

European Colonization of the Americas

In 1492, Christopher Columbus, representing the Spanish throne, ushered in a new era of European expansion: overseas conquest. In his attempt to reach India by going west instead of east, he discovered an entire region that was largely unknown to Europe. It proved to be resource rich and populated – in some places densely so.

The Spanish and the Portuguese were the first to engage in conquest, but the other European powers soon followed; from the 15th to the early 18th centuries cartographers filled in maps of what was called “the new world”, and by the middle of the 18th century most of the Americas were claimed by European powers. There was no clear consensus of how imperial powers treated the lands they took; their attitudes towards the territories, resources and people they encountered varied from empire to empire, according to their own government structure, economic needs and the population density in the colonies.

The changes in the balance of power in Europe were very real considerations for those who lived in the colonies as the international standing of the mother country often affected relations with other imperial powers and the way people were treated. The colonies were also affected by the economic agendas of their imperial power; demands abroad often had a knock-on effect in the colonies.

As decades of colonial became centuries, the colonies became increasingly autonomous. The sheer distance of the Americas from Europe meant that constant oversight was not possible. The imperial powers encouraged a certain degree of autonomy, especially regarding defense of the realm, as sending regular military troops to the colonies was very costly, even for the most advanced navies.

Reasons for emigration to the New World varied not only from empire to empire, but from person to person. Not all emigrated willingly; Africans arrived as slaves who had been captured and sold in the lucrative and exploitative transatlantic slave trade. Destitute Europeans often sold themselves into temporary bondage to pay for their passage, in the hopes of making a new start. Still others arrived in the Americas to escape religious persecution, and many accepted political or military appointments overseas because it provided a way to advance their careers at home. Most were men.

What would eventually become the United States of America formerly existed as 13 colonies of England from 1607 to 1783, a period of 76 years. In contrast, the Latin American colonies had been controlled by Spain from 1492 to 1825: a period of over 300 years. Clearly, colonial traditions were deeper within Latin America. Additionally, Spanish colonization was motivated by initial discoveries of gold and silver; instead, the English colonists found fertile land and wildlife that could employ them as farmers and furriers. All encountered native populations and contributed to their alienation and decimation. Both the Spanish and the British introduced African slaves to their territories. The native populations encountered by the British were smaller in population numbers and less developed than those encountered by the Spanish. Furthermore, attitudes toward the indigenous population were different. While the English occupied the land and forced scattered, disparate tribes to move from coastal to inland territories, the Spanish approach was based upon the subjugation and control of the native population upon whom they were dependent for labor. Furthermore, in many areas of Spanish America the indigenous populations had formed highly organized hierarchical societies such as the Inca, Maya and Aztec which necessitated a period of conquest that was bloody but relatively

brief. By the late 18th century, most of these groups in Spanish America had been subdued, but not all. In this period, British North America was still ringed by native tribes who were resentful of British encroachment on their territory.

The administration and government of the British and Iberian colonies were in many ways an expression of those of the motherlands. The political organization of the Iberian empires in America reflected the centralized, absolutist regimes of their home countries. From 1516 to 1700, Spain and the Spanish Empire were ruled by the Habsburg monarchy. In theory, and to some degree in practice, the authority of the Spanish king was supreme in the Americas. Spain had an extensive body of laws dealing with the administration of the new world, which created an extremely large and complex bureaucratic and legal system. Although these legislative pronouncements tended to work in the major administrative centers, in the outlying areas they were often ignored. Spanish colonies were often known for their noncompliance with the laws of the empire. The senior functionaries in the Spanish colonies were Spanish-born and referred to as *peninsulares*; the creoles were virtually excluded from the administration. The only political institution that satisfied local aspirations to some degree was the *cabildo* (town council). In the late 17th century, it became an established practice for the king to sell administrative posts to the highest bidder and the creoles were able to have more input at the local levels of the administration. As the most significant political institution in which the creoles were largely represented, the *cabildos* were destined to play a significant role in the wars of independence. The governmental institutions established by Portugal were, as in the Spanish Empire, highly developed, costly bureaucracies that thwarted local economic initiative and political experimentation. Unlike the Spanish colonies, however, Portuguese rule in Brazil was relatively relaxed. It did not establish the type of colonial administration that Spain held until the 18th century and by then the Portuguese ability to control the Brazilian population was largely mitigated.

As in the Iberian empires, the government and judiciary in the British colonies represented an extension of the English Parliament. The English system was based on common law, and the view that governance was an administrative and judicial system. The English brought with them a tradition of partial representation, and the English colonies had a large degree of self-government. The colonies all had some form of a representative assembly that was voted in by popular support. While only white male landowners could vote, this still constituted some degree of democracy. In some colonies, even the governors were decided by popular vote.

The colonial economy adopted by the European empires was mercantilism. The basic premise of mercantilism is that national wealth is measured by the amount of capital that a country possesses. Prior to industrialization, gold and silver were the most important resources that a country could own. The mercantile theory is that colonies exist for the economic benefit of the mother country and are useless unless they help to achieve profit. The mother country should draw raw materials from its possessions and sell finished goods back to the subject nations, with the balance favoring the European country. This trade should be monopolistic, so that foreigners would not compete with imperial goods; it also meant that when foreigners were allowed to trade in the colonies, protectionist taxes would make imperial goods artificially competitive. Mercantilism guided the imperial powers in their economic relationships with their colonies.

The British passed regulatory laws to benefit their own economy. These laws created a trade system whereby North Americans provided raw goods to Britain, and Britain used the raw

goods to produce manufactured goods that were sold on to European markets and back to the colonies. As suppliers of raw goods only, the colonies were not allowed to compete with Britain in manufacturing. English ships and merchants were always favored, excluding other countries from sharing in the British Empire's wealth. England's government implemented mercantilism with a series of Navigation Acts (1650 to 1673) which established the rules of colonial trade throughout the entire empire, not just with British America. These were protectionist laws that made the price of imported goods from other parts of the empire much more affordable than foreign goods.

Spanish mercantilism was equally restrictive. Unlike England, however, its implementation was tightly enforced and, given the geographic characteristics of colonies, more complex. Spain designated monopoly ports on either side of the Atlantic to oversee the collection of taxes. During most of the colonial period, legitimate transatlantic trade was confined to convoys which were supposed to sail annually between Seville and the American ports. The transport and distribution of the goods from Spain to the various administrative centers could take a long time. Moreover, the quantities of manufactured goods were insufficient and the prices inflated. As in the British colonies, smuggling competed with legitimate commerce.

Although its political and economic systems control was more rigid, Spain did not benefit as much from its mercantilist policies as the British did. The problem for the Spanish was that the raw materials shipped to Spain were only a small percentage of the cargo; bullion (mostly silver and some gold) comprised the majority of Spanish colonial exports. Instead of producing finished products in Spain for sale abroad, the Spanish sent the raw materials on to England or the Netherlands for production, and paid for the finished goods with bullion. The long-term result for Spain was a crippling dependence on precious metals, inflation, and a failure to industrialize. Since Spain itself had to rely on finished goods from abroad, it had difficulty supplying its colonies with which they demanded. Mercantilism was resented by the colonists who felt its restrictions and were taxed but saw no benefit from the system. By the late 17th century the inequity, shortages and high prices of the Spanish monopoly became more flagrant, prompting the colonists to create their own solutions. Thus, Spanish colonies began to engage in trade among themselves, and intra-continental trade developed a vitality of its own independent of the transatlantic trade. As a result, the colonies saw a rise in new classes of elites in their societies. And with elites, also came the downtrodden.

The pattern of settlement and migration into the New World was different for Spanish and British America. Spanish emigrants did not come to the Americas as family units since conditions were more demanding in their colonies, and opportunities were limited. Instead, it was largely single men who came over as soldiers, officials, some as laborers. The Spanish empire also had a much denser indigenous population than British North America. Consequently, there was more intermarriage or interracial relationships, and thus a large percentage of mixed populations in the Iberian colonial regions. In the Spanish colonial territories, racial classifications became very important as the basis of maintaining class and power distinctions. Race was linked to social status in a society with a complex racial make-up, and where family connections were important for social advancement. The highest classes were the *peninsulares*-those born in Spain; they had the most privileges, access to the highest political positions and were at the top of the social hierarchy. The creoles, those who were of Spanish blood, but born in the Americas, were denied certain positions and privileges simply due to their place of birth. Below the *peninsulares* and creoles were the mixed races or *castas* as they were sometimes called. This group included *mestizos* (mixed European/Native

American) and mulattos (European/African) and formed the majority of the population. Although these groups were relegated to lower jobs and limited opportunities, there were those who achieved wealth and therefore status, especially in cities with sparse creole populations. At the bottom of the social system were the Native Americans and those of African descent, including slaves. They were considered decidedly inferior to the rest of the population and faced brazen discrimination. Social mobility was extremely limited for these groups; although some of them achieved wealth and success, they remained excluded from the upper classes in the Spanish colonies.

Unlike the Spanish, those who migrated to British North America usually came in family groups or even as whole communities, seeking greater personal freedoms and/or greater economic opportunity. Within English colonies, the social structure was largely based on class, but there were always certain ethnicities that were treated as less-than-desirable. In the early stages of colonialism, the Irish and Catholics were seen as threats to colonial security; they were often discriminated against, leading to their further migration westwards.

The class system that developed was based on economics rather than family connections. Wealthy landowners were at the top. Tradespeople and small farmers formed the majority of the population and they were spurred on by the opportunity to improve their standards of living and attain social advancement through hard work. It is important to remember that two key groups were underrepresented in British colonial society: the aristocracy who rarely emigrated; and the very poor, who could not afford to leave the mother country.

Unlike Spanish America the complex social hierarchy based on racial identity and mixture was absent; the recognized human spectrum was largely white. But, as in the Spanish colonies, the African Americans were at the bottom of the scale with laws that discriminated against them and placed limits on their rights and opportunities. It is often forgotten that even in the northern colonies slaves were an integral part of colonial life, and that the lower white classes based their own sense of social superiority on the slaves who were below them in social status. Native Americans were not even considered to be part of the social spectrum since they remained outside of society; regarded as barbarians or savages, they were not integrated into the class or social system of British North America.

The Americas were colonized by Europeans who wanted to extend the influence of Christianity; while Spanish America was dominated by the Roman Catholic Church, the 13 colonies were mostly-but not entirely-Protestant. Among the settlers were those who sought escape from persecution and those who were driven by missionary zeal. In Spanish America, the Catholic Church played a significant and vital role in the colonies in terms of education, culture and the evangelization of the native population. It also provided social welfare to the general population. The Catholic Church strengthened Spanish imperial control over all segments of colonial society, and was the only faith accepted in the region. Moreover, the church participated in the economy as the leading corporate owner of land, real estate and capital, after the Crown. It also served as a bank, providing laymen with credit and investment capital.

In the British colonies of North America, plurality of faith, although not necessarily tolerance of dissension, was the norm. In many ways, what people believed depended on where they lived: The New England colonists were largely Puritans, the Middle colonists were a mixture of religions, including Quakers, Catholics, Lutherans and Jews. The Southern colonists

had a mixture of religions as well, including Baptists and Anglicans. This meant that the role of religion and its relationship with the state varied throughout the 13 colonies.

The first French colonies were trading post in Newfoundland. Others followed in the wake of exploration of the St. Lawrence River valley. In the 1530s, Jacques Cartier had claimed the lands bordered by the Gulf of St. Lawrence for France. By the 1580s, hundreds of ships from many nations were arriving annually off the coast of Newfoundland to catch fish, whales, and seals. Most early French colonists were fur traders, merchants, and missionaries. The first permanent settlement came in 1608, when Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec. The colonies were fully subject to the French king. There were no political rights or representative government, and public meetings could not be held without permission.

The French insisted on attempting to transplant elements of feudalism, a form of social organization then in steep decline in Europe. Huge manorial estates were established in desirable locations for favorites of the crown. The holders of these lands were known as Seigneurs. The first Seigneurs were French nobles and religious organizations. Although these land grants could be inherited they were also bought and sold. As a result, the social structure was based on class determined by land ownership and wealth.

Few Frenchmen and women migrated to New France. By 1672 there were no more than 5,000 colonists in New France. Various state policies and laws discouraged migration. In his fervor to expand France's boundaries, for example, Louis XIV drafted tens of thousands of potential migrants into military service. The Catholic monarch also barred Huguenots (French Calvinist Protestants) from migrating to New France. Moreover, the legal system gave peasants strong rights to their village lands, which they were loath to give up. Finally, most French people thought of New France as a cold and forbidding place.

The French priests who sought converts were members of the Society of Jesus (or Jesuits), a Catholic religious order. Between 1625 and 1763, hundreds of French Jesuits lived among the Indian peoples of the Great Lakes region. These priests came to understand and respect the Indians' values. They did not exploit the labor of the Indian peoples. French respect for Native Americans (and their smaller numbers) allowed many to forge alliances with Native American tribes, especially in their wars against the British. Still, despite the Jesuits' efforts, the French fur-trading system brought cultural devastation to the Indians of the Great Lakes region.

By the late 17th century, a great rivalry had developed between France and Britain. Over a period of roughly 70 years, four major wars would be fought between these powers. As time passed, the importance of colonies, North America in particular, grew in importance. The final round in this struggle, the French and Indian War, spelled the end of New France.

Excerpts taken from:

Berliner, Yvonne, Tom Leppard, Alexis Mamaus, et. al. *History of the Americas: Course Companion*. New York: Oxford University of Press, 2011.

Henretta, James A., David Brody, and Lynn Dumenil. *America's History*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008.