

# COLONIAL SOCIETY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

*The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, and useless labor, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. This is an American.*

J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782

The Frenchman who wrote the above description of Americans in 1782 observed a very different society from the struggling colonial villages that had existed in the 17th century. The British colonies had grown, and their inhabitants had evolved a culture distinct from any in Europe. This chapter describes the mature colonies and asks: If Americans in the 1760s constituted a new kind of society, what were its characteristics and what forces shaped its “new people”?

## Population Growth

At the start of the new century, in 1701, the English colonies on the Atlantic Coast had a population of barely 250,000 Europeans and Africans. By 1775, the figure had jumped to 2,500,000, a tenfold increase within the span of a single lifetime. Among African Americans, the population increase was even more dramatic: from about 28,000 in 1701 to 500,000 in 1775.

The spectacular gains in population during this period resulted from two factors: immigration of almost a million people and a sharp natural increase, caused chiefly by a high birthrate among colonial families. An abundance of fertile American land and a dependable food supply attracted thousands of European settlers each year and also supported the raising of large families.

## European Immigrants

Newcomers to the British colonies came not only from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, but also from other parts of Western and Central Europe. Many immigrants, most of whom were Protestants, came from France and German-speaking kingdoms and principalities. Their motives for leaving Europe were many. Some came to escape religious persecution and wars. Others sought

economic opportunity either by farming new land or setting up shop in a colonial town as an artisan or a merchant. Most immigrants settled in the middle colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware) and on the western frontier of the southern colonies (Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia). In the 18th century, few immigrants headed for New England, where land was both limited in extent and under Puritan control.

**English** Settlers from England continued to come to the American colonies. However, with fewer problems at home, their numbers were relatively small compared to others, especially the Germans and Scotch-Irish.

**Germans** This group of non-English immigrants settled chiefly on the rich farmlands west of Philadelphia, an area that became known as Pennsylvania Dutch country. They maintained their German language, customs, and religion (Lutheran, Amish, Brethren, Mennonite, or one of several smaller groups) and, while obeying colonial laws, showed little interest in English politics. By 1775, people of German stock comprised 6 percent of the colonial population.

**Scotch-Irish** These English-speaking people emigrated from northern Ireland. Since their ancestors had moved to Ireland from Scotland, they were commonly known as the Scotch-Irish or Scots-Irish. They had little respect for the British government, which had pressured them into leaving Ireland. Most settled along the frontier in the western parts of Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. By 1775, they comprised 7 percent of the population.

**Other Europeans** Other immigrant groups included French Protestants (called Huguenots), the Dutch, and the Swedes. These groups made up 5 percent of the population of all the colonies in 1775.

## ***Africans***

The largest single group of non-English immigrants did not come to America by choice. They were Africans—or the descendants of Africans—who had been taken captive, forced into European ships, and sold as enslaved laborers to southern plantation owners and other colonists. Some Africans were granted their freedom after years of forced labor. Outside the South, thousands of African Americans worked at a broad range of occupations, such as being a laborer, bricklayer, or blacksmith. Some of these workers were enslaved and others were free wage earners and property owners. Every colony, from New Hampshire to Georgia, passed laws that discriminated against African Americans and limited their rights and opportunities.

By 1775, the African American population (both enslaved and free) made up 20 percent of the colonial population. About 90 percent lived in the southern colonies in lifelong bondage. African Americans formed a majority of the population in South Carolina and Georgia.

## The Structure of Colonial Society

Each of the thirteen British colonies developed distinct patterns of life. However, they all also shared a number of characteristics.

### **General Characteristics**

Most of the population was English in origin, language, and tradition. However, both Africans and non-English immigrants brought diverse influences that would modify the culture of the majority in significant ways.

**Self-government** The government of each colony had a representative assembly that was elected by eligible voters (limited to white male property owners). In only two colonies, Rhode Island and Connecticut, was the governor also elected by the people. The governors of the other colonies were either appointed by the crown (for example, New York and Virginia) or by a proprietor (Pennsylvania and Maryland).

**Religious Toleration** All of the colonies permitted the practice of different religions, but with varying degrees of freedom. Massachusetts, the most conservative, accepted several types of Protestants, but it excluded non-Christians and Catholics. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania were the most liberal.

**No Hereditary Aristocracy** The social extremes of Europe, with a nobility that inherited special privileges and masses of hungry poor, were missing in the colonies. A narrower class system, based on economics, was developing. Wealthy landowners were at the top; craft workers and small farmers made up the majority of the common people.

**Social Mobility** With the major exception of the African Americans, all people in colonial society had an opportunity to improve their standard of living and social status by hard work.

### **The Family**

The family was the economic and social center of colonial life. With an expanding economy and ample food supply, people married at a younger age and reared more children than in Europe. More than 90 percent of the people lived on farms. While life in the coastal communities and on the frontier was hard, most colonists had a higher standard of living than did most Europeans.

**Men** While wealth was increasingly being concentrated in the hands of a few, most men did work. Landowning was primarily reserved to men, who also dominated politics. English law gave the husband almost unlimited power in the home, including the right to beat his wife.

**Women** The average colonial wife bore eight children and performed a wide range of tasks. Household work included cooking, cleaning, making clothes, and providing medical care. Women also educated the children. A woman usually worked next to her husband in the shop, on the plantation, or on the farm. Divorce was legal but rare, and women had limited legal and political rights. Yet the shared labors and mutual dependence with their husbands gave most women protection from abuse and an active role in decision-making.

## The Economy

By the 1760s, almost half of Britain's world trade was with its American colonies. The British government permitted limited kinds of colonial manufacturing, such as making flour or rum. It restricted efforts that would compete with English industries, such as textiles. The richness of the American land and British mercantile policy produced colonies almost entirely engaged in agriculture.

As the people prospered and communities grew, increasing numbers became ministers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. The quickest route to wealth was through the land, although regional geography often provided distinct opportunities for hardworking colonists.

**New England** With rocky soil and long winters, farming was limited to subsistence levels that provided just enough for the farm family. Most farms were small—under 100 acres—and most work was done by family members and an occasional hired laborer. The industrious descendants of the Puritans profited from logging, shipbuilding, fishing, trading, and rum-distilling.

**Middle Colonies** Rich soil produced an abundance of wheat and corn for export to Europe and the West Indies. Farms of up to 200 acres were common. Often, indentured servants and hired laborers worked with the farm family. A variety of small manufacturing efforts developed, including iron-making. Trading led to the growth of such cities as Philadelphia and New York.

**Southern Colonies** Because of the diverse geography and climate of the southern colonies, agriculture varied greatly. Most people lived on small subsistence family farms with no slaves. A few lived on large plantations of over 2,000 acres and relied on slave labor. Plantations were self-sufficient—they grew their own food and had their own slave craftworkers. Products were mainly tobacco in the Chesapeake and North Carolina colonies, timber and naval stores (tar and pitch) in the Carolinas, and rice and indigo in South Carolina and Georgia. Most plantations were located on rivers so they could ship exports directly to Europe.

**Monetary System** One way the British controlled the colonial economy was to limit the use of money. The growing colonies were forced to use much of the limited hard currency—gold and silver—to pay for the imports from Britain that increasingly exceeded colonial exports. To provide currency for domestic trade, many colonies issued paper money, but this often led to inflation. The British government also vetoed colonial laws that might harm British merchants.

**Transportation** Transporting goods by water was much easier than attempting to carry them over land on rough and narrow roads or trails. Therefore, trading centers such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston were located on the sites of good harbors and navigable rivers. Despite the difficulty and expense of maintaining roads and bridges, overland travel by horse and stage became more common in the 18th century. Taverns not only provided food and lodging for travelers, but also served as social centers where news was exchanged and politics discussed. A postal system using horses on overland routes and small ships on water routes was operating both within and between the colonies by the mid-18th century.

## Religion

Although Maryland was founded by a Catholic proprietor, and larger towns such as New York and Boston attracted some Jewish settlers, the overwhelming majority of colonists belonged to various Protestant denominations. In New England, Congregationalists (the successors to the Puritans) and Presbyterians were most common. In New York, people of Dutch descent often attended services of the Reformed Church, while many merchants belonged to the Church of England, also known as Anglicans (and later, Episcopalians). In Pennsylvania, Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers were the most common groups. Anglicans were dominant in Virginia and some of the other southern colonies.

**Challenges** Each religious group, even the Protestants who dominated the colonies, faced problems. Jews, Catholics, and Quakers suffered from the most serious discrimination and even persecution. Congregationalist ministers were criticized by other Protestants as domineering and for preaching an overly complex doctrine. Because the Church of England was headed by the king, it was viewed as a symbol of English control in the colonies. In addition, there was no Church of England bishop in America to ordain ministers. The absence of such leadership hampered the church's development.

**Established Churches** In the 17th century, most colonial governments taxed the people to support one particular Protestant denomination. Churches financed through the government are known as established churches. For example, in Virginia, the established church was the Church of England. In Massachusetts Bay it was the Congregational Church. As various immigrant groups increased the religious diversity of the colonies, governments gradually reduced their support of churches. In Virginia, all tax support for the Anglican Church ended shortly after the Revolution. In Massachusetts by the time of the Revolution, members of other denominations were exempt from supporting the Congregational Church. However, some direct tax support of the denomination remained until the 1830s.

### ***The Great Awakening***

In the first decades of the 18th century, sermons in Protestant churches tended to be long intellectual discourses and portrayed God as a benign creator of a perfectly ordered universe. Ministers gave less emphasis than in Puritan times on human sinfulness and the perils of damnation. In the 1730s, however, a dramatic change occurred that swept through the colonies with the force of a hurricane. This was the Great Awakening, a movement characterized by fervent expressions of religious feeling among masses of people. The movement was at its strongest during the 1730s and 1740s.

**Jonathan Edwards** In a Congregational church at Northampton, Massachusetts, Reverend Jonathan Edwards expressed the Great Awakening ideas in a series of sermons, notably one called "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741). Invoking the Old Testament scriptures, Edwards argued that God was rightfully angry with human sinfulness. Each individual who expressed deep

penitence could be saved by God’s grace, but the souls who paid no heed to God’s commandments would suffer eternal damnation.

**George Whitefield** While Edwards mostly influenced New England, George Whitefield, who came from England in 1739, spread the Great Awakening throughout the colonies, sometimes attracting audiences of 10,000 people. In barns, tents, and fields, he delivered rousing sermons that stressed that God was all-powerful and would save only those who openly professed belief in Jesus Christ. Those who did not would be damned into hell and face eternal torments. Whitefield taught that ordinary people with faith and sincerity could understand the gospels without depending on ministers to lead them.

**Religious Impact** The Great Awakening had a profound effect on religious practice in the colonies. As sinners tearfully confessed their guilt and then joyously exulted in being “saved,” emotionalism became a common part of Protestant services. Ministers lost some of their former authority among those who now studied the Bible in their own homes.

The Great Awakening also caused divisions within churches, such as the Congregational and Presbyterian, between those supporting its teachings (“New Lights”) and those condemning them (“Old Lights”). More evangelical sects such as the Baptists and Methodists attracted large numbers. As denominations competed for followers, they also called for separation of church and state.

**Political Influence** A movement as powerful as the Great Awakening affected all areas of life, including politics. For the first time, the colonists—regardless of their national origins or their social class—shared in a common experience as Americans. The Great Awakening also had a democratizing effect by changing the way people viewed authority. If common people could make their own religious decisions without relying on the “higher” authority of ministers, then might they also make their own political decisions without deferring to the authority of the great landowners and merchants? This revolutionary idea was not expressed in the 1740s, but 30 years later, it would challenge the authority of a king and his royal governors.

## Cultural Life

In the early 1600s, the chief concern of most colonists was economic survival. People had neither the time nor the resources to pursue leisure activities or create works of art and literature. One hundred years later, however, the colonial population had grown and matured enough that the arts could flourish, at least among the well-to-do southern planters and northern merchants.

### *Achievements in the Arts and Sciences*

In the coastal areas, as fear of American Indians faded, people displayed their prosperity by adopting architectural and decorative styles from England.

**Architecture** In the 1740s and 1750s, the Georgian style of London was widely imitated in colonial houses, churches, and public buildings. Brick and stucco homes built in this style were characterized by a symmetrical placement

of windows and dormers and a spacious center hall flanked by two fireplaces. Such homes were found only on or near the eastern seaboard. On the frontier, a one-room log cabin was the common shelter.

**Painting** Many colonial painters were itinerant artists who wandered the countryside in search of families who wanted their portraits painted. Shortly before the Revolution, two American artists, Benjamin West and John Copley, went to England where they acquired the necessary training and financial support to establish themselves as prominent artists.

**Literature** With limited resources available, most authors wrote on serious subjects, chiefly religion and politics. There were, for example, widely read religious tracts by two Massachusetts ministers, Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. In the years preceding the American Revolution, writers including John Adams, James Otis, John Dickinson, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson issued political essays and treatises highlighting the conflict between American rights and English authority. The lack of support for literature did not stop everyone. The poetry of Phillis Wheatley is noteworthy both for her triumph over slavery and the quality of her verse.

By far the most popular and successful American writer of the 18th century was that remarkable jack-of-all-trades, Benjamin Franklin. His witty aphorisms and advice were collected in *Poor Richard's Almanack*, a best-selling book that was annually revised from 1732 to 1757.

**Science** Most scientists, such as the botanist John Bartram of Philadelphia, were self-taught. Benjamin Franklin won fame for his work with electricity and his developments of bifocal eyeglasses and the Franklin stove.

## **Education**

Basic education was limited and varied among the colonies. Formal efforts were directed to males, since females were trained only for household work.

**Elementary Education** In New England, the Puritans' emphasis on learning the Bible led them to create the first tax-supported schools. A Massachusetts law in 1647 required towns with more than fifty families to establish primary schools for boys, and towns with more than a hundred families to establish grammar schools to prepare boys for college. In the middle colonies, schools were either church-sponsored or private. Often, teachers lived with the families of their students. In the southern colonies, parents gave their children whatever education they could. On plantations, tutors provided instruction for the owners' children.

**Higher Education** The first colonial colleges were sectarian, meaning that they promoted the doctrines of a particular religious group. The Puritans founded Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1636 in order to give candidates for the ministry a proper theological and scholarly education. The Anglicans opened William and Mary in Virginia in 1694, and the Congregationalists started Yale in Connecticut in 1701. The Great Awakening prompted the creation of five new colleges between 1746 and 1769:

- College of New Jersey (Princeton), 1746, Presbyterian
- King’s College (Columbia), 1754, Anglican
- Rhode Island College (Brown), 1764, Baptist
- Queens College (Rutgers), 1766, Reformed
- Dartmouth College, 1769, Congregationalist

Only one nonsectarian college was founded during this period. The College of Philadelphia, which later became the University of Pennsylvania, had no religious sponsors. On hand for the opening ceremonies in 1765 were the college’s civic-minded founders, chief among them Benjamin Franklin.

**Ministry** During the 17th century, the Christian ministry was the only profession to enjoy widespread respect among the common people. Ministers were often the only well-educated person in a small community.

**Physicians** Colonists who fell prey to epidemics of smallpox and diphtheria were often treated by “cures” that only made them worse. One common practice was to bleed the sick, often by employing leeches or bloodsuckers. A beginning doctor received little formal medical training other than acting as an apprentice to an experienced physician. The first medical college in the colonies was begun in 1765 as part of Franklin’s idea for the College of Philadelphia.

**Lawyers** Often viewed as talkative troublemakers, lawyers were not common in the 1600s. In that period, individuals would argue their own cases before a colonial magistrate. During the 1700s, however, as trade expanded and legal problems became more complex, people felt a need for expert assistance in court. The most able lawyers formed a bar (committee or board), which set rules and standards for aspiring young lawyers. Lawyers gained further respect in the 1760s and 1770s when they argued for colonial rights. John Adams, James Otis, and Patrick Henry were three such lawyers whose legal arguments would ultimately provide the intellectual underpinnings of the American Revolution.

## **The Press**

News and ideas circulated in the colonies principally by means of a postal system and local printing presses.

**Newspapers** In 1725, only five newspapers existed in the colonies, but by 1776 the number had grown to more than 40. Issued weekly, each newspaper consisted of a single sheet folded once to make four pages. It contained such items as month-old news from Europe, ads for goods and services and for the return of runaway indentured servants and slaves, and pious essays giving advice for better living. Illustrations were few or nonexistent. The first cartoon appeared in the Philadelphia *Gazette*, placed there by, of course, Ben Franklin.

**The Zenger Case** Newspaper printers in colonial days ran the risk of being jailed for libel if any article offended the political authorities. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, a New York editor and publisher, was brought to trial on a charge of libelously criticizing New York’s royal governor. Zenger’s lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, argued that his client had printed the truth about the governor.

According to English common law at the time, injuring a governor's reputation was considered a criminal act, no matter whether a printed statement was true or false. Ignoring the English law, the jury voted to acquit Zenger. While this case did not guarantee complete freedom of the press, it encouraged newspapers to take greater risks in criticizing a colony's government.

### ***Rural Folkways***

The majority of colonists rarely saw a newspaper or read any book other than the Bible. As farmers on the frontier or even within a few miles of the coast, they worked from first daylight to sundown. The farmer's year was divided into four ever-recurring seasons: spring planting, summer growing, fall harvesting, and winter preparations for the next cycle. Food was usually plentiful, but light and heat in the colonial farmhouse were limited to the kitchen fireplace and a few well-placed candles. Entertainment for the well-to-do consisted chiefly of card playing and horse-racing in the southern colonies, theater-going in the middle colonies, and attending religious lectures in Puritan New England.

### ***The Enlightenment***

In the 18th century, some educated Americans felt attracted to a European movement in literature and philosophy that is known as the Enlightenment. The leaders of this movement believed that the "darkness" of past ages could be corrected by the use of human reason in solving most of humanity's problems.

A major influence on the Enlightenment and on American thinking was the work of John Locke, a 17th-century English philosopher and political theorist. Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, reasoned that while the state (the government) is supreme, it is bound to follow "natural laws" based on the rights that people have simply because they are human. He argued that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people rather than with the state. Furthermore, said Locke, citizens had a right and an obligation to revolt against whatever government failed to protect their rights.

Other Enlightenment philosophers adopted and expounded on Locke's ideas. His stress on natural rights would provide a rationale for the American Revolution and later for the basic principles of the U.S. Constitution.

### ***Emergence of a National Character***

The colonists' motivations for leaving Europe, the political heritage of the English majority, and the influence of the American natural environment combined to bring about a distinctly American viewpoint and way of life. Especially among white male property owners, the colonists exercised the rights of free speech and a free press, became accustomed to electing representatives to colonial assemblies, and tolerated a variety of religions. English travelers in the colonies remarked that Americans were restless, enterprising, practical, and forever seeking to improve their circumstances.

## Politics

By 1750, the 13 colonies had similar systems of government, with a governor acting as chief executive and a separate legislature voting either to adopt or reject the governor's proposed laws.

### **Structure of Government**

There were eight royal colonies with governors appointed by the king (New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia). In the three proprietary colonies (Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware), governors were appointed by the proprietors. The governors in only two of the colonies, Connecticut and Rhode Island, were elected by popular vote.

In every colony, the legislature consisted of two houses. The lower house, or assembly, elected by the eligible voters, voted for or against new taxes. Colonists thus became accustomed to paying taxes only if their chosen representatives approved. (Their unwillingness to surrender any part of this privilege would become a cause for revolt in the 1770s.) In the royal and proprietary colonies, members of the legislature's upper house—or council—were appointed by the king or the proprietor. In the two self-governing colonies, both the upper and lower houses were elective bodies.

**Local Government** From the earliest period of settlement, colonists in New England established towns and villages, clustering their small homes around an open space known as a green. In the southern colonies, on the other hand, towns were much less common, and farms and plantations were widely separated. Thus, the dominant form of local government in New England was the town meeting, in which people of the town would regularly come together, often in a church, to vote directly on public issues. In the southern colonies, local government was carried on by a law-enforcing sheriff and other officials who served a large territorial unit called a *county*.

### **Voting**

If democracy is defined as the participation of all the people in the making of government policy, then colonial democracy was at best limited and partial. Those barred from voting—white women, poor white men, slaves of both sexes, and most free blacks—constituted a sizable majority of the colonial population. Nevertheless, the barriers to voting that existed in the 17th century were beginning to be removed in the 18th. Religious restrictions, for example, were removed in Massachusetts and other colonies. On the other hand, voters in all colonies were still required to own at least a small amount of property.

Another factor to consider is the degree to which members of the colonial assemblies and governors' councils represented either a privileged elite or the larger society of plain citizens. The situation varied from one colony to the next. In Virginia, membership in the House of Burgesses was tightly restricted to certain families of wealthy landowners. In Massachusetts, the legislature was more open to small farmers, although there, too, an educated, propertied elite held

power for generations. The common people everywhere tended to defer to their “betters” and to depend upon the privileged few to make decisions for them.

Without question, colonial politics was restricted to participation by white males only. Even so, compared with other parts of the world, the English colonies showed tendencies toward democracy and self-government that made their political system unusual for the time.

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WAS COLONIAL SOCIETY DEMOCRATIC?**

Was colonial America “democratic” or not? The question is important for its own sake and also because it affects one’s perspective on the American Revolution and on the subsequent evolution of democratic politics in the United States. Many historians have focused on the politics of colonial Massachusetts. Some have concluded that colonial Massachusetts was indeed democratic, at least for the times. By studying voting records and statistics, they determined that the vast majority of white male citizens could vote and were not restricted by property qualifications. According to these historians, class differences between an elite and the masses of people did not prevent the latter from participating fully in colonial politics.

Other historians question whether broad voting rights by themselves demonstrate the existence of real democracy. The true test of democratic practice, they argue, would be whether different groups in a colonial town felt free to debate political questions in a town meeting. In the records of such meetings, they found little evidence of true political conflict and debate. Instead, they found that the purpose of town meetings in colonial days was to reach a consensus and to avoid conflict and real choices. These historians believe that the nature of consensus-forming limited the degree of democracy.

A third historical perspective is based on studies of economic change in colonial Boston. According to this view, a fundamental shift from an agrarian to a maritime economy occurred in the 18th century. In the process, a new elite emerged to dominate Boston’s finances, society, and politics. The power of this elite prevented colonial Massachusetts from being considered a true democracy.

The question remains: To what extent were Massachusetts and the other colonies democratic? Much of the answer depends on the definition of democracy.

## KEY TERMS BY THEME

<p><b>Arts &amp; Science (CUL)</b> English cultural domination Benjamin West John Copley Benjamin Franklin <i>Poor Richard's Almanack</i> Phillis Wheatley John Bartram professions: religion, medicine, law</p> <p><b>Religion (CUL)</b> religious toleration established church Great Awakening</p>	<p>Jonathan Edwards George Whitefield Cotton Mather sectarian nonsectarian</p> <p><b>The Land (GEO)</b> subsistence farming</p> <p><b>Ethnicity (NAT)</b> J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur colonial families Germans Scotch-Irish Huguenots Dutch Swedes Africans</p> <p><b>People (MIG)</b> immigrants social mobility</p>	<p><b>Government (POL)</b> hereditary aristocracy John Peter Zenger Andrew Hamilton Enlightenment colonial governors colonial legislatures town meetings county government limited democracy</p>
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