Life in the New England Colonies

What was it like to live in the New England colonies? Remember that even though there are now six New England states, there were just four New England colonies: Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New Hampshire. The land in Maine was part of Massachusetts and the land in Vermont belonged to the New York colony.

Massachusetts was first settled by members of the religious group, the Pilgrims. This influenced how people lived in Massachusetts when the colony was first founded. The Pilgrims, or Puritans as they are also called, were known for their simple lifestyle. When the first settlers arrived in Massachusetts a top priority was building shelters. The settlers constructed homes similar to the ones they had left in England. These early homes were not built on foundations or basements. Wooden corner posts were sunk into the ground. Since there were no nails, wooden pegs were used to hold boards together. Typical homes had one main room with a large fireplace for cooking and heat. Homes might also have a second story loft for sleeping.

All manufactured goods, like cloth, pots and pans, any metal goods, and firearms, were imported from England. Colonists sent back furs, lumber and other raw materials that were available. In the early days, most colonists were farmers who needed to grow food in order to survive. New England is hilly and the soil is rocky because of the retreat of ancient glaciers left granite stones and boulders behind. It was difficult soil to farm plus the growing season in New England is quite short compared to colonies that were further south. A short growing season in summer also means a longer winter. Settlers in New England had to contend with a long, cold and snowy winter.

Over the years, as more settlers came to New England, cottage crafts developed. For example, a shoemaker made shoes from his home while the blacksmith made metal objects in his blacksmith shop. Young boys would serve as apprentices to craftsmen in order to learn the trade. Young girls learned the arts of cooking, preserving food, sewing, and spinning yarn. Towns developed and in the 1700s the population of Boston reached 20,000.