



Section 3

AMERICAN LIVES John Winthrop

Man of Principle, Man of God

"We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we shall deal falsely with our God . . . we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God."—John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity" (1630)

Well-educated, John Winthrop (1588–1649) was also a Puritan who believed that the English church needed reforming. He set aside his country estate in England and agreed to join a new venture: planting a colony in North America. As one of the leaders of that new colony, he helped shape how Americans see themselves.

Winthrop trained as an attorney and enjoyed a successful law career for many years, living comfortably in a country manor. He suffered tragedy as well, losing two wives. His third marriage, though, lasted thirty years, however, and that wife joined him later in Massachusetts.

In 1629, he began to listen to those talking of a colony in North America. Many friends advised against the idea, but Winthrop carefully listed the pluses and minuses—and decided to join. Winthrop was willing to leave England because economic troubles had cut his income and political problems cost him his position as attorney. Like the other Puritan leaders, he was also convinced that the best hope for reforming the church was to take it away from England. He quickly became influential among the leaders, who chose Winthrop as governor shortly before the Massachusetts Bay Company sailed to North America in 1630. Determined to control the fate of the colony, the leaders took the company charter with them. As a result, they were relatively free of interference from the British government.

As hundreds of colonists sailed for their new home, Winthrop wrote "A Model of Christian Charity," setting forth the principles underlying the colony. He said that the colony's goal was "to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord." He emphasized that the colonists joined "by mutual consent" to seek a home—the "city upon a hill"—under a "government both civil and ecclesiastical." He closed by urging the colonists to work together "that we and our seed may live by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him."

Winthrop dominated Massachusetts in its early years, serving as governor or deputy governor for most of the colony's first two decades. He and other leaders—many from the clergy—served as magistrates and set policy for the colony. Some of their decisions have had lasting effect. They set aside one area of Boston—the Common—as public property for common use, which it remains to this day. They created the Boston Latin School and Harvard University and told the various towns in the colony to start schools, launching American public education. Ironically, students schooled in these institutions later challenged the colony's conservative leaders.

Winthrop did not believe in democracy. He felt that leaders knew what was best for the people. He wrote that the magistrates must have the power of vetoing the actions of the people. Democracy was wrong, he said, because "there was no such government in Israel."

However, Winthrop was always strictly honest. When voted out of office the first time, his successor ordered that the colony's accounts be examined, a veiled slap at Winthrop's conduct. The audit showed that everything was in perfect order—in fact, Winthrop had loaned the colony some of his own funds to meet expenses. His agent in England was less fair to him, however, and Winthrop lost money due to his dishonesty. For the remainder of his life, Winthrop was financially strapped. However, he was often elected to one-year terms as governor, and his son John Winthrop, Jr., (1606–1676) became a respected colonial governor of Connecticut.

Questions

1. What did Winthrop mean by calling the colony a "city upon a hill"?
2. Why did Winthrop leave his advantages in England for uncertainty in Massachusetts?
3. On what basis did Winthrop reject democracy, and what does this show about his political beliefs?