Three days before Christmas in 1820, the Presbyterian minister James Sabine gave a sermon celebrating the second centennial of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. Speaking from his pulpit in the Essex Street Church in Boston, Sabine combined a number of images and ideas that defined early Republicans’ national identity in New England. The immigrant from old England praised such New England virtues as modesty, simplicity, and hard work and admired New Englanders’ Republican sacrifice of their individual interests for the common good. Implying New England’s superiority to other “nations,” Sabine emphasized that these traditions furnished the region with a unique history and character. He linked his regionalist statements with a strong nationalist appeal. At the time of the sectional crisis of the Missouri Compromise, he did not want his sermon to spur the emotions and attitudes that divided the nation. “I do not forget that New England is a part, and but a part, of a great nation,” he assured his parishioners. But after the clergyman repeated how he himself and New Englanders in general felt loyal to the United States, he nevertheless heartily highlighted the region’s peculiar virtues again. Repeatedly praising New England, Sabine alluded to the region’s leading role within the nation. Furthermore, he joined other regionalists who imagined New England culture spreading throughout the entire country. Enthusiastically, Sabine claimed that New England had already molded the nation’s character.

New England nationalists such as Sabine vehemently ignored the history of Southern states and the role Southern history played in shaping the new nation. Nevertheless, Virginia not Massachusetts is the oldest colony. New Englanders reinvented American history by completely disregarding Southern history. With this attitude it became easy for them to overrate the importance of their own regional history.
The careful denial of any disloyalty to the union that Sabine included in his sermon distinguished clergymen from other elites who helped create New England's collective identity. In contrast to lawyers, professors, and writers who helped engineer this identity, clergymen often tried to legitimize the regionalist character of their nationalism by emphasizing their national loyalty and denying any sectional feelings of superiority, but then reaffirming New England's uniqueness as a mere fact. In many cases they still implied New England's role as a model for the entire nation. Sabine, for example, added to his proclamation of federal loyalty that "still, New England has her own character, and this character is more distinctly spiritual, than that of any other nation under heaven."\(^1\)

James Sabine participated in a larger cultural movement portraying the New England identity as a religious identity. He predicted that in the future the United States would depend even more on their people's piety than on a strong military force or a prospering economy. The vehement articulation of the idea that religion was an essential element of the New England identity was also unique to the regionalist rhetoric of New England ministers. When James Sabine preached to his Boston parish he gave a sermon that many of his colleagues, including those who belonged to other denominations, could have given as well. Even if they believed in different doctrines, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists all propounded the same general ideas of New England nationalism to their growing audiences. The collective identity that emerged during the early years of the republic provided a source of unity in the Second Great Awakening. Church membership doubled during the religious revivals and exposed many New Englanders to such nationalist religious ideology. The regional nationalism promoted in sermons reached New Englanders not only in coastal centers such as Boston and Portland, Maine, but also in the smaller towns and frontier settlements as, for example, Weatherfield, Connecticut and Middlebury, Vermont.

With his promotion of Christian New England nationalism, Sabine fit the pattern of a typical New England minister; but he also shared the views English tourists who came to travel the region and in their comments contributed to its glorification. Sabine was born in Farnham, England. It was only in 1818, two years before he gave his sermon on the Pilgrims, that he crossed the Atlantic and moved to Boston with his family. Sabine is a good example of how easy the transition from a European to an American identity was for some immigrants. The English-born minister probably compared himself and his Atlantic crossing with the experience of the Pilgrims—believing that he shared