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Mather, Cotton

The Mather family towers over the first 100 years of New England history, and Cotton Mather joined his father, [Increase Mather](#), and his grandfather, [Richard Mather](#), to form a near dynasty of Puritan ministers. His mother, Maria, lent additional weight to the gravity of his spiritual heritage, since she was herself the daughter of [John Cotton](#), the most famous preacher of New England's first generation. Cotton Mather, the heir of two great Puritan lineages, was born in Boston on February 12, 1663. Like his father, Increase, Cotton entered Harvard College at the age of 12. He graduated in 1678 when he was 16 years old, and in 1681 he earned an M.A. from Harvard. Even before this later academic accomplishment, Cotton Mather had, like his father and two illustrious grandfathers, preached his first sermons. Beginning in rapid succession in late summer of 1680, he preached at Dorchester, where his grandfather, Richard Mather, had served before his death some 20 years earlier; then at Second or Old North Church in Boston, where his father preached; and then at the Boston church where John Cotton had preached. These and other early sermons were well received, although the young preacher battled with stuttering and acquired in his warfare against this impediment a deliberateness of speech that would characterize his preaching for the rest of his life.

The congregation of Old North Church determined on hearing Cotton Mather's first sermon that he would be a fit colleague for his father, Increase. But Increase was cool to the idea. Although persuaded to accept his son on probationary terms as one of the church's preachers, he steadfastly opposed Cotton's ordination until his congregation's persistence finally caused him to relent five years after Cotton had preached his maiden sermon. Cotton Mather was ordained in North Church on May 13, 1685, and he served alongside his father at the church until Increase died nearly 40 years later.

Cotton Mather's father had combined a pastoral ministry with political activity in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, especially after its original charter had been revoked in the mid-1680s. The English Crown appointed [Sir Edmund Andros](#) to serve as governor of New England, as well as New York and New Jersey, and on his arrival in 1686, he proved to be a highly unpopular agent of royal policy. Increase set out for England, where he remained until after the [Glorious Revolution](#), which deposed James II and enthroned William and Mary, and he was able to obtain a new charter for Massachusetts. Cotton, for his part, stayed in Massachusetts, tending the affairs of Old North Church but also participating to some extent in New England's own miniature revolution, in which Governor Andros was arrested and evicted from the colony. Cotton Mather wrote a defense of those who unseated Andros, *Declaration of the Gentlemen, Merchants, and Inhabitants of Boston and the County Adjacent*. Cotton, however, was generally less engaged in political matters than his father.

Increase Mather returned from England in 1692 and rejoined his son in the pulpit of the Old North Church. When he arrived home, the Salem witch trials were in progress and soon commanded the attention of both men. Though he had no doubt that Satan was busy at work in Salem as elsewhere, Increase Mather expressed dissatisfaction with the Salem court's reliance on "spectral evidence," that is, testimony from witnesses who claimed to have seen apparitions of those accused of witchcraft engaged in various nefarious activities. Increase ultimately published a book criticizing the methods employed at Salem to uncover witchcraft. Cotton Mather, however, though opposed as his father was to the use of spectral evidence, believed that the Salem proceedings had, in fact, ferreted out the devil's doings there, and he wrote a book defending the Salem trials, *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Both at the time and since, Mather's defense of the Salem trials earned him scorn.

Cotton Mather married Abigail Phillips in 1686, and the couple had nine children before she died in 1702. Thereafter, he remarried, this time the widow Elizabeth Hubbard, with whom he had six children. After Elizabeth's death in 1713, Mather married Lydia Lee George in 1715. She was the wealthy widow of a prominent businessman, and she insisted on retaining control of the financial assets with which she had entered the marriage to Mather. By the time of his marriage to Lydia, only six of his children by previous marriages had survived. At the time of his death, only two of his children remained alive. His marriage to Lydia soon proved to be unhappy. Lydia was prone to "prodigious Paroxysms" of rage against her husband, so much so that he feared that she was mad and that public discovery of this fact would ruin his ministry. The marriage survived, though, until his death 13 years later. Mather died in Boston on February 13, 1728, the day after his 65th birthday.

Though prominent as a preacher in his day, Cotton Mather has a place in history that owes more to his pen than to his tongue. He wrote more than 400 volumes in his life, which revealed a dazzling breadth of interest and intellect, on subjects as diverse as

scriptural exegesis, hymnody, and natural history. His interest and writing on scientific topics, including his *Curiosa Americana*, ultimately gained him membership in the Royal Society of London. The most famous of his works, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, published in 1702, chronicled the history of Puritan New England. Cotton Mather was the last great Puritan preacher of an illustrious lineage and was himself Puritanism written large, with all its energies, enthusiasms, and errors.

Further Information

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