

THE PURITANS:

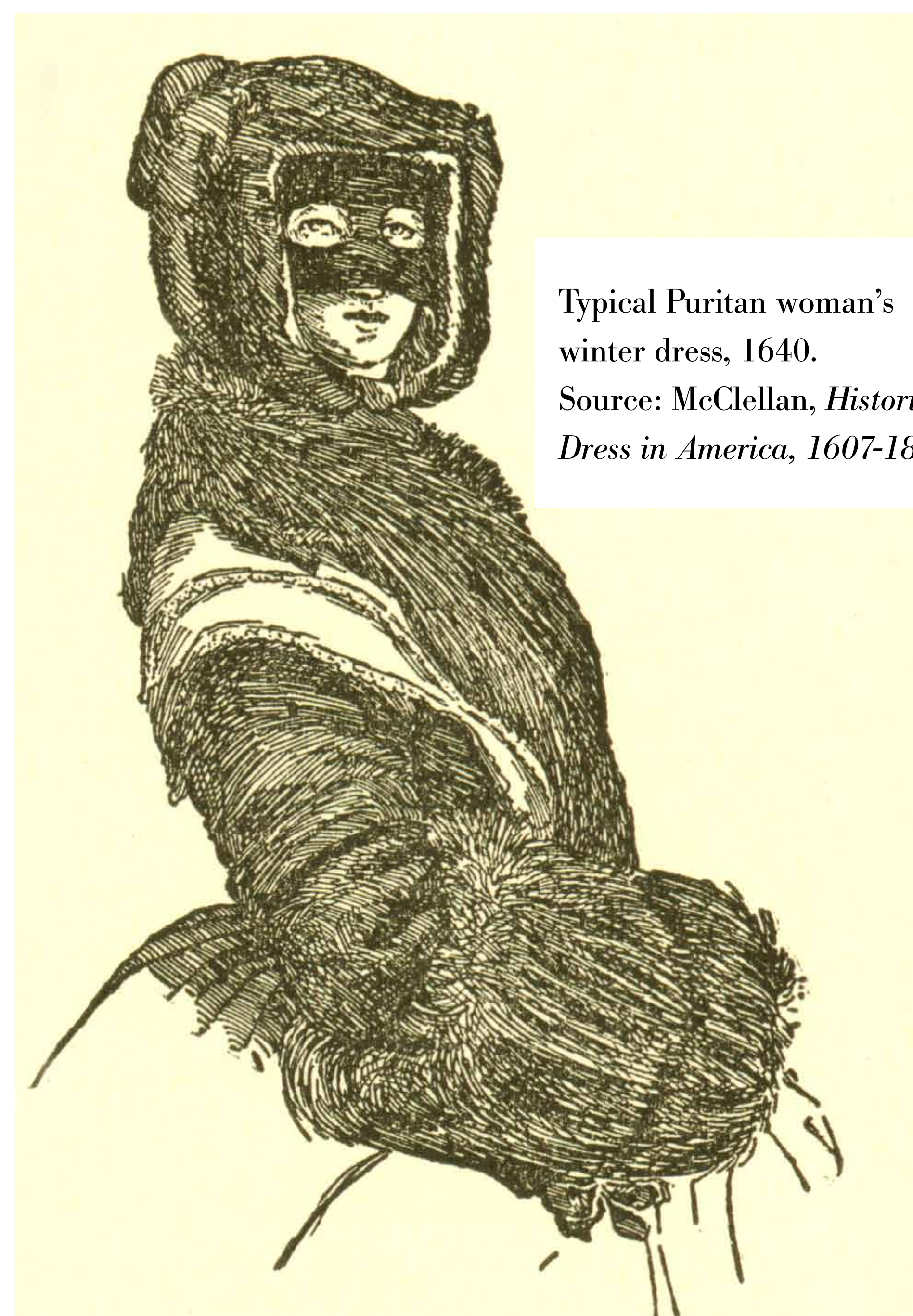
SUMPTUARY

LAWS FOR

THOSE OF

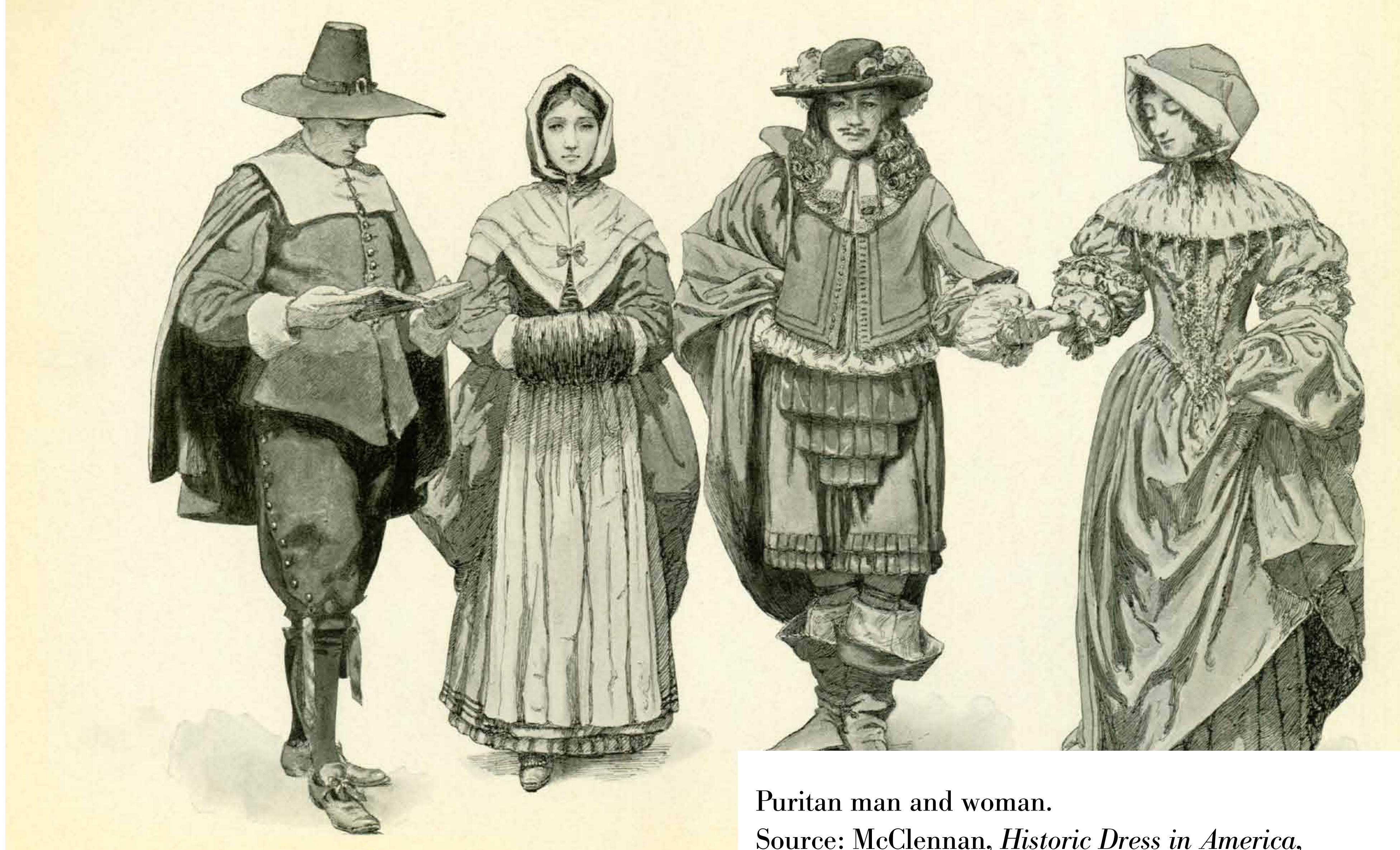
MEAN CONDITION

The Puritans began immigrating to the Americas from England in 1620. Their style of dress was a more moderate version of the style typical of the reign of Charles I. Although their sartorial moderation was related to the Puritan ideal of simplicity, the sumptuary laws they enacted in the American colonies were geared toward keeping lower class Puritans in place. Massachusetts Bay Colony officials... declared their “utter detestation & dislike that men or women of meane condition, educations, & callinges should take upon them the garbe of gentlemen, by the wearinge of gold or silver lace, or buttons, or poynts at their knees, to walke in greate bootes; or women of the same ranke to weare silke or tiffany hoodes or scarfes, which though allowable to persons of greater estates, or more liberall education, yet we cannot but judge it intollerable in p[e]rsons of such like condition.*



Typical Puritan woman's winter dress, 1640.
Source: McClellan, *Historic Dress in America, 1607-1800*.

WHAT NOT TO WEAR: RITES, RANKS AND REGULATIONS



Puritan man and woman.
Source: McClellan, *Historic Dress in America, 1607-1800*, 1904.

Throughout the 17th century, the General Court of Massachusetts passed a series of sumptuary laws as a way to reinforce social distinctions:

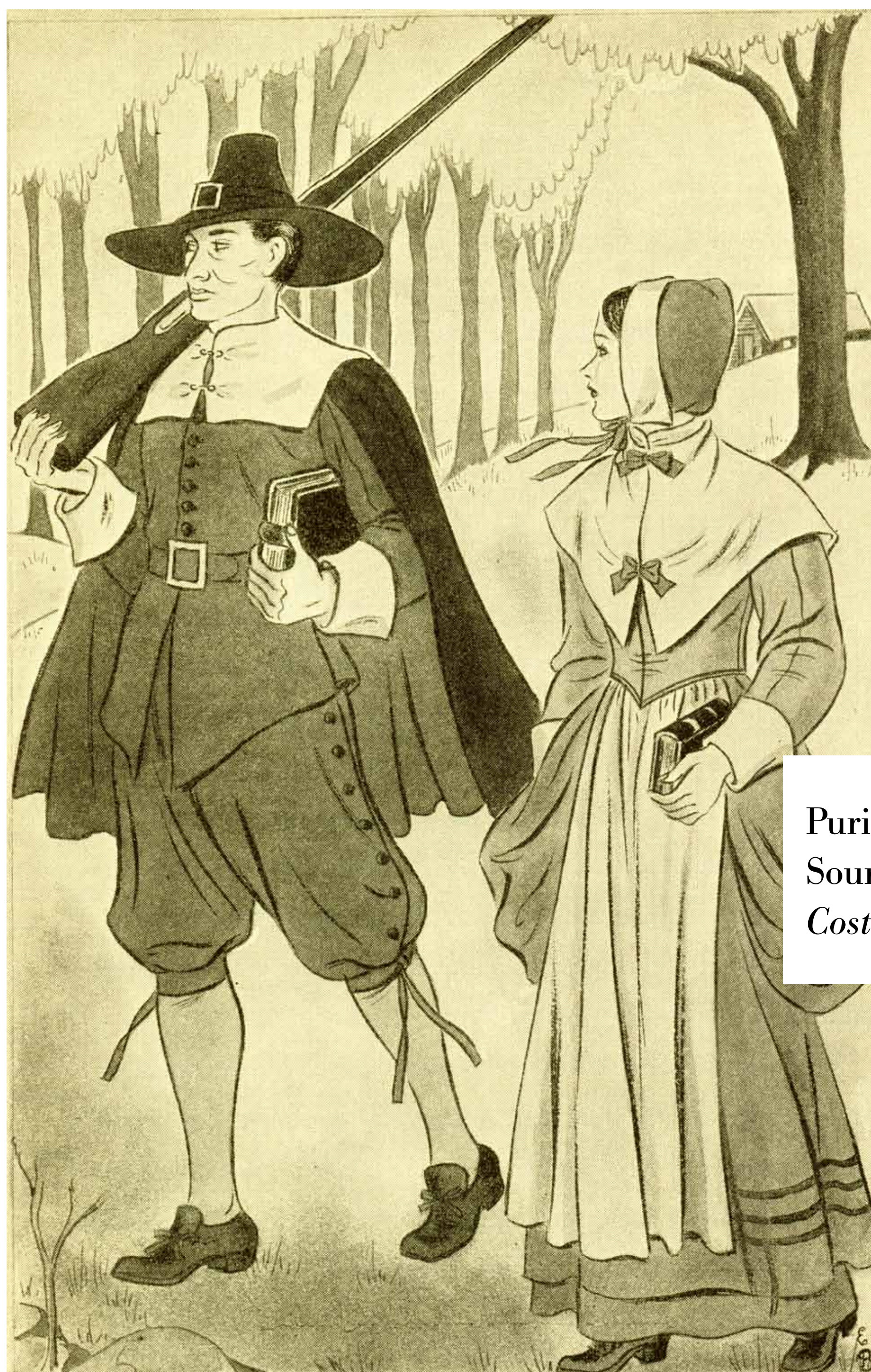
✦ In 1634, they prohibited the use of lace, silk, gold, and silver in clothing. Lower class Puritans were also prohibited from wearing more than one slash on their sleeves and the back of their doublet. A slash referred to the technique of cutting outer fabric to decoratively expose inner fabric.

✦ In 1636, a manifesto urged against the “impious” growing of long hair for men. Puritans were known as “Roundheads” for their bobbed style but people of rank, called “gentle folks,” wore periwigs, wigs popular during the 17th through the early 19th century.

✦ In 1638, the Court ordered that no clothes should be made with short sleeves. Moreover, those who already had short-sleeved clothes had to wear something over them in order to cover their arms up to their wrists.

✦ In 1645, masks, which were used to shade the face from sun or wind, were forbidden when used for “improper purposes,” although these were not defined.

✦ In 1652, laws were passed curtailing the amount of money spent on clothing.



Puritan man and woman.
Source: Evans, *How to Make Historic American Costumes*, 1942.

Those who could establish that their estate was worth £ 200 or more were discharged as happened in the case of two wives who wore silk hoods and scarves but were spared punishment because of their husbands’ wealth.

Slashing

The slashing technique has an interesting history. It began when Swiss army troops in present day France used colorful tent and banner cloth to fill in the holes in their clothing. Upper class Europeans adopted this technique as a decorative practice.

The Scarlet Letter

In colonial America, certain crimes were punishable by having offenders wear the initial letter of their wrongdoing: D for drunkard, T for thief, and as was made famous by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, A for adulterer. However, even here, class was an issue. Servants or repeat offenders did not have the letter sewn onto their garments but rather, branded on their forehead.

The *Scarlet Letter*'s Hester Prynne as played by Lillian Gish in 1926 and Demi Moore in 1995.
Source: Soares, Andre. (2009.) “Best Films 1926.” <http://www.altfg.com/Stars/s/scarlet-letter-lillian-gish.jpg> (accessed May 19, 2010).



(October 30, 2009.) “Daily Confession.” <http://redchairconfessions.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/daily-confession-103009-A.jpg> (accessed July 8, 2010).]