

Of the church we're members of (S.Congregational UCC, Centerville, MA), I've just read the earliest records (6Aug1816-), and make these several remarks about 170 years since our origin. In this, I am not an archivist (who preserves everything, just in case each item will be of historical use) but rather an historian, having a then-eye and a now-eye working together.

1. As then in general society you could get yourself killed (by the government) for more reasons than now, so for more reasons than now you could get yourself thrown out of church (by "excommunication") or denied fellowship (as was one "suspended from communion," who'd've been excommunicated had there not been question about "sound mind"). Deacons functioned to serve notice as well as to serve communion! But they "labored" with the wayward.
2. Following the Matthean injunction, the congregation was to clean up its own messes: you were in trouble if you took your complaint directly to secular court, bypassing the church court (ie, the congregation itself, directly or through appointed representatives delegated by the congregation with this authority).
3. It was tough being a pastor in those days (when not?), but he had a protection s/he doesn't have now: you could get yourself excommunicated for slandering the minister! You were in big trouble if you only dug up dirt from his past: when he became the minister of this church, his past was dead to this congregation.
4. More than ½ of the minutes of church meetings are taken up with complaints against members, and the church roll was constantly being slimmed down by church disciplining (1) directly, by excommunication, and (2) indirectly, by folks bugging off from under the pressures against their proved or only alleged turpitudes. This fact of lean church membership, in contrast to the lax-fat rolls of most congregations today, should be used to adjust perception when you hear that Early America was largely unchurched.
5. "Her conversation (=conduct) not corresponding with her confession," Sister Caroline was in big trouble for going to balls and missing church. Even though she evidenced "from full proof that she does not wish to walk with the church any longer," she was excommunicated....But after "taking the covenant" (=joining) and then being excommunicated, you could on repentance return to "full communion," as of course was true if you had only been "suspended from communion" for "breach of covenant." "Covenant" is a big word in the minutes; you could get yourself half out if you hadn't proved that, eg, the person you said lied actually did--or on suspicion of adultery (guilty unless you prove yourself innocent!). If you were put out & joined another church (a local Baptist church, in this case), a church letter of your excommunication would be sent to that church; and you couldn't get a letter of transfer to a church the church did not consider a "Church of Christ." And you could get 6 mos. suspension, or even be "cut off," for universalism.
5. Sophie Case was excommunicated for "fornication" in 1820, just 30 years before Hester Prynne (ie, Hawthorne's THE SCARLET LETTER: but that letter-"A" wearer was a fictional character of the 1640s). ...You had to make public confession of such things as overdisciplining your child and claiming "sinless perfection."

\*Even though she confessed to all the charges except intending to abort.