticated hypotheses about all such towns, indeed about the entire history of colonial America, a society dominated by rural settlements.

The story of Dedham will be treated whenever possible within a simple narrative framework. Many techniques of social-science analysis—demography, mobility analyses, statistical breakdowns of the distribution of wealth—will inform that narrative, but as a rule they will not intrude. Greater detail might save a social scientist some trouble in reproducing the relevant calculations, but it would also burden this book with a weight of apparatus which would hobble the narrative and would be more than in this case the results, the methods, or the data justify. The book would become as much a history of the author's labors as a history of Dedham, with social scientism obscuring as much as social science has illuminated.

The main theme of the book is almost mystical in its scope. What was it like in "the world we have lost"? What was the essence of pre-industrial village life within this American town? How was this lost part of our national experience changing in the century after it began? Intertwined with this theme is another, the theme of American uniqueness. Dedham, like any of its companion towns, was a product of English culture and

4. Works describing other, similar towns are footnoted in the concluding chapter and discussed in the Bibliographic Essay.

an agricultural community whose basic traits it shared with villages all over Europe. At the same time, as a settlement in the wilderness and a refuge for a group of English Puritans whose very flight made them unusual, Dedham was peculiarly American. An attempt to discover precisely what was and what was not "American" in the experience of this town can sharpen the perception of the earliest sources of our national character. With these themes, incorporated into them, will be provocative or controversial questions about life in a New England town, not all of them answerable but all deserving to be asked: was it democratic, was it equalitarian, was opportunity great, was the society mobile, was it static or dynamic, who had power, who wanted power? In the end, a consideration of all these matters in the context of events in other towns will open the possibility of a reinterpretation of our rural heritage, which though America is now a thoroughly urbanized nation, is still influencing our lives—and not always in the ways we might wish.

# I

## A Utopian Commune, 1636-1686

In the first decades of its existence Dedham was a remarkably stable agricultural community. It was also a utopian experiment, hardly less so than the famous Amana, Oneida, and Brook Farm experiments of the nineteenth century. The founders of this community set out to construct a unified social organism in which the whole would be more than the sum of the parts. To a considerable degree, they succeeded.



## The Policies of Perfection: The Town

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SCATTERED AMONG the first waves of the Puritan exodus, they had arrived in the Massachusetts Bay colony in the years between 1630 and 1635. Many of them still strangers to one another, they had taken up temporary residence in several of the earliest settlements along the shores of the Bay. Sheer circumstance helped draw them together: it happened that most of them had found refuge in Watertown, where scores of immigrants were crowding in upon one another and where much of the best land had already been parceled out to the first arrivals.<sup>1</sup> Yet behind the pressure of circumstance lay motives common to most of the Puritan immigrants. Within the limits set by the emerging policies of the colony, groups of settlers everywhere were coalescing and searching for the opportunity to create a communal life, seeking to shape in their own agricultural villages their own versions of the good society. So it was with the men who were to found the town of Dedham.

In 1635 they petitioned the General Court of the colony for a grant of land for a "plantation" south of Watertown. In polite phrases the petitioners asked for full control of the distribution of such lands as might be granted them, for exemption from taxes during the next four years, and for immunity from military obligations except in dire emergencies. Though the

1. *Early Records of the Town of Dedham* (6 vols., Dedham, Mass., 1886-1936) [hereafter, *Records*], II, *Church and Cemetery, 1638-1845*, 1; *Watertown Records* (4 vols., Watertown, Mass., 1894 and 1900; Boston, Mass., 1904 and 1906), I, part 2; *Land Grants and Possessions*, 1-67.

advice of the Court was solicited, the petition carried the implication that "the well ordering of . . . our society according to the best rule" would be left largely to the petitioners themselves. Significantly, the name which the founders would have given their plantation was "Contentment." Prosaic minds in the General Court changed "Contentment" to "Dedham," but the substance of the petition was granted.<sup>2</sup>

Late in the summer of 1636 about thirty families excised from the broad ranks of the English middle classes, coming from the towns and villages of several regions,<sup>3</sup> found themselves in possession of nearly 200 square miles of American wilderness. The hilly, rocky tract stretched from the southwestern boundary of Boston down to what was to become the Rhode Island border. Except for several score Indians, who were quickly persuaded to relinquish their claims for a small sum, the area was free of human habitation. Since Adam awoke in Paradise there had been no moments in which mankind had been given a clean slate, but the founders of Dedham came as close as men had ever come. They brought to their task the inevitable cultural baggage of Englishmen: language, rank, religion. They were subject to the broad guidance of the General Court. The rest, how they chose to organize what was in the most immediate sense *their* town, was up to them.

The way in which they began demonstrates the coherent social vision which had prompted this collection of men to seek their own community:

"One: We whose names are here unto subscribed do, in the fear and reverence of our Almighty God, mutually and severally promise amongst ourselves and each other to profess and practice one truth according to that most perfect rule, the

2. *Records*, III, *Town and Selectmen, 1636-1659*, 1.

3. The origins of some of the settlers may be traced through references in the standard genealogical works, many of which are cited below in specific contexts. They came chiefly from the North Country (Yorkshire, chiefly) or from East Anglia. See also *Records*, II, 1.

foundation whereof is everlasting love."<sup>4</sup> This was the first clause of the Dedham Covenant, a document in which the founders of the town simultaneously set forth their social ideal, outlined the policies by which they would attempt to bring that ideal to reality, and pledged themselves to obey those policies. Every future townsman would be expected to signify his acceptance of its terms by signing his name beneath those of the founders. The Covenant began by binding every man to each of his fellows before God in a pledge to practice Christian love in their daily lives. The unity of men living according to this "one truth and most perfect rule" was to be the bedrock of the intended community. In four more clauses the Covenant further articulated the founders' vision of social perfection.

"Two: That we shall by all means labor to keep off from us all such as are contrary minded, and receive only such unto us as may be probably of one heart with us, [and such] as that we either know or may well and truly be informed to walk in a peaceable conversation with all meekness of spirit, [this] for the edification of each other in the knowledge and faith of the Lord Jesus, and the mutual encouragement unto all temporal comforts in all things, seeking the good of each other, out of which may be derived true peace." They expected that all townsmen would begin as humble seekers after that true faith in the Lord Jesus out of which came the capacity for genuine Christian love. All would go together in their search for faith and would be united by the mutual love that would arise in the course of the search and would reach its culmination in their achieved faith. A deep and abiding peace within each man and pervading the whole community would be the fruit of their companionship in this course. But in such a community there could be no place for the contrary minded or the proud of spirit. These would be warned off or, if need

4. This and the following quotations are from *Records*, III, 2-3. The explications of each clause are based on an understanding of later events and expressions, as well as on the text of the Covenant itself.

be, expelled. The founders saw no contradiction in the idea that the ideal society was to be built upon a policy of rigid exclusiveness.

"*Three:* That if at any time differences shall rise between parties of our said town, that then such party or parties shall presently refer all such differences unto some one, two, or three others of our said society to be fully accorded and determined without any further delay, if it possibly may be." The founders were striving for social perfection, but they were realistic about the means leading to its achievement. Even among the most carefully selected human material there would be some men who would now and then in the course of the common search for faith forget their pledges and quarrel. Indeed, there would be men who for all their trying would never achieve a valid Christian faith. Damned by eternally flawed natures unredeemed by God's grace, time and time again they would disrupt the harmony of the community. So the founders wrote into the Covenant a secular policy designed to achieve from without what Christian love would in most cases guarantee from within. This was that all men should promise to submit their "differences," as they so delicately put it, to a gentle mediation by several of their fellows. A little sincere persuasion would remind the disputing parties of their obligations and restore the community, if not their souls, to unity and to peace.

"*Four:* That every man that . . . shall have lots [land] in our said town shall pay his share in all such . . . charges as shall be imposed on him . . ., as also become freely subject unto all such orders and constitutions as shall be . . . made now or at any time hereafter from this day forward, as well for loving and comfortable society in our said town as also for the prosperous and thriving condition of our said fellowship, especially respecting the fear of God, in which we desire to begin and continue whatsoever we shall by his loving favor take into hand." Implied in this clause was the assumption that

the ideal community was to be characterized by more than a vague atmosphere of peace and unity generated by Christian love and further preserved by local mediation. "Orders and constitutions" would be made to arrange the practical details of life so as to ensure a comfortable and thriving society. Pleasing to the men who lived therein, such a society would also be pleasing to a God who reserved his special wrath for disorderly communities. Accordingly, a free but strict obedience to the policies which would provide this good order was the final promise exacted of each townsman. Continuing dissent and debate were not to be permitted; once a policy was established, all men were to accept it without reservation.

"*Five:* And for the better manifestation of our true resolution herein, every man so received [into the town is] to subscribe hereunto his name, thereby obliging both himself and his successors after him for ever, as we have done." It was more than a lifetime contract which the founders intended; it was a contract in perpetuity, ~~binding posterity~~ in a continuing testimony to the hunger for social perfection which had seized a handful of Englishmen in the midst of a wilderness.

They meant what they said. The story of Dedham through the first decades of its existence is above all the story of the implementation of the policies of perfection written into the Covenant. Because true Christian love could only grow within each man's soul, perhaps with the help of the church, the leaders of secular society could do little to nourish this element of the covenantial ideal. But they could and did follow the guidance of the Covenant in excluding those who would disrupt Christian unity, mediating the disputes of those who broke the peace, and instituting and obeying countless ordinances which brought every area of life into a stable secular order. Thus the promises of the Covenant were kept and there emerged a community that realized the vision of the founders.

In practice, the communal ideal was static. Suitable men would be culled from among the applicants and the rest refused. When enough men had been accepted, the community would be declared complete. The select group of townsmen and their perpetually committed descendants would then live under the rules of the Covenant, the land theirs to assign, their rare disputes contained within the town. The culling began at the first meeting, on the 18th of August, 1636, when it was agreed by all that a townsman signing the Covenant incurred an obligation to tell whatever he might know about future candidates for admission. Every candidate would undergo a public inquisition in which his entire past could be brought to light. The discovery of a lie would be grounds for instant exclusion. As admissions went forward, the townsmen moved to plug a loophole through which unexamined persons might enter. After November of 1636 a member of the town could not sell or rent for more than a year any of his land unless the prospective customer was already a member of the town or had been approved by a majority of "the whole Company." If the rule were broken, the land in question could be confiscated.<sup>5</sup>

An unsettled issue facing the town was that of the exact number to be included in their planned community. While the principles of the Covenant could be extended to justify a limitation on the numbers of townsmen, neither in the Covenant nor in the record of the early meetings had an official limit been set down. A temporary halt on admissions was imposed in 1637, when the first set of forty-six house lots had been assigned: "We do now therefore fully agree by a general consent that no more lots shall be granted out [or persons admitted] until a further view be made what accommodations may be found for comfortable entertainment of others . . . for we

5. *Records*, III, 20, 24; Admissions and alienations were still being controlled thirty years later; *Records*, IV, *Town and Selectmen*, 1659-1673, 205, 194.

have as many as we conceive can yet be entertained."<sup>6</sup> But admissions soon resumed, no official decision was made as to the ultimate number which could be "comfortably entertained," and the issue loomed larger with each new admission.

Raw self-interest finally forced a decision. The ever-increasing numbers of townsmen were diluting the land rights of the first settlers. In 1636, the thirty signers of the Covenant had shared the possession of the immense quantities of land possessed by the town by virtue of the General Court's approval of their petition. By 1637 the number of signers was forty-six; by early 1656 more than seventy-five had signed. Thus, a man admitted to the community in 1636 had shared to the rough extent of one-thirtieth each time a section of the town's land was subdivided, while by 1656 his proportion was closer to a seventy-fifth. And of course his implied share in the huge areas of land yet undivided was correspondingly reduced. Partially because of the resultant pressure from some of the old settlers and partially because it had been intended all along, the town acted to limit its growth. As of the end of 1656 the seventy-nine men then officially members of the town were constituted the proprietors of the public lands of Dedham, their shares of the proprietorship varying according to certain guidelines. Henceforth only these men, their heirs, or approved newcomers who purchased some of their proprietary rights would be entitled to join in the periodic divisions of land. While in theory strangers could, and in practice a few did, still gain admission to the town, an admission which no longer carried with it an automatic share in the town lands was not as desirable a privilege. The net effect was to set a seal to the society embraced by the Covenant.

The town had probably not allowed itself to expand very much beyond its founders' general expectations. Henry Phillips and others of the first settlers complained in 1656 that "in the

6. *Records*, III, 34-35.

infancy of this plantation . . . the first planters agreed that they would entertain only sixty persons to the privilege . . . of divisions . . . in the town commons."<sup>7</sup> Phillips and his friends considered the difference between the hypothetical sixty and the actual seventy-nine proprietors of 1656 to represent a harmful dilution of their rights, yet the town had come fairly close to the number foreseen in the informal agreement to which Phillips referred. (As for the complainants, the town later enlarged their shares in the proprietorship, thereby easing the tension which had arisen and remaining true to the policies of the Covenant.)

Land was the ultimate reward in a society based on agriculture. Enjoying a free hand in its distribution, Dedham was able to use its periodic allotments of land to shape as well as to limit the ideal society which was to be created from its select human material. The goals which governed the distribution of land followed from the mood of the Covenant—community and above all order.

One of the standards determining the amount of land a man received from the town was the number of persons in his household.<sup>8</sup> Thus, mere existence within the commune gave even the youngest infant or most feeble maiden aunt a claim to its support. Another standard was "usefulness either in Church or Commonwealth," a standard which meant for the most part service to the local community, since only a handful of Dedham men achieved prominence in the affairs of the colony. Grants of land for the support of the church and a school likewise bore witness to the mutual needs of the townsmen. Every person within the embrace of the Covenant had a right to live, and to live in a community well served by its leaders and in which the suppliers of spiritual and intellectual fare were well supported. The allotment of land sustained these communal rights.

The mutuality preached in the Covenant and thus practiced

7. *Records*, III, 142-46; IV, 230.

8. The guidelines are in *Records*, III, 92.

notwithstanding, a clearly defined social hierarchy was also a part of the ideal of the founders, and the town's land policies were set accordingly. For Christian love toward all men does not have to imply absolute human equality, and in fact this particular Christian commune was not about to practice Christian Communism. To the contrary, the men of Dedham held fast to the belief of their Puritan culture in the natural inequality of men. It was foreordained by God that some men should have both greater capabilities and virtues than others and should rise and prosper. It was equally fated that some men should be incompetents and sinners who would lag behind the rest. Nor was this without its social purpose, since obedience to men of high rank was the cement of an orderly society, while the needs of less fortunate souls kept men attentive to their duties of Christian charity. Thus, the settlers did not see any necessary contradiction between their emphasis on mutuality to the point of a form of collectivism, and a frank recognition that a certain hierarchy of wealth and status was as desirable as it was inevitable, for in the view of their culture each tended in its own way to ensure social harmony. As long as within the levels of society the gap between the high and the low was not too extreme, as long as men of rank acquitted themselves responsibly and with a proper modesty, and as long as the lower ranks freely respected the upper, hierarchy was expected to add to collectivism yet another source of harmony, not to detract from it.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, ever attentive to the will of God and to the ad-

9. As will be seen (in chapters 2, 3, and 4), the conditions required for the successful blending of hierarchy with collectivism could be found in Dedham for quite some time after the founding of the town. The tensions implicit in this delicately balanced blend of opposite social ideals were as typical of Puritan social theory as of their renowned theology: see John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," most readily available in Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., *The Puritans* (2 vols., New York, 1963), I, 195-99; and see Stephen Foster, "The Puritan Social Ethic: Class and Calling in the First Hundred Years of Settlement in New England," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1966.

vantages of social harmony, the founders of Dedham made "men's rank and quality" major criteria for the assignment of land. Though few if any of the settlers affected much "rank and quality" as an English courtier would have defined these, there were among them men who had been relatively wealthy or somewhat prominent in the localities from whence they came. These men received larger portions of each division of land, while men without such distinctions had to show large families or accept the smaller allotments appropriate to their lesser stations. Those who had, got, because in the Puritan lexicon those who had, deserved; and by this light Dedham acted in yet another way to perfect itself as it saw perfection.

The juxtaposition of a small band of Englishmen and a huge tract of wilderness was one of the most striking characteristics of early Dedham, but even more striking was the reaction of these Englishmen to the prospect of hundreds of thousands of acres of virgin land. Far from indulging appetites long held in check by the scarcity of land in England, the Dedham settlers' initial reaction was to turn their backs on the wilderness. During the first twenty years they divided among themselves less than 3,000 acres. They deliberately refused to indulge in the rapid assignment of large individual farms which had taken place in Watertown. Instead they parceled out to each man tiny houselots, with additional strips of arable, meadow and woodland scattered around the village. Each strip ranged from two to twelve acres, depending on the size of a man's family, his usefulness and rank; each was located in a large field in which every man had a similar strip of land and in which the common decisions of the group were to determine what crop would be sown in the field, its care and harvesting.<sup>10</sup> The slow process of allotment enabled the town to enforce its social priorities with precision, while the common fields brought

10. For the details of the land system see *Records*, III.

men into continual contact with one another and kept the village from disintegrating into isolated farms out in the countryside. Slowly, as ever larger areas of the common land were divided, as individual holdings were bought and sold and thereby consolidated into farms, the rigid pattern was to dissolve. Until it did, the village remained a cohesive social organism.

The overriding message of the Covenant had been simply love. Love, forbearance, cooperation, peace . . . these were the essential qualities of the perfect society whose image had inspired the Covenant. Exclusion and orderly planning alone could not make that vision real. The townsmen did not neglect the message. In the first place, they did not neglect to make use of the mediators whose advice the Covenant obliged them to seek when differences arose. There came into existence in the town an ephemeral but effective system of mediation which largely supplanted the hierarchy of formal courts established by the colony. "Three understanding men" were to determine just compensation in a land case. On another occasion, "two judicious men" were to be chosen. Damages done by runaway swine were assessed by "three indifferent neighbors" of the offending party. When Joseph Kingsbury, Joshua Fisher, and Lambert Chinnery disagreed with the town over the pre-emption of their land for a highway, each of the four parties selected a mediator while a fifth was approved "by joint consent of all parties." The decisions of the mediators (or arbitrators as they were sometimes called) were seldom challenged. Though decisions were entered in a book kept especially for the purpose so that all might refer to them as to the written law, the underlying law applied by the mediators was nothing more than the Golden Rule. The parties to a difference were urged to "live together in a way of neighborly love and do each other as they would have the other do themselves."<sup>11</sup>

11. *Records*, III, 24, 38, 43, 114-15; IV, 15, 118-19.

The same system governed Dedham's disputes with neighboring towns. When a disagreement between the town and Medfield arose in 1651, Dedham instructed its emissaries, "if it cannot be satisfactorily composed betwixt our bretheren of Medfield and ourselves, we shall yield to a free and indifferent reference and engage to make their conclusion good." Representatives sent to negotiate a dispute with Dorchester the next year were empowered "to conclude the case either by arbitration, composition or any other peaceable way." The instructions continued, "in case . . . they satisfy you that the title [to the disputed land] is truly and legally theirs, then you shall forbear making further claim thereof . . . [further] you shall by all your care and diligence waive and avoid, so much as in you lay, all occasions whatsoever [that] may tend to provocation or breach of peace, and shall . . . present them with the loving respect our town in general bears towards them."<sup>12</sup>

As the instructions to the representatives sent to Dorchester indicate, the emphasis on informal accommodation as the key to peace went beyond the appointment of mediators. Within the town as well as without, the greatest care was exercised to prevent disputes before they arose. Was the town going to pre-empt a man's farmland along the river for a mill? Then policy required satisfactory compensation, satisfactory to the owner as well as to the town. Was there bad soil in part of the next field to be divided among the townsmen? Then the lots which included bad soil would be larger than the others, so that no man could complain of injustice. Had a man not heard of the latest order forbidding the cutting of oak trees? Very well, then, he would not pay a fine for the oaks he had felled in his ignorance.

Year in and year out the keeper of the town book recorded many such small examples of solicitude. The Covenant was kept in spirit as well as in letter, and the keeping of the spirit

12. *Records*, III, 197, 208-09.

of the Covenant kept the peace in Dedham. In the fifty years after its foundation the town was entirely free of the prolonged disputes which racked some towns nearby.<sup>13</sup>

Supplementing Dedham's policies of perfection were lesser policies which helped maintain the social fabric. Many were policies not uncommon in the villages of England and most were required of all towns by the General Court of Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup> The town made its own formal bylaws, which served to protect the common interest, as in the case of laws for the conservation of timber and laws regulating the operation of the grist mills.<sup>15</sup> Poor persons were aided if they were members of a townsman's family, otherwise sent packing no matter how hungry they might be; the town would take care of its own but would not risk expense or scandal by entertaining impoverished outsiders.<sup>16</sup> The town was empowered to inquire into private lives, ordering amendment where amendment was due, putting the offender under the supervision of an upright townsman if he did not mend his ways. Thus, "upon information that John Littlefield . . . runs up and down misspending his time, and by that means may not only bring ruin to himself but also charge and damage may come to the town thereby, the selectmen . . . have ordered him to dwell with Thomas Aldridge two, three, or four weeks," and, "the selectmen having treated John McIntosh concerning the state of his family and of some . . . disorder that they understood to be in the same, . . . understanding that disorder in the family do rather in-

13. Which is not to say that the town was without its brief disputes. The above-mentioned complaint of some old settlers (led by Henry Phillips) over the dilution of their land rights, beginning in 1656, was one such; a political clash in 1660 was another, as will be seen. The extent to which these episodes undermined the ideal of the Covenant will be considered in chapter 5.

14. For examples, see *Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay in New England* (5 vols., Boston, Mass., 1853-1854), II, 4, 6-9, 163, 180.

15. *Records*, III, 177; IV, 155.

16. *Records*, III, 196, is an exception.

crease, . . . think it meet to dispose of one of his sons to service with . . . Timothy Dwight." The selectmen, chief officers of the town, were also charged with arranging the seating in the meetinghouse according to the rank of the persons within the society. The local hierarchy of age, service, and estate was literally displayed before the eyes of each inhabitant as he took his seat on Sunday mornings.<sup>17</sup> The Dedham school, kept in accordance with the law, offered the education in obedience and social conformity usual in the schools of the time.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the local taxes all men had to pay, every man owed the community a certain share of his time. He labored several days each month on the roads of the town or he paid the cash equivalent of his labor.<sup>19</sup> The communal obligation extended to the myriad tedious offices which had to be filled. Every townsman experienced days of annoyance and missed meals while serving as constable, assessor, clerk, surveyor, fenceviewer, poundkeeper, woodreeve, or (for the unfortunate few) hogreeve.

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Out of their vision of society and out of the wilderness tract with which they had begun the founders of Dedham had created what might best be described as a Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community. Christian because they saw Christian love as the force which would most completely unite their community. Utopian because theirs was a highly conscious attempt to build the most perfect possible community, as perfectly united, perfectly at peace, and perfectly ordered as man could arrange. Closed because its membership was selected while outsiders were treated with suspicion or rejected altogether.

17. *Records*, V, 111-12, 114; III, 148.

18. Bernard Bailyn, *Education in the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1960); *Records*, III, IV, indexes under "school."

19. *Records*, V, 60-61, for one example.

And Corporate because the commune demanded the loyalty of its members, offering in exchange privileges which could be obtained only through membership, not the least of which were peace and good order. The corporative nature of the town was confirmed by the practices of the colony: the typical inhabitant of Massachusetts could obtain land only by belonging to a particular town, since the allotment of most of the land in settled areas had been delegated to the towns by the General Court; and a man was represented in the House of Deputies (the lower house of the General Court) only if he was a member of a town, since representatives were elected from the town corporations rather than from electoral districts containing a certain number of inhabitants.

The obvious origin of the Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community lay in the Puritan ideology. The very term "Puritan" was coined to describe the desire for perfection which drove many of these otherwise typical Englishmen into martyrdom or exile. Purity in the church itself was the chief goal. The Puritans sought an end to bishops, vestments, ritual—to "papisty" in whatever form it might take. Their consciences required a return to the simple forms of primitive Christianity and a ministry which would preach the unadorned Word of God as it appeared in the Bible. What has often been passed over, however, is the intensity of the drive for social purity which likewise characterized Puritanism. If the Puritan sometimes dreamed of a church whose membership was confined to "visible saints," he also dreamed on occasion of a society dominated by secular saints, men able to live in harmony with their fellowmen as God had commanded.

Most immediately, the policies of perfection in Dedham were the products of a vivid utopian spirit which came to possess most of the leaders and many of the rank and file of the Puritan emigration as they approached America. They were aware that a great opportunity awaited them in the confrontation of the Puritan social ideal with the New World. Here was a chance



to begin again, leaving behind the compromises of an established culture. Governor John Winthrop's famous "Modell of Christian Charity," a sermon delivered aboard the *Arabella* on the way to America, is proof of the excitement and trepidation with which he approached the unique opportunity opened to his people. With God's help they would build in their colony a "city upon a hill" which would stand as a shining example to all men. The plan of the society Winthrop hoped to construct in Massachusetts was the plan of early Dedham writ large, a holy covenanted corporation mixing mutuality with hierarchy and Christian love with exclusiveness.<sup>20</sup>

But the origins of the Dedham commune ran deeper than the Puritan ideology, deeper even than Christianity. At first glance they seem to run back to the English rural culture which had done so much to shape the social ideals of Puritanism. Any number of institutions and customs found in Dedham were direct transplantations from the English villages of the time. Genuine as this line of descent is, it is also deceptive. For the deepest secular origins of this Utopian Closed Corporate Community lay not merely in English villages but in a major strain of peasant culture also found in medieval and modern villages of France and Spain, and in modern Indian and Javanese villages.

An anthropologist entirely unaware of the internal structure of the New England Town has described the "Closed Corporate Peasant Community" common to all these places and times. His description fits Dedham nicely. Social relationships in these rural communities are "many-stranded and polyadic"; the villagers tend to form a single social coalition which deals with all the issues of village life—land, taxation, regulation, morality. A "Closed Corporate Peasant Community" restricts its member-

20. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints, The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York, 1963), and Stephen Foster, "The Puritan Social Ethic," will serve as background. Again, "A Modell of Christian Charity" is in Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, I.

ship, retains ultimate authority over the alienation of land, seeks to guarantee its members equal access to resources, and maintains its internal order by enforcing common standards of behavior (by accusations of witchcraft, if all else fails). "The community thus acquires the form of a corporation, an enduring organization of rights and duties held by a stable membership; and it will tend to fight off changes and innovations as potential threats to the internal order that it strives to maintain." Indeed, the constant possibility of disruptions imposed by outside forces generates a powerful hostility toward everything strange, a hostility which further protects the internal order by uniting the villagers in a shared emotional experience. Conscious utopianism may be found in these as in all peasant communities, for from them arise movements centering on a "myth of a social order," looking forward to "the establishment of a new order on earth."<sup>21</sup>

So the utopia of the Puritan émigrés who founded Dedham was in many respects a peasant utopia.<sup>22</sup> The communal ideal of these men repeated so many features of the peasant ideal that their Puritanism seemed a mere continuation of the peasant ethos.<sup>23</sup> [The dichotomy of mutual devotion within and hostility

21. Eric Wolf, *Peasants* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1966), 84ff., 106ff.; the quotations are from pp. 86 and 106.

22. Only an historian limited by a preoccupation with medieval European peasant society (and indeed by a narrow view of that slice of human experience) would insist that tenancy on the lands of a lord is a necessary characteristic of a peasant community. The more universal definition used by anthropologists does not require a lord or lords, since it defines as "peasant" any more or less self-shaping community of men on the land in a pre-modern context which tends to view and organize itself according to certain patterns. Landlordism merely introduces variations, sometimes quite minor ones, in these patterns. But even if the term "peasant" is to be restricted to European villages and/or to villages with lords of the manor, the fact remains that Dedham shaped itself in a form common to many communities of men on the land all over the world in many ages, and in this sense was part of a tradition that went beyond Puritanism, call it what you will.

23. Of the writers on Puritan New England, Perry Miller has best

without, which had been practiced by a multitude of villages all over the world for thousands of years, was in turn both preached and practiced in Puritan Dedham, and all the characteristic implications of this corporative form were worked out in full detail. Further, the tendency of medieval peasants to look on the villages of an imaginary golden past as their model for the future regeneration of society was repeated in the Puritan idealization of the communes of the primitive Christian church and in the use of these communes as a model for some features of Dedham's organization.<sup>24</sup> Precedents for the peculiar mixture of hierarchy with collectivism manifested in Puritan Dedham could even be found in the history of peasant utopianism.<sup>25</sup> The Puritan source did not simply echo the peasant; they were directly linked. The social ethic of Englishmen of the day still owed much to the peasant experience which had once dominated the English scene, and among the Puritans as among all Englishmen were many men whose families were only a few generations removed from villeinage and still lived in hamlets that were essentially peasant.

Did this really mean that for the men of Dedham Puritanism was nothing more than the continuation of traditional impulses? Not entirely. Puritanism was above all a new religious impulse, part of the Reformation which swept over Europe in the six-

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perceived the blend of motives which lay behind its utopianism. Thus his suggestive sentence, "Springing from the traditions of the past, from the deep and wordless sense of the tribe, of the organic community, came a desire to intensify the social bond, to strengthen the cohesion of the folk." Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, The Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1937), 440.

24. Dedham's Covenant itself, together with John Allin's account of the founding of the church, demonstrates the Puritans' deliberate imitation of the primitive Christian communities; see *Records* II, III, and Hans Lietzmann, *The Beginnings of the Christian Church* (trans. B. L. Woolf, London, 1937), especially p. 181. For the equivalent syndrome in medieval peasant utopianism, see F. Graus, "Social Utopias in the Middle Ages," *Past and Present*, no. 38 (Dec., 1967), 3-19.

25. Graus, "Social Utopias," 16-17.

teenth and seventeenth centuries and which in its origins and effects was far more than a mere offshoot of the peasant ethos. This new impulse would color the history of Dedham, and indeed it had brought the townsmen there in the first place.<sup>26</sup> Yet somehow when these creatures of the Reformation came to articulate their ideal of social organization, they not only continued but actually perfected and sanctified the ideal of the peasant past. The two sources, Puritan and peasant, were not identical, but by some inscrutable chemistry they came together in a mixture which was as powerful as it was inseparable.<sup>27</sup>

It may be that the catalyst was the American wilderness, whose frightening presence turned the settlers back upon the old ways engrained in them and their forbears. If this was the case, then Puritanism was somewhat incidental to that intensification of the peasant tradition found in Dedham; Puritanism had brought the townsmen face to face with the wilderness and had provided the rhetoric by which their social reaction to this alarming prospect could be sanctified, but it had not directly urged them to their conservative social ideal. Yet it may be also that within Puritanism itself was a fear of the future which tended to send its advocates to the past for their definition of the holy society.<sup>28</sup>

Whatever the exact nature of the mixture, Dedham was at once a Puritan and a peasant utopia. It partook of the desire for a reformed religion which had seized Europeans in all walks of life and at the same time it embraced half-conscious patterns which had arisen in peasant villages long before the discovery of America. It blended these sources into an ideology strong enough to unite men from diverse parts of England into a

26. See particularly chapter 2.

27. The precise modern term would be "synergetic compound."

28. Professor Darrett B. Rutman of the University of New Hampshire is now preparing an essay on this problem of distinguishing the traditional from the innovative in Puritanism, and weighing their relative influence.

coherent social organism. Ironically, what was most uniquely "American" about the policies of earliest Dedham was the intensity of their utopianism. For here in the New World the settlers could heed almost without restriction whatever mysterious fears urged them to reconstruct in new perfection the ancient patterns of social organization.

## The Heart of Perfection: The Church

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DEDHAM WAS NOT to be a theocracy. By law, the Puritan clergy could not become officers of the civil society here or elsewhere in the colony. In some ways, the local church actually came to occupy a position of isolation. A good many of the lay elders of the congregation would play no role in the leadership of the town, while the town government, though it shared control of the business affairs of the church, had so little to do with religious beliefs that references to the Lord appeared in its records only twice in fifty years.

This superficial isolation did not mean that the church was irrelevant to the life of the new community. Quite the contrary, it was in several ways central to the settlers' experience. In the first place, these Englishmen had not left their homes merely to organize their own township. John Allin, their first minister, spoke for most of them when he wrote that only "the hope of enjoying Christ in his ordinances" could have persuaded the emigrants to "forsake dearest relations, parents, brethren, sisters, Christian friends and acquaintances, overlook the dangers and difficulties of the vast seas, the thought whereof was a terror to many, and . . . go into a wilderness where we could forecast nothing but care and temptation."<sup>1</sup> Even before a church was organized, this overriding concern for the implementation of true Christian faith had been written into the town Covenant, ensuring that the townsmen would be Christians in secular life

1. John Allin, *Defense of the Answer Made unto the Nine Questions or Positions Sent from New England . . .* (London, 1648).