

# **Literacy, Education and Written Works in Colonial New England**

Part One of a Two-Part Lecture Series  
by Donna La Rue

The first illustrated lecture looks at early New England's schools and schooling, and at the early and longstanding contributions of Boston and Cambridge to education and literacy. Protestants, expected to read Scriptures, and other well-educated inhabitants, fostered reading, a calligraphic hand and classically influenced writing. In addition to the country's oldest university, two early grammar schools, a printing press, and a literary community were established by the end of the 1600s.. Samplers, hornbooks, primers, calligraphic texts, Psalters, gravestones, broadsides, printed books of prose and poetry, and published sermons exemplify the importance of literacy; the town's center shifted in response to the place of schools, the press, and the scholars residing there.

Literacy was higher than that in Old England and the Continent. The Bay Psalm Booke (HUP, 1640), published to replace awkward, 'unsingable' extant Psalm translations, set higher aesthetic standards for written and sung works than those known "at home." Rev. John Eliot, "missioner to the Indians," learned and transliterated Algonkian and oversaw publications in it. All admitted to University read and spoke Latin, and some Greek, as well as English. Books were owned, loaned and shared; Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall wandered through the Old Burying Ground translating epitaphs to keep up their Latin. A literate populace read and understood broadsides and pamphlets, developing informed opinions on political issues as they arose.

Active in colonial leadership and educative standards from the first—so it continues, in many ways, as it began, to the present.

The second part of this series will take place later in the spring with an outside walk-around tour to view school and publishing sites; objects tied to the practice of teaching reading; and teachers' and students' home-and gravesites..