

Author explores paradoxes of Puritan America

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Sarah Vowell loves the Puritans, who left England in search of religious freedom and then condemned and expelled those who didn't believe exactly as they did.

"What can I say?" Vowell said. "I love a contradiction. Massachusetts was supposed to be this community of like-minded individuals, but basically it was a totalitarian community like the Soviet Union."

The man who embodied those contradictions was John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company.

Winthrop is best known today for his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," which includes the phrase "city upon a hill" and has been referenced in speeches by John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and other politicians.

John Winthrop

Winthrop had a lot more to say about community and charity that appealed to Vowell, who made Winthrop the focus of her new book, *The Wordy Shipmates*.

Winthrop, she discovered, was incredibly industrious and learned, "a real jack-of-all-trades" who organized and built a community from scratch while thinking deeply about faith and spirituality.

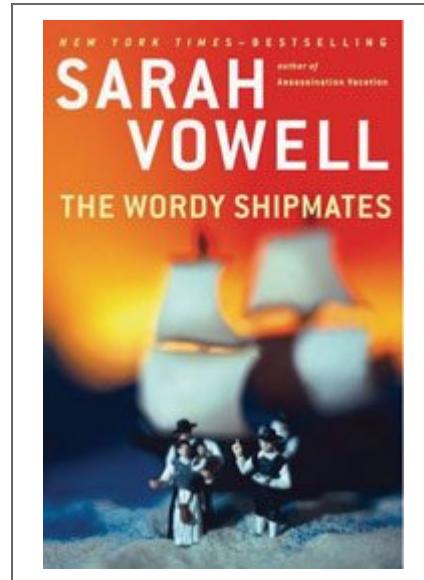
"He was a sweet guy as long as you agreed with him," Vowell said. "If not, you got the boot."

Roger Williams found that out. Williams, a young minister, arrived in Boston from England after Winthrop and immediately began stirring up trouble with his contrary views.

Among other things, Williams believed Native Americans should be treated with respect and that the king of England had no right to sell their land.

Williams also believed in the separation of church and state—a radical notion in Puritan New England.

He bounced around from Salem to Plymouth before being kicked out of the colony. He eventually founded Rhode Island and the first Baptist church on American soil.



“Roger Williams was quite eccentric and a very annoying man who I would not want to hang out with for more than 10 hours or so, but he’s kind of the hero of my book,” Vowell said.

“He was an amazing thinker who came up with a lot of the concepts that good people in this country now hold dear. ... I think he was fairly heroic. He was just born too early.”

Vowell is conducting a media blitz for *The Wordy Shipmates*. She’s beloved

for her work on Chicago Public Radio's *This American Life* and is a popular guest on talk shows, particularly David Letterman's.

For someone who loves to be home by herself learning about history, it's a little disconcerting. Vowell said she's going to take inspiration from another Puritan who was banished from the colony for speaking her mind, Anne Hutchinson.

"Anne Hutchinson was a mouthy dame who couldn't shut up," Vowell said. "I'm a stay-at-home loner by nature, and it's worth remembering that there were times in this country when if you didn't shut up, you could lose your home."