

Anne Bradstreet

Pilgrim and poet

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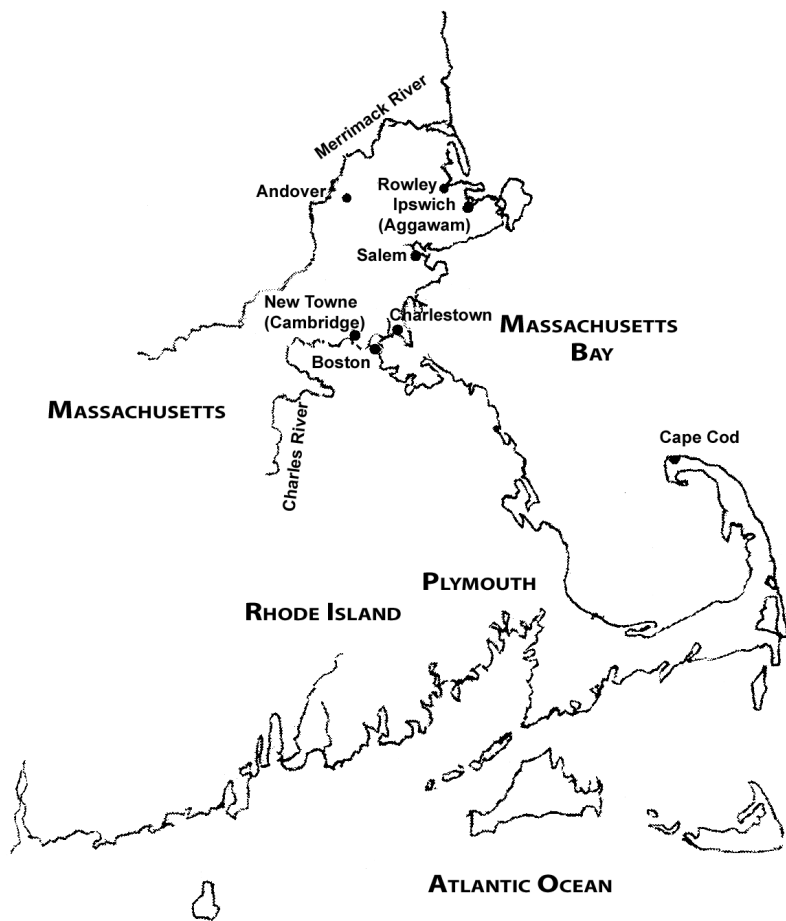
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Strangers and pilgrims here below,
this earth, we know, is not our place;
but hasten through the vale of woe,
and, restless to behold thy face,
swift to our heavenly country move,
our everlasting home above.

(Charles Wesley)



Massachusetts Bay in the days of the early settlers

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1. Formative years

King James I of England was angry. His patience finally snapped when he received yet another delegation of Puritan preachers urging him to grant greater religious toleration to men of their persuasion and to make further reformatations in the English state church. The king had already been confronted by these issues on several previous occasions following his accession to the throne of Elizabeth I in 1603. Now he had had enough. Pressed once more on the subject at a conference convened at Hampton Court Palace early in 1604, he could only snarl contemptuously, 'If this is all your party have to say, I will *make* them conform or I will harry them out of this land ... or worse.'

Such ugly threats were not immediately fulfilled, but fulfilled they certainly were before the end of the reign of this king, known as 'the wisest fool in Christendom'. Some of the noblest and best citizens in the land were to feel the lash of his drive towards total conformity of religion and eventually be 'harried' out of the country.



James I (1566–1625)

Eight years later—years when religious intolerance was steadily increasing—a daughter was born to a Puritan couple, Thomas and Dorothy Dudley, a child they named Anne. Thomas Dudley, born in 1576, had been orphaned at a young age and had subsequently come under the influence of wealthy Puritan patrons. Early converted to God, he soon demonstrated an earnest and inflexible zeal for spiritual truth, laying down firm biblical guidelines for his life. Moving to Northampton, he entered the

service of the Earl of Northampton as manager of his extensive estates. Before long Thomas married Dorothy Yorke, a wealthy and well-connected young woman.

Their first child, Samuel, was born in 1608, followed by Anne in 1612; then three more daughters, Patience, Sarah and Mercy, were added to the family during the next few years. Living in their own cottage on the Earl of Northampton's estate, the children had enjoyed a pampered and privileged childhood. But all was suddenly to change in 1620, when Anne was eight. Thomas Dudley announced that the family would be moving from Northampton to Sempringham, Lincolnshire, where he had obtained a fresh appointment, this time to act as steward to Theophilus, Earl of Lincoln.

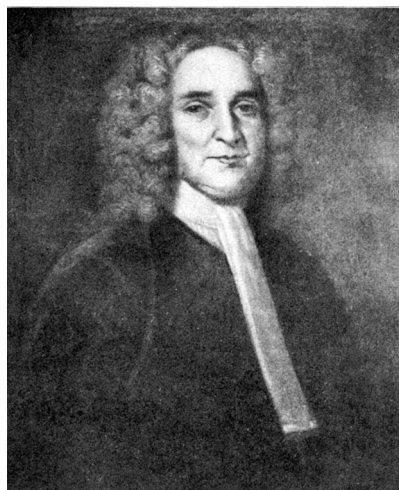
Theophilus had inherited the title when he was only twenty, following the early death of his father, but with it he also inherited

the burden of the family finances, which were in a chaotic state. With strong Puritan persuasions himself, Theophilus urgently needed a like-minded, capable and trustworthy steward to sort out his affairs and help to balance the books. Thomas Dudley came to his notice. An astute businessman, Dudley seemed the right choice for the task, and so it proved as he set about transforming the earl's interests.

The rambling Lincolnshire estate to which the Dudley family was introduced was a contrast to life in Northampton. The household was lively and active, for Theophilus had eight siblings all still at home, cared for by a retinue of fifty or more servants. The dowager Countess Elizabeth, the earl's hawk-eyed mother, a woman of staunch evangelical principles, was clearly in charge, supervising the whole family.

For eight-year-old Anne Dudley, an intelligent and studious child, the greatest pleasure of her new home was the books. The Earl of Lincoln's library was crammed with volumes—history, literature and religious writings—and it would seem that Anne had liberty to read to her heart's content. Added to this she had the privilege of sharing in the tuition provided for the earl's five younger sisters, some of whom were little older than Anne herself. The countess was advanced in her thinking for the times and strongly believed in educational opportunities for girls, a circumstance which held benefits that would influence Anne's entire life.

But of even greater benefit for Anne was the nearness of the new family home to Boston, and therefore to the ministry of the great Puritan preacher John Cotton at St Botolph's Church. Each Saturday afternoon covered wagons stood ready to carry the family the fifteen miles that lay between Sempringham and Boston. The three-hour drive along muddy lanes through the

*John Cotton*

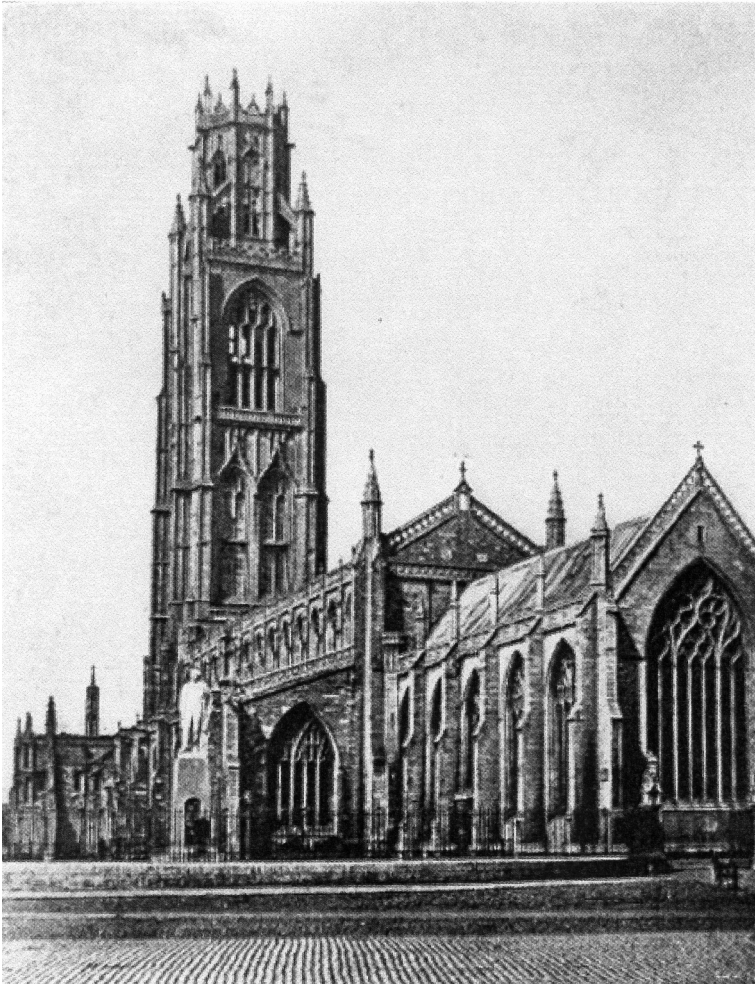
low-lying Fen Country brought them at last into the bustling market town of Boston and to the Earl of Lincoln's Boston home. Here they spent two nights enabling them to join in worship with the congregation at St Botolph's.

John Cotton's searching ministry left a permanent mark on Anne, for she was a serious child. From an early age she had been troubled by her sins and often could not

sleep at night until she had confessed them to God in prayer and felt his forgiveness. Writing many years later she records:

In my young years, about 6 or 7 as I take it, I began to make conscience of my ways, and what I knew was sinful, as lying, disobedience to parents etc. I avoided it. If at any time I was overtaken with the like evils, it was a great trouble, and I could not rest until by prayer I had confessed it unto God.

Clearly Anne had been carefully taught God's moral law both by John Cotton and also by her mother Dorothy, whom she would describe as 'a true instructor of her family'. Although little is known of this self-effacing woman, Anne's later words point her out as a good mother, a woman of quiet godliness, who must have encouraged her children to read the Bible regularly at an early age. Anne herself found 'much comfort in reading the Scriptures', but in common with small children everywhere she could as easily forget, or find herself not bothered to read or pray. Then with



St Botolph's Church, Boston, England

pangs of conscience she realized her neglect and redoubled her efforts.

The year 1620, when the Dudley family moved from Northampton to Lincolnshire, was one that would prove highly significant in