

The British Colonies

Introduction

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. Thousands of refugees fled continental Europe to escape the path of war. Many left their homelands to avoid the poverty induced by government 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 a family could move from Massachusetts to Virginia or from South Carolina to Pennsylvania, without major readjustment, distinctions between individual colonies were marked. They were even more so between the three regional groupings of colonies.

The Northern Colonies

It has long been understood that the prime motive for the founding of the northern colonies was religious freedom. Certainly what those early colonists wanted was the freedom to worship God as they deemed proper, but they did not extend that freedom to everyone. Those who expressed a different approach to religious worship were not welcome. Puritans especially were intolerant toward those who held views other than their own.

Much of the religious disaffection that found its way across the Atlantic Ocean stemmed from disagreements within the Anglican Church, as the Church of England was called. Those who sought to reform Anglican religious practices—to “purify” the church—became known as Puritans. The Separatists who opposed any accommodation with the Anglican Church held a more extreme view. Unlike the Puritans, the Separatists advocated a complete break with the Church of England. In 1620, they set sail for America on the *Mayflower*. As a result of their migrations, the Separatists became known as the Pilgrims, people who undertake a religious journey.

This was the first permanent settlement in the New England region, but beyond that distinction, its place in American history is somewhat exaggerated. Before long, the Pilgrims were eclipsed by the far larger and more important immigration of Non-Separatist Puritans, who started the Massachusetts Bay colony.

Between 1630 and 1640, more than twenty thousand Puritan men, women, and children took part in the “Great Migration” to their new home. The Puritans brought a high level of religious idealism to their first colony, which their leader John Winthrop described as “a city upon a hill”—a model of piety for all. Almost overnight, they founded a half dozen towns, each with its own church. These churches ran their own affairs, taxed the community to finance operations, and hired and fired ministers. Although church attendance was compulsory, not everyone was deemed worthy of membership. The New England Way was a rigorous examination of a person's spiritual beliefs to identify “saints,” or those qualified to be a church member. This intimidating test ultimately served to limit church membership and forced the next generation to modify procedures. Education was a high priority in Puritan society because literacy was essential to Bible study. Laws were passed calling for the creation of grammar schools to teach reading and writing, and Harvard College was founded in 1636 to train the clergy.

The Puritans brought disease as well as their religion to the New World, and the impact on the native population was the same as it had been in the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America a century earlier. As settlements expanded beyond the coastal region, conflicts with the local tribes became common, with equally devastating results. Notably, for the colonists in Massachusetts Bay and New England, disease was less of a problem than it was in the southern colonies. The cold winters limited travel, and the comparatively small farming communities that were established limited the spread of

infection. Death rates dwindled, and life expectancy rose. Improved survival combined with the immigration of entire families contributed to the rapid growth of the population.

Massachusetts Bay was a theocratic society, or a society in which the lines between church and state were blurred. Church membership, for example, was required for men to vote for elected local officials. The intent of many of the colony's laws was regulation of personal behavior based on Puritan values. Single men and women could not live on their own. Disrespectful servants, errant husbands, and disobedient wives were subject to civil penalties, and rebellious children could even be put to death. The laws also provided a degree of protection for women by punishing abusive men and compelling fathers to support their children.

Puritan efforts to maintain an intensely ideal religious community did not endure past the first generation. Their restrictive membership requirements in place made it difficult for the Puritan churches to maintain themselves. In 1662, the Half-Way Covenant was adopted to address the problem. It allowed the church members' baptized children who would not give testimony to achieve sainthood (and thereby church membership) a "half-way" membership in the congregation. This change in the rules meant that the children's children could receive baptism after all. Without sainthood, however, they could neither vote on church matters nor take communion. Change was also imposed from outside. Massachusetts's 1691 royal charter made property ownership rather than church membership the qualification for voting and provided for the toleration of religious dissenters. The New England Way was breaking down.

Generally, the northern region had 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 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, and 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.

Northern shippers soon discovered, too, that rum and slaves were profitable commodities. One of the most enterprising -- if unsavory -- trading practices of the time was the so-called "triangular trade." Merchants and shippers 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 the north. In many ways, Pennsylvania and Delaware owed their initial success to William Penn.

Under his guidance, Pennsylvania functioned smoothly and grew rapidly. By 1685 its population was almost 9,000. The heart of the colony was Philadelphia, a city soon to be known for its broad, tree-shaded 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 colonial America.

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.

As mixed as the people were in Pennsylvania, 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 forerunners of millions to come.

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 the northern and middle colonies were the predominantly rural southern settlements: Virginia, Maryland, North and South Carolina, and Georgia.

Virginia was the first successful southern colony. While Puritan zeal was fueling New England's mercantile development, and Penn's Quaker experiment was turning the middle colonies into America's breadbasket, the South was turning to cash crops. Geography and motive rendered the development of these colonies distinct from those that lay to the North.

Immediately to Virginia's north was Maryland. Begun as a Catholic experiment, the colony's economy would soon come to mirror that of Virginia, as tobacco became the most important crop. To the south lay the Carolinas, created after the English Civil War had been concluded. In the Deep South was Georgia, the last of the original thirteen colonies. Challenges from Spain and France led the king to desire a buffer zone between the cash crops of the Carolinas and foreign enemies. Georgia, a colony of debtors, would fulfill that need.

English American Southerners would not enjoy the generally good health of their New England counterparts. Outbreaks of malaria and yellow fever kept life expectancies lower. Since the northern colonies attracted religious dissenters, they tended to migrate in families. Such family connections were less prevalent in the South.

By the late 17th century, Virginia and Maryland's economic and social structure rested on the great planters and the yeoman farmers. The contrast between rich and poor was greater in the South than in the other English colonies, because of the labor system necessary for its survival. 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. Most Southerners did not experience this degree of wealth.

At the same time, yeoman farmers, who worked smaller tracts of land, 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.

Charleston, South Carolina, became the leading port and trading center of the South. There the settlers quickly learned to combine agriculture and commerce, and the marketplace became a major source of prosperity. Dense forests also 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, which was used in coloring fabric. By 1750 more than 100,000 people lived in the two colonies of North and South Carolina.

In the southern-most 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, and by the 1730s they were

pouring into the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. Soon the interior was dotted with farms.

Living on the edge of the Indian country, frontier families built cabins, cleared tracts in 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, house-warmings for newly married couples, shooting matches and contests for making quilted blankets.