

The reason of Jeremiah

Scholarly sources:

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Adair, John (1998). *Puritans: Religion and politics in seventeenth-century England and America*. Gloucester, UK: Sutton Publishing.

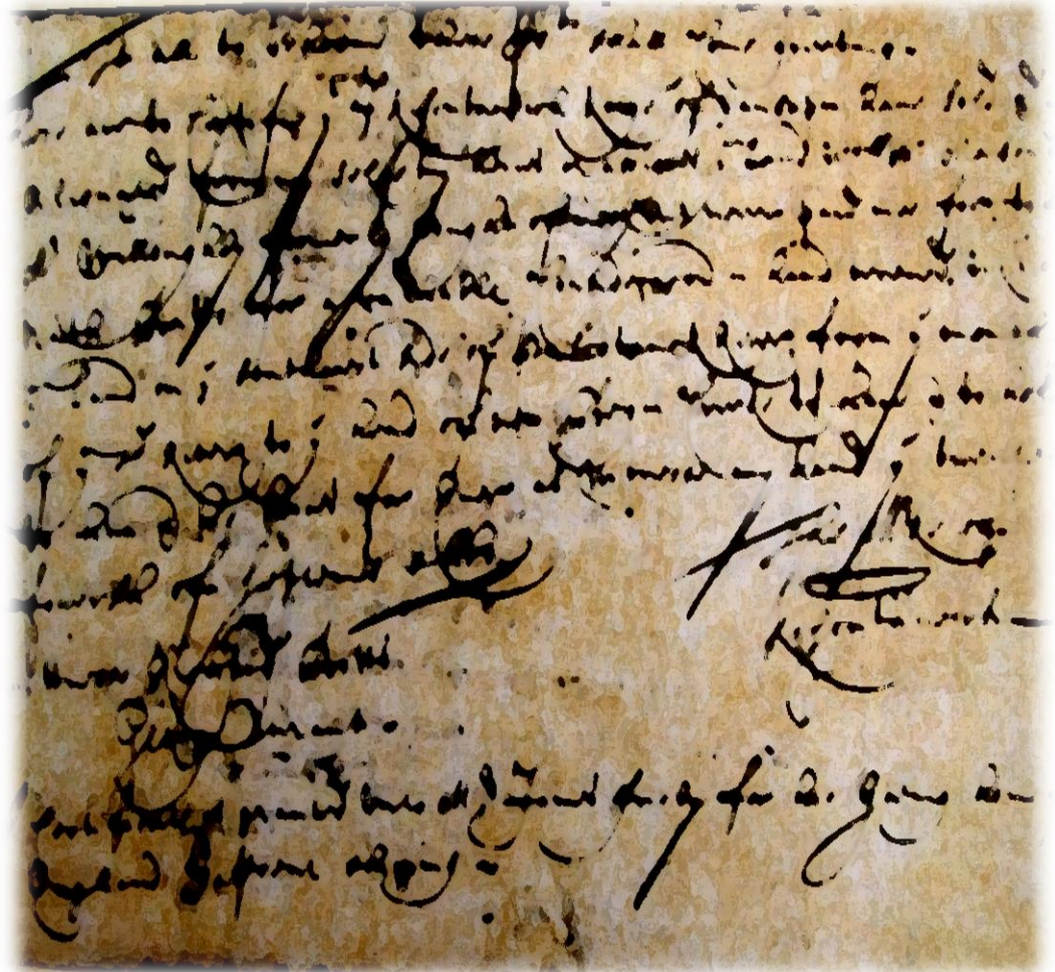
Meet Jeremiah

Seventeen-year-old Jeremiah Smith lived in a pious Puritan household with his parents and sisters in 1688. The Puritans, who emigrated from wealthy areas in England, started arriving in America in the 1620s. They formed the Massachusetts Bay Company.

Jeremiah lived in the town of Hingham, Massachusetts, the twelfth town of the Massachusetts Bay Company.



Hingham's land had been deeded to the Puritans by Josiah Wampatuck, a major chief among the Wampanoag Indians. The people of Hingham lived in relative peace with the Indians.



Hingham was peaceful enough for its residents to begin building somewhat large, ornate homes.



They'd even built their first permanent place of worship, called the Old Ship Church.



And religion to the Puritans was everything. They'd left England to be free to practice their own form of Christianity, which was very strict. For example, on Sundays, they were not allowed to do anything but get dressed, eat, pray, and read the Bible.



Their clergymen, along with a few magistrates, were at the top of the Puritan social order. The clergymen judged the people and always reminded them what it had been like to be persecuted for being different back in England. Members of the parish had to give thanks continuously for their current freedoms.

Clergymen were important to Hingham Puritans for another reason.



During these early colonial times, there was almost no medicine available for people when they got ill—even for common maladies like lice. Diseases such as small pox, the flu, measles, and even the common cold often took lives—particularly of children.

Parents needed reassurance from the clergy that their deceased little ones would end up in heaven.



There was something else about the Puritans.

They had a *ferocious* work ethic. They believed that if people were not praying, learning, or reading the Bible, they should be working. And that meant all the time. Puritan youth or adults were not allowed to get more than six hours of sleep a night.

There was no tolerance for recreation or rest time. Puritans thought that the devil would attack an idle mind or body.



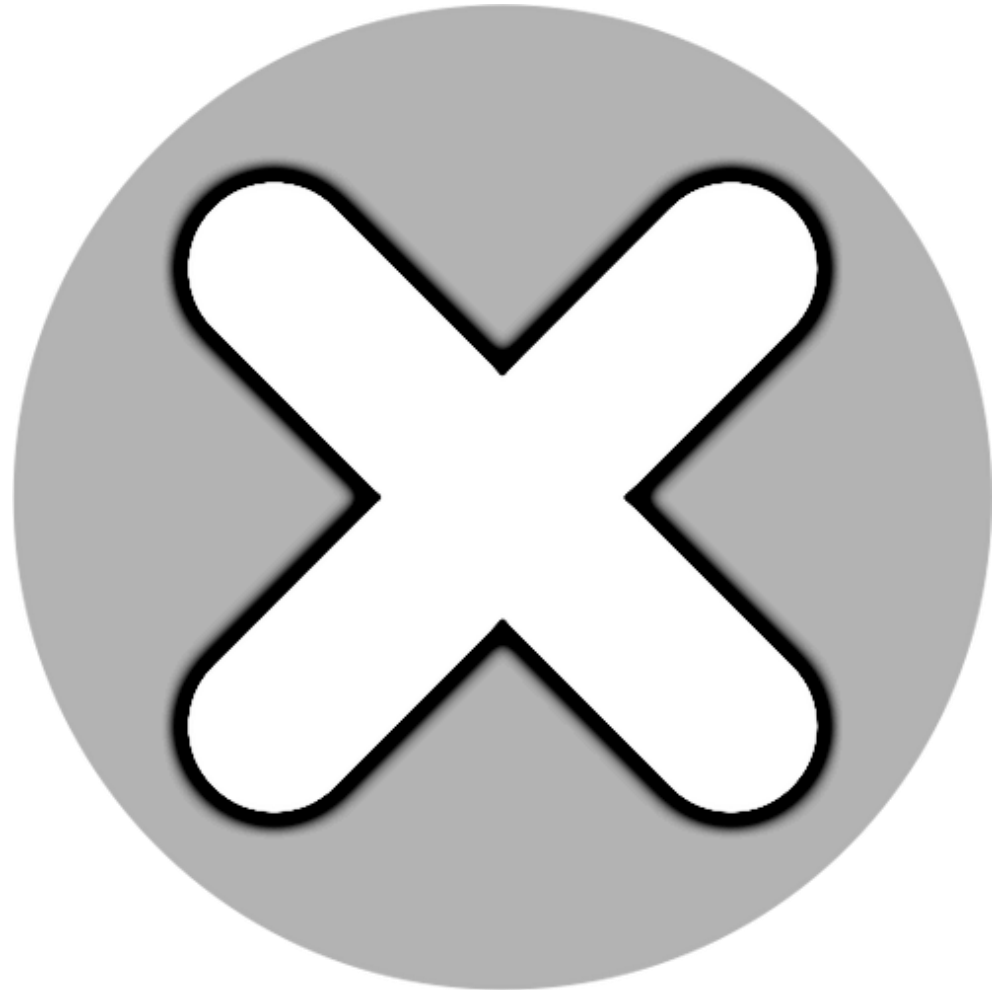
All the stress with no diversions became a problem for Jeremiah when he was a young boy.

He had lost two brothers and four of his friends to small pox. Each time there was a death, Jeremiah threw himself into a world of day dreams.



He imagined what it would be like to do things like celebrate holidays. He dreamed about Christmas. He'd seen some of the Scots in the next town celebrating this with caroling and feasting. Christmas was forbidden by his people because it led to overindulgence with little praying or working.

"Your idle mind invites Satan," his father reminded him constantly. "You shouldn't fantasize about these extravagances. You might also die any day and you will have all these unpardoned sins that will take you to hell."



But Jeremiah couldn't focus on work. All around him were contradictions that continued to bother him. If a Christmas feast was supposed to be overindulgence, what about his own family?

He thought about everything they had. Most members of his Hingham community had been wealthy in England and were wealthy in the colonies.

He had a beautiful house. His father was a successful merchant.



The family sent to England for the finest fabrics, trims, hats, and silk petticoats for his mother and sisters.



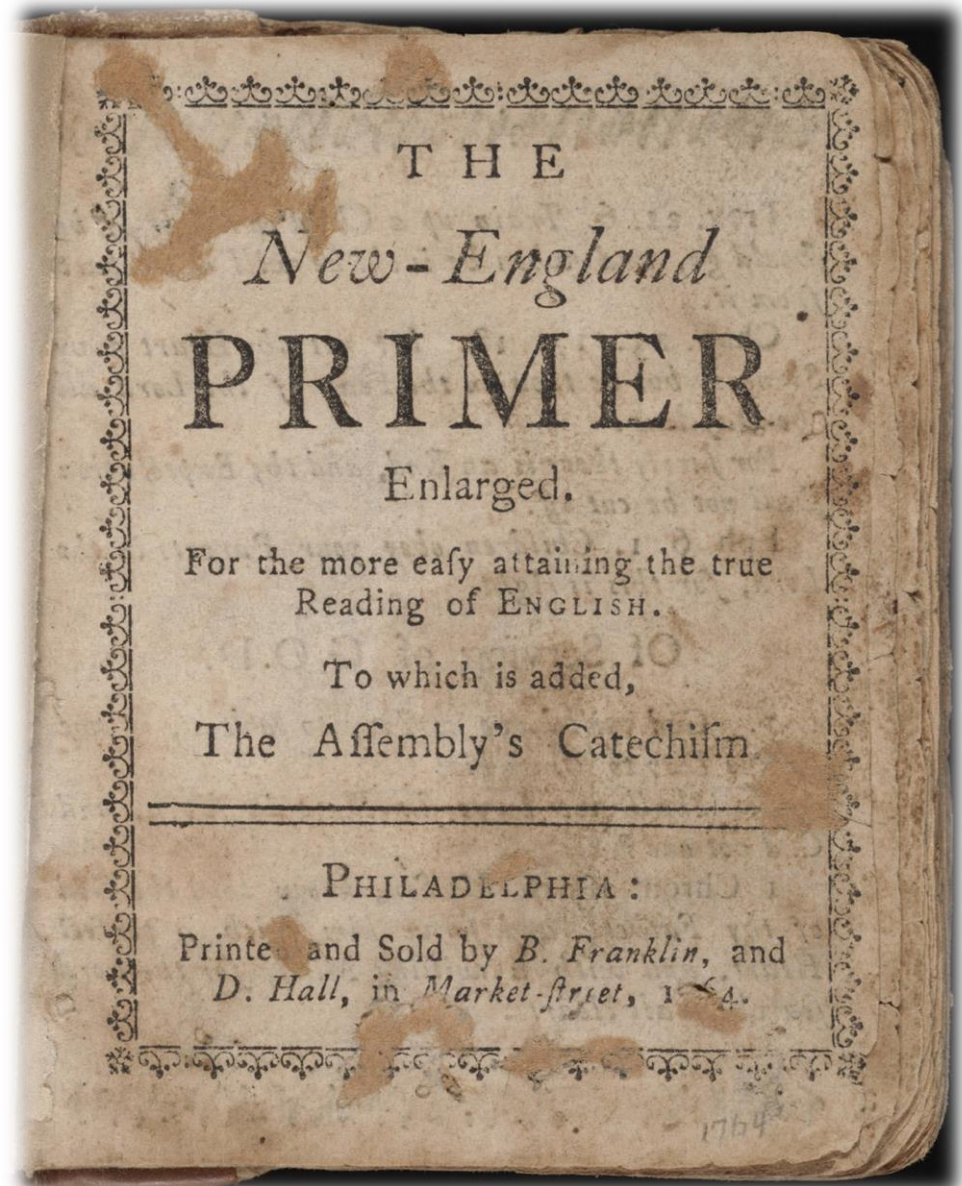
Jeremiah wondered why his family didn't just buy their cloth from Mr. Samuel Lincoln, the weaver who lived on his block. Mr. Lincoln was a generous man who lived without extravagances.

When Jeremiah asked his father if they were living too extravagantly, his father replied: "Son, all our material wealth comes from God and only God."



And then there was education.

He and his sisters went to a local writing school where they studied from the *New England Primer*.



Jeremiah would then graduate to grammar school where he'd study classical languages and literature. There he'd be encouraged to prepare for the Puritan college of Harvard. All this would turn him into an even wealthier professional one day (of course, if he repented of his idleness).



By contrast, his sisters only learned reading and a little writing. They learned enough to be able to study the Bible.

When Jeremiah asked his father why his sisters weren't learning anything else, his father replied: "Your sisters *could* learn to sew and cook, but they have no need."

Jeremiah's father pointed toward the fire.



There was Belle, hard at work.

Belle had been with them all of Jeremiah's life. She cared for the younger children, did the cooking, sewed the girls' fineries, did the gardening, and cleaned the house.

Belle was a slave.

Jeremiah thought about what his clergyman always said—that the community should remember that they were discriminated against in England. Jeremiah doubted though that the Puritans had been forced into slavery, like Belle and her people.



All these contradictions in Jeremiah's life turned him deeper into his fantasy world. He daydreamed during Bible study. He dallied with his school work.

He played. And that was the worst of it. He played marbles, and whirligig, and scotch-hopper, and board games. All forbidden.

His father disciplined him harshly. At first it was shunning, and later on it was whippings.

Still Jeremiah didn't repent of his idle ways.



At least not until he turned thirteen and something happened.

One day Jeremiah was walking home from school when he saw a gathering. He recognized his clergyman and several townspeople.

"What is going on?" Jeremiah asked.

Sarah, a girl his own age, answered. "It's Josiah Peters. He just turned sixteen and they're going to hang him."

"What!" screamed Jeremiah. "What did he do?"

"It's not what he did but what he didn't do. He never obeyed his parents. He was a rebellious child. Look at him beg now."



And at that moment, Jeremiah understood. He understood that he must stop rebelling (lest he also be hanged when he turned sixteen). But he also understood that he must work to better his world.

That night he stayed awake, looking out onto the unforgiving surroundings he knew he needed to change. He planned and planned. He would no longer be part of the problem, but part of the solution. But how?

He would become a clergyman.



From that day on, William gave up his daydreaming and idleness. He read the Bible hourly, worked on his school work, and by age seventeen, entered Harvard.

He knew he couldn't change everything at once. He had to use his reason to begin changing a few things at a time.

He wanted to start with Belle.



For years, he'd overheard the nighttime conversations of his parents. His mother loved Belle but always questioned whether it was moral to keep her.

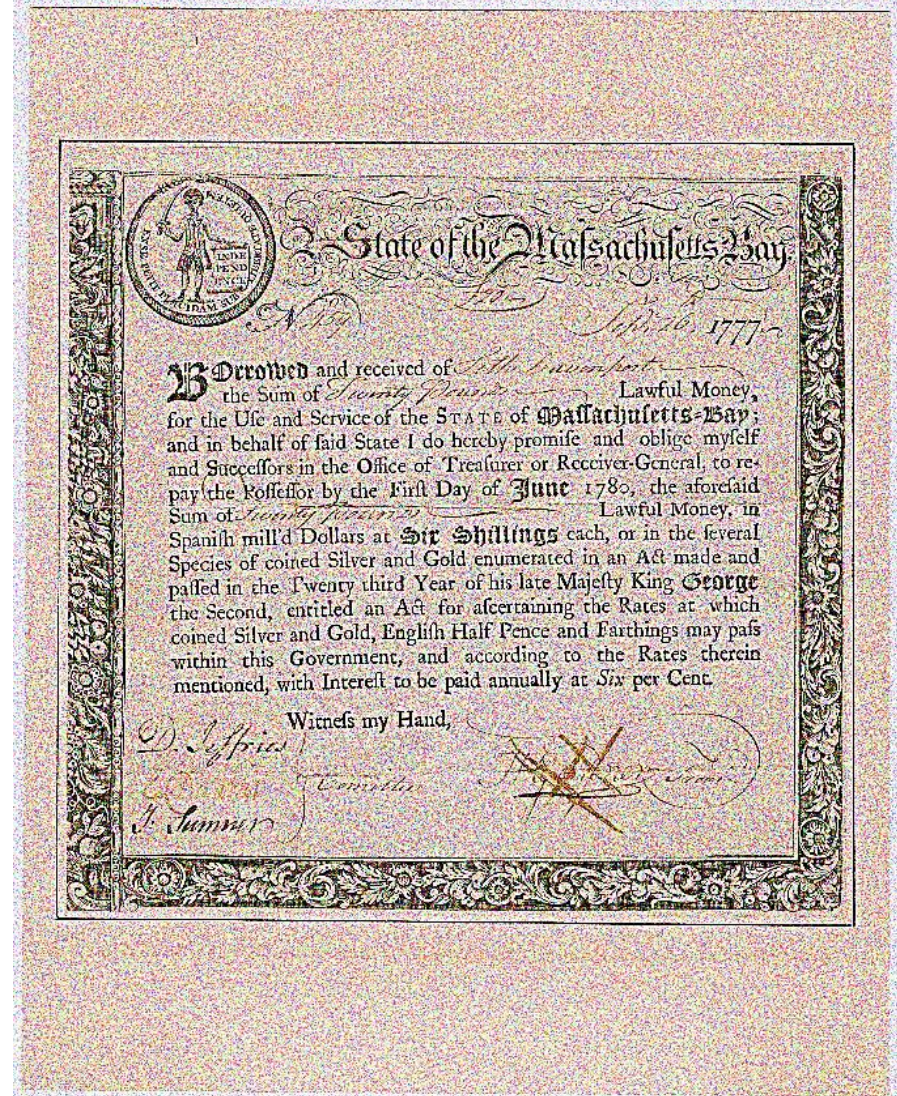
One night when Jeremiah was home from college, he overheard the following.

"I don't think we'd like it if she left," Jeremiah's mother Hannah said. "But she's a slave and doesn't have a choice."



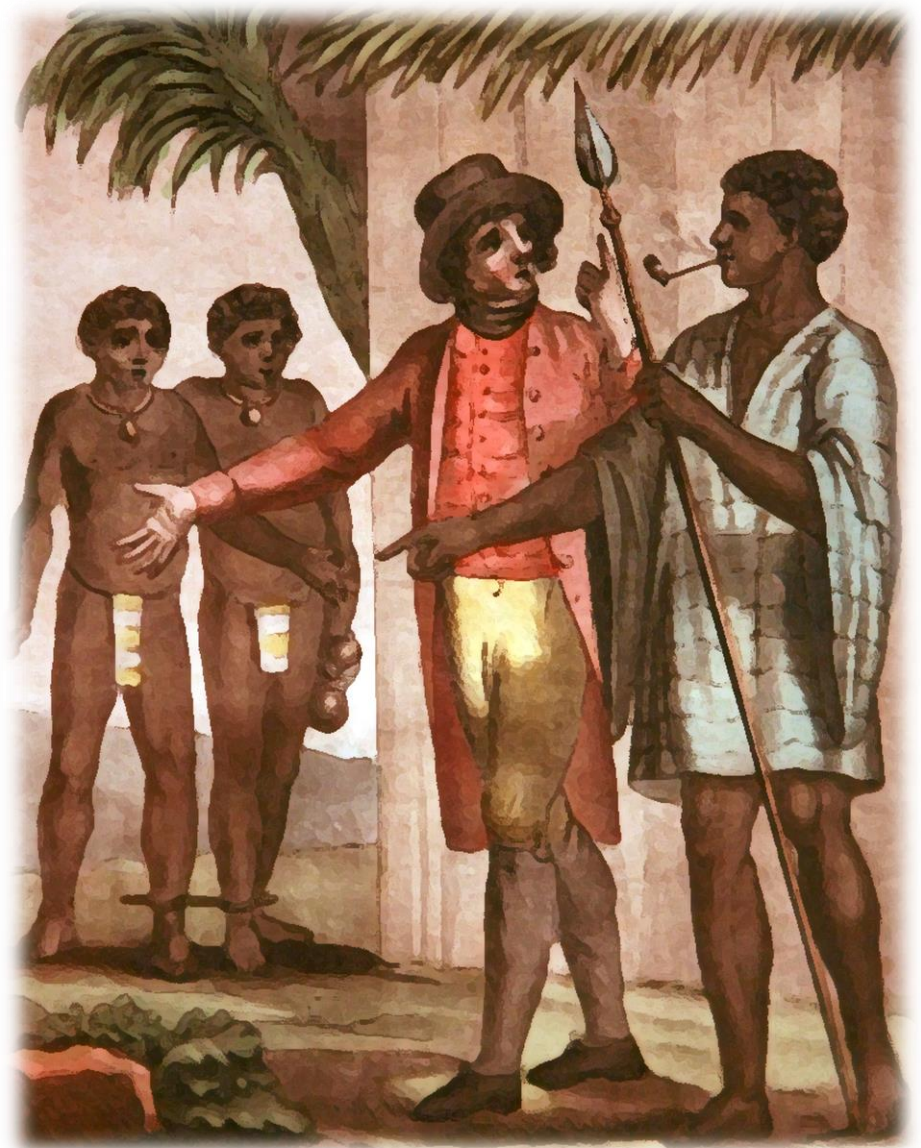
His father turned to his Puritan *Body of Liberties*. "Our leaders have always said that slavery is acceptable if it occurred during a just war," Jeremiah's father maintained.

"Still," remarked Hannah, "the Quakers in Pennsylvania made statements against slavery already this year."



"And since when do we care what the Quakers have to say?" snapped the father. "It is *our faith*—our Puritan faith—that we must heed."

Hannah nodded. "You are right, my husband. If our leaders say that Belle and her people came to us in a just war, then this must be right."



Jeremiah then devised a plan. He knew he couldn't use an argument from any outside source to make his case to emancipate Belle.

He would use pure Puritan reason.

The following night Jeremiah asked to address his father.



"Yes, my worthy son," his father replied.
"Since your transformation some years ago,
I hold anything you say in the highest
esteem."

"Thank you, father," answered Jeremiah.
"My concern here is not for myself."

"Who then?"

"It is for my little sisters—your daughters.
I see them all day in the idleness that was
once my sin. They gaze in the mirror
admiring their newest fineries every hour.
They gossip and do nothing else."

The father gasped. "Can this be true?"



Jeremiah nodded. "See my father, it is because of the slave woman Belle. She does all the work for them. She has stripped them of their work ethic. I fear that if illness takes either of them at this moment, that they will come to a very bad end."

"Oh, say no more, my wise son. Say no more."



And the following day Belle was freed.
She left their household to join a
brother who had been freed by the
Quakers a year earlier.

Jeremiah's little sisters took up her
tasks.



And so it happened that young Jeremiah used reasoning from his own Puritan faith to emancipate Belle.

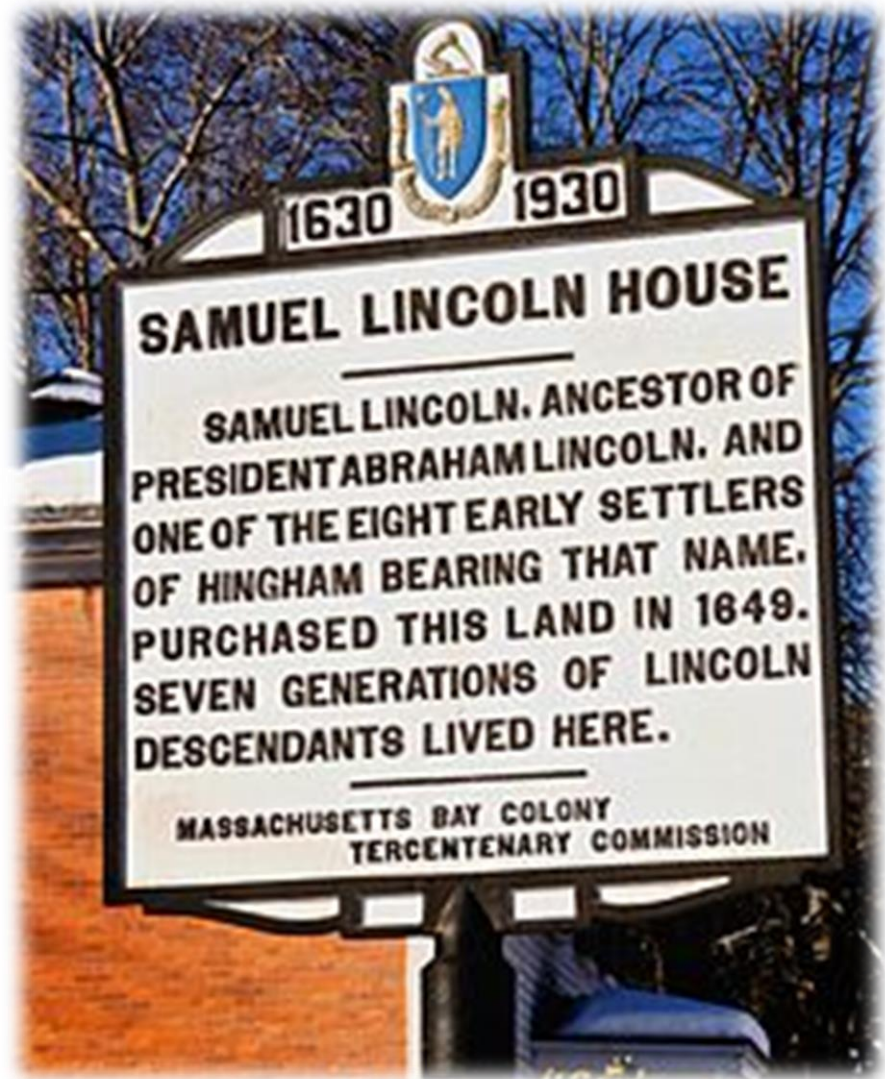
He would graduate from Harvard and become a clergyman himself. Here he would work tirelessly to argue against slavery and other injustices in his community.

Through the work of Jeremiah and other leaders that followed him, the State of Massachusetts would eventually end slavery in 1783.



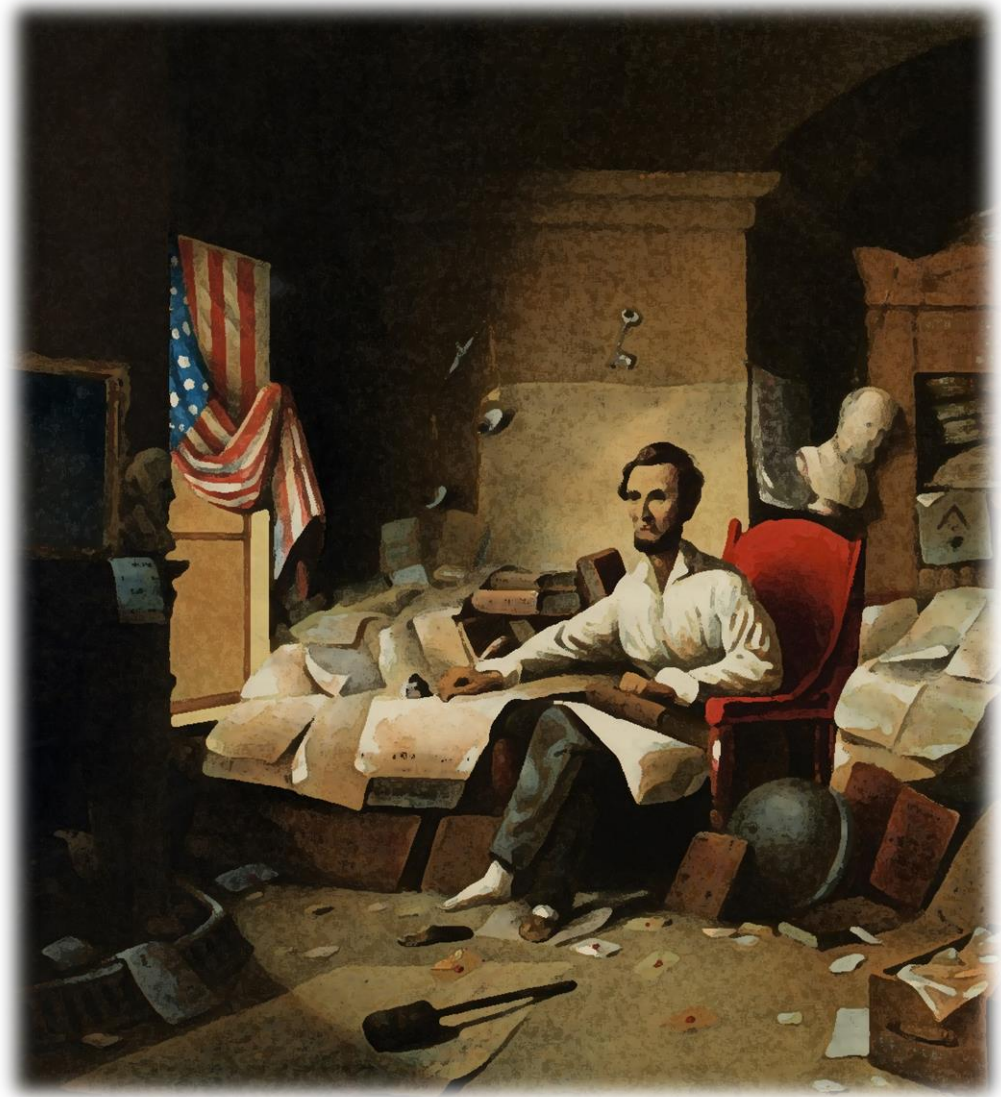
And when would slavery actually end for the entire nation?

Well, remember the generous weaver, Samuel Lincoln? Seven generations of the Lincolns ended up living in the town of Hingham before migrating out.



One of Samuel Lincoln's descendants was Abraham Lincoln who became president and signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

And so ended slavery all over the United States.



The end

Let's talk!