

Colonial Society in the 18th Century

I. Characteristics of 18th century British Colonial America

- A. Enormous population growth: common feature among the 13 colonies
1. Demographic changes resulted in shift in the balance of power between the colonies and England.
 2. 1700 = less than 300,000 people; 2.5 million by 1775 (20% black)
 3. High fertility rate: ratio of English immigrants for each American-born colonist dropped
 - a. 20 to 1 in 1700.
 - b. 3 to 1 in 1775.
 4. Largest colonies were Virginia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Maryland
 5. Only four major cities: Philadelphia, NY, Boston, Charleston
 6. 90% lived in rural areas in early 18th century; 80% by American Revolution

B. America as a melting pot: The "Old Immigration"

1. Most mixed population in perhaps all the world despite being mainly English
 - a. South held 90% of slaves
 - b. New England the least ethnically mixed; predominantly Puritan
 - c. Middle colonies most ethnically mixed
 - d. Outside of New England, about 1/2 of population non-English in 1775
2. Population breakdown: 1790
 - a. English & Welsh (66%): English was dominant language; British institutions
 - b. African: 20% of population by 1775; mostly concentrated in the South
 - c. **Scots Irish** (and Scots Highlanders) -- 6%
 - i. Presbyterian Scots Lowlanders
 - Hated the British for uprooting them earlier from Scotland.
 - Most were frustrated and poor
 - ii. Thousands came to America in early 1700s (mostly in Pennsylvania)
 - iii. Squatted on frontier lands and fought Native Americans.
 - Eventually moved south into backcountry of Maryland, Western Virginia, & western Carolinas; fought Indians on the frontier

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- iv. Scots Highlanders – small population; loyal to the crown; relatively well-off
- c. German (5%)
 - i. Fled religious persecution, economic oppression, and war in early 1700's
 - ii. Settled mostly in Pennsylvania; comprised 1/3 of its population
 - iii. Primarily Lutheran
 - iv. No loyalty to British crown.
 - v. Retained German language and customs.
- d. Dutch (2%): concentrated in New York, New Jersey
- e. Irish (2%)
- f. French (0.4%)
- g. All other whites (0.3%) (Swedes, Jews, Swiss)

C. Structure of Colonial Society

1. Stratification emerged by the mid 18th century; not as much prior to 1750
 - a. Small Upper-class:
 - i. Aristocratic plantation owners in South dominated wealth and influence
 - ii. Merchants, lawyers, officials, and clergymen dominated the North
 - b. Yeoman farmers constituted the majority of the population: owned land
 - c. Small merchants, manual workers, and hired hands: many did not own land
 - d. Indentured servants and jailbirds: limited to no influence
 - e. Slaves: 20% of population
2. Americans on average had the highest standard of living in the world.

II. Commerce and Trade

- A. **Triangular trade** (illegal trade designed to circumvent England's Navigation Laws)
 1. New England exported timber, fish, cotton goods, and light manufacturing to French Caribbean for molasses.
 2. New England ships brought molasses back home to be distilled for rum production.
 - Rhode Island became center for rum distillation in the colonies.
 3. Rum from New England shipped to West Indies where slave ships that had disposed of their human cargo, took rum to Gold Coast of Africa.
 4. Slaves transported via Middle Passage to the colonies (e.g. Newport, RI)

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- B. Land speculation made many investors wealthy
- C. Manufacturing
 - a. Secondary in importance to farming
 - b. Small industries such as tailoring, shoemaking, baking, metalworking, and furniture making were part of small industries.
 - c. Lumbering most important: shipbuilding
 - d. Women spinners and weavers at home produced large output of cloth.
 - e. Other enterprises: naval stores, beaver hats, rum, carpentry
- D. Increased trade
 - 1. Growth of American population created increased demand for British goods
 - 2. As American economy grew, Americans sought other foreign markets
 - a. Exports to France and West Indies brought in money to buy British goods
 - b. **Molasses Act, 1733:** British sought to stop colonial trade with French West Indies; the colonists ignored it
- E. Transportation
 - 1. Inland transportation poor by road
 - 2. Most of population located near rivers
 - 3. Taverns along roads were important places to discuss politics
 - 4. Postal system emerged by mid 1700s

III. Religion

- A. State of Religion
 - 1. Only 1 in 7 Northerners were church members; less in the South
 - 2. Toleration came about in large part due to non-church members.
 - 3. Two major issues:
 - a. Rights of dissenters in established churches
 - b. Religious style and conviction during the Great Awakening
 - 4. After the American Revolution, desire for religious toleration led to separation of church and state (except for New England)
- B. Different religious groups
 - 1. **Anglican Church** -- Church of England; tax supported
 - a. Official faith in VA, MD, N & S Carolina, GA, & part of NY
 - b. Church was a branch of royal authority
 - c. Faith was less intense; more worldly compared to Puritanism
 - d. Weakened by lack of a resident bishop in US
 - Non-Anglicans saw a bishop as a conspiracy to impose royal power

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- e. Established College of William and Mary in VA to train ministers, 1693
- 2. **Congregational Church** (Grew out of the Puritan church)
 - a. Prominent in New England
 - b. Initially, all citizens, regardless of faith, supported the church through taxes
 - Eventually, non-members of other well-known denominations protested and became exempted.
 - c. Emphasized Christ's existence in each individual Congregation.
- 3. **Presbyterian Church**
 - a. Closely associated with the Congregational Church -- both were Calvinist
 - b. Contrast to Congregationalists: Presbyterians believed all Presbyterian churches constituted a unified body
 - c. Not an official religion in any of the colonies
- 4. **Quakers**
 - a. Quakers existed in large numbers in PA, NJ, DE, and Rhode Island.
 - b. Protested New England slave trade (e.g., Newport, RI)
 - Became important in the emerging 18th century abolition movement.
- 5. Jews
 - a. First Jews arrived in mid-17th c.; located in RI, NY, PA, MD, and SC.
 - b. Approximately 1,500 in the colonies by mid-18th century.

C. The Great Awakening: 1730s-1740s

- 1. **First mass social movement in American History**
 - Spread principally throughout the middle and southern colonies.
- 2. Main issue was religious style: personal faith, church practice, & public decorum.
 - a. Two primary issues:
 - i. Crisis within the ministry (to what degree should organizational purity be maintained)
 - ii. Crisis between the clergy and the laity (e.g. ministers' salaries, degree of political control exercised by the Congregation)
 - b. Great Awakening was a reaction against the elaborate theological doctrines, emotional stagnation, & liberal doctrines (arminianism) of established churches
 - **Arminianism:** Directly challenged Calvinism's predestination doctrine and was supported increasingly by liberal ministers; stated man is not helpless in achieving salvation; his will can be an effective force in being saved

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- c. Enthusiasts saw themselves as beneficiaries of a direct inspiration from God:
became the driving force behind the Great Awakening
- 3. **Jonathan Edwards** (1703-1758)
 - a. Credited with starting the Great Awakening in 1734
-- Most influential theological writer and thinker of the movement; some of his sermons read world wide.
 - b. Blasted the idea of salvation through free will (arminianism); dependence on God's grace is paramount
 - c. Emphasized eternal damnation
 - d. Style was learned and reasoned; not emotional like other "new lights"
- 4. **George Whitefield** (1714-1770)
 - a. Brilliant English orator who traveled extensively throughout South (coastal towns), the Middle and New England colonies
 - b. His basic appeal was to the Bible
 - c. Most influential figure of Great Awakening; founded Methodism in GA and SC
- 5. **"Old Light" vs "New Light"**
 - a. **Old Lights:** orthodox and liberal clergymen deeply skeptical of emotionalism and theatrics of the revivalists.
-- Believed emotionalism threatened their usefulness and spiritual authority.
 - b. **New Lights:** supported the Awakening for revitalizing American religion and used emotionalism to move followers.
 - c. Congregationalists and Presbyterians split over the issue
 - d. **Baptists** attracted believers in conversion who longed for emotion in religion.
- 6. Results
 - a. Split denominations thus increasing competitiveness of American churches
-- By 19th century, Baptist and Methodist churches were the two largest in the U.S.
 - b. Brought religion to many who had lost touch with it
 - c. Undermined the older clergy
 - d. Encouraged a new wave of missionary work among Amerindians and slaves
 - e. Founding of "new light" colleges: Dartmouth, Brown, Rutgers, & Princeton.
 - f. Laid the foundation for anti-intellectualism as part of the American character.
- 7. The Great Awakening had a strong democratic component
 - a. People increasingly had more choice over religion (a highly American trait)
 - b. Another important example of resistance to established authority

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IV. Education

A. New England was most dedicated to education

1. Stressed Bible reading by community members
2. Primary and secondary schools established early (Massachusetts School of Law)
3. Literacy much higher in New England than the Chesapeake region or deep South where only the privileged enjoyed the benefits of education.

B. Middle colonies

1. Also had primary and secondary education
 - a. Some tax-supported, some privately owned
 - b. Spread-out population made creation of good school systems difficult
2. Many wealthy families sent their sons to colleges in England

C. South

1. Educational opportunities limited for most people except the wealthy.
2. Wealthy planters hired tutors to teach their children.
3. Population highly dispersed; ineffective educational system for common folks

D. Higher education

1. Primary focus on the training of new clergy, not academics
 - Emphasis placed on religion and on the classical languages, Latin and Greek
2. Higher education improved with establishment of University of Pennsylvania
 - a. Benjamin Franklin helped establish it
 - b. First American college free from denominational control
 - More modern curriculum: modern languages, experimentation, reason
3. Nine important colleges emerged during colonial period (others existed as well)
 - Harvard, William & Mary, Yale, Princeton, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth

V. Culture and the Press

- A. Most Americans too busy working to survive to spend time on art.
- B. **Phillis Wheatley** (c.1753-1784) a notable exception
 1. Slave taught by her master's mistress to read & write
 2. First important African American writer in America.
 3. Abolitionists would point to her as proof that blacks not intellectually inferior.

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C. Benjamin Franklin

1. Writings had a profound effect on shaping the American character
2. *Poor Richard's Almanack* (edited from 1732-1758)
 - a. Compendium of writings of many contemporary thinkers
 - b. Emphasized thrift, industry, morality, and common sense
 - c. More widely read than any book except the Bible; widely read in Europe
3. Franklin's *Autobiography* now considered a classic
4. Franklin perhaps the only first-rank scientist produced in colonies.
 - a. Experiments with electricity
 - b. Bifocal spectacles
 - c. Franklin stove
 - d. Started first privately supported circulating library in America; by 1776, there were about 50.

D. The colonial press

1. Manual printing presses ran off pamphlets, leaflets and journals.
 - Effective for airing social grievances and building opposition to the British
2. **Zenger Case** (1735)
 - a. Case paved the way towards freedom of expression
 - b. John Peter Zenger's newspaper had criticized the corrupt royal governor
 - c. He was charged with seditious libel and brought to trial
 - d. He argued that he had printed the truth; royal chief justice ruled printing was enough to convict, regardless of truth
 - e. Jury ruled in favor of Zenger
 - f. Newspaper editors thus received some freedom (not as much as post-1776)

VI. Colonial Politics

A. Structure of Colonies -- 1775

1. **Royal Colonies:** Eight colonies had royal governors appointed by the crown.
2. **Proprietary Colonies:** 3 colonies led by proprietors who chose governors
 - Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware
3. **Charter Colonies:** Connecticut & Rhode Island elected own governors under self-governing charters.

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B. Bicameral legislature most common

1. **Upper house**, or **Council**: normally appointed by the crown or proprietor
2. **Lower house**, or **Assembly**: elected by property owners (the people)
-- Voted for taxes to pay expenses in the Colonial government

C. Nature of American politics

1. Colonial governments did not enjoy the power that Parliament enjoyed
2. Yet, colonial governments far more reformed than those in England
 - a. Much more direct representation; will of the people more effective
 - b. Less corruption
3. Administration at the local level
 - a. New England -- **townhall meetings**
 - b. South -- county government
 - c. Middle colonies -- Combination of the above
4. Voting restrictions
 - a. The upper class opposed democracy; did not trust common people
 - b. Property and/or religious qualifications were imposed
 - c. As much as 50% of white males were disenfranchised

D. Governors

1. Legal power
 - a. Authority to exercise veto power over colonial legislation
 - b. Had power to dissolve lower houses of colonial assemblies.
 - c. Had power over the judiciary in colonies; in Britain judges lacked these powers
2. Weak in many respects
 - a. Assemblies often controlled governors' salaries
-- One governor did not get paid for a dozen years!
 - b. King's orders were often strict & ineffective as Britain was 3,000 miles away
 - c. Lack of money from supporters
 - d. Assemblies had powers to fill government positions in most colonies
 - e. Towns instructed their representatives how to vote-- will of the people

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E. Development of Democratic Ideals in Colonial America

1. Democratic ideal of tolerance emerged
2. Educational advantages compared to Europe
3. Equality of opportunity much more pronounced than in Europe
4. Freedom of speech & the press
5. Freedom of assembly
6. Representative government

VII. Age of the Enlightenment -- (1720s to about 1790)

A. **Classical Liberalism**

1. Liberty -- Individual human rights
 - a. Freedom of religion
 - b. Freedom of speech & press
 - c. Fair and equal treatment before the law
2. Equality -- All citizens should have identical rights and civil liberties. Above all, nobility had no right to special privileges based on accident of birth.
 - a. Equality of opportunity
 - b. Did not mean everyone should be economically equal.
3. Human dignity and human happiness
4. Science, progress, and rationality: liberal principles would lead to better government and a better society for all.
5. Representative government (but not democracy): Only those who owned property and had a stake in society could become representatives.

B. **Important Thinkers**

1. **John Locke**: *Second Treatise on Civil Government* (1690) (late 17th century during England's "Glorious Revolution")
 - a. Men set up governments in order to protect their property
 - b. **Natural Rights**: Life, liberty, and property
 - c. **Natural right to rebellion**: A gov't that abuses its power becomes a tyranny. Rebellion can be avoided if gov't respects the right of its citizens and if the people defend their liberties.
2. **Baron de Montesquieu**: *The Spirit of Laws* (1748)
 - a. **Checks and balances; separation of powers** among 3 branches of gov't
 - b. Despotism could be avoided if political power divided and shared by a diversity of classes and orders holding unequal rights and privileges.
3. **Adam Smith**: *Wealth of Nations* (1776)
 - a. Most significant work on capitalism ever written; founded modern economics
 - b. Formulated idea of a free economy; contrasted mercantilism -- Free competition, via private enterprise, would result in greater income for everyone, not just the rich.

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- D. **Deism** – Religious or philosophical branch of the Enlightenment
1. Premise: God created the universe and then stepped back; universe ran like a clock—the "Ghost in the Machine"
 2. Deists largely rejected traditional Christianity & divinity of Jesus
 3. Influenced Jefferson, Franklin, Washington & Paine
 4. Not a wide-scale movement; popular among certain groups of intellectuals

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XIII. Democratic developments in colonial America

- **1619, Formation of the Virginia House of Burgesses:** First representative assembly in America; beginning of representative government in America.
- **1620, Mayflower Compact:** First agreement for self-government; freemen agreed to majority rule
- **After 1629, New England Townhall Meeting:** Church members discussed political and community issues
- **Colonial Assemblies:** The lower house of colonial assemblies gradually gained political influence; governors had difficulty ruling without the support of assemblies.
- **1639, Fundamental Orders of Connecticut:** First written constitution in America.
- **1643, New England Confederation:** Connecticut, New Haven, Plymouth, and Massachusetts formed an organization for collective security against Indian attacks. This was an important step in creating more unity among New England colonies.
- **1649, Maryland Act of Toleration:** Guaranteed religious freedom to all Christians (but not Jews and atheists)
- **1676, Bacon's Rebellion:** Western Virginia farmers revolted against eastern government; first of several major rebellions where common people are fighting for a more responsive government.
- **1683, New York chapter of Liberties:** Granted freedom of religion to all Christians and gave all landowners the right to vote. Created to attract more settlers to New York.
- **1691, Leisler's Rebellion:** Jacob Leisler led a rebellion of frustrated poor people and farmers who protested huge land grants favoring wealthy landholders and speculators that left common people with few opportunities to own land.
- **1735, Zenger Case:** A colonial jury found John Peter Zenger innocent of libel against New York's governor. This is an important first step towards freedom of the press.
- **1754, Albany Plan for Union:** Proposed by Benjamin Franklin, this plan would have created an intercolonial congress. It was rejected by Britain for giving too much control to the colonies. It was also rejected by the colonies who feared an oppressive colonial congress.

- **1764, Paxton Boys:** Western Pennsylvanians (Scots Irish) rebelled against gov't believing gov't not doing enough to protect them from Amerindian attacks.
- **1771, Carolina Regulator Movement:** Frustrated poor people from western North Carolina rebelled against the colonial government (similar to Bacon's Rebellion and Leisler's Rebellion)
- **1713-1763, "Salutary Neglect":** The colonies enjoyed relative autonomy from British rule. Americans became used to regulating their own political and economic affairs (such as Triangular Trade) without British interference. When Britain tried to reimpose control in 1763, the road to revolution began.
- **1740s, Great Awakening:** Americans enjoyed much choice regarding religious groups. Churches increasingly had to cater to the needs of their parishioners. This was an important democratic step.
- **1720s to 1790s, The Enlightenment:** American political thought was influenced by Locke's natural rights philosophy (including consent of the governed) and Montesquieu's views on checks and balances.

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Questions for Review:

1. To what extent had the American colonies developed a democratic society by the eve of the American Revolution?
2. Analyze the impact of the Great Awakening on American religion in the 18th century.
3. To what extent did each of the three regions of colonial America develop a unique and separate society by 1750? (You may need to review notes for Units 2.2, 2.3 and especially 2.4)

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