

Level: First year students (1)

Module: Language & Culture

Colonial Period

NEW PEOPLES

Most settlers who came to America in the 17th century were English, but there were also Dutch, Swedes, and Germans in the middle region, a few French Huguenots in South Carolina and elsewhere, slaves from Africa, primarily in the South, and a scattering of Spaniards, Italians, and Portuguese throughout the colonies. After 1680 England ceased to be the chief source of immigration, supplanted by Scots and “Scots-Irish” (Protestants from Northern Ireland). In addition, tens of thousands of refugees fled northwestern Europe to escape war, oppression, and absentee-landlordism. By 1690 the American population had risen to a quarter of a million. From then on, it doubled every 25 years until, in 1775, it numbered more than 2.5 million. Although families occasionally moved from one colony to another, distinctions between individual colonies were marked. They were even more so among the three regional groupings of colonies.

NEW ENGLAND

The northeastern New England colonies had generally thin, stony soil, relatively little level land, and long winters, making it difficult to make a living from farming. Turning to other pursuits, the New Englanders harnessed waterpower and established grain mills and sawmills. Good stands of timber encouraged shipbuilding. Excellent harbors promoted trade, and the sea became a source of great wealth. In Massachusetts, the cod industry alone quickly furnished a basis for prosperity.

With the bulk of the early settlers living in villages and towns around the harbors, many New Englanders carried on some kind of trade or business. Common pastureland and woodlots served the needs of townspeople, who worked small farms. American author and agriculturist J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, 1782 nearby. Compactness made possible the village school, the village church, and the village or town hall, where citizens met to discuss matters of common interest.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony continued to expand its commerce. From the middle of the 17th century onward

it grew prosperous, so that Boston became one of America’s greatest ports.

Oak timber for ships’ hulls, tall pines for spars and masts, and pitch for the seams of ships came from the Northeastern forests. Building their own vessels and sailing them to ports all over the world, the shipmasters of Massachusetts Bay laid the foundation for a trade that was to grow steadily in importance. By the end of the colonial period, one-third of all vessels under the British flag were built in New England. Fish, ship’s stores, and woodenware swelled the exports. New England merchants and shippers soon discovered that rum and slaves were profitable commodities. One of their most enterprising - if unsavory - trading practices of the time was the “triangular trade.” Traders would purchase slaves off the coast of Africa for New England rum, then sell the slaves in the West Indies where they would buy molasses to bring home for sale to the local rum producers.

THE MIDDLE COLONIES

Society in the middle colonies was far more varied, cosmopolitan, and tolerant than in New England. Under William Penn, Pennsylvania functioned smoothly and grew rapidly. By 1685, its population was almost 9,000. The heart of the colony was Philadelphia, a city of broad, treeshaded streets, substantial brick and stone houses, and busy docks. By the end of the colonial period, nearly a century later, 30,000 people lived there, representing many languages, creeds, and trades. Their talent for successful business enterprise made the city one of the thriving centers of the British Empire.

Though the Quakers dominated in Philadelphia, elsewhere in Pennsylvania others were well represented. Germans became the colony’s most skillful farmers. Important, too, were cottage industries such as weaving, shoemaking, cabinetmaking, and other crafts. Pennsylvania was also the principal gateway into the New World for the Scots-Irish, who moved into the colony in the early 18th century. “Bold and indigent strangers,” as one Pennsylvania official called them, they hated the English and were suspicious of all government. The Scots-

Irish tended to settle in the backcountry, where they cleared land and lived by hunting and subsistence farming.

New York best illustrated the polyglot nature of America. By 1646 the population along the Hudson River included Dutch, French, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, English, Scots, Irish, Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Portuguese, and Italians. The Dutch continued to exercise an important social and economic influence on the New York region long after the fall of New Netherland and their integration into the British colonial system. Their sharp-stepped gable roofs became a permanent part of the city's architecture, and their merchants gave Manhattan much of its original bustling, commercial atmosphere.

THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

In contrast to New England and the middle colonies, the Southern colonies were predominantly rural settlements.

By the late 17th century, Virginia's and Maryland's economic and social structure rested on the great planters and the yeoman farmers. The planters of the Tidewater region, supported by slave labor, held most of the political power and the best land. They built great houses, adopted an aristocratic way of life, and kept in touch as best they could with the world of culture overseas.

The yeoman farmers, who worked smaller tracts, sat in popular assemblies and found their way into political office. Their outspoken independence was a constant warning to the oligarchy of planters not to encroach too far upon the rights of free men.

The settlers of the Carolinas quickly learned to combine agriculture and commerce, and the marketplace became a major source of prosperity. Dense forests brought revenue: Lumber, tar, and resin from the longleaf pine provided some of the best shipbuilding materials in the world. Not bound to a single crop as was Virginia, North and South Carolina also produced and exported rice and indigo, a blue dye obtained from native plants that was used in coloring fabric. By 1750 more than 100,000 people lived in the two colonies of North and South Carolina. Charleston, South Carolina, was the region's leading port and trading center. In the southernmost colonies, as everywhere else, population growth in the backcountry had special significance. German immigrants and Scots-Irish, unwilling to live in the original Tidewater settlements where English influence was strong, pushed inland. Those who could not secure fertile land along the coast, or who had exhausted the lands they held, found the hills farther west a bountiful refuge. Although their hardships were enormous, restless settlers kept coming;

by the 1730s they were pouring into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Soon the interior was dotted with farms. Living on the edge of Native American country, frontier families built cabins, cleared the wilderness, and cultivated maize and wheat. The men wore leather made from the skin of deer or sheep, known as buckskin; the women wore garments of cloth they spun at home. Their food consisted of venison, wild turkey, and fish. They had their own amusements: great barbecues, dances, housewarmings for newly married couples, shooting matches, and contests for making quilted blankets. Quilt-making remains an American tradition today.

SOCIETY, SCHOOLS, AND CULTURE

A significant factor deterring the emergence of a powerful aristocratic or gentry class in the colonies was the ability of anyone in an established colony to find a new home on the frontier. Time after time, dominant Tidewater figures were obliged to liberalize political policies, land-grant requirements, and religious practices by the threat of a mass exodus to the frontier.

Of equal significance for the future were the foundations of American education and culture established during the colonial period. Harvard College was founded in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Near the end of the century, the College of William and Mary was established in Virginia. A few years later, the Collegiate School of Connecticut, later to become Yale University, was chartered.

Even more noteworthy was the growth of a school system maintained by governmental authority. The Puritan emphasis on reading directly from the Scriptures underscored the importance of literacy. In 1647 the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted the "ye olde deluder Satan" Act, requiring every town having more than 50 families to establish a grammar school (a Latin school to prepare students for college). Shortly thereafter, all the other New England colonies, except for Rhode Island, followed its example.

The Pilgrims and Puritans had brought their own little libraries and continued to import books from London. And as early as the 1680s, Boston booksellers were doing a thriving business in works of classical literature, history, politics, philosophy, science, theology, and belles-lettres. In 1638 the first printing press in the English colonies and the second in North America was installed at Harvard College.

The first school in Pennsylvania was begun in 1683. It taught reading, writing, and keeping of accounts. Thereafter, in some fashion, every Quaker community

provided for the elementary teaching of its children. More advanced training - in classical languages, history, and literature - was offered at the Friends Public School, which still operates in Philadelphia as the William Penn Charter School. The school was free to the poor, but parents were required to pay tuition if they were able.

In Philadelphia, numerous private schools with no religious affiliation taught languages, mathematics, and natural science; there were also night schools for adults. Women were not entirely overlooked, but their educational opportunities were limited to training in activities that could be conducted in the home. Private teachers instructed the daughters of prosperous Philadelphians in French, music, dancing, painting, singing, grammar, and sometimes bookkeeping.

In the 18th century, the intellectual and cultural development of Pennsylvania reflected, in large measure, the vigorous personalities of two men: James Logan and Benjamin Franklin. Logan was secretary of the colony, and it was in his fine library that young Franklin found the latest scientific works. In 1745 Logan erected a building for his collection and bequeathed both building and books to the city.

Franklin contributed even more to the intellectual activity of Philadelphia. He formed a debating club that became the embryo of the American Philosophical Society. His endeavors also led to the founding of a public academy that later developed into the University of Pennsylvania. He was a prime mover in the establishment of a subscription library, which he called "the mother of all North American subscription libraries."

In the Southern colonies, wealthy planters and merchants imported private tutors from Ireland or Scotland to teach their children. Some sent their children to school in England. Having these other opportunities, the upper classes in the Tidewater were not interested in supporting public education. In addition, the diffusion of farms and plantations made the formation of community schools difficult. There were only a few free schools in Virginia.

The desire for learning did not stop at the borders of established communities, however. On the frontier, the Scots-Irish, though living in primitive cabins, were firm devotees of scholarship, and they made great efforts to attract learned ministers to their settlements.

Literary production in the colonies was largely confined to New England. Here attention concentrated on religious subjects. Sermons were the most common products of the press. A famous Puritan minister, the Reverend Cotton Mather, wrote some 400 works. His masterpiece, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, presented the

pageant of New England's history. The most popular single work of the day was the Reverend Michael Wigglesworth's long poem, "The Day of Doom," which described the Last Judgment in terrifying terms.

In 1704 Cambridge, Massachusetts, launched the colonies' first successful newspaper. By 1745 there were 22 newspapers being published in British North America.

In New York, an important step in establishing the principle of freedom of the press took place with the case of John Peter Zenger, whose *New York Weekly Journal*, begun in 1733, represented the opposition to the government. After two years of publication, the colonial governor could no longer tolerate Zenger's satirical barbs, and had him thrown into prison on a charge of seditious libel. Zenger continued to edit his paper from jail during his ninemonth trial, which excited intense interest throughout the colonies. Andrew Hamilton, the prominent lawyer who defended Zenger, argued that the charges printed by Zenger were true and hence not libelous. The jury returned a verdict of not guilty, and Zenger went free.

The increasing prosperity of the towns prompted fears that the devil was luring society into pursuit of worldly gain and may have contributed to the religious reaction of the 1730s, known as the Great Awakening. Its two immediate sources were George Whitefield, a Wesleyan revivalist who arrived from England in 1739, and Jonathan Edwards, who served the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Whitefield began a religious revival in Philadelphia and then moved on to New England. He enthralled audiences of up to 20,000 people at a time with histrionic displays, gestures, and emotional oratory. Religious turmoil swept throughout New England and the middle colonies as ministers left established churches to preach the revival.

Edwards was the most prominent of those influenced by Whitefield and the Great Awakening. His most memorable contribution was his 1741 sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Rejecting theatrics, he delivered his message in a quiet, thoughtful manner, arguing that the established churches sought to deprive Christianity of its function of redemption from sin. His magnum opus, *Of Freedom of Will* (1754), attempted to reconcile Calvinism with the Enlightenment.

The Great Awakening gave rise to evangelical denominations (those Christian churches that believe in personal conversion and the inerrancy of the Bible) and the spirit of revivalism, which continue to play significant roles in American religious and cultural life. It weakened the status of the established clergy and provoked

believers to rely on their own conscience. Perhaps most important, it led to the proliferation of sects and denominations, which in turn encouraged general acceptance of the principle of religious toleration.

EMERGENCE OF COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

In the early phases of colonial development, a striking feature was the lack of controlling influence by the English government. All colonies except Georgia emerged as companies of shareholders, or as feudal proprietorships stemming from charters granted by the Crown. The fact that the king had transferred his immediate sovereignty over the New World settlements to stock companies and proprietors did not, of course, mean that the colonists in America were necessarily free of outside control. Under the terms of the Virginia Company charter, for example, full governmental authority was vested in the company itself. Nevertheless, the crown expected that the company would be resident in England. Inhabitants of Virginia, then, would have no more voice in their government than if the king himself had retained absolute rule.

Still, the colonies considered themselves chiefly as commonwealths or states, much like England itself, having only a loose association with the authorities in London. In one way or another, exclusive rule from the outside withered away. The colonists - inheritors of the long English tradition of the struggle for political liberty - incorporated concepts of freedom into Virginia's first charter. It provided that English colonists were to exercise all liberties, franchises, and immunities "as if they had been abiding and born within this our Realm of England." They were, then, to enjoy the benefits of the Magna Carta - the charter of English political and civil liberties granted by King John in 1215 - and the common law - the English system of law based on legal precedents or tradition, not statutory law. In 1618 the Virginia Company issued instructions to its appointed governor providing that free inhabitants of the plantations should elect representatives to join with the governor and an appointive council in passing ordinances for the welfare of the colony.

These measures proved to be some of the most far-reaching in the entire colonial period. From then on, it was generally accepted that the colonists had a right to participate in their own government. In most instances, the king, in making future grants, provided in the charter that the freemen of the colony should have a voice in legislation affecting them. Thus, charters awarded to the Calverts in Maryland, William Penn in Pennsylvania, the proprietors in North and South Carolina, and the

proprietors in New Jersey specified that legislation should be enacted with "the consent of the freemen."

In New England, for many years, there was even more complete self-government than in the other colonies. Aboard the *Mayflower*, the Pilgrims adopted an instrument for government called the "Mayflower Compact," to "combine ourselves together into a civil body politic for our better ordering and preservation ... and by virtue hereof [to] enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices ... as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the colony "

Although there was no legal basis for the Pilgrims to establish a system of self-government, the action was not contested, and, under the compact, the Plymouth settlers were able for many years to conduct their own affairs without outside interference.

A similar situation developed in the Massachusetts Bay Company, which had been given the right to govern itself. Thus, full authority rested in the hands of persons residing in the colony. At first, the dozen or so original members of the company who had come to America attempted to rule autocratically. But the other colonists soon demanded a voice in public affairs and indicated that refusal would lead to a mass migration.

The company members yielded, and control of the government passed to elected representatives. Subsequently, other New England colonies - such as Connecticut and Rhode Island - also succeeded in becoming self-governing simply by asserting that they were beyond any governmental authority, and then setting up their own political system modeled after that of the Pilgrims at Plymouth.

In only two cases was the selfgovernment provision omitted. These were New York, which was granted to Charles II's brother, the Duke of York (later to become King James II), and Georgia, which was granted to a group of "trustees." In both instances the provisions for governance were short-lived, for the colonists demanded legislative representation so insistently that the authorities soon yielded.

In the mid-17th century, the English were too distracted by their Civil War (1642-49) and Oliver Cromwell's Puritan Commonwealth to pursue an effective colonial policy. After the restoration of Charles II and the Stuart dynasty in 1660, England had more opportunity to attend to colonial administration. Even then, however, it was inefficient and lacked a coherent plan. The colonies were left largely to their own devices.

The remoteness afforded by a vast ocean also made control of the colonies difficult. Added to this was the

character of life itself in early America. From countries limited in space and dotted with populous towns, the settlers had come to a land of seemingly unending reach. On such a continent, natural conditions promoted a tough individualism, as people became used to making their own decisions. Government penetrated the backcountry only slowly, and conditions of anarchy often prevailed on the frontier.

Yet the assumption of self-government in the colonies did not go entirely unchallenged. In the 1670s, the Lords of Trade and Plantations, a royal committee established to enforce the mercantile system in the colonies, moved to annul the Massachusetts Bay charter because the colony was resisting the government's economic policy. James II in 1685 approved a proposal to create a Dominion of New England and place colonies south through New Jersey under its jurisdiction, thereby tightening the Crown's control over the whole region. A royal governor, Sir Edmund Andros, levied taxes by executive order, implemented a number of other harsh measures, and jailed those who resisted.

When news of the Glorious Revolution (1688-89), which deposed James II in England, reached Boston, the population rebelled and imprisoned Andros. Under a new charter, Massachusetts and Plymouth were united for the first time in 1691 as the royal colony of Massachusetts Bay. The other New England colonies quickly reinstalled their previous governments.

The English Bill of Rights and the Toleration Act of 1689 affirmed freedom of worship for Christians in the colonies as well as in England and enforced limits on the Crown. Equally important, John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* (1690), the Glorious Revolution's major theoretical justification, set forth a theory of government based not on divine right but on contract. It contended that the people, endowed with natural rights of life, liberty, and property, had the right to rebel when governments violated their rights.

By the early 18th century, almost all the colonies had been brought under the direct jurisdiction of the British Crown, but under the rules established by the Glorious Revolution. Colonial governors sought to exercise powers that the king had lost in England, but the colonial assemblies, aware of events there, attempted to assert their "rights" and "liberties." Their leverage rested on two significant powers similar to those held by the English Parliament: the right to vote on taxes and expenditures, and the right to initiate legislation rather than merely react to proposals of the governor.

The legislatures used these rights to check the power of royal governors and to pass other measures to expand

their power and influence. The recurring clashes between governor and assembly made colonial politics tumultuous and worked increasingly to awaken the colonists to the divergence between American and English interests. In many cases, the royal authorities did not understand the importance of what the colonial assemblies were doing and simply neglected them. Nonetheless, the precedents and principles established in the conflicts between assemblies and governors eventually became part of the unwritten "constitution" of the colonies. In this way, the colonial legislatures asserted the right of self-government.

THE FRENCH AND INDIAN WAR

France and Britain engaged in a succession of wars in Europe and the Caribbean throughout the 18th century. Though Britain secured certain advantages - primarily in the sugar-rich islands of the Caribbean - the struggles were generally indecisive, and France remained in a powerful position in North America. By 1754, France still had a strong relationship with a number of Native American tribes in Canada and along the Great Lakes. It controlled the Mississippi River and, by establishing a line of forts and trading posts, had marked out a great crescent-shaped empire stretching from Quebec to New Orleans. The British remained confined to the narrow belt east of the Appalachian Mountains. Thus the French threatened not only the British Empire but also the American colonists themselves, for in holding the Mississippi Valley, France could limit their westward expansion.

An armed clash took place in 1754 at Fort Duquesne, the site where Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is now located, between a band of French regulars and Virginia militiamen under the command of 22-year-old George Washington, a

Virginia planter and surveyor. The British government attempted to deal with the conflict by calling a meeting of representatives from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and the New England colonies. From June 19 to July 10, 1754, the Albany Congress, as it came to be known, met with the Iroquois in Albany, New York, in order to improve relations with them and secure their loyalty to the British.

But the delegates also declared a union of the American colonies "absolutely necessary for their preservation" and adopted a proposal drafted by Benjamin Franklin. The Albany Plan of Union provided for a president appointed by the king and a grand council of delegates chosen by the assemblies, with each colony to be represented in proportion to its financial contributions to the general treasury. This body would have charge of defense, Native American relations, and trade and

settlement of the west. Most importantly, it would have independent authority to levy taxes. But none of the colonies accepted the plan, since they were not prepared to surrender either the power of taxation or control over the development of the western lands to a central authority.

England's superior strategic position and her competent leadership ultimately brought victory in the conflict with France, known as the French and Indian War in America and the Seven Years' War in Europe. Only a modest portion of it was fought in the Western Hemisphere.

In the Peace of Paris (1763), France relinquished all of Canada, the Great Lakes, and the territory east of the Mississippi to the British. The dream of a French empire in North America was over.

Having triumphed over France, Britain was now compelled to face a problem that it had hitherto neglected, the governance of its empire. London thought it essential to organize its now vast possessions to facilitate defense, reconcile the divergent interests of different areas and peoples, and distribute more evenly the cost of imperial administration.

In North America alone, British territories had more than doubled. A population that had been predominantly Protestant and English now included French-speaking Catholics from Quebec, and large numbers of partly Christianized Native Americans. Defense and administration of the new territories, as well as of the old, would require huge sums of money and increased personnel. The old colonial system was obviously inadequate to these tasks. Measures to establish a new one, however, would rouse the latent suspicions of colonials who increasingly would see Britain as no longer a protector of their rights, but rather a danger to them.

AN EXCEPTIONAL NATION?

The United States of America did not emerge as a nation until about 175 years after its establishment as a group of mostly British colonies. Yet from the beginning it was a different society in the eyes of many Europeans who viewed it from afar, whether with hope or apprehension. Most of its settlers - whether the younger sons of aristocrats, religious dissenters, or impoverished indentured servants - came there lured by a promise of opportunity or freedom not available in the Old World. The first Americans were reborn free, establishing themselves in a wilderness unencumbered by any social order other than that of the primitive aboriginal peoples they displaced. Having left the baggage of a feudal order behind them, they faced few obstacles to the development

of a society built on the principles of political and social liberalism that emerged with difficulty in 17th- and 18th-century Europe. Based on the thinking of the philosopher John Locke, this sort of liberalism emphasized the rights of the individual and constraints on government power.

Most immigrants to America came from the British Isles, the most liberal of the European polities along with The Netherlands. In religion, the majority adhered to various forms of Calvinism with its emphasis on both divine and secular contractual relationships. These greatly facilitated the emergence of a social order built on individual rights and social mobility. The development of a more complex and highly structured commercial society in coastal cities by the mid-18th century did not stunt this trend; it was in these cities that the American Revolution was made. The constant reconstruction of society along an ever-receding Western frontier equally contributed to a liberal-democratic spirit.

In Europe, ideals of individual rights advanced slowly and unevenly; the concept of democracy was even more alien. The attempt to establish both in continental Europe's oldest nation led to the French Revolution. The effort to destroy a neofeudal society while establishing the rights of man and democratic fraternity generated terror, dictatorship, and Napoleonic despotism. In the end, it led to reaction and gave legitimacy to a decadent old order. In America, the European past was overwhelmed by ideals that sprang naturally from the process of building a new society on virgin land. The principles of liberalism and democracy were strong from the beginning. A society that had thrown off the burdens of European history would naturally give birth to a nation that saw itself as exceptional.

THE WITCHES OF SALEM

In 1692 a group of adolescent girls in Salem Village, Massachusetts, became subject to strange fits after hearing tales told by a West Indian slave. They accused several women of being witches. The townspeople were appalled but not surprised: Belief in witchcraft was widespread throughout 17th-century America and Europe. Town officials convened a court to hear the charges of witchcraft. Within a month, six women were convicted and hanged.

The hysteria grew, in large measure because the court permitted witnesses to testify that they had seen the accused as spirits or in visions. Such "spectral evidence" could neither be verified nor made subject to objective examination. By the fall of 1692, 20 victims, including several men, had been executed, and more than 100 others were in jail (where another five victims died) - among them some of the town's most prominent citizens.

When the charges threatened to spread beyond Salem, ministers throughout the colony called for an end to the trials. The governor of the colony agreed. Those still in jail were later acquitted or given reprieves.

Although an isolated incident, the Salem episode has long fascinated Americans. Most historians agree that Salem Village in 1692 experienced a kind of public hysteria, fueled by a genuine belief in the existence of witchcraft. While some of the girls may have been acting, many responsible adults became caught up in the frenzy as well.

Even more revealing is a closer analysis of the identities of the accused and the accusers. Salem Village, as much of colonial New England, was undergoing an economic and political transition from a largely agrarian, Puritan- dominated community to a more commercial, secular society. Many of the accusers were representatives of a traditional way of life tied to farming and the church, whereas a number of the accused witches were members of a rising commercial class of small shopkeepers and tradesmen. Salem's obscure struggle for social and political power between older traditional groups and a newer commercial class was one repeated in communities throughout American history. It took a bizarre and deadly detour when its citizens were swept up by the conviction that the devil was loose in their homes.

The Salem witch trials also serve as a dramatic parable of the deadly consequences of making sensational, but false, charges. Three hundred years later, we still call false accusations against a large number of people a "witch hunt."

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