

Paper: Defining Dissenters: A Historiography of the “Puritans”, “Separatists”, and their Contribution to the American Revolution and Religious Freedom

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This paper explores the groups of British religious dissenters, opponents of whom collectively labeled “Puritans”, “Separatists”, etc, from a historiographical perspective. Amidst all of the pejoratives from their opponents, these groups did, in fact, have a definite identity (although not as monolithic as many historians often present). Terms such as “Puritan” and “Separatist” were often attached to many religious dissenters whose beliefs and practices did not always line up perfectly with modern conceptions of the respective terms. Those whom historians often identify with the terms actually had a wide array of labels, some of which were self-imposed and some were not. Ultimately, the paper attempts to sort out the confusion regarding “Puritans”, “Separatists”, and others who shared that label and explains some ways they influenced the coming of the American Revolution. This in part came from their time in Geneva during the reign of Mary Tudor, otherwise known as “Bloody Mary” for her adamant persecution of Protestants. During this period, the British dissenters fled to Geneva, and interacted with John Calvin and several of his followers, and translated their Geneva Bible into English before their return to England. This document influenced many of the thought patterns of its day even more so than the Authorized Version of the Bible of 1611, otherwise known as the King James Version of the Bible because of the role of King James I in its translation. It also explores the role of dissenting sects across the Atlantic Ocean in the Thirteen Colonies, and how they influenced even the Founding Fathers toward eventual American religious freedom.