The Economy and Labor System in British North America

Map 10 Eastern North America, 1715–1760.
Money makes the world go round, it is popularly said. This aphorism was certainly true of the British North American colonial world, which was dominated by the need to make a living. The possession, creation, and spending of wealth determined people’s goals, tastes, and living standards, as well as shaping their identities. For this reason the colonial economy is considered before the family, gender identity, religion, and culture.

In order to understand the economic development of particular regions in the British North American colonies, it is first necessary to understand the broader transatlantic commercial system of which they and (after 1707) Great Britain were a part. As colonial promoters like Hakluyt had predicted, the creation of colonies in the seventeenth century had provided a destination for England’s poor and unemployed and produced revenues for the Crown. Moreover the colonies had become inextricably linked to the mother country through trade, though this trading system had developed in ways that Hakluyt could not have foreseen.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, between 300,000 and 400,000 Englishmen left England to settle in North America and the Caribbean. The vast majority of them were poor, as Hakluyt had suggested they would be. They were also primarily young and male. This large exodus of marriageable young men had a predictable impact on the fertility rate in England. The shortage of young men combined with poor economic conditions contributed to a decline in marriages and a decline in English population growth after 1650. This demographic shift helped to solve the terrible crisis of unemployment which had fuelled out-migration in the first place. Thus by 1700 poor, unskilled English youths were less likely to move to the colonies since they could find paid work at home. In turn the relative scarcity of labor in England drove up real wages (wages measured by their purchasing power), so that by the 1680s ordinary people had small amounts of disposable income for the first time in English history.
Economic historians have suggested that even though the extent of people’s new purchasing power was not great, it made a difference to England’s economy. Wages rose at a time when new products from the colonies were becoming available for sale in England, and ordinary Englishmen and -women responded by changing their buying habits and becoming consumers of colonial staple commodities. The development of a market for tobacco offers an example. When English merchants first began to import tobacco early in the seventeenth century, smoking tobacco became a fashionable activity among English gentlemen and merchants. Because tobacco commanded a high price, though, it was only a luxury commodity. Ordinary people could not afford it. Then over the course of the seventeenth century, as the spread of tobacco production caused the price to fall, ordinary English laborers discovered for themselves the joys of nicotine addiction and demand for tobacco grew exponentially. In response to the new demand, imports of tobacco from the American colonies into England expanded from one million pounds in 1640 to 28 million pounds in 1700.4

The development of a market for sugar followed a similar trajectory. When first introduced into English markets, sugar was a luxury consumed only by the rich. As production became more efficient and the price of sugar fell, the English population developed a new taste for sweetness. Sugar exports from the West Indian colonies (mostly Barbados and Jamaica) rose from 8,000 tons in 1663 to 25,000 tons in 1700. During the eighteenth century, demand for sugar rose even faster as British consumers developed a taste for imported tea (and to a lesser extent coffee and chocolate) sweetened with sugar from the West Indies, and consumed as much of it as could be produced.5

Historians see this change in consumption patterns as part of a larger phenomenon called the “consumer revolution,” which represented a new type of human behavior not seen in peasant societies. In the past, consumption of non-necessities had been limited to the rich. However around the end of the seventeenth century ordinary English people began to aspire to enjoy novel or exotic products that could make their lives more comfortable (or at least more stimulating). Widespread desire for novelty fuelled demand for tobacco, sugar, tea, calicoes from India, and tableware from China, producing new patterns of spending, especially among the middling sort but even among poor laborers.6

English consumers’ new ability and willingness to spend money on colonial products in turn spurred other kinds of trade, much of it channeled in particular ways by the English navigation laws, or the mercantilist system. Indeed the navigation laws would encourage additional commercial connections and economic activity which the original theorists of mercantilism could hardly have foreseen. English traders who carried tobacco from the Chesapeake to London then re-exported it to continental Europe. Merchants who brought sugar from the West Indies to England then carried English manufactured goods to sell to planters on their return voyages. By 1700 English merchants had replaced the Dutch as the world’s premier slave-traders, carrying slaves by the thousands from West Africa to the West Indies (and increasingly to the North American mainland). 7 Products not covered by the Navigation Acts, such as fish and furs from Newfoundland or Maine, could be taken straight to European ports, where they could be traded for commodities like wine. Lumber and livestock from New England and grain from Pennsylvania could be shipped to both the British and the French West Indies, and exchanged for sugar, which could be distilled into rum and sold within the colonies. Because the navigation laws had provided incentives for English investors to build more ships, the number of ships available for global trading voyages more than doubled between 1650 and 1700. This reduced the cost of shipping goods (and lowered their prices). The increase in the size of the merchant marine expanded the number of vessels available to the king’s navy, making it possible
for the English government to drive out its competitors in the global trade. By the end of the
seventeenth century, Britain had displaced Holland as the financial and commercial leader of Europe
and was also experiencing the beginnings of the phenomenon known as the Industrial Revolution.

By 1713, British North American colonial economies had, with a few exceptions, embarked on
paths of development shaped by the British Atlantic economic system, with its flows of people and its
patterns of consumer demand. Most colonists were increasingly becoming part of a wider market
economy, devoting much of their productive energy to produce goods or services to sell to others.
The ways in which they took part in that economy – the types of production in which they engaged and
the labor systems that they developed in order to produce goods for the market – varied greatly,
particularly between the South and the North. It is these variations we will now examine.

2 THE SOUTHERN PLANTATION SYSTEM

Historians have disagreed as to whether economic growth in British North America during the
eighteenth century occurred because colonial economies developed a greater capacity to produce
goods, or because of the growing demand in Europe for American-produced staples. A related
question is whether the domestic market was more important than the export market in the southern
economy.

To some extent the first distinction is artificial, since supply and demand are two sides of the same
coin. However, both factors played some part in expanding exports from the South. Making the
second determination has also proved difficult. Exports were certainly important to the South,
because the region was geared to the production of cash crops. On the other hand, the majority of its
population were owners of small farms who produced primarily for their own needs. Since the export
of staples is usually considered the most dynamic element in the southern economy, it will be
considered first.

The most important staple in mainland British North America was tobacco. Even by 1700
production had reached 28 million pounds and it continued to climb, reaching 80 million pounds by
1760. By this time tobacco comprised almost 45 percent of mainland colonial exports. The total value
of the exported crop was some £700,000. Seventy percent of it was grown in Virginia.

This increase had been achieved as a result of both supply and demand factors. Among the more
important supply elements was the growth in the labor force. In 1660 the population of Virginia had
been 25,000, Maryland had 10,000 settlers, while North Carolina had only a few hundred. By 1760
Virginia had almost 350,000 inhabitants, Maryland 160,000, and North Carolina 120,000.

Another supply factor was improved efficiency. By the eighteenth century, the average tobacco
worker was able to attend between two and three acres or up to 10,000 plants, producing between
700 and 1,000 pounds of tobacco. The seventeenth-century average attendance had been only 3,000
plants.

Also on the supply side was the availability of land. Without this, extra hands would have been to
no avail. Land and people were two advantages enjoyed by the Chesapeake colonies in particular.

But demand factors were also very important. During the eighteenth century European purchases of
tobacco continued to grow steadily. After the 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland
exports of tobacco were further stimulated by the advent of an aggressive Scottish merchant
community to market the crop. This was especially beneficial to smaller producers who until then had
to rely on the intermediary services of the larger growers. As we have seen, even the decline in price was advantageous, as it widened the market. By the middle of the eighteenth century, tobacco was no longer a luxury for most of Europe’s population.

Two kinds of tobacco were cultivated during the eighteenth century, one the sweet-scented variety originally introduced by John Rolfe, the other the Orinoco from South America. The type planted was partly a matter of climate. The Orinoco was a harder plant and better able to thrive in the shorter summers of the upper Chesapeake and less fertile soils of the Piedmont. Much of this was exported to continental Europe. However, most tidewater planters continued to grow the more traditional sweet-scented variety, since this was most popular in Britain.

Despite the growth in production, the cultivation of tobacco was not without its problems. Late frosts posed a serious hazard in the early stages, while too much rain was similarly disastrous before harvesting. In between, pests like the tobacco fly and hornworm could ruin a crop. The owner then had the difficult decision of when to cut his tobacco, since a mistake would leave him with an inferior product. Curing and packing were also delicate operations that required great care if the tobacco was to get to market in good condition.

To protect its industry, Virginia developed a system of inspection. For almost a century various attempts to control the quality of the tobacco had met with fierce opposition from the small-scale planters, who feared that their inferior bulk product would be excluded. An act passed in 1712 was subsequently disallowed by the Privy Council, but an amended version, passed in 1730, required all tobacco to be brought to a public warehouse for inspection to ensure that it was properly cured. One unanticipated benefit was that the receipts provided a useful circulating medium. The system of inspection was sufficiently successful to be copied by Maryland in 1748.

A common criticism of the tobacco industry in the eighteenth century was its extravagant use of land. Tobacco made heavy demands on the soil, wearing it out in three or four years, after which the planter had to move on to fresh acreage. While land was so abundant, however, this practice made economic sense, for as Jefferson later noted, it was cheaper for British North Americans to buy a new acre than to manure an old one. Such reasoning was not generally appreciated by European visitors, who forgot they were looking at agriculture from a different perspective when making derogatory remarks. In Europe labor was plentiful and land scarce; moreover, the countryside had been under intensive cultivation for many centuries. Hence behavior in North America that seemed slovenly and wasteful was often the result of attempts to avoid the high cost of labor. Best practice on the two continents necessarily differed at times.

Like all industries, tobacco suffered cyclical movements in its prosperity. Prices were highest – around two and a half pence a pound – in the periods 1700–4, 1714–20, 1735–43, and 1747–53, which generally coincided with peace in Europe. In between, prices often fell below one penny a pound.

The uncertainty concerning prices and the difficulties of production led many Chesapeake planters to turn to wheat after the outbreak of war in the 1740s. Wheat could be grown in fields left fallow after tobacco, often as a winter crop. Over a 20-year period 12 crops of wheat might be grown to three of tobacco, though the value of tobacco was approximately six times greater. George Washington was one of those who switched to wheat after the French and Indian War ended in 1763. Wheat permitted the use of ox-drawn plows, making it less labor-intensive and therefore allowing more time for building and other improvements. Production climbed steadily throughout the later colonial period, though its export value, around £150,000 by 1760, was still less than one-fifth that of
tobacco. Most wheat was shipped to southern Europe or to the West Indies.

By comparison, South Carolina’s economy was still in transition in 1713. The deerskin and Indian slave trades had been its lifeline during the seventeenth century. These would soon decrease with the end of the Yamasee War and the decline in the supply of game. A profitable market for rice, however, was beginning to develop in both the Mediterranean and northern Europe. Production, which rose from 10,000 to 100,000 barrels between 1720 and 1760, was boosted by the expansion of cultivation to the adjacent areas of North Carolina and Georgia. Other factors also helped production. One was the partial removal of rice from the enumeration list in 1730, which allowed its direct export to Spain, Portugal, and the Mediterranean. Production was also aided towards the end of the colonial period by the use of wind-powered fans for winnowing the rice and of draft animals for pounding it, which made processing easier and more efficient. By 1760 rice accounted for about 20 percent of colonial commodity exports, bringing in about £300,000. This made it the second most valuable export after tobacco. However, like tobacco, it was susceptible to market fluctuations. This was especially true during the War of Jenkins’ Ear, when the price plummeted from nine to two shillings a hundredweight.

Rice, unlike tobacco, was a relatively hardy plant to grow. The main requirement (and difficulty) was the need to immerse the crop in water at various stages during the growing season. This meant the construction of special fields protected by embankments, with ditches, sluice gates, and reservoirs to control the water supply. A dry spring or early summer could mean disaster if the reservoirs ran dry, while too much rain might lead to flooding at the wrong time. For this reason some planters began experimenting with river tidal flows to get a more dependable supply of water, but the technology and capital to do this were not widely available during the colonial period.

Map 11 The provincial economy, 1700–1760.
Another crop developed in South Carolina after 1740 was indigo. Its production at this time was the result of attempts by the planters to diversify in response to the problems caused by the war in Europe. When boiled in special vats, the leaves of this plant yielded a brilliant violet dye, which was especially prized before the invention of chemical substitutes. The advantage of indigo was that it could be grown on land where rice cultivation was not possible. The disadvantage was that it was not easy to produce, since the periods of fermentation, distillation, and drying were difficult to assess, making quality control a nightmare. Nevertheless, production rose steadily, helped after 1748 by a bounty of sixpence a pound from Parliament. Indigo provided an export value of approximately £100,000.
Cotton, the crop usually associated with the Deep South in nineteenth-century North America, was still almost unknown. The short-staple variety was impracticable to harvest on any scale until Eli Whitney invented his famous gin, though some slaves and poor whites spun a little yarn for their own use. Otherwise, all the colonies at this time imported sea island cotton from the West Indies if they wanted fabric from this material.

The first southern colonizers had envisioned a mixed economy of commerce, manufacturing, and farming, but their hopes had been sadly disappointed. Timber was plentiful, but shipbuilding was restricted by a lack of skilled labor. In the eighteenth century, however, a lumber industry developed using water-powered saw mills. Its principal product was staves for making barrels to export the South’s cash crops. Shingles for roofing and clapboard were also produced, and found a ready market in the West Indies, where all wood products were scarce. Sales of these products brought in perhaps £50,000.

Timber also supported the naval stores industry. As the century progressed, the Royal Navy required ever larger quantities of pitch and tar for making vessels watertight, as well as turpentine for varnishing woodwork. Until the eighteenth century these items were obtained mainly from the Baltic, but political uncertainty in that area eventually induced the navy to seek alternative supplies from the North American colonies. To encourage this Parliament passed an act in 1704 providing for bounties on the production of masts, hemp, pitch, and tar. The pitch and tar industry was especially important for the Carolinas, since both had a vast supply of suitable pine trees. The resinous timber was heated slowly to make the tar run out without catching fire. Initially the industry flourished in South Carolina, but as rice cultivation became more widespread there, production shifted to North Carolina. The export value of this product was about £60,000 annually.

The continued expansion of cash crops in the South was made possible by the growth of the labor force, primarily through the purchase of African slaves. As was pointed out in Part II, before 1700 Virginia and Maryland had relied on indentured servants, although South Carolinians had always preferred slaves, including both Native Americans and Africans. The eighteenth century witnessed a rapid increase in the size of the African labor force in both the upper and lower South, as planters sought to extend their holdings and increase their profits. In 1680 Virginia had 3,000 slaves and 15,000 indentured servants. By 1715 the ratio of slaves to indentured laborers was almost exactly the reverse, with 23,000 slaves in the province, and another 1,000 being imported annually. Even these figures were dwarfed by the dramatic increase between 1743 and 1756. The total number during this period rose from 42,000 to 120,000 as a result of both importation and the fertility of the existing population.

Maryland and the Carolinas experienced similar increases. In 1690 there had been 1,500 enslaved Africans in South Carolina; by 1720 the figure had risen to 12,000, reaching 57,000 in 1760. By then Virginia and South Carolina were each importing over 2,500 enslaved Africans annually; and even North Carolina was buying several hundred. During the 1750s imports often exceeded 7,000 slaves a year.

The reasons for the growth of slavery were varied, as we have seen. White laborers from England became less willing in the late seventeenth century to migrate to the Chesapeake as indentured servants. Most indentured servants left their masters at the end of their service and thereafter became too expensive. According to the Reverend Peter Fontaine of Virginia, in 1750 a free white servant would expect to be paid almost £20 a year, while for another £7 or £8 a planter could “have a slave for life.” The cost of slaves relative to indentured servants had significantly decreased since the
seventeenth century, especially as the numbers of enslaved Africans being shipped by British traders increased the available supply.

Other reasons probably had to do with the behavior of servants and slaves themselves. British servants who ran away could blend into the surrounding population, while Africans could not. Northern Europeans languished (and often died) in the tropical or semi-tropical conditions found in the southern colonies, while Africans understood how to grow their own food and build adequate housing out of available materials. British servants could resort to the courts for redress if they were mistreated, while African slaves, unused to the English legal system, were less likely to do so.

As slavery became more common and numbers of African slaves grew, racial fears and antipathies also became more virulent, making it easier for owners to exploit blacks than whites. Most plantation tasks were of a dull, routine nature. While white indentured servants were apt to resist such work, both male and female slaves could be forced to put up with them.

It was traditionally assumed that slave-ownership was limited to the wealthy few. Scholarship has now shown that it was more widespread, especially in the tidewater, where 40 percent of households in many counties had three or more slaves. Even in the piedmont 20–30 percent of households owned one or two slaves. Of course ownership was distributed unevenly, many households having only one, while others had half a dozen or more. Large plantations with more than 20 slaves were relatively scarce and were found most frequently in South Carolina, where rice and indigo cultivation and the production of naval stores were expensive businesses which could be undertaken only by large producers.

Despite the widespread ownership of slaves, their use did not go unquestioned. Many South Carolinians feared that slaves would become too numerous and eventually overpower them. Accordingly, attempts were made in the early 1730s to restrict slave imports by imposing a tax, linked to a promise of 50 acres of land without quitrents for 10 years for every white person settling new townships in the back-country. The Crown saw the tax on slaves as a restriction on trade and disallowed the measure.

Similar efforts to restrict the slave trade were made in Virginia, though concern there was not as great as in South Carolina, since Africans were not a majority of the population. Nevertheless, some thoughtful Virginians already recognized that white planters there were influenced by a system of economic incentives that would inevitably lead to greater reliance on plantation agriculture and slavery. Hiring wage laborers was expensive, so most planters invested instead in slaves, a cheaper investment in the long run. This meant that there were few opportunities for free laborers. White men sought instead to become planters, and as a result did not spend time learning the skills that in the North would lead to better wages and opportunities for advancement. As a result there were fewer skilled coopers, smiths, joiners, wheelwrights, leather workers, weavers, and bricklayers in the South than in the North. The full consequences of this lack were not felt until the onset of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, when the South was to find itself increasingly disadvantaged by its lack of skilled labor and commercial acumen.

One possible alternative to slave labor was the use of convicts. In 1718 Parliament passed a law providing for their transportation to America. While occasional convicts had been sent over since the time of the Restoration, the numbers now greatly increased, reaching a total of 30,000 by 1760. Some two-thirds went to the Chesapeake, where they worked in gangs like the slaves, serving sentences between seven and 14 years. The advantage for employers was that convicts were cheaper than any other hired labor. No purchase or transportation charges were incurred, nor were freedom dues
payable when their sentences were completed. Not all were hardened criminals; many were first offenders convicted of minor crimes for whom transportation was a chance to make good. However, the practice did not become popular with most colonials, and the convicts were invariably blamed for increases in crime. Benjamin Franklin suggested America should send her rattlesnakes to England in “return for the Human Serpents sent us by the Mother Country.” A larger problem was that there were not enough convicts to supply the demand for labor, so slaves were preferred.

Although slavery was now the predominant form of labor, its prevalence did not cause the disappearance of white servitude. Considerable numbers of indentured servants continued to be imported into the Chesapeake, especially from Ireland. Most masters still preferred a mixed labor force to give them some control over their African slaves. Others had to invest in servants because they required a smaller initial outlay. In all, 18,000 came to Maryland between 1718 and 1760.

The employment of slaves, convicts, and indentured servants was confined largely to the production of staples for export. Fifty percent of the white population were subsistence farmers with no labor other than their own. Although this chapter has focused on colonial exports, at least 80 percent of all economic activity was purely domestic, a fact which has led some historians to suggest that the role of exports in shaping the colonial economy has been grossly exaggerated.¹¹

Small-scale tenant and freehold farmers were especially numerous in the backcountry of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, where most families grew a little tobacco in exchange for other essentials. In the lower South the common surpluses were wheat, horses, cattle, and hogs. Since there were few towns to buy their produce, their opportunities were necessarily limited. Towards the end of the colonial era, however, corn and wheat began to be exported to the Mediterranean and West Indies. Even the poorest farm families wanted to market some produce so that they could improve their lot. By 1760 farmers in the Shenandoah Valley and south side of Virginia were trading up to one-quarter of their produce in the market.¹²

Almost no manufacturing took place in the South, except for the production of pig and bar iron. Most foundries were concentrated in Maryland close to the Delaware, though there were some furnaces scattered throughout Virginia and North Carolina. Another obvious aspect in which the southern colonies differed from their northern neighbors was lack of towns, which for many southerners explained the failure of their economy to diversify. Of course, South Carolina had a commercial center at Charleston and Maryland the beginnings of a port at Baltimore by 1760. Virginia, however, remained stubbornly rural despite numerous attempts by the House of Burgesses to establish towns.

The lack of diversification in the southern economy has induced much speculation. It is usually attributed to the institution of slavery, which absorbed the region’s available capital while burdening it with a labor force with limited skills. In addition southerners preferred to invest in the area which they knew best and in which they had the greatest competitive edge: growing cash crops.

Certainly diversification was not a major worry in the eighteenth century. The South paid its way vis-à-vis Britain, something that the North found more difficult. Nor did it feel itself to be a beleaguered or inferior region. The planter class bought the best goods from Europe and displayed far more obvious wealth than did the northern elites. Indeed, the per capita income of the region’s white inhabitants was twice that of either New England or the middle colonies.¹³
While the South was dominated by the production of cash crops, the northern British mainland colonies from an early stage had a more varied economy. This diversity increased during the eighteenth century, though somewhat paradoxically the actual percentage of persons engaged in agriculture remained around 85 percent. The region nevertheless had a growing commercial sector and even the beginnings of manufacturing, though mainly of a craft or cottage kind.

Northern farm sizes ranged from between 50 and 100 acres to 300 acres. Not all the land could be cultivated at one time. Like his southern counterpart, the northern farmer exhausted his soil and then moved on to freshly cleared land. In general a man could harvest only between five and ten acres. So even with two or three sons and a couple of servants, a farmer could not cultivate more than 50 acres, though a much larger pasturage could be handled.

The most common products on the northern farm were hogs and corn. Indian corn was an extraordinarily productive crop and easy to grow. It provided bread for the family and fodder for the animals, especially hogs, which were said to fatten best on this crop. The usual method of cultivation was to sow the plants at regular intervals in small hillocks, which were created by scraping the surface of the soil with a hoe, an unavoidable procedure in ground not yet clear of roots and stumps. But even in well-cultivated land, this method was often used, since it avoided the necessity of plowing – no mean consideration for small-scale farmers who had neither plow nor draft animals. Approximately 1,200 to 1,500 could be planted to the acre. On the larger farms, especially in Pennsylvania, wheat became an increasingly popular and valued crop, since it produced a finer flour than Indian corn and hence better bread. Barley and rye were also grown in some areas. These crops all required the ground to be plowed.

The other pillar of British North American agriculture, the hog, was also easy to raise. Hogs foraged for themselves and provided meat for much of the year. By the latter part of the colonial period, however, cattle were also becoming popular, especially in New England, as better pasture became available following the importation of European grasses. Unfortunately, the readiness of farmers to let their cattle forage made breeding improvements difficult and also meant the loss of much valuable manure, something that European visitors were quick to criticize.

All farm families tried to produce what their members needed, at least insofar as purchased substitutes were unavailable. Poultry provided extra protein, while most farms had a good orchard. Beer was brewed with barley malt, and in the spring the maple trees could be tapped for syrup. Many farm families also kept some sheep; their wool, although coarse, made excellent working garments. Unfortunately, the lack of pasture resulted not only in inferior fleeces but also in the loss of much wool in the scrubby terrain. For this reason some farmers cultivated flax for making linen yarn.

Although northern farmers had no southern-style cash crops to sell, they were still keen to market their produce. The opportunities were twofold. One was the growth of towns, especially the seaports along the coast, which by mid-century had a total population of 120,000. The other was the development of export markets to the West Indies and southern Europe.

Prosperous commercial farming was confined largely to the coast or major river valleys like the Hudson, Connecticut, and Delaware, which offered not only the best land but also water transport. The majority of northern farmers were not blessed with such resources, especially in New England, where the rivers were not generally navigable, the soil was often rocky, and the climate harsh. As a result most of the population in these areas engaged mainly in subsistence farming.
Since the time of Jefferson, Americans have glorified the small farmer as a self-sufficient individual who provided for himself and his family without depending on outsiders or entangling himself in the marketplace. This idealization should be qualified on a number of counts. In the first place, the image of the individual farmer is a myth. It was virtually impossible to run a farm without at least two adults, typically a husband and a wife, to divide the necessary labor, usually with substantial assistance from children, servants, or slaves. Second, subsistence did not equal self-sufficiency, something that no farm family could ever attain completely. Farmers always needed tools or other equipment and of necessity bartered surpluses to secure them. Third, a farm family’s existence was by no means enviable. Farming was a hard business, dependent on the climate, and precarious too should either adult be injured or fall sick. Hence farmers always aimed to increase production beyond mere subsistence level. If they were fortunate they might secure additional land and purchase servants or slaves, in which case a family might live in greater comfort. Subsistence farming was never seen as anything other than a prelude to entering the market.¹⁴

The principal provisions exported by the east coast producers were pickled beef and pork from New England; wheat from New York; and wheat, flour, and bread from Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Because it was the easiest farm commodity to sell, most New England farmers kept a few head of cattle on their limited pasture, driving them to Boston and other seaports for slaughter and pickling. This practice became so common that meat exports from New England reached a value of approximately £80,000 by mid-century, the most important area of production being the Connecticut River Valley. The middle colonies also produced some meat, though from the early days they concentrated on the cultivation of grain, especially wheat. Pennsylvania in particular produced some of the finest flour, instituting a rigorous inspection system in 1725 to maintain its high quality. Pennsylvania and New Jersey in addition exported some corn and peas, and the total annual value of their combined exports amounted to about £300,000 by 1760.

Figure 18 West Indian slaves processing indigo. From Pierre Pomet, A Compleat History of Drugs (1725). Slave-based societies in the West Indies provided the northern colonies in British North America with their main market for food and other products, since West Indian planters generally did not grow enough food to feed the slave population.
As in the South, the principal export markets were southern Europe and the West Indies. By 1750 the value of shipments of flour and pickled meat to southern Europe amounted to some £150,000 a year. Equally important, those trading there brought little back with them, thus ensuring a net gain to the balance of payments. Most cargoes comprised wine from Madeira and the Canary Islands.

The annual value of victuals exported to the West Indies was about £200,000 during the same period. This market existed because planters in Barbados, Jamaica, and other British West Indian islands now devoted virtually all of their resources to the production of sugar, and had to import food to provision both themselves and their slaves. Exports to the West Indies in turn financed further trade transactions. Most captains returned from their provisioning voyages with cargoes of sugar and molasses, the thick syrup that was drained off from the sugar. Molasses was an important commodity because it could be fermented and distilled into rum, a useful stimulant after a long day’s work and a valuable anesthetic in the event of injury. Rum was also a key item in the trade with Native Americans. Its manufacture consequently supported over 100 refineries and distilleries in the northern colonies, with the heaviest concentration around Boston and Newport. Other goods imported from the Caribbean included cocoa, coffee, cotton, and mahogany.

A variant on direct trade between British North America and the West Indies was the so-called triangular voyage via Africa to purchase slaves. The volume of slaving voyages on ships owned by North American merchants has been difficult to estimate because of incomplete data; however, the best currently available evidence shows that about 2,000 slaving voyages set out from North American mainland ports between 1714 and 1807, carrying some 200,000 slaves. British carriers transported more than 10 times as many slaves as North Americans did during the same period. Nevertheless, the shipment of slaves was a lucrative business for a small group of North American merchants. The most active slave traders were from Newport, Rhode Island, while a few also operated from New York.15

At the start of the eighteenth century the dominant force in the export of victuals was Boston, whose merchants had pioneered the trade in provisions with the West Indies and elsewhere. When supplies
from its own hinterland proved scarce, the Boston merchants had scoured the other colonies for alternative sources, effectively replacing the Dutch as general carriers. By the third decade of the eighteenth century, however, both Philadelphia and New York were developing their own commerce at Boston’s expense, resulting in a stagnation in its growth after 1720.

New Englanders were involved in two other forms of commerce: fishing and whaling. Fish was a common ingredient in many colonial diets and was similarly important in southern Europe, where the Catholic Church proscribed the eating of meat on Fridays. Like rice, fish could be shipped directly, not being an enumerated product, and consequently numerous vessels were employed for this purpose. What made the industry so important in New England was the region’s proximity to the great fishing banks of Maine and Newfoundland. Each catch was usually dried or pickled with salt and put into barrels. The highest-quality fish were dispatched to Europe, while the inferior refuse fish were sent to the West Indies to feed the slaves. Fishing was New England’s most valuable industry, its exports amounting annually to some £150,000.

Whaling constituted a similarly valuable commerce both for the domestic market and for export to England. Whale meat was an important addition to the colonial diet, while the fat could be made into candles or used as oil for lamps and for tanning leather. Whale bone was also used for decorative combs and for stays in women’s corsets. Lastly, the intestines of the whale produced the odoriferous ambergris, which was used as an ingredient of perfume. The whaling industry has traditionally been associated with Nantucket, but whalers operated from most New England and eastern Long Island ports, mainly patrolling the areas around Newfoundland and Greenland; the searching of the Seven Seas occurred only in the nineteenth century. Annual export values of whale products were in the region of £50,000 by 1760.

Although the fur trade had declined in relative importance since the seventeenth century, it remained significant for the merchants of Albany and other centers near the frontier. Indeed a fierce rivalry continued between New York, Pennsylvania, and of course New France for access to the Great Lakes and Ohio country. The principal pelts were deer and beaver. Deer hides were used for making leather goods like saddles, bags, belts, and shoes. Beaver pelts were prized for making hats. It is difficult to put a total value on the trade, but it probably averaged around £30,000 a year for the northern colonies.

Another important commodity industry in the north was lumber. In the early settlement period each man cut his own crude requirements. However, as areas became well established, settlers increasingly demanded finished products for their timber-frame and clapboard houses. Such quality necessitated water-powered saw mills. By the middle of the eighteenth century all the colonies had such mills near the fall line. New Hampshire was particularly blessed in this respect, having both timber and water power near the coast. For this reason New England exported more timber than any other region, mainly to the West Indies, where many of the sugar islands lacked even firewood. Consequently, on voyages there vessels usually carried items like hoops for making casks, boards, and posts for building houses, and shingles for covering roofs. Though the annual export value of such commodities was about £60,000, this was one industry whose products were intended mainly for the domestic market.

Maine and New Hampshire, like the southern colonies, also benefited from the 1704 Naval Stores Act. Their forests produced the timber for the very large masts required for the battleships of the Royal Navy. Here, too, bounties were paid to encourage production, and the result was an important trade, centered on Portsmouth, worth perhaps £20,000 in an average year.
Commerce provided employment for hundreds of ships and thousands of seamen. In addition the export of provisions required a sizable processing industry for their preparation and packing. Warehouses were needed to store the goods, middlemen to distribute them once they had arrived, and clerks to settle accounts between customers who lived thousands of miles apart. Increasingly complicated logistics led to the emergence of counting houses. Insurance was also increasingly used, as was credit. Although no banks were actually set up during the colonial period, attempts were made to establish one in Boston. Here was the economic sophistication and diversification that eluded the Chesapeake economy.

Another way in which commerce benefited the North was by stimulating manufacturing. So much tonnage required a considerable shipbuilding industry to sustain it. Ships needed replacing on average every 10 to 15 years and had to be repaired in between. The northern colonies were extremely well placed to develop shipbuilding; they had almost inexhaustible supplies of timber and could supply practically all the materials required for the construction of the largest ocean vessels, in addition to having a skilled labor force.

Much of what the colonists built they exported to Britain. Indeed, it was frequently the practice to sell both the ship and the cargo on arrival there. The reputation of colonial builders was such that by 1760 their yards were producing 25,000 tons a year, one-third of all British requirements. This trade was an important element in enabling the northern colonies to pay their way, contributing perhaps £140,000 annually to their balance of payments.

As the century progressed, other types of manufacturing also began to develop, although unlike shipbuilding, they were devoted mainly to supplying the domestic market. Most of these enterprises were concentrated either around the Delaware, where Quaker pragmatism was conducive to manufacturing skills, or in southern New England, where a similar environment and concentration of skills existed.

Among the more important manufacturing processes were the smelting of iron and production of metal wares. John Winthrop, Jr. had made the first attempt to produce iron in Massachusetts in the 1640s. But the industry did not become established until the second decade of the eighteenth century. Most of the furnaces for producing pig iron, slitting mills for fashioning it into bars, and forges for making finished goods were concentrated in the two key regions of the Delaware and southern New England. By 1750 colonial iron output was sufficiently important for Parliament to pass an act controlling the industry, by which time British North America was producing one-eighth of the world’s pig iron.

Also concentrated in these two areas was the silver industry, with numerous workshops in Connecticut and the towns of Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore. Here also were located other key metalworkers, notably gunsmiths and clockmakers. Another significant craft industry was cabinetmaking. As British colonial standards of living improved, so did the demand for furniture designed in the latest European fashion.

Other manufacturing industries which had developed by 1760 were pottery and glass. Both had existed as cottage industries from the early days, but the production of finer pieces had to await technical improvements and a more skilled workforce. By 1760 a number of factories had been established in the two main areas of manufacturing. The paper industry, too, established mills in these two areas.

One other incipient manufacturing activity was woolen and linen goods. During the seventeenth century, colonists imported cloth from England. By the eighteenth century, domestic production began
to emerge as well, with specialist weavers producing cloth for sale in shops out of wool spun at home. The native wool was coarse and unable to compete with English cloths, but British producers were sufficiently apprehensive to have an act passed in 1699 prohibiting the export of colonial woolens. They need not have worried, since the colonists never had enough yarn to meet even their own domestic needs.

All this activity meant that the northern economy required additional labor to sustain its multifarious activities, especially skilled personnel like coopers, smiths, tanners, weavers, shipwrights, printers, and clerks. In New England this demand could be met from the resources of the local population. Not all fathers had sufficient land for their sons after 1700, as the population grew, and many younger sons had to be apprenticed to ensure themselves of a livelihood. Others did casual labor when not required on the family farm. One consequence was the emergence of a flexible multiskilled workforce.

The middle colonies, in contrast, continued to use the system of indentured servants as the mainstay of their labor force. Almost 100,000 were imported from the British Isles in the period 1700–75, while another 35,000 came from Germany. About half of all servants went to Pennsylvania, with Philadelphia becoming the great entrepot for them. One result of indenture was an absence of the English apprenticeship system with its restrictive guilds. Employers either recruited already trained servants from Europe or chose suitable persons from the many eager young men anxious to learn a trade. The opportunities for developing skills were always greater in British North America than in Europe.

One resource which was not usually employed to solve the northern labor shortage to a significant extent was African slavery. Northern cereals and husbandry were less labor-intensive than southern cash crops. And since the growing season was shorter and the winters longer, there was less year-round work. In these circumstances the family, including a few indentured laborers and perhaps one slave, was usually sufficient to work most farms. Additional hands or casual labor could be found from the local white community if required. The same was true of manufacturing. Employers generally preferred to employ indentured servants, living and working as they did in close proximity to one another. An additional disincentive was the cost. African slaves cost considerably more than indentured servants, and most northern farmers (in contrast to the staples producers in the South and the West Indies) did not earn profits high enough to justify the investment.

One other question that has concerned historians is the extent to which the northern (and southern) economies were true capitalist systems operating through a market economy. Many key ingredients were certainly there, particularly in the North. Property could be sold without restrictions like primogeniture and entail (which did exist in some southern colonies), facilitating the accumulation of capital. Markets for labor were developing, with an incipient system of wage labor in the North which allowed the workforce to be deployed in a flexible and efficient manner, unencumbered by the restrictive practices of guilds and other craft associations. Sumptuary laws had been dispensed with, leaving individuals free to spend their money. They could also use their capital for investment without fear of prosecution for usury. Compared to the seventeenth century, the economy was now predominantly a cash-based one rather than one determined by barter and exchange.

On the other hand, many restrictions still operated, including restraints on wages, prices, and working conditions, and there was as yet no modern banking system. Moreover, in a society where most inhabitants still lived on small family farms, prices were never determined solely by impersonal economic forces. Also important were social factors like the good of the community and the personal
needs of the household. Most farmers, for instance, assisted their neighbors at certain times of the season, receiving help in return, which made cooperation rather than competition the underlying principle of economic activity.¹⁶

4 THE MERCANTILIST SYSTEM

We have already seen that the colonial economy had to function within the parameters of the navigation laws, or the mercantilist system, to ensure that the colonies’ trade and domestic economy were regulated for the benefit of the mother country. This system had become fully articulated by the eighteenth century.

Though we have seen that the system stimulated the expansion of British trade, there has been considerable debate about its impact on colonial economies. Some historians have asserted that it strangled development, others that it was an irrelevance; still others have claimed that it was beneficial.¹⁷ The truth undoubtedly lies somewhere in between.

Industrialization in the mother country brought a number of advantages to the colonists. First, it increased demand for colonial raw materials, which enjoyed a protected market, since high tariffs excluded foreign producers from selling in Britain. Second, it supplied capital to the colonists. As members of the landed classes still sent younger sons or relatives to build up estates, so merchants similarly sought trade outlets and partners, extending credit to their colonial contacts. Equally important was the export of human capital, especially skilled labor.

As the pace of industrialization quickened, Britain was also able to supply the best and cheapest manufactured goods to colonial buyers. These included machinery like saws, cogs, axles, cranks, and gears; nails, hooks, files, chisels, hammers, shovels, knives, plows, and anchors; implements of war, notably cannon, firearms, shot, and gunpowder; and navigational instruments like compasses and sextants. The wealthy imported British fabrics made from wool, linen, cotton, lace, silk, and felt. Many other household goods, such as lanterns, taps, mirrors, curtain rings, pewter, cutlery, kettles, sieves, measuring cans, and brass items like candlesticks could also be obtained from the mother country at ever lower prices. So, too, could books and fine-quality paper.

Being part of the British mercantilist system brought the colonists other advantages too, one of which was the benefit of insurance from Lloyds, which helped the flow of trade and furthered colonial economic development. Another was the protection afforded by the British navy. In wartime British trade suffered less disruption than that of any other European state. This continuity was crucial in a period of so much strife, with major wars from 1689 to 1713, 1739 to 1748, and 1755 to 1762. Moreover, after 1700 an increasing number of warships were employed in commerce protection, so that by 1720 the day of pirates like Teach and Kidd was over. In addition, mercantilism offered the collective advantages of British financial policies, which allowed many goods shipped for re-export incentives in the form of customs repayments. After 1704, Britain also gave various bounties to colonial industries which would otherwise not have been viable, notably naval stores.

The expansion of trade combined with the growth in the number of available ships, itself a side effect of the navigation laws, contributed to making transatlantic shipping more frequent and more efficient. By the eighteenth century, the time required to travel across the ocean was considerably shorter than it had been a century earlier. Maps and navigational techniques had improved with time and experience, and monthly packet boats began traveling from London to the West Indies in 1702.
The British navy’s suppression of piracy by the 1720s made overseas voyages more regular and predictable. Shipping costs declined, benefiting both farmers who produced goods for export and colonial consumers, who could purchase goods for lower prices. An unanticipated benefit of the greater frequency of transatlantic crossings was the improvement of communications between Great Britain and its colonies. Eventually a regular mail service was established between London and a few of the mainland colonies, and families and friends began to send letters back and forth on a regular basis. Books, pamphlets, and sermons reached Boston and Philadelphia within months after they went into print in London. News reached the colonies while it was still reasonably fresh. By the middle of the century newspapers were being printed in virtually all of the mainland cities, carrying British political and diplomatic news, satirical essays from the *Spectator*, and information about British fashions. The increased flow of news and information stimulated consumer demand in the colonies for new and fashionable British products, creating an incentive for greater economic activity. Increased transatlantic communications would even have an impact on colonial culture, increasing colonial sympathy for and identification with Great Britain.  

A final aspect of British imperial policy which profoundly impacted colonial society was free immigration. Most other European powers controlled the flow of people to their colonies so as to exclude subversive elements. Both the French and the Spanish, for example, prohibited Protestants from emigrating to their colonies in New France and Spanish Florida. Britain, on the other hand, placed few obstacles in the way of troublesome elements like the Quakers and was even ready to open the door to the refugees of other nations, such as French Huguenots, many of whom were skilled craftsmen or persons with capital. Britain’s liberal policy continued into the eighteenth century. Although fewer immigrants came now from England, new arrivals included large numbers of Scots, Irish, and Germans. Some historians estimate that as many as 300,000 or more new immigrants entered the 13 continental colonies in the period 1700–79. This open-door policy helped to facilitate the extraordinary speed with which British North America was settled.

Unfortunately no economic system can satisfy all its constituent elements. The British liked to assert that mercantilism was complementary: Britain sold its manufactures to the colonies, while they sent their produce in return. The disadvantage of being taxed for enumerated exports was theoretically offset by the advantage of a protected market. In practice the system did not work so well. In the Chesapeake a planter might receive £5 on a 1,000-pound hogshead of tobacco. After the shippers had added their charges and the Crown had collected duties of nearly £17, the same hogshead sold for £25. The amounts suggest a less than adequate return, as is also indicated by the fact that the Virginia and Maryland planters were constantly in debt to their British factors. The question of Virginian indebtedness is a complex one, however. Contemporaries in Britain argued that such debts were the result of extravagance; the planters were simply too much given to importing expensive luxuries. Later historians believe that the planters should have been more efficient and made greater efforts to control the tobacco trade itself. Others have seen the planters’ indebtedness as evidence of their creditworthiness and their debts as basically an investment in the system. What is not in doubt is that some planters resented their dependency on British merchants and that this may have been one reason why the Virginian elite later supported the Revolution so ardently.

To some extent the Virginian tobacco industry was the victim of its own success. The planters overproduced, causing the depressions of 1704–13, 1720–34, and 1756–65, with their consequent loss of income. The eighteenth-century Chesapeake also demonstrated the classic weakness of a
single-crop economy: reliance on tobacco left the planters especially vulnerable to market forces because they had little else to supplement their income. The same difficulties afflict many developing countries today.

Another, more obvious flaw in the argument that mercantilism was complementary is that New England and the middle colonies actually produced few raw materials for the mother country. This problem was partially solved by their supply of foodstuffs to the West Indies, which restored the principle of complementarity. Unfortunately, the middle colonies expanded so fast that by 1720 Britain was unable to use all that they produced. As a result surplus foodstuffs were sold to the French and Spanish colonies. Although this practice did not contravene the navigation laws in peacetime, the colonists began buying so much cheap French and Spanish sugar for their return voyages that the British islands then found themselves being undercut on their own market. The result was the Molasses Act of 1733, whereby all foreign sugar products imported into the colonies had to pay a duty of sixpence a gallon.

Had this act been enforced, it would have dealt a serious blow to the northern economy. However, customs machinery in the period 1714–60 was still rudimentary. The coast was divided into a number of districts, but they were poorly staffed. Many of the officers were corrupt and levied only a nominal duty of one penny a gallon, though the low yield suggests that some illicit trade must also have occurred.

This situation has led to the assertion that the mercantilist system was in fact maintained by smuggling. The extent of illegal trading is difficult to assess; as with social security fraud today, the perpetrators did not keep records. People certainly talked as though smuggling was common, though the evidence suggests that outside the West Indies most merchants obeyed the rules, especially when trading with Europe, since North American vessels were very conspicuous and could be easily policed by their British counterparts. Even in the West Indies there was a tendency to abide by the law. A Newport ship-owner instructed the master of one vessel on a voyage to St. Eustatius in 1750 as follows: “You may perhaps meet with some Frenchman… who may propose to make a French bottom of your vessel; but desire that you will not take up with any such proposal, as I would not have you go on any illicit trade.”

Religion was one reason for such a law-abiding attitude, since conscience clearly dictated that it was improper to deny the king his due. Quakers were especially insistent on the ethical conduct of business and had a vested interest in ensuring that others kept within the law. If there were infractions, these are likely to have occurred as a result of the 1733 Molasses Act, which seemed to have been passed to allow British sugar planters to live in idleness and luxury.

The increasing development of manufacturing in the northern colonies indicates a third discrepancy in the theory of complementarity. Shipbuilding, especially, ought to have been the preserve of the mother country, but the demands of British merchants for cheap ships overrode the cries of protest from British shipbuilders, who did not have the advantage of cheap timber. Protectionism prevailed, however, in other areas where colonial producers were seen as a threat. Wool, for example, was one of the oldest industries in England, accounting in the past for 80 percent of her exports. By the end of the seventeenth century the industry was under attack not only from America but from Ireland too. Accordingly a Woolen Act was passed in 1699 stating that no wool or finished items were to be exported from Ireland or the colonies, even to a neighboring province. All domestic produce must be sold where it was made. The hat industry, too, was regulated in this way. When this long-established British trade found itself in danger of losing its traditional markets to colonial producers, a ban was
placed on the export of colonial hats in 1732. Regulations were also laid down concerning the number of apprentices who must be employed in the trade, ostensibly to maintain quality but in reality to restrict production. No slaves could be employed, and all apprentices had to serve for seven years.

The third major activity to be regulated in the interests of Britain was the iron industry, where the conflict was similar to that in the shipbuilding industry. British smelters wanted all colonial activity banned, while the makers of finished goods wanted cheap pig and bar iron from the colonies. The latter group eventually won. In 1750 Parliament enacted legislation banning the colonists from building or operating any “mill or other engine for slitting or rolling of iron, or any plating forge… or any furnace for making steel,” but in accordance with the principle of complementarity, no duties were to be levied on the import of any pig or bar iron. The North American colonies were to produce the raw materials, Britain the finished products, the latter of course being the more profitable activity.

The same reasoning led Britain to annul various colonial laws encouraging local manufactures. In 1705 the Privy Council disallowed a Pennsylvania law encouraging shoemaking. The following year it was New York’s turn to have a sail-making venture condemned. In 1756 a Massachusetts law to facilitate the production of linen suffered a similar fate.

It is difficult to say how effective these prohibitions were, since governors and other officials had neither the information nor an inspectorate to enforce them. In any case, British concern was generally premature. The quality of British North American wool, for instance, was too poor to be exported. The number of slitting mills and forges for iron was relatively small, and the infant industry was not seriously inconvenienced. The ability to ship as much pig and bar iron as could be produced seems to have satisfied the North American iron industry. There was no outcry before 1760.

Nevertheless, these prohibitions on colonial manufacturing suggest that by 1750 there had been a qualitative change in the operation of the mercantilist system caused by British recognition that its economy now depended as much on the export of manufactured goods as on the import of cheap raw materials. In the seventeenth century the colonists had been encouraged to produce as many goods as possible: now they were being restricted in what they could do. It has been argued that this indicates that the system was being increasingly managed for the benefit of special interests, notably the merchants of London, in contrast to the seventeenth century when the aim had been to strengthen the kingdom as a whole. The evidence on this point is not conclusive, since the original navigation laws had been largely prompted by English merchant interests. Nevertheless the continued commitment of Britain to a system designed to benefit the imperial center certainly contained the potential for discord in the future.23

5 MONEY AND TAXATION

One problem faced by all the colonies in the period 1689–1760 was a lack of specie. The condition used to be attributed to a chronic imbalance of payments with Britain, but modern scholars have largely discounted this interpretation. Although exports to the mother country often equaled only half the value of imports, the imbalance was generally corrected by colonial surpluses on trade with the West Indies and southern Europe.24

Even so the domestic economy was invariably short of specie. Minting fresh coinage was not permissible, since this was a Crown prerogative. The colonies in any case had little gold or silver to mint. Barter solved the problem on the frontier, but it was a hindrance elsewhere as the colonial
The economy became more sophisticated.

One alternative was the use of commodity money, the most common forms of which were tobacco and wampum, though the latter was largely a seventeenth-century device. Most colonies passed acts regulating such items in terms of their sterling value. North Carolina, for instance, rated 16 commodities in 1715, including tobacco, corn, wheat, tallow, leather, beaver, butter, cheese, pitch, whale oil, pork, and beef.

The difficulty was fixing the value of a commodity satisfactorily. In times of a glut, the commodity was devalued and the creditor was hurt; in times of scarcity, the debtor was at a disadvantage. In addition, commodities used in payments could often be spoiled or become unmarketable. Complaints were made in New Haven that worthless wampum was being put into the church collection plate, to the distress of the minister and his family. Although the provincial assemblies constantly tried to regulate commodity prices, it was an almost impossible task.

A third option was the use of bills of exchange, whereby those wishing to settle an account or buy some goods would go to a local merchant and buy a bill that was negotiable with a third party with whom the purchaser wanted to do business. This procedure was really only feasible for merchants or persons dealing in large sums, usually overseas or in another colony.

Most colonists had to make do with whatever specie was available: Spanish pesos or pieces of eight, Flemish ducatoons, Portuguese crusadoes, Dutch guilders or florins, German and Danish talers or dollars, and French ecus. Apart from their bewildering variety, such specie often had variations in their silver or gold content. Many coins were also clipped. Nevertheless, some specie was better than none, and many colonial legislatures passed laws placing higher values on certain coins to attract them to their province. The ploy was rarely successful, since it merely stimulated other colonies to do the same. This practice so alarmed British merchants, who were apprehensive of being paid in artificially inflated coin, that in 1704 the Privy Council issued a proclamation regulating the value of foreign coins according to their silver content. In the future such specie was not to exceed the sterling equivalent by more than one-third. Three years later Parliament enacted legislation to this end, though with only limited effect.

By this time the colonies had discovered a new solution to their lack of money, namely the printing of paper. Essentially two types of paper currency were issued during the colonial period: tax anticipation bills, or notes to be redeemed from tax receipts, and asset-backed currency. Tax anticipation notes were first issued by Massachusetts in 1690 to finance the expedition of Sir William Phips against Québec. The bills had to be repaid within a short time at the insistence of the British merchants, who feared that otherwise they would be paid in depreciated paper. The Board of Trade in consequence was under constant pressure either to prevent their issue or to ensure that such notes were not legal tender and obligatory in the settlement of debts. Nevertheless, the device was too useful to ignore, especially in wartime, and other colonies followed Massachusetts’ example: South Carolina in 1703, New York and New Jersey in 1709, and North Carolina in 1712.

Most of the notes were in denominations of between 5 shillings and £20 and were more like bills of credit than modern currency. The individual had to purchase them from the provincial treasurer and pay interest for the privilege of doing so. The advantage was that they could be circulated more widely than bills of exchange, which were restricted to the name of the eventual payee.

So useful did these emissions prove that a number of colonies continued their use long after the official redemption date, sometimes to pay their government expenses, sometimes to redeem other bills, and sometimes as a means of stimulating the economy. However, their unpopularity in London
led some colonies to experiment with the second type of paper money: asset-backed currency based on land. The most notable scheme was that of Pennsylvania in 1723 whereby individuals could obtain notes ranging from £10. 10s. to £100. 0s. from the local loan office. The borrower had to pay five percent interest and provide as security land twice the value of the total loan, for what was effectively a mortgage. That same year New Jersey adopted a similar scheme, using the interest on the notes to meet the expenses of government.

The benefit of paper currency was not lost on some royal officials. As Governor William Burnet of neighboring New York explained in November 1724, such schemes had widespread advantages: “The officers of the government might otherwise be kept out of their money for a very long time and have difficulty to subsist.” Essential expenditures like repairs to the fort and diplomatic contacts with Native Americans would also suffer. Indeed, Burnet asserted, “Under good regulation, these acts are both of service to the trade of the plantations and of Great Britain.” Burnet also pointed out that the colonists were merely imitating Parliament, anticipating revenues by means of paper.

In the aftermath of the 1720 South Sea Bubble in Britain, in which thousands of investors were ruined by fraudulent share schemes, Burnet’s arguments were not appreciated. Hence in 1725 the Privy Council ordered South Carolina to redeem its £55,000 of outstanding bills. Nevertheless, the need for a circulating medium led to the acceptance of two New Jersey acts in 1730 and 1733 for an emission of £60,000 and one in Maryland. The following year Connecticut managed to secure an issue of £35,000 “to promote trade.” Even the South Carolina assembly managed to pass another bill in 1736 for an emission of £210,000, arguing that its trade was in great distress for want of a circulating medium.

The problem of sustaining the value of such currency became acute only in the late 1730s when there was a renewed threat of war. By then the Massachusetts pound was trading at £5. 5s. to £1 sterling; and the South Carolina currency at £7. 19s. to £1. Fearing new issues of depreciated paper, the Privy Council sent a circular letter in August 1740 telling the governors to allow no more emissions. If any such acts did have to be passed, they must contain a suspending clause until they had been approved in Britain. The following year the Board of Trade ordered the Massachusetts assembly to retire all its paper money, except for £30,000 to finance its government.

In response, a group of merchants decided to set up a Land Bank to print notes, using their landholdings as security. The idea had been mooted during the previous decade, but it was the recall of the provincial bills which now led to its execution. A more conservative group then proposed a rival Silver Bank, with notes redeemable in silver. Both groups proposed to operate without a charter from the provincial legislature. At this point the British vetoed both measures by declaring that they fell within the scope of the 1720 Bubble Act, which had been passed to prevent just such enterprises. The closing of the Land Bank hurt a number of people, including the father of Samuel Adams.

Nonetheless, the Privy Council’s attempts to restrict the issue of paper proved difficult in the 1740s, for military expenditures would not wait. A number of issues were accordingly made, much to the dismay of British officials. The New England colonies were particular offenders, though they were provoked by the need to meet the cost of capturing Louisburg in 1745. Worse, their emissions were not well managed, lacking any redemption date or security in the form of tax revenue. By the end of the war the exchange rate had slumped to £12 of Massachusetts currency for £1 sterling. Fortunately Massachusetts was owed a large sum in reimbursement for its war effort, and Thomas Hutchinson persuaded the assembly to use this to redeem its near worthless currency.

Despite this far-sighted initiative, Parliament passed an act in 1750 requiring the redemption of all
existing bills in New England. In future, only sufficient paper for the government salaries and other necessary expenditures could be issued, and this amount had to be redeemed in two years, though in an emergency the period could be extended to five years. Such notes were not to be legal tender, thus restricting their use as a circulating medium.

Nevertheless, further emissions continued to be made, especially of asset-backed paper, which suffered little depreciation due to the rising value of the land offered as collateral. Hence New Jersey was allowed another £60,000 worth of bills in 1754 in recognition of its earlier judicious handling of paper. As the Board of Trade commented, the previous issues were “found to be the least burthensome method of levying taxes for the support of government” and had “also been of great service in enabling the inhabitants to extend and improve their trade.” The bills were not to be legal tender.

Even that restriction had to be lifted to stimulate the colonial war effort during the final conflict with the French and their Indian allies. The British merchants then renewed their clamors, even though Virginia stipulated in its first issue of 1755 that any discount would be made good in the settlement of sterling debts. The issue of paper was to be one element in the subsequent conflict between Britain and the colonies after 1760.

The supply of money generally seems to have sufficed. Even Britain in the eighteenth century had to manage with a mixture of barter, commodity money, paper, and coin. The colonial economy was no exception.

One aspect of the colonial economy which was favorable throughout the period was tax rates. Though the colonies had to pay the navigation duties, which could be heavy, the burden fell on the consumer rather than on the population at large. In contrast, internal taxation was light, since the government expenses were low except in wartime. The bureaucracy was tiny, and there was no standing army or fleet. Poor relief was the responsibility of the local authorities. Spending on roads or other facilities was minimal.

One reason for the popularity of paper money was that it could finance extraordinary expenditures in wartime, though ultimately such issues had to be redeemed and other obligations met. To this end taxes were most commonly levied on land or personal property. Poll taxes on adult males over 16 were another option; in the Chesapeake an export duty on tobacco was imposed, and excise duties on liquor were also adopted. But with the exception of quitrents, none was so onerous as to cause significant protest before 1760.  

6 THE STANDARD OF LIVING: POVERTY AND PROSPERITY

Whatever the restraints of the mercantilist system, the colonies developed at a remarkable pace throughout the later colonial period. Growth was by no means even, there being periods of stagnation. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that the system cannot have been too restrictive. Colonial trade with Britain grew by 700 percent in the period 1689–1760, while the population of the British North American colonies increased from 250,000 to around 1.5 million. At the same time average per capita income rose by at least 0.5 percent a year in real terms, so that the standard of living for most of the population improved by between 50 and 100 percent. The British North American colonies were among the first societies to escape the Malthusian cycle in which increased resources merely
stimulated population growth and ultimate decline in per capita income. British North Americans
never experienced the kind of famines which afflicted most European societies until the nineteenth
century.

One indication of colonial well-being was the reaction of visitors. In the seventeenth century it was
the wild appearance of the continent which drew comment, whereas by the 1750s visitors were
impressed by the general prosperity of the inhabitants. Most white men appeared to have land, and
European travelers noticed little poverty or unemployment. As a British officer commented,
"Everybody has property and everybody knows it." The general progress was well symbolized by the
rise of Philadelphia, a town that did not exist in 1682, but which by 1760 was on a par with Dublin,
Edinburgh, or Bristol. Benjamin Franklin, too, constantly emphasized the material benefits of living in
British North America. After a trip through Scotland he commented, with characteristic irony, “I
should never advise a nation of savages to submit to civilization,” suggesting that he thought even the
Indians in North America were better off than tenant farmers in the British Isles.

The same points were made more prosaically by Thomas Hutchinson in his History of
Massachusetts. He wrote, “Property is more equally distributed in the colonies… especially those to
the northward of Maryland than in any nation in Europe. In some towns you see scarce a man destitute
of a competence to make him easy.” The reason, of course, was the availability of land, which led
“most men as soon as their sons grow up endeavour to procure tracts in some new township where all
except the eldest go out one after another with a wife, a yoke of oxen, a horse, a cow or two and
maybe a few goats and husbandry tools… A small hut is built and the man and his family fare.”

Though a few such statements could be misleading, other types of evidence such as wills and
contemporary depictions of household furnishings tend to support the view that living standards were
improving, at least for the middling ranks of the settler population. Whereas in the seventeenth century
most decedents left a few tools, some rough furniture, and livestock, eighteenth-century inventories
often reveal a much richer standard of living, including china rather than coarse pottery, silverware,
furniture, clocks, warming pans, and other household items designed for decoration or comfort rather
than mere survival. Additional evidence can be obtained from the records of colonial imports. After
1700 these increasingly included what earlier would have been considered inessential luxury items:
tea, coffee, French wines, Indian silks and calicos, glass, porcelain, and even furniture. Previously
colonials had made their own, found substitutes, or done without. The first 60 years of the eighteenth
century witnessed a consumer boom which seems to suggest a standard of living 20 percent higher
than in Britain, for the middle classes at least.26

Of course, this wealth was not evenly spread, even within the colonial elite. The evidence from
wills for the year 1774 reveals that the Charleston area of South Carolina, with its large rice
plantations, had by far the highest concentration of wealth, with the estates of decedents there
averaging £2,337. The next most wealthy area was Ann Arundal in Maryland, with an average
inventoried estate of £660. Slaveholding planters in the South were substantially wealthier than elites
elsewhere, including northern merchants. Philadelphia, for all its commerce, had an average estate of
no higher than £396, while the figure in Suffolk County, Massachusetts, was just £312. New York
City was even lower with a mere £278, suggesting the presence of many middling people who
enjoyed a comfortable existence, rather than a conspicuously wealthy upper class.27

How was this prosperity achieved? One answer was greater efficiency. Although historians have
generally condemned the British North American colonial farmer for his wasteful land usage,
improvements did occur through greater knowledge of the climate and terrain. Some modest
technological improvements occurred in manufacturing and commerce, though less so in farming. Most colonials were still using tools similar to those of their seventeenth-century ancestors, though implements like plows were now used more widely. In addition, the colonial period was generally one of price stability. The price of manufactured goods actually fell as production methods improved and transport became cheaper, giving settlers greater purchasing power. Throughout the period the colonists continued to enjoy that almost unique combination of abundant land, cheap food, and unlimited fuel.

Lastly, the growth in living standards was ironically fueled by consumer behavior itself. Many historians now argue that British American colonists underwent their own consumer revolution in the eighteenth century. Whereas colonial families had once sought to replicate the familiar and traditional as they made decisions about food production and architectural styles, they now began to hunger for the new. Colonial elites led the way, developing new tastes in architecture, furniture, food, clothing, and manners so that they could present themselves as “refined” or “genteel” in the eyes of the British gentry. Middling people followed suit, adopting new customs like drinking tea out of imported china teacups, signaling new aspirations to refinement or, at least, comfort.

As consumer behavior changed, moral judgments of consumption changed along with them. Until the end of the sixteenth century only gentlefolk were expected to live sumptuously as a sign of their rank and a means whereby the social order could be maintained. Ordinary people, it was assumed, would merely be corrupted by such consumption into idleness and vice. (The purpose of sumptuary laws, which virtually all colonial governments enacted in the seventeenth century, was to prevent ordinary people from engaging in excess consumption.) By the end of the seventeenth century such attitudes had changed in favor of personal improvement. Now it was argued that many of these same luxuries were items of refinement which could be defended on moral grounds as leading to gentility.

Changes in consumer behavior and attitudes had two consequences for colonial economies. One was a surge in demand. The other was an increase in production. Colonial people underwent what has been called an “industrious revolution,” spending more of their hours in labor so as to be able to buy new objects to improve their standard of living. The Protestant work ethic was now geared to the god of consumption.

The contemporary statements of Franklin, Hutchinson, and others have encouraged the belief that British North America was the first society to banish poverty. Interestingly, Hutchinson did not say that no towns experienced any deprivation, and modern historians have shown that poverty was a growing problem in cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In the case of Boston the first serious poverty occurred after the 1690–1713 war. That conflict had precipitated a boom in shipbuilding and privateering; when it ended many seamen and carpenters were left in straitened circumstances. War widows were also badly hit. Indeed, the advent of peace ushered in a period during which the population of Boston actually fell. By 1740, 25 percent of the town’s inhabitants were living below the poverty line. Responding to this catastrophe, prominent Bostonians constructed workhouses and a linen factory where the unemployed might work and repay the cost of their upkeep. Unfortunately, this attempt to use private capital to solve unemployment in Boston was not a success: the factory was unable to compete with low-priced imports and had to close after a few years. Other towns were similarly affected by the scourge of poverty, and by 1760 even Providence had a workhouse.

Though Benjamin Franklin is known for his optimistic conviction that any man in British North America could become an economic success, Franklin’s Philadelphia belies his claims by
demonstrating the reality of urban deprivation in the eighteenth century colonies. Many artisans and laborers there were rarely above the poverty line. This was especially the case in winter, when perhaps a quarter of the workforce required relief. Many tried to avoid this humiliation, since recipients of public assistance had to wear a large letter P (for pauper) on their garments. Even when the economy was robust, many seamen, shoemakers, and journeymen tailors earned barely enough to feed, clothe, and house their families. As a result they were never able to amass enough capital to break out of their cycle of poverty, no matter how hard they worked or observed the aphorisms of Franklin’s *Poor Richard*. 

**DOCUMENT 15**


The following maxims were published by Franklin in his *Poor Richard’s Almanac*. Questions to consider: To what extent are the values Franklin espouses here still shared by Americans? To what extent is Franklin making fun of these values?

The Taxes are indeed very heavy; and if those laid on by the Government were the only ones we had to pay, we might more easily discharge them; but we have many others, and much more grievous to some of us. We are taxed twice as much by our *Idleness*, three times as much by our *Pride*, and four times as much by our *Folly*... However let us hearken to good Advice, and something may be done for us; *God helps them that help themselves, as Poor Richard says*, in his Almanack of 1733...

How much more than is necessary do we spend in Sleep! forgetting that *The sleeping Fox catches no Poultry*, and that *there will be sleeping enough in the Grave*, as Poor Richard says. If Time be of all things the most precious, *wasting Time* must be, as Poor Richard says, *the Greatest Prodigality*, since, as he elsewhere tells us, *Lost Time is never found again*; and what we call *Time-enough always proves little enough*: Let us then be up and be doing, and doing to some Purpose; so by *Diligence* shall we do more with less Perplexity. *Sloth makes all things difficult, but Industry all easy*, as Poor Richard says; and *He that riseth late, must trot all Day, and shall scarce overtake his Business at Night*. While *Laziness travels so slowly, that Poverty soon overtakes him*, as we read in Poor Richard, who adds... *Early to Bed, and early to rise, makes a Man healthy, wealthy and wise.*

Nor was poverty limited to the towns. New England farming communities increasingly warned away strangers for fear they would become a charge on the inhabitants. In Virginia the House of Burgesses passed a law in 1723 against vagabonds who were becoming a burden on the parish and county authorities. According to the most recent calculations, 30 percent of the population in that colony were poor even by the standards of the time. A similar picture pertained for Maryland, while in South Carolina the governor calculated that 6,000 of its 26,000 white population lived in dire poverty, with another 10,000 possessing only the bare necessities of life.

Historians are also now aware how large was the proportion of tenant farmers – perhaps 30 percent of all those engaged in agriculture. Since 20 percent of the population were laborers, this figure actually indicates that close to 50 percent of white males owned no land. Of course, tenancy could be the first step on the ladder to ownership; and many young men with no land were simply waiting to inherit from their parents or relatives. A study of conditions in Connecticut suggests that most males owned no land on reaching adulthood. However, by the time they were married they possessed an average of around 40 acres, which had typically increased to 100 acres by age 40. Only five percent remained permanently poor. On the other hand tenancy rates rose during the eighteenth century, especially in the South. 

Finally, although optimistic European observers rarely acknowledged them, the African slaves who
comprised some 20 percent of the colonial population lived in forced, permanent poverty. Slaves were permitted, even encouraged, to grow crops and raise poultry or hogs in order to supplement their own diets. Slaveholders in North America had an economic incentive to keep their slaves sufficiently well fed so that they would be able to work. But by the eighteenth century slaves had little or no legal right to any property of their own, and were rarely able to acquire the kinds of consumer goods that were becoming widely available to European farmers. African Americans’ standards of living improved little, if at all, over the course of the eighteenth century. Their poverty offered a stark contrast to the growing prosperity of most whites.

Thus it can still be asserted that most white persons in British colonial North America had a better chance of a comfortable existence at some point in their lives than did their counterparts in the mother country, which was why most of them, or their ancestors, had come in the first place. At the same time, poverty was growing in the cities and in parts of the South, and increasingly defined the lot of African slaves. Indeed its marks were probably now especially visible in a world where rising prosperity was coming to seem the norm.

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1 The 1707 Act of Union between England and Scotland created the United Kingdom of Great Britain. When discussing the period after that date, the noun “Britain” or adjective “British” is used in place of “England” or “English.” Too many writers use “England” when they mean Britain, to the annoyance of most Scots and Welsh.

2 An additional 100,000 people from England and Wales migrated to Ireland during the period.

3 The English population is estimated to have shrunk from 5.3 million to 5 million between 1650 and 1700.


7 It is estimated that from the introduction of sugar and slavery to Barbados in the 1630s until 1700, some 450,000 African slaves were imported into the English and French sugar colonies in the West Indies, while about 30,000 African slaves were taken to the North American mainland.


9 For the economics of the southern fur trade, see Kathryn E. Holland Braund, *Deerskins and Duffels: Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685–1815* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1993).

10 The claim that slave-owning was relatively widespread in the Chesapeake is advanced by Allan Kulikoff, in *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1986). His argument that large concentrations of Africans were rare is challenged by Philip D. Morgan and Michael L Nicholls in “Slaves in Piedmont Virginia, 1720–1790,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 46 (1989), 211–51, who found that in many piedmont counties 30 percent of Africans lived on plantations of 21 slaves or more.


13 For the distribution of income, see Alice Hansen Jones, *Wealth of a Nation To Be: The American Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1980); and section 5 of this chapter. Historians have traditionally seen the southern economy, with its concentration on a few staples, as an anomaly, compared to the diversification of the North. During the 1980s several scholars suggested that it was New England and the Middle Colonies that were anomalous in the wider context of the Americas, where cash-crop economies were the norm. See Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, *British Colonial America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore, 1984), and McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British North America*.


16 Unsurprisingly, historians have not been able to agree when a true market economy emerged. See Chapter 7, n. 6 for the historiography concerning this topic.

17 One of the earliest critics of the navigation system was George W. Bancroft, *History of the United States*, 10 vols (Boston, 1834–74). Bancroft was a member of the Whig nationalist school and was anxious to justify America’s separation from Britain in 1776. Like most nineteenth-century writers, he was overly influenced by Adam Smith and the doctrines of free trade. In the early twentieth century, Progressive historians also criticized mercantilism, believing that its restrictions left the colonies in debt. See especially Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 vols (New York, 1930); and Lawrence A. Harper, *The English Navigation Acts: A Seventeenth-Century Experiment in Social Engineering* (New York, 1939). This view was challenged by members of the imperial school. They, too, were products of the Progressive era but had more obvious Anglo-Saxon leanings which led them to emphasize the benefits of the British connection. See especially Charles McLean Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History*, 4 vols (New Haven, 1934–8); and Oliver M. Dickerson, *The Navigation Acts and the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1951). Most recent writers have been favorable to the navigation laws as a system of economic management, notably McCusker and Menard, *The Economy of British America*; and Gary M. Walton and James F. Shepherd, *The Economic Rise of Early America* (New York, 1979). The latter emphasize the advantages of competitive shipping rates, capital investment, and access to technology.


19 However, as noted in Chapter 5, section 1, it is not clear that many French people would have immigrated even in the absence of government restrictions.

20 For this estimate (as well as a discussion of the range of estimates in the historical literature), see Christopher Tomlins, “Indentured Servitude in Perspective: European Migration into North


For the accepted view that taxation was light, even during the final French and Indian War, see Lawrence Henry Gipson, *Connecticut Taxation, 1750–1775* (New Haven, 1933). That Parliament by no means reimbursed all the costs of that struggle and that considerable taxation was necessary is argued by Harold E. Selesky in *War and Society in Colonial Connecticut* (New Haven, 1989).


For further information, see Alice Hanson Jones, *Wealth of a Nation to Be*.

The issue of urban poverty is dealt with by Gary P. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social
The rapidly increasing flow of information, news, and consumer goods between the colonies and Great Britain would not only change consumer behavior and gender ideology but also affect religious ideas, educational expectations, manners, literary tastes, and even perceptions of national identity among ordinary colonists. Colonial culture changed so rapidly during the eighteenth century that its disparate strands can be difficult to make sense of. At times it seemed that colonial culture was becoming more rational, influenced by the Enlightenment and the scientific ideal. At other times it appeared that colonial culture was becoming more emotional with the growing popularity of evangelical Protestantism. Much like cultural change in the modern era, these trends can seem contradictory and impossible to reconcile. Yet one common thread runs through the many manifestations of cultural change during the era. Over time, colonial societies were becoming more integrated into the larger British empire. Their inhabitants were growing more aware of British religious movements, intellectual debates, politics, and wars. As time went on they were coming to think of themselves as Britons.

Clearly religion remained the most important aspect of colonial life, even in the South. Although
sectarian differences generally became less divisive after 1689, religion was still a crucial element in people’s lives, and provided one of the main lenses through which ordinary colonists viewed their world.

Many characteristics of seventeenth-century religions persisted in the eighteenth century. God was still seen as a vengeful deity who punished the wicked by sending them to hell. Only a minority would go to heaven. Nevertheless, important developments had taken place. In New England the need to expand the elect had led some ministers to extend the communion. The first tentative steps in this direction had been taken by Thomas Hooker in seventeenth-century Connecticut. Towards the end of his ministry, Hooker had opened communion at Hartford to all adults of good behavior, believing that only God could judge whether someone was of the elect. At the same time he urged everyone to prepare for salvation. Hooker argued that God had not necessarily made up his mind about every individual. Grace might still be achieved if the covenant were observed.

Hooker’s ideas were later adopted at Northampton, further up the Connecticut Valley, where Solomon Stoddard was the minister. Opponents like Cotton Mather understandably argued that Hooker and Stoddard were preaching a covenant of works, meaning that salvation could be achieved by doing good works rather than through faith or God’s grace. Nevertheless, Stoddard was not prevented from continuing these practices when the Massachusetts synod of ministers was convened in 1679 to discuss the issue of church declension. Increasingly others followed his lead, notably the Brattle Street Church in Boston. After 1740 most churches began offering communion to all who appeared of a godly disposition, effectively ending the distinction between the elect and the rest of the congregation. All that was now required in most places to take communion was a satisfactory preparatory examination before a minister.1

Other philosophical influences were also at work. By the start of the eighteenth century the European intelligentsia were moving towards a more rational, less theological explanation of the world, based on the scientific work of Galileo and Newton and the deductive philosophy of Locke. An intellectual revolution was in progress which even the churches could not escape. Especially important was the view that man was not the product of original sin. A benign deity had given humanity reason so that it could understand the environment and benefit there from. Opinion, in other words, was shifting towards those who believed in free will rather than predestination as the answer to salvation. Among those affected by these intellectual currents were the two Mathers. Although they continued to believe in an elect chosen through grace, they now sought to reconcile theological explanations of the world with the new insights of the natural sciences. Hence the elder Mather accepted the scientific explanation for the periodic appearance of comets, but also affirmed that they were God’s way of indicating his divine purposes. Cotton Mather argued similarly for the workings of providence when he published his views on the natural world in The Christian Philosopher in 1721.

This intellectual approach helped narrow the gap between the Congregational and Presbyterian churches, since both subscribed to many of the new ideas. One sign of this rapprochement was the readiness of the two Mathers to attend the consecration of a Presbyterian church in Boston. Clearly the Massachusetts establishment had come a long way since the time of Robert Child. Exclusivity was now less important than standing together against the growing irreligion of the population at large.

The most dramatic closing of the gap between these two churches occurred at the Connecticut synod of 1708, when the Congregational ministry adopted the Saybrook Platform, which effectively instituted a Presbyterian form of discipline. Another sign of the retreat from Congregationalism was
that the ordination of the clergy was now done entirely by the laying on of ministerial hands rather than those of the laity. The ministers felt that their congregations contained too many unregenerate elements for the old practice to continue, though another reason may have been the disproportionate number of women now comprising most congregations. The result was a further distancing of the ministers from their flock. The drift towards clericalism caused considerable disquiet and may have been one cause of the subsequent Great Awakening.

Officially or unofficially, most colonies continued to have an established church. In most of New England it remained the Congregational Church. The Massachusetts charter of 1691 stated that “there shall be a liberty of conscience allowed in the worship of God to all Christians, except papists.” This provision was interpreted to mean that each town could levy tithes for the support of a Congregational minister. Liberty of conscience did not mean the right to equal treatment. Not until 1727 and 1728 were laws passed exempting Anglicans, Baptists, and Quakers from the payment of tithes for the support of the Congregational ministry. Even then it was a case of applying for an exemption rather than an automatic right.

Connecticut and New Hampshire similarly tried to exclude other religious groups. Connecticut did grant the Baptists the right to worship in 1708, but they still had to pay tithes and obtain permission from the county court to hold their services. In this hostile climate the Anglicans did not manage to form their first church there until 1722. Between 1727 and 1729 the tithe requirement was finally abated for most denominations, including Quakers, though the exemption was still hedged by various restrictions and Connecticut was far from accepting genuine toleration. The presumption remained that minority religious groups undermined the established order and ought to be discouraged.

The only province in New England not to have an established church was Rhode Island. Here the legacy of Roger Williams prevailed: all churches had to be supported by their congregations without the aid of a tithe. The result, as Cotton Mather sarcastically observed, was that Rhode Island had “Antinomians, Familists, Anabaptists, Antisabbatarians, Arminians, Socinians, Quakers, Ranters – everything in the world but Roman Catholics and real Christians.”

Elsewhere, except for Pennsylvania and Delaware, the Anglican Church superficially reigned supreme. It had prospered in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, securing establishment in the Carolinas, Maryland, and part of New York. One sign of its growing confidence was the founding in 1701 of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, the SPG, which dispatched numerous missionaries, books, and pamphlets to the colonies. The Anglicans were also helped by the desire of several groups to ingratiate themselves with the British authorities. By 1750 many Dutch in New York City had joined Trinity Church, and Huguenots acted similarly in South Carolina. By the end of the colonial period the Anglicans had built over 400 churches, including 70 in New England. The Dutch Reformed Church in contrast had barely 60 congregations, concentrated in New York and New Jersey.

The newfound confidence of the Anglicans was reflected in the building of Christ Church, otherwise known as the Old North Church in Boston in 1723. Its steeple dominated the Puritan capital, compelling the Congregational community to respond with a similar adornment for the Old South Church in 1729. Other churches were given steeples also in an attempt to dominate the skyline. But perhaps most shocking to Congregationalists was the defection to Anglicanism in 1722 of the rector of Yale, Timothy Cutler, and another leading minister, the Reverend Samuel Johnson.

Despite these successes, the Anglican Church suffered from a number of weaknesses. In the South it tended to remain the religion of the planter class, who seemingly adopted it for reasons of social
One fundamental weakness of Anglicanism was its lack of locally trained clergy. The failure to create an American bishopric contrasted sharply with the position of the other major denominations, which had no such problems in the ordination of their ministers. The decision to place the colonies under the episcopal authority of the bishop of London in 1691 did not help, since he was too remote to exert effective leadership. Hence the church, like other institutions of the English establishment, was starved of local input and later withered like the proverbial seed in stony ground on the outbreak of the Revolution in 1776.

In addition to Rhode Island, Pennsylvania and Delaware were by the eighteenth century two other provinces not to have an established church. The Quaker conviction that religion was a matter for the individual meant that uniformity was not sought there. Only Catholics were excluded from full toleration, at the insistence of the authorities in the mother country.

Three churches – Presbyterian, Lutheran, and German Reformed – enjoyed major growth during the eighteenth century. There had been Presbyterians in America since the time of Robert Child, but they remained an insignificant group. Indeed, the church was not properly organized until 1706 when Francis Makemie, an Edinburgh-trained Scots-Irishman, succeeded in bringing the various English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish congregations together under a presbytery in Philadelphia. The subsequent arrival of more Scots following the Act of Union in 1707 and, more important, of the Scots-Irish from northern Ireland after 1717, led to such remarkable growth that by the end of the colonial period Presbyterians made up the largest denomination in the middle colonies and had significant support in Virginia and the Carolinas. By then they comprised nearly 400 congregations.

The Lutheran and German Reformed churches also flourished because of immigration, in this case from Germany. Most of the new immigrants went to Pennsylvania, though some later took the great road down the Shenandoah into the backcountry of North and South Carolina. The Lutherans, like the Church of England, subscribed to salvation through faith and similarly retained much of the former Roman liturgy. The Reformed churches, on the other hand, were strictly Calvinist and believed in purging their worship of all traces of Catholicism. By 1760 the Lutherans had around 200 churches and the German Reformed 150.

Finally, mention should be made of the German Pietist sects, the Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers, and Moravians. The Mennonites and Amish believed in the supremacy of the laity, reliance on the gospel, and the need for personal religious experience. They were in many respects close to the Quakers. The Dunkers, on the other hand, were the German equivalent of the Baptists, believing in the need for adult immersion. All three were inward-looking, concerned about their own salvation, and were limited to a few scattered communities in eastern Pennsylvania.

The Moravians, in contrast, affected to believe in St. Paul’s dictum about going out to preach to the world. Another difference was that they claimed to be part of the Lutheran Church, though in reality they were much closer to the Quaker movement. Despite their outward stance, their numbers were small even in Pennsylvania, where they comprised perhaps 2,000 believers. Their main proselytizing success proved to be with the Native American peoples, where the simplicity of their message about the love of Christ and their readiness to interpret Indian dreams made them welcome. Their most
important mission was at the Delaware village of Shamokin, near the forks of the Susquehanna River.

Obviously this was a theologically diverse population. Yet the bitter sectarian disputes of the seventeenth century had waned, at least for the time being. The defeat of the Catholic James II and the accession of the Protestant William and Mary, it has been suggested, helped to promote a new sense of pride among Britons that they were part of a Protestant nation. The Toleration Act of 1689 guaranteed dissenting Protestants the right to worship without interference by the state. While the Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic had been forced to compromise and guarantee religious toleration, New Englanders took as much pride as any Britons in being the subjects of a Protestant monarch. Congregationalist ministers like John Wise explained to their flocks that while the Crown might govern secular affairs it was still the “New England Churches” who governed men’s souls. Indeed the New England churches believed they were as quintessentialy English as any church in existence. “[T]here is in the Constitution of our Church Government more of the English Civil Government in it, and it has a better Complexion to suit the true English Spirit, than is in the English Church.”

None of this new sense of common purpose implied a loss of commitment by church leaders to their individual denominations. In fact, many churches worried during the early decades of the eighteenth century that their flocks were sinking into irreligion and godlessness. An inquiry at the end of Queen Anne’s War in Connecticut concluded that the spirit of the original covenant had “departed from us” and called for an inquiry into the state of religion.

Historians now believe that no serious declension in religious belief was taking place. Nevertheless, attempts continued to be made to enhance the appeal of the churches by relaxing membership requirements and adopting a more rational approach. Paradoxically these attempts at modernization were to cost the major churches dear. As sermons became ever more theoretical and philosophical in content, they provided opportunities for the Baptists to pick up converts from denominations which had lost their fire. The Baptists, as we have seen, had first arrived in the 1650s, preaching the need for adult baptism and attacking the idea of state-supported churches. Their simple style was beginning to win them many converts, especially in the South, where their ministers courageously journeyed to the furthest habitations. By the late colonial period they had perhaps 300 congregations.

The most persuasive challenge to the major churches came from the phenomenon known subsequently as the Great Awakening, which began in a number of different places on both sides of the Atlantic as individual ministers, mainly of a Calvinist variety, sought to revive religious feeling through evangelical methods. Their efforts involved placing greater emphasis on the four Gospels with their message of glad tidings and salvation, stressing the need for individual religious experience rather than formal acknowledgment of established doctrine. The Calvinist churches, with their greater concern about heaven, hell, and the millennium, were perhaps more open to such appeals. Accordingly, one of the first churches in the colonies to adopt this method was Theodore Frelinghuysen of the Dutch Reformed church in the Raritan Valley in 1726. His success in rousing his congregation was emulated by other ministers, notably the venerable Solomon Stoddard, who was still seeking to recreate the First Church of Christ at Northampton, Massachusetts. In New Jersey the evangelical style of preaching was first adopted by the Presbyterian William Tennent and his son Gilbert, a close associate of Frelinghuysen. They in turn inspired Jonathan Edwards, Stoddard’s successor at Northampton, to deliver a series of sermons aimed at stopping young people from “night walking, and frequenting the tavern” and other “lewd practices.” This was in 1735. Two years later
Edwards claimed in his published account, *Faithful Narrative*, that 500 persons had been saved.

The movement’s most important boost came with the arrival of George Whitefield, an Englishman who had already achieved fame in Britain as an extraordinarily effective preacher and one of the founders of Methodism. Methodists were generally Anglicans who, like many denominations, found that their church had lost its vitality in the face of abstract theology and the defense of established privileges. They preached a new evangelical message that all men could be saved if they turned to God. In some respects the Great Awakening was a return to the old belief in salvation through faith and God’s saving grace, though without the concept of an exclusive elect. This was in stark contrast to most churches which veered implicitly towards a brand of Arminianism that was linked to the concept of free will and the belief that humanity could save itself.

All this the Great Awakening rejected, seeking instead to center religion once more on the heart rather than the head, on faith rather than reason, and on grace rather than good works. Even more important than its theology was the movement’s style; its proponents reached out to the mass of the population by preaching in fields in what became the first mass revivals of modern times.

Whitefield himself came to British North America in 1739 on the first of seven tours. Beginning in Savannah, Georgia, he proceeded up the coast to Philadelphia before returning via the backcountry to Charleston. In August 1740 he traveled to New England, after drawing crowds of many thousands all along his route. In Philadelphia he impressed even the cynical Benjamin Franklin with the power of his delivery, the simpleness of his message, and his ability to be heard.

Whitefield’s greatest triumphs, however, came in New England, where his itinerant style of preaching was as yet hardly permitted. When pulpits were denied him, he took to the fields, followed by huge crowds. Everywhere he subjected his listeners to the certainty of hellfire and eternal damnation unless their repentance was immediate and complete. Thousands wept for their sins.

Whitefield and his imitators posed a serious challenge to the established churches. The speed of their conversions and their indifference to denominational boundaries inevitably caused dispute. Many ministers, recognizing the revivalists’ appeal, opened their doors in the belief that these techniques would help rekindle the religious zeal of their own congregations. Others, notably Charles Chauncey of Boston’s First Church, rejected this approach, feeling that such enthusiasm was of little value in awakening real spirituality and that only a proper appreciation of Christ could bring an individual real grace. Among the doubters, the need for caution was soon reinforced by the antics of James Davenport, who urged his followers to give away their worldly goods, including much of their clothing, and follow him dancing and singing through the streets of Boston and other New England towns.

The result was an internal split in many churches, notably among the Presbyterians of the middle colonies and the Congregationalists of New England, where both denominations established rival congregations in many towns. Among the Presbyterians divisions were especially bitter after Gilbert Tennent published his pamphlet *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry*, which attacked the conservatives. The two groups came to be known as the New and Old Lights, representing the radical and conservative wings respectively. Some of these rifts healed after a few years; others remained. Many New Lights subsequently found that the Baptist Church met their desire for a more informal, less institutionalized religion.

The dilemma posed by the twin challenges of revivalism and orthodoxy is aptly illustrated by the career of Jonathan Edwards himself. As we have seen, Edwards, like many ministers, tried to adapt the new enthusiasm to revitalize the existing Congregational Church. The theme of his most famous
sermon, delivered in 1741, was “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” during which individual members of the congregation cried out “What shall I do to be saved?” and “Oh, I am going to hell.” However, Edwards soon came to distrust the idea of simple conversion, emphasizing instead the old Calvinist view that God could not be bargained with. Repentance had to be deep and sustained. Being of the elect was still the key to salvation. He increasingly felt that the revivals could only create a better environment in which God’s purpose might be revealed. Significantly, this attempt to return to the old standards cost Edwards his pulpit in 1750.

Some historians believe that there were social and economic factors behind these divisions, noting that the supporters of the Great Awakening tended to be drawn from the young, the new commercial classes, and the poorer elements of the population, notably artisans, small farmers, and traders. Opponents, on the other hand, were largely drawn from the governing elite and merchant aristocracy. All three of the former desired to challenge the existing religious order, the exclusiveness of the political establishment, or the restrictive nature of the economy. Thus in Connecticut, the New Lights were strong in the growing commercial center of New London and recently settled towns of the interior. The Old Lights in contrast were dominant in the older towns of Hartford and New Haven. However, the evidence is by no means conclusive; for while most New Lights wanted to break the existing religious mold, they were by no means in favor of political reform or the development of a market economy with its trend towards consumerism.7

The area least affected by the Great Awakening in its early stages was the South, partly because the Anglican Church dominated the tidewater and partly because the back country was so isolated. The Anglicans were afraid of the impact that the new style of religion might have on their slaves. During the 1750s, however, Baptists like Shubal Stearns traveled through the piedmont preaching the message of salvation, so that by the end of the decade revivals were still common there long after they had ceased elsewhere. The uneven impact of the Great Awakening has led some scholars to question whether the revivals should be described as part of a single phenomenon (even though its supporters believed it was a clear manifestation of God’s work).8

Finally, some historians have suggested a link between the Great Awakening and the American Revolution, arguing that revivalism destroyed the old deference for established institutions and made it easier for the colonists to break free from Britain politically and intellectually. Furthermore, the Calvinist emphasis on an elect and the popularity of millennial thought reinforced the colonial view that they were a special people, like the children of Israel, who would be released from their bondage. Lastly, it has been argued, the Awakening provided an opportunity for an intercolonial exchange of ideas, thus helping further the development of a shared Anglo-American identity.

Certainly, the emphasis on personal salvation strengthened those elements in colonial culture which placed the individual ahead of the group and paved the way for a more democratic culture in the nineteenth century. Equally important was the revivalists’ adoption of the open-air mass meeting, where not much was required for religious topics to be supplanted by political and social ones. It was this dangerous implication of revival meetings which made so many Old Lights wary of the new movement.

Nevertheless, most scholars downplay the importance of the links. They stress the time lag between the Great Awakening and the Revolution, especially in New England and the middle colonies. Another point is the fragmented nature of the movement and the fact that it had an international dimension: it was not specifically a North American phenomenon. Evangelical revivals swept across Europe, especially England and Scotland, during the same decades. Moreover, if Calvinist theology
and millenarianism were so strong, they are curiously absent from the rhetoric of the leaders of the Revolution (although there is evidence of a strongly millennial current in popular culture which helped to build support for independence.) Finally, the idea that the New Lights provided the core leadership of the Revolution is not borne out by the subsequent careers of many Old Lights, notably Charles Chauncey, who took the lead in the controversy about a North American episcopacy and remained a strong supporter of the patriot cause.9

A more recent view suggests that the Awakening strengthened the sense of British national identity which was already emerging in the British North American colonies, rather than making them feel more distinctively American. One of its long-term consequences was to further break down sectarian barriers as people from diverse denominations became swept up in the revivals together. Rather than aiming for doctrinal purity, the evangelicals often spoke to their listeners simply as Christians. The new preaching styles they popularized became influential in many denominations. The Awakening also helped to stimulate the growth of the nonestablished denominations of the Baptists and of Methodism, both of which were more welcoming of the poor and the illiterate than most of the older sects. Thus it seems likely that the Awakening contributed to a sense among many of the British colonists that they were part of a chosen nation of Protestant believers committed to God’s purposes. That nation was clearly British.

**DOCUMENT 18**


*This description of Whitefield’s preaching techniques comes from Benjamin Franklin, who admired Whitefield’s ministry without being fully persuaded by his message. Questions to consider: What impact would attendance at one of Whitefield’s sermons be likely to have had on a rural person who had spent his whole life living in the same small village? Why do you think Whitefield was so effective?*

In 1739 arrived among us from England the Reverend Mr Whitefield who had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy taking a dislike to him, soon refused him their pulpits, and he was obliged to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers and how much they admired and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring they were naturally “half beasts and half devils.” It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants, from being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the streets in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street…

I happened soon after to attend one of his sermons, in the course of which I perceived he intended to finish with a collection and silently resolved he should get nothing from me. I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars, and five pistoles in gold. As he proceeded, I began to soften and concluded to give the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all…

Some of Mr Whitefield’s enemies affected to suppose that he would apply these collections to his own private emolument, but I who was intimately acquainted with him (being employed in printing his sermons and journals, etc.) never had the least suspicion of his integrity, but am to this day decidedly of opinion that he was in all his conduct a perfectly honest man.

2 EDUCATION

The United States has a long tradition of providing free schooling for its citizens and was the first
nation to do so. The origins of this achievement can be traced back to the colonial period.

We have seen that the first educational establishments, notably those in New England, were motivated by religious considerations. Persons wishing to be saved must be conversant with the word of God and therefore required the ability to read the Bible. Another consideration was the need for a trained ministry.

To these ends schools and colleges were established from an early stage in New England. A Massachusetts law of 1647, the first to regulate education, stated that if parents neglected to instruct their children, the selectmen could apprentice them so that they could “read and understand the principles of religion and the capital laws of the country.” Connecticut passed a similar law in 1650.

In smaller communities most instruction was provided in “dame” schools, where the teacher was a female member of the church. Only the larger towns could afford a qualified master to run a grammar school, and these were restricted to boys. Nevertheless, by 1700 in New England some 70 percent of men and 45 percent of women could read and write. The figures continued to climb throughout the colonial period as communities became more settled, but literacy remained essentially a religious rather than a secular quest. This is reflected in the principal book used by children after 1686, the New England Primer, which, apart from the alphabet and a list of syllables, contained mostly hymns, prayers, biblical stories, and accounts of Protestant martyrs. Not until the 1760s were materials like Tom Thumb’s Song Book and Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe used. The value of education in advancing a person’s skills and livelihood was not generally accepted until after the Revolution.10

Outside New England, schooling was more haphazard, on account of different attitudes among the other churches. Most left the attainment of salvation to guidance by the minister rather than personal study by the individual. Such elitist views were especially prevalent in the Anglican Church. The rector’s sermons, services, and parish visits were thought to be sufficient guidance for the congregation, though education was seen as a legitimate part of the missionary process. Those least concerned with education were the Baptists and Quakers, who relied on inspiration and spontaneity, for which neither formal training nor literacy was necessary, though this attitude started to change once these sects became more institutionalized.

In the middle and southern colonies schooling was accordingly left to individual parishes and communities. Large towns like New York and Philadelphia had schools by the end of the seventeenth century, though their emphasis remained religious. The first school in New York was established by the Dutch Reformed Church, followed in 1710 by Trinity School, an SPG foundation. In Philadelphia the first educational institution was the Friends’ School, founded by the Quakers in 1689, in part to maintain their tribal purity which made separate educational facilities seemingly necessary. Elsewhere, especially in the South, the only instruction available was by private tutor, though many parents did their best to pass on their skills. In reality, appreciation of the need for education had not advanced much beyond the time of Sir William Berkeley, who proudly boasted that Virginia had neither printing presses nor free schools, which he believed was a blessing, since they merely encouraged sedition and rebellion.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the need for better schools outside New England was recognized not just by the churches. This increased awareness in part reflected a growing need for clerks and other literate persons in commerce, law, and administration. The growth of education was also a response to the Enlightenment, as the more affluent began to sense that they could improve themselves materially as well as morally if they were educated.

These factors resulted in greater efforts to provide schooling. In Maryland attempts were made in
1723 to set up county schools for the poor, albeit unsuccessfully, while in the Charleston area a number of “free” schools were established where only the better off had to pay. This increase in schools in turn led more people to contemplate a career in teaching, which had now become accepted as a separate vocation from the ministry, though many people continued to practice both. Another aid to educational expansion was an increase in the number of legacies left to schools. The consequence was a respectable increase in literacy even in Virginia, where perhaps two-thirds of males could read documents and sign their names by 1760, though an ability to read did not necessarily mean an ability to write. Pennsylvania had roughly the same literacy level.

The figure for women’s literacy is less definite. Since women were expected to marry and wives could not normally participate in business transactions, girls were offered less education. In particular, girls were not taught to sign their names, so tended to sign documents with a mark even if they knew how to read. For this reason, it has been difficult for historians to measure women’s literacy. However, women often did know how to read the Bible. For the daughters of the elite, music, penmanship, and foreign languages were sometimes added, in order to give girls some social polish. Female literacy was undoubtedly aided by the new form of literature, the novel. Especially influential was Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*, which took the form of an exchange of letters between two young women.

**Figure 22** “A Westerly View of the Colledges…” (Harvard College), attributed to Paul Revere. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts.

We have already seen that New England was also at the forefront of higher education with the founding of Harvard in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to provide a trained ministry. The college was never intended solely as a seminary, for in addition to theological topics, instruction was offered in “good literature, arts and sciences.” Nevertheless, until the end of the colonial period any male wishing to graduate in anything other than classics, divinity, and philosophy had to journey across the Atlantic for his education. The most popular subjects were medicine in Edinburgh and law in London.

Life at Harvard was very formal. Freshmen were not allowed to wear gowns or carry canes, and all undergraduates had to doff their caps on passing the president’s house. They were similarly required to salute at 50 yards when meeting the president in the street and had to acknowledge
professors and tutors at 40 and 25 yards respectively.

Harvard remained the only institution of higher learning in British North America for 50 years until the College of William and Mary was established at Williamsburg in 1693 as a belated response by the Anglican community there to the need for a trained ministry. The lack of a higher institution to prepare Anglican clergy had hampered the Episcopalian cause, although with no bishop in the American colonies, candidates still had to cross the Atlantic to be ordained. The first president and founding father was a Scottish Episcopalian, James Blair, who always intended William and Mary to be a college as well as a seminary to cater to the needs of the Virginian planters.

Blair’s friendship with John Locke was reflected in the college’s curriculum, which provided for the study of medicine and law in addition to the more traditional classics and theology. In 1717 the first chair in natural philosophy and mathematics was created. But though generously endowed, the college languished because of internal squabbles. A serious fire also destroyed most of the main building in 1705. As a result some planters continued to send their sons to England for their education, especially in law.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, Harvard had begun to adopt more liberal attitudes in religious matters, reflecting the growth of Arminian views. Not everyone welcomed this trend, and as a result Yale was founded in New Haven in 1701 to produce ministers of a more orthodox stance. The curriculum at the new college was similar to that of Harvard in the previous century, having a heavy emphasis on classics, divinity, and philosophy. In due course Yale, too, found that it could not divorce itself from the intellectual currents which were sweeping Europe. By 1760 it was little different from its rival.

The middle colonies had to wait longer for an institution of higher learning. New York lacked a single dominant religious group, while Quaker Pennsylvania felt no need of one, having no trained ministry. The Quakers in any case laid more emphasis on the “university of life,” as Benjamin Franklin termed it. However, as the Presbyterians grew in strength, they became increasingly eager to have some institution to train their ministers. A few candidates attended Harvard, and in 1726 William Tennent established a “log college” at Neshaminy in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, which trained some 20 ministers before closing its doors through lack of funding. Accordingly, in 1746 a group of New Light Presbyterians, led by Jonathan Dickinson, a Yale-trained New Englander, with the enthusiastic support of the Neshaminy-trained ministers, founded the College of New Jersey. Initially this operated from Dickinson’s house in Elizabethtown, before moving on his death to Newark. Finally, in 1754 new premises were established at Princeton, though the college was not known by that name until the 1760s. From the beginning it was interdenominational; indeed, its third president was Jonathan Edwards. And like Harvard, Yale, and William and Mary, Princeton had many students who were not candidates for the ministry.

Figure 23 College of New Jersey (later Princeton University). Engraving by Henry Dawkins, 1764. A northwest prospect of Nassau Hall with a front view of the president’s house. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.
Meanwhile, under Benjamin Franklin’s guidance, in 1751 the Academy of Philadelphia had been founded, with the distinction of being the first secular institution to impose no religious test for admission. Initially it was designed to be only a school, but in 1755 a three-year undergraduate program was added, after which its name was changed to the Academy and College of Philadelphia. From the beginning its aim was to promote knowledge as an end in itself. As Franklin argued in his initial appeal, this was the surest way to advance “the happiness both of private families and of commonwealths.” Franklin was heavily influenced by his Quaker surroundings and by the educational philosophy of Locke. The academy therefore placed a heavy emphasis on what was useful. Among the proposed subjects were arithmetic, accounts, geometry, and astronomy. Also included were English and history, to show “the beauty and usefulness of virtue”; natural history and botany, to contribute to the “improvement of agriculture”; and mechanics, “by which weak men perform such wonders, labour is saved, [and] manufactures expedited.” The academy also taught Greek and Latin, which were useful in the study of divinity, law, medicine, and modern languages. Franklin’s academy has often been seen as the forerunner of the future public school system of the United States. It was certainly no coincidence that the University of Pennsylvania was later to be the first institution of higher learning to have a medical school, in 1765.

Lastly, in 1754 New York obtained its first institution of higher learning with the establishment of King’s College. The Anglicans had tried to charter a college in 1746 but had been prevented by the Presbyterians in the assembly, where neither group was sufficiently dominant to dictate its wishes. When King’s College finally opened, therefore, it was effectively a nondenominational institution. Its curriculum was centered on “the learned languages” and “liberal arts and sciences.” Entrants had to be able to read and write, have basic arithmetic, and possess a good knowledge of Greek and Latin. It, too, added a medical school in 1767.

**DOCUMENT 19**


*The law was just beginning to become more professional when John Adams set out to be a lawyer after graduating from Harvard. This segment of his diary describes the subjects he was advised to master in order to practice law. Questions to consider: Was the legal profession open to any person in the colonies who wanted to enter it? What*
kinds of skills, knowledge, and qualities was Adams urged to cultivate in order to become a lawyer?

Went in the morning to Mr Gridleys, and asked the favour of his Advice what Steps to take for an Introduction to the Practice of Law in this Country. He answered “get sworn” [i.e. at the bar]…

ADAMS: But in order to that, sir, as I have no Patron, in this County.

GRIDLEY: I will recommend you to the Court. Mark the Day the Court adjourns to in order to make up Judgments. Come to Town that Day, and in the mean Time I will speak to the Bar for the Bar must be consulted, because the Court always inquires, if it be with the Consent of the Bar.

Then Mr Gridley inquired what Method of Study I had pursued, what Latin Books I read, what Greek, what French. What I had read upon Rhetorick. Then he took his Common Place Book and gave me Lord Hale’s Advice to a Student of the Common Law, and when I had read that, he gave me Lord Chief Justice Reeves’ Advice to his Nephew, in the Study of the common Law. Then Hegavemea Letter from Dr. Dickins, Regius Professor of Law at the University of Cambridge, to him, pointing out a Method of Studying the civil Law. Then he turned to a Letter He wrote himself to Judge Lightfoot, Judge of the Admiralty in Rhode Island, directing a Method of Studying the Admiralty Law. Then Mr. Gridley run a Comparison between the Business and studies of a Lawyer or Gentleman of the Bar, in England, and that of one here. A Lawyer in this Country must study common Law and civil Law, and natural Law, and Admiralty Law, and must do the duty of a Counsellor, a Lawyer, an Attorney, a solicitor, and even of a scrivener, so that the Difficulties of the Profession are much greater here than in England…

I have a few Pieces of Advice to give you Mr. Adams. One is to pursue the Study of the Law rather than the Gain of it. Pursue the Gain of it enough to keep out of the Briars, but give your main Attention to the study of it.

The next is not to marry early. For an early Marriage will obstruct your Improvement, and in the next Place, twill involve you in Expence.

Another Thing is not to keep much Company. For this application of a Man who aims to be a lawyer must be incessant. His Attention to his Books must be constant, which is inconsistent with keeping much Company.

By 1760, then, six colonies had institutions of higher learning. Five of them were in the North, reflecting the concentration of dissenting churches there. All were exclusively male. An increasing number of students no longer intended to be ministers, having more secular ends in view. For a growing segment of the elite and the upper middle classes, saving the world was no longer a primary aim. But although all the colleges were broadening their curriculum, they still only partially met the needs of professions like law and medicine. Nor did the situation change dramatically in the 1760s. Of the three new institutions of higher education founded before the Revolution, two – Rutgers (Dutch Reformed) and Brown (Baptist) – were overtly religious; and Dartmouth, though affecting to be interdenominational, provided a traditional curriculum based on Christianity and the classics. Until the Revolution, those who could not afford to study law and medicine in Europe had to graduate from a colonial college and then practice with someone already qualified in the profession (see Document 19).

3 THE ANGLICIZATION OF TASTE

Traditionally, historians viewed the eighteenth century as a time when the British North American colonies were becoming distinctively American. Many historians today have concluded that in reality the colonies were becoming anglicized as the century progressed.11

Originally, when the colonists first came over during the seventeenth century, they were clearly English in their cultural attitudes. Then over time the unfamiliar environment compelled them to adapt their styles of life, modifying dress, food, housing, and farming methods. In many cases they borrowed agricultural techniques, crops, and even cuisine from Native Americans and adapted it to their own cultures. A landscape full of unfamiliar animals and potentially hostile native inhabitants caused the
colonists to change their language and adopt new words from Native American languages. They developed a simplified standard of living more appropriate to an environment in which consumer goods were hard to come by.

Yet with the advent of the eighteenth century, colonists in the more settled areas became eager to acquire British goods and manners and to develop British tastes. They bought British books and copied London furniture styles. They aspired to become more sophisticated and “polite.” In some respects, they were no different from their counterparts at home, for Great Britain itself was in the throes of a consumer revolution, in which the emerging middle classes were adopting the fashions, dress, and lifestyles of the aristocracy. In addition the British colonists had some of their own distinct reasons for emulating the British gentry. As discussed in the previous chapter, during the late seventeenth century an established colonial elite had emerged whose members aspired to be recognized as part of the gentry class. Fulfilling these aspirations required them to conform to the standards of refinement, in terms not only of living standards and consumer preferences but also of education, manners, and even artistic tastes. Second, the new efficiency of transatlantic communication in the eighteenth century had increased the amount of information available to people in the British North American colonies about what was going on in Britain. Their greater awareness of their connection with Great Britain gave colonial people a strong sense of pride and shared commitment to the mother country. A third factor was the increasing availability of consumer goods, which spurred even ordinary people to aspire to become more fashionable. Since London and other major British cities were recognized as the centers of fashion, becoming more fashionable by definition meant emulating the British.

Several historians argued that the anglicization of British North American culture also heightened the colonists’ awareness of class differences. Indeed more affluent colonists were eager to distinguish themselves from ordinary people by observing the new code of genteel refinement which had begun in the royal households of Europe before spreading to the gentry and commercial classes. Among its requirements was politeness of speech, especially the use of “please” and “thank you.” Refinement also required individuals to be clean and their surroundings to be neat. Particular attention was given to improving eating habits through the use of cutlery, plates, chairs, and linen rather than hands, bowls, and stools, which latter methods inevitably led to stained and smelly clothing. The aim everywhere was to elevate and refine in order to create a pleasing impression. Those who thought of themselves as polite invariably looked down on ordinary people with their unrefined manners and undeveloped sensibilities and tastes.

At the same time, manners offered a relatively fluid way of demarcating class boundaries. Unlike the traditional British idea that membership in the elite depended on birth and inherited status, the concept of refinement which was developing in the northern colonies tended to stress that it was a person’s ability to display polite behavior, dress fashionably, and attain a particular level of education that made him a gentleman. Thus a man from an urban artisan’s family like Benjamin Franklin, or a man from a moderately prosperous but essentially undistinguished farming family like John Adams, could aspire to rise to the upper middle class by becoming well educated and learning to act the part of a gentleman. In the South, access to upper and upper middle-class status appears to have depended upon more traditional markers, such as distinguished family connections and ownership of considerable quantities of land (and slaves), although refinement was important here too. However, in the more commercially oriented North, where merchants dominated the society, refinement could turn a man with money into a gentleman within a single generation.
The desire among merchants, professionals, upwardly mobile artisans, and planters to be thought of as refined, sophisticated, and “polite” helps to explain a great deal about the culture that developed in the long-settled areas of the eastern seaboard by 1700. Of course members of this group represented a minority of the colonial population, even if their group was growing. The differences (and to some extent the similarities) between their cultural sensibilities and those of the vast majority of the population can be seen in a survey of the kinds of reading material consumed by the literate population.

4 LIBRARIES, LITERATURE, AND THE PRESS

The earliest libraries in British North America belonged to private individuals and were relatively small and few in number. The first collection of a public nature was set up in Boston’s town house and comprised mainly the books of Robert Keayne, a merchant who died in 1656 and bequeathed his collection to the town. Most of its stock was of a religious nature.

Book-collecting, like education, had been motivated largely by religion in its early stages. At the turn of the eighteenth century Dr Thomas Bray, one of the founders of the SPG, established several libraries, primarily for the benefit of the Anglican clergy. Among the most notable were those at Annapolis, Maryland and at Charleston, South Carolina.

As the century progressed men from the merchant and planter classes began to demand more secular collections, leading to the founding of private subscription libraries. The first of these was the Library Company of Philadelphia in 1731, in which development the indefatigable Franklin played a prominent role. It was funded by a subscription of 40 shillings and prominent among its early purchases were various works on science. The scheme proved sufficiently successful for Charleston to establish a similar library in 1748, followed by New York City in 1754. The joining fee for the latter was £5, with an annual subscription thereafter of 10 shillings. The New York Society Library, as it was called, inherited a collection of books originally donated by Bray, but it quickly set about expanding its selection to meet the changing tastes. A new form of literature, the novel, proved popular, especially works by Richardson and Smollett. By 1760 some 20 such libraries had been established. All were private libraries created for the use of the subscribers; none were public libraries in the modern sense of being open to ordinary people.

Outside the main towns, people had to buy their own books. As they were relatively expensive, purchasers were generally members of the clergy, lawyers, and the small but increasing number of well-educated people who affected to believe in the enlightened mind, not least the Virginia plantocracy. Among the more notable collections were those of Robert Carter, who had 1,200 volumes at his death in 1732, and Cotton Mather, whose collection amounted to some 3,000 volumes when he died in 1727.

The content of library collections by mid-century provides good evidence that men who aspired to be part of the colonial elite were expected to have read, or at least to be aware of, the major European poets, philosophers, and scientific thinkers, along with some of the classics. A good subscription library would contain the poetry of Pope, Dryden, Milton, and Spenser; the plays of Shakespeare, Moliere, Congreve, and Addison; the novels of Smollett, Richardson, Fielding, and Sterne; and the political and philosophical works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Locke, Sidney, Swift, Bolingbroke, and Hume. Also indispensable were a good selection of the classics: Cicero, Tacitus,
Livy, Seneca, Aristotle, Terence, Virgil, and Homer; the historical works of Robertson, Hume, and Clarendon; and the scientific works of Buffon and Newton. Finally, no library was considered complete without some sermons and the legal works of Coke, Bracton, and Fortescue.

Few of these books were published in the colonies, though an increasing number of printing presses were being established. The first press opened in Boston in 1638, but it was mainly for official business. Most of its other publications were of a religious nature, for example, the Bay Psalm Book in 1640. The literary output of this as well as of later local presses gives a good idea of the types of books that ordinary colonists were likely to read. Religious tracts and essays were always popular. A perennial bestseller was Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, an account of the sufferings of Protestants who had been executed during Queen Mary’s reign. Another literary genre to attain popularity in New England was the narratives of those captured by Indians during the various wars with the Indians and the French, the most notable being that of Mary Rowlandson, which first appeared in 1682.

Outside of New England the development of printing was considerably slower. Nevertheless, by the eighteenth century nearly all the colonies had at least one press for producing official documents, while the larger provinces had several. In 1738 the first non-English press appeared in Pennsylvania to cater to the colony’s German community.

Relatively few books were written by colonial British North Americans before 1760, and even fewer of these were actually published there, though the number was growing. In 1702 Cotton Mather produced his *Magnalia Christi Americana* in Boston. This work consisted of a history of New England, supposedly from the ecclesiastical point of view of explaining divine providence, although it included most of the key events concerning the colony’s settlement and expansion. Three years later Robert Beverley, Jr. produced his *History and Present State of Virginia*, a more secular account. This work was the first to be written in the mainland British colonies from a consciously American point of view. The newfound pride of the Virginian elite led the Reverend Hugh Jones to produce a similar volume in 1726, entitled the *Present State of Virginia*. Elsewhere the desire to understand the North American environment stimulated John Lawson to write his *New Voyage to Carolina* in 1707 and Cadwallader Colden to produce his *History of the Five Indian Nations* in 1727, while in 1757 William Smith published his *History of the Province of New York*. By then most provinces had seen some work published about their history or physical environment.

Apart from works of a religious, historical, or topographical nature, the most regularly printed work was the almanac. This useful compendium of information about the political and physical world was an indispensable tool for upwardly mobile urban artisans and merchants. Since almanacs were cheaper and more widely distributed than books, there is reason to think they were read by a broader cross-section of the population as well, along with the Bible and locally published religious tracts. The most famous almanac was Franklin’s *Poor Richard’s Almanac*, which first appeared in 1732, though there were a number of competing publications.

The first weekly newspaper in the colonies was the *Boston News-Letter*, founded in 1704. The second was the *Boston Gazette*, established in 1719. That same year marked the appearance of Philadelphia’s first newspaper, the *American Mercury*, on which the youthful Franklin was employed. New York followed in 1725 with the *New York Gazette*, while Charlestonians saw the appearance of the *South Carolina Gazette* in 1732. By 1760 Boston had four newspapers and five other printing establishments, Philadelphia two newspapers and three other presses, New York three newspapers, and Charleston two. Other newspapers were published in Williamsburg, Annapolis, Germantown, New Haven, New London, Newport, and Portsmouth. The distribution, if not the sale,
of newspapers was assisted by the establishment of a post office in 1710, which had a network of some 65 offices by 1770, serving all 13 continental colonies.

Newspapers were aimed squarely towards an audience of merchants and their relatively well-to-do customers. Most contained advertisements for the sale of goods and the arrival and departure times of ships. The news they reported was almost entirely news of European events, reflecting the increasing interest of merchants and the rural gentry in metropolitan culture. When Franklin and his partner David Hall took over Pennsylvania’s second newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, in 1729, they announced that they would provide more coverage of public events, history, diplomatic affairs, and matters of cultural and scientific interest. Their model was the London *Spectator*, which was popular on both sides of the Atlantic. It does not seem to have bothered readers that the news and information found in the newspapers rarely touched upon local events. Their identities were becoming increasingly bound up with their self-concept as educated and sophisticated Britons. Moreover their livelihoods were increasingly dependent on transatlantic trading, so it made sense for them to stay informed about international diplomacy and war. Awareness of European affairs helped them to assess their investment risks.

## 5 SCIENCE AND THE ARTS

The eighteenth century was an age of science, and upper-class British North Americans were keen students. They were loath to think of themselves as unsophisticated provincials; they wanted to stay up to date with most important new ideas. Moreover, living in a new world, many of them were genuinely eager to understand their environment, and found many of the traditional religious explanations no longer convincing. In this context the Enlightenment in Europe, with its stress on understanding the universe through analysis and observation, proved an important influence.

Philadelphia was perhaps the most important center of science and technology, its position reflecting the Quaker belief in reason and the notion that God had given man his intellect to understand his environment. Equally, it was no coincidence that from 1743 Philadelphia was the home of the American Philosophical Society, the first colonial institution dedicated to scientific enquiry. Five of its first nine trustees were Quakers or had been members of the Society of Friends.

The most famous of the trustees was Benjamin Franklin, though of course he was not a Quaker. He was a New Englander by birth but had left Boston when still a youth. It was Franklin who was instrumental in getting the society started. He conducted numerous experiments himself, notably those in which he identified electricity’s positive and negative qualities. Out of his observations came the lightning conductor, a useful invention which reduced the risk of fire. This was one of the attractions of science: the production of useful gadgets which would improve the quality of life. Later, Franklin helped devise a stove which required less air, burned more slowly, and gave out greater heat, thus making homes less draughty and easier to keep warm.¹⁵

Another Philadelphia Quaker interested in science was James Logan, who helped classify the flora and fauna of North America. Also resident in the city was John Bartram, who in 1728 established the first botanical garden and later traveled throughout the known portions of the continent collecting plants. It was in Philadelphia, too, that David Rittenhouse, a clockmaker, subsequently built the first orrery, or model for explaining the planetary system.

Of course scientific inquiry was not restricted to Philadelphia. Paradoxically, Boston, the home of
Puritanism, was not without its cognoscenti. We have seen that many ministers accepted the new scientific revolution to keep their theology relevant, and some even engaged in scientific inquiry themselves. Increase Mather, in cooperation with Dr Zabdiel Boylston, experimented with inoculation after learning of its use in Africa from his slave Onesimus, persuading some inhabitants of Boston to adopt the practice during a smallpox epidemic in 1721. In general New Englanders excelled in the more theoretical sciences. Thomas Robie identified the nature of a meteor. John Winthrop IV, the Harvard professor of mathematics and natural philosophy, worked on sunspots, the transit of Venus, the lunar eclipse, and Halley’s comet.

Figure 24 Portrait of Benjamin Franklin at the age of 54. Engraving by James McArdell after Benjamin Wilson. Benjamin Franklin Collection, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University Library.

All these individuals recognized the desirability of a forum in which to exchange their ideas. One such was of course the Royal Society in London, to which no fewer than 18 British Americans belonged during the colonial period. Colonials contributed substantially to the society’s published transactions, and the establishment of a British North American post office in 1710 facilitated the dissemination of its ideas. Traveling across the Atlantic, however, was not feasible on a regular basis.

Accordingly, in 1727 Franklin and several others established the Junto Club in Philadelphia. This
group, which helped John Bartram to continue his observations about the botanical nature of the North American continent, later expanded to become the American Philosophical Society. Elsewhere, several New Yorkers attempted to establish a similar project in 1748 with their Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge. Despite its title it was designed to complement the activities of the Royal Society, though its name exhibited that later American tendency to view all knowledge as potentially useful. In any event it failed to survive. So too did the American Philosophical Society. Before 1760 colonial science was not yet ready to stand on its own feet. Its practitioners remained essentially field workers for scientists in Europe, on whom they depended for the manufacture of accurate instruments and the publication of learned materials. The American Philosophical Society was re-established on a permanent basis only in 1768.

The fine arts meanwhile were in their infancy, with only a tiny leisured class to patronize aspiring artists. Although portraiture became increasingly popular during the eighteenth century as middle-and upper middle-class people commissioned portraits of themselves and their families, most of the work was done by amateur artists. Generally they were engravers or house painters who practiced portraiture to enhance their incomes. No painters developed the artistry and skill necessary for critical recognition among Europeans until after 1760. However, several artists emerged in the 1760s who were to win recognition at the highest level, notably John Singleton Copley, Benjamin West, and Charles Willson Peale. All had to travel to Europe to complete their training.

Classical music was also embryonic. During the seventeenth century the Puritans had been opposed to elaborate music and the use of musical instruments in church, which they considered to be relics of Catholicism within the church. Therefore people sang psalms entirely without musical accompaniment (and usually with no melody or harmony either). However, by the eighteenth century there was a movement to improve church music by teaching people how to sing by note. Organs began to appear in some Anglican churches early in the century, although no Congregationalist church allowed one before 1770. Upwardly mobile urban people began to patronize music and dancing schools, and planters hired music and dancing teachers for themselves and their children. Concerts began to be arranged in the principal towns, where there were sufficient violinists, cellists, flautists, and other instrumentalists to perform the works of composers such as Handel, Bach, and Vivaldi. The first formal concert of classical music took place in Boston, in 1731. By the 1750s New York had a regular series of subscription concerts. The performers were almost all amateurs, there being as yet no professional class of musicians.

The theater was a greater challenge. Until the 1700s going to a play was considered the equivalent of visiting a brothel and most colonies banned both forms of entertainment. Even in the eighteenth century many (especially in New England) considered theater immoral, but the colonial upper classes’ growing aspirations for sophistication and refinement induced some desire to see the works of great dramatists performed. The first permanent theater was established in Williamsburg in 1716 when two dancers, Charles and Mary Stagg, obtained permission to erect a stage. Here they produced a number of plays for several years. Slowly other groups emerged, mostly of a private or amateur nature. The most popular productions were George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* and Joseph Addison’s *Cato*. By the 1730s all the major cities had hosted some kind of theater. Several theatrical groups toured the colonies in the late 1740s and early 1750s, by which time Shakespeare had become the most popular playwright. No play, however, had yet been written or performed by a colonial author.
6 POPULAR CULTURE

Buying books, attending college, joining learned societies, and going to classical concerts were activities reserved for those who aspired to be part of the colonial elite. Most colonists had neither the money nor the inclination for these activities. It was not that they lacked time for entertainment – there were only rare periods in a year when work could not be interrupted, and farmers had a great deal of time on their hands during the winter. However, their main types of entertainment were different – less “refined,” but just as important to their sense of who they were.

Colonial British North Americans, like early modern people throughout the Western world, were sociable people, and their amusements mostly involved spending time with family and neighbors. There was little privacy. Family members spent much of their time together in a central room within their houses; neighbors often stopped by to share work and gossip. Socializing was routine. In the South, visitors stopped in and stayed to be entertained. Communal work activities like barn-raisings, corn-huskings, and quilting bees were opportunities for parties with food, drink, and other entertainment. Singing was popular and often accompanied by instruments such as the fiddle or the cittern, a stringed instrument resembling a mandolin or a banjo. When space allowed dancing was popular.

Despite the fact that most colonial people worked in or around their own houses, they had fairly frequent occasions for leaving home and socializing outside their neighborhoods as well. The most frequent opportunity for socializing was the weekly Sabbath. During the seventeenth century, dissenting Protestants had warned against treating Sundays as occasions for recreation – they were supposed to be devoted to family religious instruction, edifying sermons, and prayers. But even for the strictest seventeenth-century Puritans, Sundays offered a chance to socialize. And in the South, the visiting and chatting that took place before and after religious services sometimes seemed to be more important to the participants than the service itself.

In summer other occasions for social activity arose at markets, fairs, and meetings of the county court. In the South these three events were often combined. The courts gave planters a chance to discuss business and traders to exhibit their goods, while those wishing to see an attorney could do so at the same time. Inevitably such occasions also attracted traveling showmen. Bear-baiting and cock-fighting were common, drinking at the local tavern more so. Local groups of musicians invariably gathered, and those who wished to could dance. Some of the gentry might also arrange a horse race on which bystanders could bet.

Northern court meetings tended to be more decorous, though entertainments were customary at ceremonies like the installation of a governor or celebration of the king’s birthday. Here again fringe activities would be organized so that those attending could combine business with pleasure.

Men had more opportunities to socialize than women. One major event for young men was the militia training day, which in some colonies took place every couple of months. By the eighteenth century the threat of Indian attack was no longer imminent in long-settled areas of the east coast, and militia training days involved only a few hours of drills, a few times a year. During the rest of the day young men partied and took part in athletic contests, devoting so little attention to their military drills that one observer in 1704 sarcastically referred to militia training in New England towns as the “Olympiack games.” Election days were similarly occasions for men to gather and socialize, although since the men attending these events tended to be older and more established, they were not as rowdy.
Socializing was of course an activity that took place across society, regardless of class. By the eighteenth century, though, even the most ordinary kinds of social activities were becoming demarcated by class lines. Taverns are a good example. By the eighteenth century virtually every community along the eastern seaboard had a tavern or an inn, usually run out of somebody’s house. In towns and cities, taverns were more numerous. Of course all provided alcoholic beverages, a pleasure that was available on a daily basis, and most catered primarily to men. Provided consumption was not excessive, most men saw no contradiction between going to church in the morning and visiting the tavern at night. Taverns provided them with an opportunity to socialize, talk business, and increasingly discuss political issues after 1760. It was the kind of tavern that one frequented, and the kinds of entertainments offered there, that were now beginning to differentiate these men by class. Taverns aimed at artisans and laborers provided pugilistic contests and covert gaming. Those aimed at the upper classes provided newspapers, billiard tables, playing cards, and rooms for private meetings. Some upper-class men formed clubs that met regularly at such establishments, including the first Masonic lodges in Philadelphia in 1730 and Boston, Charleston, and Savannah shortly afterwards.¹⁸

There was at least one type of social occasion that served to reinforce people’s common identity as members of a larger group: the celebration of holidays. When the Puritans abolished the celebration of Christmas and other saints’ days and replaced them with occasional days of thanksgiving, they had engaged in a conscious attempt to create a shared sense of membership in a biblically ordained, godly commonwealth. Thanks to their efforts, the celebration of saints’ days never took hold in the New England colonies. However, after the Glorious Revolution a number of official royal holidays began to be celebrated throughout the British North American colonies. One of these was the king’s birthday, which people everywhere commemorated by lighting bonfires, holding parades, shooting off fireworks and drinking toasts. Royal holidays were declared every time a new governor arrived to govern one of the provinces. By the 1730s, new holidays had been declared to celebrate the birthdays of the queen and the Prince of Wales.

Probably the most important of the new British holidays, especially in New England, was the annual celebration of Pope’s Day on November 5. Pope’s Day commemorated the failure of an event in 1605 known as the Gunpowder Plot, when Catholics led by Guy Fawkes had attempted to blow up Parliament. The anniversary of this event was marked by ceremonies and parades all over Britain, where it was called Guy Fawkes’ Day. After the Glorious Revolution it came to be celebrated in many British North American towns and cities as well. Nowhere was Pope’s Day embraced more enthusiastically than in the towns and cities of New England, where it became an occasion for demonstrating vociferously against Catholicism. Boston’s celebrations were the most colorful. At the beginning of the day church leaders provided sermons denouncing Catholicism. Then artisans and laborers from all over the city organized parades in which they dressed up in costumes, built floats to carry effigies of the pope, the devil, and the deposed king James II (the “Catholic Stuart Pretender”), and paraded to the town common where they burned the effigies in a great bonfire. The celebration was lubricated with plenty of alcohol and by the 1750s came to involve contests between rival gangs from either end of town to see which could more effectively destroy the other’s pope.¹⁹

Despite the disorder it produced, Pope’s Day was widely approved by colonial officials. Like sending children to be educated in England or imitating the manners and clothing of the aristocracy, encouraging Pope’s Day celebrations helped to reinforce loyalty to the British empire. Like the people who participated in the revivals of the Great Awakening, urban people who built floats and
bonfires on Pope’s Day learned that what they all shared was their commitment to the higher cause of defending Protestantism against the Catholic threat. All of these practices changed colonial aspirations and linked people emotionally to a larger entity, what they imagined as a Protestant British empire. It encouraged people to think of themselves as Britons, loyal subjects of a great empire, entitled to the respect and the rights that were due to them as Englishmen. Their future was bright, full of optimism that as Britons, they would continue to grow prosperous and powerful.

1 On the abandonment of the requirement that all candidates relate their conversion experience, see Baird Tipson, “Samuel Stone’s Discourse against Requiring Church Relations,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 46 (1989), 786–803. Stone was Hooker’s deputy at Hartford. The importance of Stoddard is argued by Perry Miller in *The New England Mind from Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953). This view is challenged by Paul R. Lucas, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636–1725* (Hanover, NH, 1976). More recently Stoddard’s influence has been reasserted by Philip F. Gura in “Going Mr Stoddard’s Way: William Williams on Church Privileges, 1693,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 45 (1988), 489–98.

2 The view that congregationalism as a form of church government was in decline is challenged by James F. Cooper, Jr., *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalist in Colonial Massachusetts* (New York, 1999).

3 For the Baptist advance in Virginia, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, 1982).

4 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992), has argued that Protestantism provided the unifying force that helped to create a sense of shared British identity in England, Wales, and Scotland after 1707. The same argument has been made recently with respect to the British colonists by Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill, 2006).

5 See Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York, 1986); and Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990). Butler argues that, except for New England, the North American colonies were essentially unchurched in the seventeenth century, a situation that began to change only after 1700 with the imposition of more effective discipline and organization. An increase in religious faith was also found by Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690–1750* (New York, 1985).

6 The term “Great Awakening” was first used in 1841.


8 For the debate over the origins of the term, see Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction,” *Journal of American History*, 69 (1982), 305–25. The view that the Great Awakening was largely a publicity stunt is argued by Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton, 1999).


12 The rise of “politeness” or “refinement” in England has been traced to the rise in wealth and political power of the commercial class. In England the middle class, defined as people who made their livings in business, had traditionally been looked down upon by the aristocracy. During the eighteenth century members of this group began to think of themselves as gentlemen, entitled to respect not because of their titles but because of their manners, tastes, and educational achievements. See for example Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783 (Oxford, 1989).

13 The doyen of refinement was Lord Chesterfield, though his Letters of Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield to His Son, were not published until 1774. Richard Bushman makes the argument about gentility and its contribution to the emergence of an eighteenth-century colonial elite in The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York, 1992).

14 Dallett Hemphill, Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1620–1860 (New York, 1999), finds that comportment and physical self-control, both attributes which aspiring members of the middle classes could attain, were increasingly emphasized in the conduct books that circulated in the northern colonies after 1740. Hemphill argues that northern ideals of gentility and refinement were noticeably different from southern ideals, which stressed family connection more than behavior. See her “Manners and Class in the Revolutionary Era: A Transatlantic Comparison,” William and Mary Quarterly, 63 (2006), 345–72. Another aspect of gentility and refinement after 1750 was the display of sensibility, or sympathy for the feelings of others. See Sarah Knott, Sensibility and the American Revolution (Chapel Hill, 2009).

15 However, the links between science and technology remained relatively weak. See Brooke Hindle, The Pursuit of Science in Revolutionary America, 1735–1789 (Chapel Hill, 1956).

16 The experiment caused considerable controversy at the time, since most people believed that it would spread the disease. These fears subsided only when Boylston subsequently demonstrated that about 15 percent of the naturally infected died, compared with 2.4 percent of those inoculated.

17 The description was offered by Sarah Kemble Knight, The Journal of Madam Knight, ed. Malcolm Frieberg (Boston, 1972), 20, quoted in Bruce Daniels, Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England (New York, 1995), 98.
For the impact of taverns on colonial society, see especially David W. Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1995); Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Tavern going and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1999); and Sharon Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore, 2002). Salinger challenges an earlier view that taverns contributed to social leveling, showing that taverns in fact became increasingly differentiated by class during the eighteenth century. Upper-class men drank with other gentlemen, not with ordinary folks.

For the argument that the adoption of these royal holidays helped to generate feelings of loyalty to the monarchy that were even stronger in the colonies than in Britain, see Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces*, ch. 2.

DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, a swelling volume of British shipping carried information, goods, and people more regularly across the Atlantic. The annual transatlantic crossings tripled from about five hundred during the 1670s to fifteen hundred by the late 1730s. The increasing shipping (and diminished piracy) reduced insurance costs and
freight charges, which encouraged the shipment of greater cargos. More and larger ships, some dedicated to the emigrant trade, also cut in half the price of a passage from Europe to the colonies between 1720 and 1770.

The ocean became less of a barrier and more of a bridge between the two shores of the empire. Clustered close to the Atlantic, most colonists felt oriented eastward toward the ocean and across to Europe, rather than westward into the interior. The continental interior of dense forests, Indian peoples, and immense but uncertain dimensions was far more mysterious and daunting than an ocean passage. Colonists knew, often by direct and multiple experience, that the Atlantic was regularly traversed, but none had crossed the North American continent.

Far from dividing the colonists from the mother country, the ocean and the passage of time both worked to draw them closer together during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century. The colonists became significantly better informed
about events and ideas in Britain and especially London. The swelling volume of shipping also led to more complex trading patterns, which fed an impressive growth in the colonial economy. Consequently, most free colonists enjoyed rising incomes, which permitted their increased consumption of British manufactures. That consumption reinforced the ties between the mother country and the colonies, especially for the colonial elite. Paradoxically, as the Atlantic became more British in its shipping, information, and goods, it also became a conduit for a greater diversity of emigrants.

Despite the proliferation of British shipping, the overall number of emigrants declined in the early eighteenth century from its seventeenth-century peak. During the early decades of colonization, when the English economy and state were weak, ruling opinion regarded the realm as dangerously over-populated. To reduce unemployment and discontent at home, England’s rulers encouraged emigration to the colonies,
where laborers could raise staple commodities for the mother country and where dissidents could be exiled from political influence. Late in the seventeenth century, however, ruling opinion shifted, as the home government became more tolerant of religious diversity; English manufacturing expanded, increasing the demand for cheap labor; and the realm frequently needed additional thousands for an enlarged military. Thereafter, English emigration seemed an economic and strategic loss to the mother country.

While discouraging English emigration, imperial officials wished to continue colonial development and bolster colonial defenses by procuring an alternative supply of colonists. By recruiting for colonists in Europe, imperial officials hoped to strengthen the colonies without weakening the mother country. William Penn explained that it had become “the interest of England to improve and thicken her colonys with people not her own.” In 1740, Parliament passed the Plantation Act, which enabled foreign-born
colonists to win British citizenship: a necessary prerequisite for legal ownership of land as well as for political rights. An immigrant qualified by residing for seven years in any colony, swearing allegiance to the king, taking communion in any Protestant church, and paying a two-shilling fee. Individual colonies also employed agents and subsidies aggressively to recruit and transport foreign Protestants, often for settlement on the frontiers.

The new recruitment invented America as an asylum from religious persecution and political oppression in Europe—with the important proviso that the immigrants had to be Protestants. Colonial laws and prejudices continued to discourage the emigration of Catholics and Jews to British America, from a fear that they would subvert Protestantism and betray the empire to French or Spanish attack. As a land of freedom and opportunity, British America had powerful limits.

More than any other eighteenth-century empire,
the British relied on foreign emigrants for human capital. The new emigration included far fewer English but many more Scots and Germans. Even larger numbers of enslaved Africans poured across the Atlantic as the slave trade escalated, eclipsing the movement of all free emigrants to British America. Free and slave emigration were intertwined. The growing numbers of African slaves alarmed leading colonists as a grave internal security threat. Addicted to slave labor, most colonies dared not block further African imports. Instead, led by South Carolina, several colonies actively recruited and subsidized free white emigrants from Europe to help counterbalance the slave numbers and guard against a slave uprising.

As the colonial population became less English, it assumed a new ethnic and racial complexity, which increased the gap between freedom and slavery, privilege and prejudice, wealth and poverty, white and black. At the same time that high culture and consumer culture
became more tied to English models, the colonial population and vernacular cultures became less homogeneous. Scots, Germans, and Africans struggled to maintain their cultural distinctiveness within an empire that generated an English model for how all elites were supposed to behave and appear.

**NEWS**

The increased volume and predictability of shipping improved the flow of transatlantic information, eroding the colonial sense of isolation. In 1690, William Byrd of Virginia had lamented, “We are here at the end of the World, and Europe may bee turned topsy turvy ere wee can hear a word of it.” By the 1730s, however, ships arrived more frequently, bearing a greater volume of letters, pamphlets, and newspapers from England. Colonists felt better informed about European events at the same time that those events bore a greater importance to them as they
became embroiled in the imperial wars.

Increased information from home—and greater colonial dependence upon it—stimulated the development of colonial newspapers. With one very brief exception in Boston in 1690, no seventeenth-century colony permitted a newspaper, because the authorities feared the press as a font of sedition and rebellion. After 1700, colonial officials and their British superiors felt more secure and less threatened by newspapers, permitting their development at home and in the colonies. The first enduring colonial newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter*, appeared in 1704. By 1739, British America had thirteen newspapers in seven seaports of seven colonies: Bridgetown (Barbados), Kingston (Jamaica), Charles Town (South Carolina), Williamsburg (Virginia), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), New York (New York), and Boston (Massachusetts).

Newspapers both depended upon and contributed to the integration of the British
Atlantic. Addressed primarily to the merchant community, the newspapers included very little local material, which consisted primarily of advertisements for newly imported goods or for the apprehension of runaway slaves and servants, as well as notices of ship arrivals, departures, and destinations. Avoiding local news stories, the colonial press primarily copied official items from the London press: diplomatic exchanges, parliamentary proceedings, and royal addresses. For filler, the colonial press drew upon English accounts of natural wonders, curious inventions, and brutal crimes, all usually from London. The cumulative effect was to draw colonial readers into an English perspective on the world. In 1717 the Boston newspaper publisher declared that the London news was what “most nearly concerns us.” Sincere rather than ironic, he attested to the growing dependence of colonial merchants and officials upon a sense of the conditions in Europe. The London news afforded a barometer of political stability and foreign relations—both of great importance as the colonists became more
involved in transatlantic commerce and more vulnerable to imperial warfare.

TRADE

During the eighteenth century, trade within the empire became increasingly complex. Rather than a simple, bilateral trade between the colonies and Britain, the empire developed a multilateral trading system that used bills of exchange drawn on London merchant firms to balance regional credits and debits. In the aggregate, the various regional surpluses and deficits eventually reached a near balance on the books of the London merchants, but there was a long-term trend toward increased debt owed by the mainland colonists, as their voracious demands as consumers exceeded even their considerable means as producers and formidable ingenuity as traders.
The Navigation Acts locked the Chesapeake and the West Indies into shipping their tobacco and sugar directly to England, but the northern colonies produced little that Britain needed. The northern colonists primarily traded fish, provisions, and lumber to the West Indies, to procure sugar and credits on London. Because the West Indies exported more value in sugar than they imported from Britain in manufactures, the sugar planters accumulated bills of exchange drawn on London. These they employed to cancel
their own trade debit for northern produce. In turn, those credits enabled the northerners to pay their debts to English merchants for the manufactured goods that the northern colonists imported in abundance.

During the early eighteenth century, the middle and New England colonists also developed a commerce with Iberia and the Atlantic islands. By the 1770s this southern European trade nearly matched the value of the West Indian market to the northern mainland colonists. In return for their fish, wheat, and flour, the colonists procured some salt and wine, but primarily bills of exchange drawn on English merchants, who had a trade deficit with southern Europe. Once again, the colonists used the bills to procure English manufactures and Asian produce brought via the mother country.

The southern European trade and the growing importance of wheat exports shifted prosperity within the colonies, as New England stagnated while the middle colonies boomed. During the
early eighteenth century, New England no longer grew enough wheat to sustain its own people, much less for export. New England’s growing population exceeded its own agricultural capacity, as a parasite compounded the effects of the marginal climate to blight the local wheat harvest. The New English began to import wheat from the more fertile and temperate middle colonies, which escaped the blight and replaced New England as the granary of the West Indies and southern Europe. Formerly the great colonial entrepôt, Boston slipped to third, behind Philadelphia and New York, by 1760. The booming export market for wheat also encouraged Chesapeake planters to produce less tobacco and grow more wheat. In value, the Chesapeake grain exports surged from £11,500 in 1740 to £130,000 by 1770, reaching about one-quarter of the value of the tobacco crop.

The improved flow of information and more complex patterns of commerce boosted economic growth in the colonies. Most of that growth
derived from a spectacular population increase of about 3 percent annually, just about the demographic maximum. But the standard of living more than kept pace with the population because of a modest increase in productivity per capita, of at least 0.3 and perhaps 0.5 percent annually. Although not much by the standards of our time, this growth rate was impressive for a preindustrial economy. Indeed, the colonies grew more rapidly than any other economy in the eighteenth century, including the mother country. In 1700 the colonial gross domestic product was only 4 percent of England’s; by 1770 it had blossomed to 40 percent, as the colonies assumed a much larger place within the imperial economy.

The growing economy endowed free colonists with a higher standard of living than their counterparts in Europe. In 1774 on the North American mainland, the free colonists probably averaged £13 annually per capita, compared with £11 in Great Britain and £6 in France. In part, that prosperity reflected the colonial exploitation of
African slaves, who amounted to a fifth of the population. Denied most of the profits of their labor, the enslaved Africans had to live in severe deprivation. In 1718 an Englishman remarked, “The labour of negroes is the principal foundation of riches from the plantations.”

Indeed, the wealth of colonial regions varied directly and positively with the number of slaves. The West Indian planters lived in the greatest luxury because they conducted the harshest labor system with the greatest number of slaves. Next, in both wealth and slavery, came South Carolina, followed by the Chesapeake and the middle colonies. At the other extreme of the imperial spectrum, New England had the lowest standard of living and the fewest slaves. But even without many slaves, a common farmer or artisan lived better in New England than in the mother country. Slavery explained some, but not all, of the colonial prosperity. Access to abundant farmland accounted for the difference.

The free colonists also enjoyed a larger
disposable income. Virtually exempt from imperial taxes, they paid less than a quarter of the burden borne by English taxpayers. Land-rich, the mainland colonies provided the necessities of life in cheap abundance. Surrounded by forests, the colonists paid little for lumber to build their homes and less for firewood to heat them. The relatively large farms and fertile soil enabled colonists to raise or to purchase cheaply the grains, vegetables, milk, and meat of a plentiful diet. The muster rolls for colonial military regiments recorded heights, revealing that the average colonial man stood two or three inches taller than his English counterpart. Stature depends upon nutrition, and especially protein, so the superior height of free colonists attested to their better diet, especially rich in meat and milk. On average, the tallest colonists were southern planters—those who profited most from African slavery and Indian land.

POVERTY
There were important exceptions to the rule of prosperity. Indeed, during the 1750s and 1760s the colonists reported growing numbers of the poor in the urban seaports. Especially in winter, when ice shut down shipping and employment shrank, the unemployed faced starvation unless they entered a grim almshouse maintained by the city as a last resort for the poor. In Boston, per capita expenditures on poor relief doubled between 1740 and 1760, only to double again by 1775—all despite a stagnation of the overall population at about sixteen thousand. In New York City, the number of poor receiving public relief increased fourfold between 1750 and 1775. In 1772 some 425 people crowded the almshouse built to house a hundred. That year the Philadelphia almshouse took in about nine hundred persons.

Although they were still a minority, the growing numbers of the urban poor alarmed contemporaries. The poverty seemed especially glaring because it was such a contrast with the increasingly conspicuous wealth of the lawyers,
merchants, and government officials in the seaports. According to tax records, in 1771 the wealthiest tenth of Bostonians owned more than 60 percent of the urban wealth, while the bottom three-tenths owned virtually nothing. Urban radicals denounced the development of greater extremes of wealth and poverty as linked. In 1765 a New Yorker complained, “Men Frequently owe their Wealth to the impoverishment of their Neighbors.”

The growth in urban poverty reflected the greater transatlantic integration of the British empire in three ways. First, the imperial wars swelled the numbers killed, incapacitated, or rendered alcoholic by military service. War’s widows, orphans, and cripples strained poor relief, especially in the cities, which attracted and collected the most desperate people. Second, after 1763, emigration surged from Europe to the colonies, flooding the seaports with poor newcomers, depressing wages, and swelling unemployment for all. Third, the freer flow of
credit, goods, and information across the Atlantic linked the colonies with the mother country in a shared market. Increasingly tied to the metropolitan economy of Britain, the colonial seaports became more vulnerable to the boom-and-bust business cycle. Market-driven unemployment compounded the more traditional seasonal cycle of cold-weather job loss. More entwined in a far-flung capitalist economy, the urban colonists could lose work at any time—whenever British creditors felt obliged to curtail credit and call for their debts, imperiling colonial merchants and artisans, and their laborers.

Although most conspicuous in the seaports, greater inequality also appeared in the older farm communities along the Atlantic seaboard. Only about 5 percent of the mainland colonists lived in the cities, which remained relatively small places, none exceeding thirty thousand inhabitants. Richer in land than in people and capital, British America was overwhelmingly rural and agricultural. Although still offering more
opportunity than the mother country, the older counties of rural America afforded laboring people fewer prospects to get ahead in the mid-eighteenth century than in the past. In the long-settled places, the growing population pressed against the limited supply of land already secured from the Indians. Unable to buy or inherit farms, many young people faced three unpalatable alternatives. They could move to a city to work for wages, emigrate westward to fight the Indians for frontier land (and still have to pay a land speculator for his title), or rent eastern land from a wealthy landlord.

When eastern land had been more abundant, tenancy was rare and temporary—a way up for poor people to accumulate the means to buy their own farms. But during the mid-eighteenth century in the older eastern counties, tenancy became more widespread as a lifelong status—a trap rather than a ladder upward. Tenants were especially numerous in New York’s Hudson Valley, in tidewater Maryland, and in eastern
New Jersey. By 1770 in Maryland’s Chesapeake counties, over half of the free inhabitants lived on tenant farms. Some tenants dwelled in substantial homes and accumulated thriving livestock, but just as many lived in deprivation. Maryland tenants often crowded their large families (an average of seven children per household) into small and flimsy wooden shacks of less than three hundred square feet, with dirt floors and stick-and-clay chimneys and without windows.

Whether we call them “poor” depends on what we compare them with. Relative to the beggars of London, the tenants lived in abundance—possessing roofs overhead and food on their tables. But compared with the colonial expectations of the recent past, the glowing rhetoric of colonial promoters, the urgent demands of the consumer revolution, and the increasingly conspicuous wealth of the colonial elite—by all of those standards, the rural tenants were poor and getting poorer.

Contrary to colonial promoters (and some
historians), frontier settlement was neither an easy escape from tenancy nor an automatic path to prosperity. The thick forests, bad roads, distance from market, voracious wildlife, and resentful natives combined to consign new settlers to prolonged hardships and danger. Moreover, land speculators demanded payments that drained the resources that new settlers desperately needed to build barns, fences, and homes, and to acquire livestock and tools. After the first five years on the land, most settlers secured an ample diet, but paying off their debts remained difficult. Although usually cited to celebrate colonial prosperity, St. John de Crèvecoeur understood the hard labor and grave risks of frontier farm-building. He explained:

Flourishing as we may appear to a superficial observer, yet there are many dark spots which, on due consideration greatly lessen that show of happiness which the Europeans think we possess. The number of debts which one part of the country owes to the other would greatly astonish you. The younger a country is, the more it is oppressed, for new settlements are
always made by people who do not possess much. They are obliged to borrow, and, if any accidents intervene, they are not enabled to repay that money in many years. The interest is a canker-worm which consumes their yearly industry. Many never can surmount these difficulties. The land is sold, their labors are lost, and they are obliged to begin the world anew. Oh, could I have the map of the county wherein I live; could I point out the different farms on which several families have struggled for many years; [could I] open the great book of mortgages and show you the immense encumberances, the ramification of which are spread and felt everywhere—you would be surprised.

Crèvecoeur estimated that only about half of the frontier families paid for their farms and escaped from debt before death passed the burden to the next generation. Although frontier settlement gave laboring families a cherished opportunity, unmatched in Europe, to employ themselves on their own property, there was no guarantee of ultimate prosperity after years of hardship.

As increasingly numerous and visible minorities, the urban, rural, and frontier poor collectively attested to the greater social
complexity of the eighteenth-century colonies. And their visibility heightened the anxiety with which the prosperous majority accumulated the goods and manners needed to claim and defend a higher status.

**GOODS**

During the eighteenth century, the expanding transatlantic commerce produced a “consumer revolution” that meant cheaper and more diverse goods in greater abundance, involving many more common people as consumers. At the same time, demand swelled to meet the improved supply, as consumers sought a wider array of new things. In the mother country, American and Asian produce became widespread at lower prices, which rendered the fruits of empire more attractive and important to a broader array of Britons. Their imports of tea from India increased a hundredfold, from a value of about £8,000 in 1700 to more than £800,000 by 1770. The British taste for tea
contributed to a further surge in the consumption of West Indian sugar, from about four pounds per capita in 1700 to eleven by 1770. Similarly, the colonists experienced the empire as consumers of larger quantities of Asian tea and spices and of British manufactured goods.

During the mid-eighteenth century, colonial consumers usually had better credit than common Britons. Over time, the terms of trade shifted in favor of most colonists, especially in the middle colonies and the south, as their produce fetched higher prices while they paid essentially stable prices for English manufactures. During the 1740s, 100 bushels of colonial wheat could be exchanged for 150 yards of woolen cloth, but by the early 1760s, 100 bushels could procure 250 yards. Colonists also benefited from the increasing competition of British merchants, especially Scots, to capture consumer markets by extending credit more freely to colonial customers.

Taking advantage of their improved buying
power, colonists procured growing quantities of British manufactures, usually on credit. Between 1720 and 1770, per capita colonial imports increased by 50 percent, and the aggregate value more than tripled from about £450,000 in 1700 to more than £1.5 million in 1750. In 1700 the American colonies consumed about 10 percent of British exports; that figure rose to 37 percent by 1772. In sum, the growing American market became critical to the profits and growth of British manufacturing.

Consumer goods became more conspicuous thanks to the proliferation of colonial stores, often with display windows, and of newspaper advertisements plugging the latest imports. Hundreds of itinerant peddlers also carried commodities far beyond the seaports into the rural hamlets and frontier settlements. In the early 1750s a German newcomer marveled that “it is really possible to obtain all the things one can get in Europe in Pennsylvania, since so many merchant ships arrive there every year.”
Romantic mythology often miscasts the common colonists as self-sufficient yeomen who produced all that they needed or wanted. There is a germ of truth to this. Most colonists lived on farm households that produced most of their own food, fuel, and homespun cloth. In the mainland colonies (but not the trade-driven West Indies), about 90 percent of economic production remained within a colony for home consumption or local trade; only about 10 percent was exported. Even in the plantation colonies of the Chesapeake and Carolinas, the production of food—principally pork and corn—for domestic consumption employed more acres and labor than did the tobacco, rice, and indigo for export.

Although only about 10 percent of total production, the export sector made a critical difference in the standard of living and the pace of development. No farm could produce everything that a household needed, and by no means did mere subsistence satisfy colonists’ desires or limit their production. On the contrary, every colonial
farm produced crops both for household needs and for the market. The colonists needed to sell produce so that they might purchase imported consumer goods beyond their own means to make. Some derived from another climate, such as the West Indian sugar and Asian tea, but the colonists also imported products from the workshops of Britain. In the production of manufactures, which required abundant capital and cheap labor, the crowded mother country had an advantage over the land-rich but thinly populated colonies. Every colonial farm needed metal tools, including plows, hoes, axes, knives, and hammers. Beyond such necessities, the colonists also aspired to the pleasures and comforts of new niceties: pewter knives and forks, bed and table linens, ceramic cups and saucers, glasses and imported wines, metal buttons and silver buckles, and manufactured cloth and clothing.

In the new and fluid colonial societies, the display of finer consumer goods mediated claims
to status. Because appearances mattered so much in regulating status and credit, colonists wished to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as something more than rude rustics. With so many people in motion over long distances, local elites especially sought a more cosmopolitan standard for demonstrating and testing claims to status in new settings.

Emulating the English gentry, the wealthier colonists cultivated “gentility”: a conspicuous and self-conscious style that emphasized personal displays of harmony, grace, delicacy, and refinement. Gentility required considerable self-discipline, the financial means to procure fine goods, and the leisure to polish manners and conversation. Seeking stages on which to enact their gentility, the colonial elite abandoned the low, dark, unpainted, cramped, and undecorated wooden houses of the seventeenth century. Instead, they built lighter, finer, larger, and more ornamented houses, increasingly in brick and filled with fine furniture. The elite’s houses
provided spacious new rooms and expansive new grounds for greeting, impressing, and entertaining guests at afternoon tea, formal dinners, garden strolls, and evening balls. Although most common people continued to live in smaller, traditional houses, they began to fill them with some of the consumer goods associated with the new mansions.

While uniting elites throughout the colonies and on both sides of the Atlantic, gentility tried to define sharper boundaries within colonial communities, distinguishing the polite and refined from those excluded as rude and common. Throughout the British empire, traveling ladies and gentlemen felt a greater solidarity with one another at a distance than with their cruder neighbors. Claiming superior morals, taste, and talents, gentlemen and ladies looked down upon the common farmers and artisans as obtuse and mean.

The genteel performed constantly for one another, ever watching and ever watched for the
proper manners, conversation, dress, furnishings, and home. Every action, every statement, every object was on display and subject to applause or censure. The well-trained eye and ear scrutinized details for the proper nuances of fashion. A faulty performance damned the unfortunate as impostors, as ridiculous as clowns. Pity the poor common man invited to eat and drink at the table of Robert “King” Carter, a great planter in Virginia. The family tutor dismissed the guest as dull and vulgar because “he held the Glass of Porter fast with both his Hands, and then gave an insignificant nod to each one at the Table, in hast[e], & with fear, & then drank like an Ox.” His awkwardness and fear expressed the insecurity that the common people often felt in the presence of gentility.

At the same time, the common people strove, as consumers, to efface the insulting line between gentility and commonality. Indeed, maintaining gentility required constant expense and attention to fashion, for the middling sort blurred the
distinction by stretching their budgets to buy some of the props of gentility. Rather than accept inferiority, artisan and farm families wanted to sip tea from ceramic teacups—because the elite did so.

The pursuit of fashion served as a coveted badge of membership in the elite, but that distinction inspired emulation by social climbers from the middling sort. In turn, that emulation fed the unease of colonial elites, already sensitive to how they looked to their counterparts in Britain. Longing for acceptance as equals with the English gentry, the colonial elite felt beleaguered by the avid consumerism of their common neighbors, who seemed determined to erase the class and taste distinctions essential to genteel superiority. Fashionable goods and their proper uses became both the exclusionary symbols of social superiority and the inclusive currency of social emulation. In that social tension lay the energy that drove accelerating consumption.

For example, the genteel Dr. Alexander
Hamilton of Maryland delighted in his own consumption but denounced that of common colonists, remarking “that if Luxury was to be confined to the Rich alone, it might prove a great national good.” During his 1744 tour of the colonies, Hamilton disliked seeing fine goods displayed in otherwise common dwellings. At one farm, he found “superfluous things which showed an inclination to finery … such as a looking glass with a painted frame, half a dozen pewter spoons and as many plates … a set of stone tea dishes, and a teapot.” Far better, he thought, for farmers to make do with “wooden plates and spoons” and “a little water in a wooden pail might serve for a looking glass.” Hamilton despised what the farmers cherished most about the consumer goods: the opportunity for ordinary people to express their aspirations.

Genteel moralists especially disliked the leading role of women in the consumer revolution. Women of middling means had the most to gain from increased consumption, for
imported goods often reduced their long and arduous labor, especially in making candles and soap or in spinning and weaving cloth. By accumulating and displaying fashionable goods, middling women also obtained a new vehicle for self-expression and self-assertion. Astute storekeepers appealed to the growing influence of women over household consumption. In 1748 a Maryland factor wrote to a correspondent: “You know the influence of the Wives upon their Husbands, & it is but a trifle that wins ’em over, [and] they must be taken notice of or there will be nothing with them.” Genteel moralizers, however, detected and denounced an erosion of patriarchal power that allegedly left men emasculated and financially ruined by their newly aggressive wives. This exaggerated concern found little echo among middling families, for most men felt proud that their wives could appear in better fashion.

Of course, the common folk could never fully match the consumption and taste of the colonial elite of great planters, merchants, and lawyers.
Indeed, the common emulation constantly drove the gentility to reiterate their superior status by cultivating more expensive tastes in the most current fashions. In 1771 an Englishman in Maryland reported:

The quick importation of fashions from the mother country is really astonishing. I am almost inclined to believe that a new fashion is adopted earlier by the polished and affluent American than by many opulent persons in the great metropolis. … In short, very little difference is, in reality, observable in the manners of the wealthy colonist and the wealthy Briton.

No other praise would have better pleased American gentlemen and ladies, so eager to prove their equality to wealthy Britons and their superiority to common colonists.

The status competition and consumer dynamic drove both commoners and the elite to buy more than they could well afford. Importing even more than they produced, the colonies had a chronic trade imbalance, and most colonists bore mounting debts. In 1762, William Smith of New
York conceded, “Our importation of dry goods from England is so vastly great, that we are obliged to betake ourselves to all possible arts to make remittances to the British merchants … and yet it drains us of all the silver and gold we can collect.” The shortage of cash and the increasing debts fed a nagging unease at odds with the overt colonial prosperity and general contentment with the empire.

**ENGLISH EMIGRANTS**

In addition to goods, the swelling volume of British shipping carried emigrants across the Atlantic. Relatively few, however, were English: only 80,000 between 1700 and 1775, compared with 350,000 during the seventeenth century. The decline is especially striking because after 1700 the colonies became cheaper and easier to reach by sea and safer to live in. But push prevailed over pull factors in colonial emigration.

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the
English push weakened as a growing economy provided rising real wages for laboring families, enabling more to remain in the mother country. At the same time, the militarization of the empire absorbed more laboring men into the enlarged army and navy for longer periods. In wartime, many would-be emigrants also balked at the greater dangers of a transatlantic passage.

Especially depressed during war, colonial emigration partially revived during the intervals of peace, when the crown demobilized thousands of soldiers and sailors, temporarily saturating the English labor market. Unable to find work, some people entered indentures for service in the colonies. Other demobilized men went unwillingly as convicted and transported criminals. In England, crime surged with every peace as thousands of unemployed and desperate people stole to live. The inefficient but grim justice of eighteenth-century England imposed the death penalty for 160 crimes, including grand larceny, which was loosely defined as stealing anything worth more than a mere shilling.
In 1717, shortly after the military demobilization of 1713–14, Parliament began to subsidize the shipment of convicted felons to the colonies as an alternative to their execution. The crown generally paid £3 per convict to shippers, who carried the felons to America for sale as indentured servants with especially long terms, usually fourteen years. The shippers’ profit came from combining the sales price (about £12) with the crown subsidy, less the cost of transportation (£5 to £6). The program recalled the logic of the West Country promotion of the 1580s: America could serve the mother country as a drain for the detritus of English society and a workhouse of rehabilitation.

Between 1718 and 1775, the empire transported about fifty thousand felons, more than half of all English emigrants to America during that period. The transported were overwhelmingly young, unmarried men with little or no economic skill: the cannon fodder of war and the jail fodder of peace. About 80 percent of the convicts went to
Virginia and Maryland, riding in the English ships of the tobacco trade. Convicts provided a profitable sideline for the tobacco shippers, who had plenty of empty cargo space on the outbound voyage from England. At about a third of the £35 price of an African male slave, the convict appealed to some planters as a better investment. Most purchasers were small planters with limited budgets. In a pinch, however, great planters, including George Washington, bought a few convicts to supplement their slaves.

The planters employed the convicts as tobacco field hands, subject to the same treatment as slaves. Convicts who protested their harsh treatment to the courts usually received sentences of additional whipping and longer service for bringing false complaints. Those who lived long enough to become free found no land of opportunity. Studies of liberated convicts in Maryland and Virginia reveal that virtually none ever obtained real estate or social standing.

Despite their purchases, colonial leaders
regarded the convict trade as an insult that treated the colonies as inferior to the mother country. The colonists wondered why they should have to accept convicts deemed too dangerous to live in England. The planters especially dreaded the possibility that white convicts would make common cause in rebellion with the black slaves. In 1736 the Virginia planter William Byrd wrote to an English friend, “I wish you would be so kind as to hang all your felons at home.”

Maryland, Virginia, New Jersey, and Jamaica tried to discourage the convict trade by levying heavy taxes per head, but the crown vetoed all such obstructions. In a political satire, Benjamin Franklin advocated sending, in exchange, American rattlesnakes to England. But ultimately, the colonists colluded in the convict trade. In 1725, Maryland’s governor conceded, “While we purchase, they will send them, and we bring the Evil upon our selves.”

SCOTS
While English emigration to the colonies flagged, Scots emigration soared to 145,000 between 1707 and 1775. Generally poorer than the English, the Scots had greater incentives to emigrate, and the British Union of 1707 gave them legal access to all of the colonies. The growth in Scots overseas shipping also provided more opportunities and lower costs for passage. After a few early emigrants prospered, their reports homeward attracted growing numbers in a chain migration. During a tour of northwestern Scotland, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson saw the locals perform a popular and symbolic new dance called “America,” in which a few original dancers gradually drew the entire audience into the performance.

The Scottish diaspora flowed in three streams: Lowland Scots, Highland Scots, and Ulster Scots. Assimilated to English ways, the Lowland Scots were primarily skilled tradesmen, farmers, and professionals pulled by greater economic opportunity in America. They usually emigrated as individuals or single families, then dispersed in
the colonies and completed their assimilation to Anglo-American ways. The Lowland Scots were especially conspicuous as colonial doctors, for more than 150 emigrated between 1707 and 1775. By the American Revolution, Scots doctors and their American apprentices dominated formal medical practice in the colonies.

More desperate than the Lowland Scots, the Highlanders responded primarily to the push of their deteriorating circumstances. In 1746 the British army brutally suppressed a rebellion in the Highlands, and Parliament outlawed many of the Highlanders’ traditions and institutions, creating much discontent. At mid-century, the common Highlanders also suffered from a pervasive rural poverty worsened by the rising rents demanded by their landlords. The emigrants primarily came from the relatively prosperous peasants, those who possessed the means to emigrate and feared a fall into the growing ranks of the impoverished.

After 1750, emigration brokers and ambitious colonial land speculators frequented the northwest
coast of Scotland to procure Highland emigrants. The brokers and speculators recognized that the tough Highlanders were especially well prepared for the rigors of a transatlantic passage and colonial settlement. One Scot observed:

They launched out into a new World breathing a Spirit of Liberty and a Desire of every individual becoming a Proprietor, where they imagine they can still obtain land for themselves, and their flocks of Cattle at a triffling Rent, or of conquering it from the Indian with the Sword, the most desireable holding of any for a Highlander.

Preferring cheap if dangerous lands, the Highland Scots clustered in frontier valleys especially along the Cape Fear River in North Carolina, the Mohawk River of New York, and the Altamaha River in Georgia. By clustering, they preserved their distinctive Gaelic language and Highland customs, in contrast with the assimilating Lowland emigrants.

Nearly half of the Scots emigrants came from Ulster, in Northern Ireland, where their parents
and grandparents had colonized during the 1690s. Like the Highlanders, the Ulster Scots fled from deteriorating conditions. During the 1710s and 1720s they suffered from interethnic violence with the Catholic Irish as well as from a depressed market for their linen, the hunger of several poor harvests, and the increased rents charged by grasping landlords. The Ulster emigration to the colonies began in 1718 and accelerated during the 1720s. In 1728 an opponent complained, “The humour has spread like a contagious distemper, and the people will hardly hear anybody that tries to cure them of their madness.” The destitute sold themselves into indentured servitude, while the families of middling means liquidated their livestock to procure the cost of passage. Of course, most of the Ulster Scots remained at home, preferring the known hardships of Ireland to the uncertain prospects of distant America.

The Ulster Scots emigrated in groups, generally organized by their Presbyterian ministers, who negotiated with shippers to arrange passage. At
first, the Ulster Scots emigrated to Boston, but some violent episodes of New English intolerance persuaded most, after 1720, to head for Philadelphia, the more welcoming seaport of the more tolerant colony of Pennsylvania. More thinly settled than New England, Pennsylvania needed more settlers to develop and defend the hinterland.

Once in the colonies, the Ulster Scots gravitated to the frontier, where land was cheaper, enabling large groups to settle together. Their clannishness helped the emigrants cope with their new setting, but it also generated frictions with the English colonists. Feeling superior to the Catholic Irish, the Ulster Scots bitterly resented that so many colonists lumped all the Irish together. In 1720 some Ulster Scots in New Hampshire bristled that they were “termed Irish people, when we so frequently ventured our all, for the British crown and liberties against the Irish Papists.” As a compromise, they became known in America as the Scotch-Irish.
Outnumbering the English emigrants, the 100,000 Germans were second only to the Scots as eighteenth-century immigrants to British America. Most were Protestants, but they were divided into multiple denominations: Lutherans, Reformed, Moravians, Baptists, and Pietists of many stripes. Drawn from both the poor and the middling sort, they emigrated primarily in families. Almost all came from the Rhine Valley and its major tributaries in southwestern Germany and northern Switzerland. Flowing north and east, the navigable Rhine channeled emigrants downstream to the Dutch port of Rotterdam, their gateway across the Atlantic to British America.

About three-quarters of the Germans landed in Philadelphia, the great magnet for colonial migration. During the late 1720s about three ships, bearing a total of 600 Germans, annually arrived in Philadelphia. By the early 1750s some twenty ships and 5,600 Germans landed every year. Seeking farms, most emigrants filtered into
rural Pennsylvania. From there, some families headed south to settle on the frontiers of Maryland and Virginia. A second much smaller and less sustained migration flowed from Rotterdam to Charles Town, South Carolina, which served as a gateway to the Georgia and Carolina frontier.

The colonial emigration was a modest subset of a much larger movement of Germans out of the Rhineland. Between 1680 and 1780 about 500,000 southwestern Germans emigrated, but only a fifth went to British America. Many more headed east, seeking opportunities in Prussia, Hungary, and Russia. Receiving subsidies from the eastern rulers but nothing from the British, the Rhineland princes promoted the eastward movement while discouraging colonial emigration.

Why, then, did so many Rhinelanders undertake such a daunting journey across an ocean to a strange land? There were push factors. No united realm, Germany was subdivided into
many small principalities, frequently embroiled in the great wars of the continent. To build palaces and conduct war, the authoritarian princes heavily taxed their subjects and conscripted their young men. Most princes also demanded religious conformity from their subjects, inflicting fines and imprisonment on dissidents. In addition, a swelling population pressed against the limits of the rural economy, blighting the prospects of thousands of young peasants and artisans.

Necessary but not sufficient for emigration, the push factors became pressing only once an uneasy people learned of an attractive alternative. In other words, they needed a pull as well as a push. They had to begin to perceive a great shortfall between their probable prospects at home and their apparent opportunities in a particular elsewhere.

Good news from Pennsylvania pulled many discontented Rhinelanders across the Atlantic. In 1682, William Penn recruited a few Germans to settle in Pennsylvania, where they prospered.
Word of their material success in a tolerant colony intrigued growing numbers in their old homeland. Nothing was as persuasive as a letter from a prospering relative or friend who could make glowing comparisons from experience. The letters reported that wages were high and land and food cheap. The average Pennsylvania farm of 125 acres was six times larger than a typical peasant holding in southwestern Germany, and the colonial soil was more fertile, yielding three times as much wheat per acre. Lacking princes and aristocrats or an established church, Pennsylvania demanded almost no taxes, and none to support someone else’s religion. And Pennsylvania did not conscript its inhabitants for war.

But even a pull and a push did not suffice to sustain a migration. Potential emigrants also needed an infrastructure to facilitate and finance their passage: a network of information, guides, ships, and merchants willing to provide passage on credit. Such an infrastructure began with the
couriers carrying the letters from Pennsylvania to Germany. Known as Newlanders, the couriers were former emigrants returning home for a visit, often to collect debts or an inheritance. For a fee, they carried letters and conducted business in Germany for their neighbors who remained in Pennsylvania. By recruiting Germans to emigrate, the Newlanders could earn a free return passage to Philadelphia, and sometimes a modest commission too, from a British shipper. By speaking from experience and guiding the new emigrants down the Rhine to Rotterdam and onto waiting ships, the Newlanders eased the decision and passage of thousands who had balked at a journey on their own into the unknown. The opponents of German emigration denounced the Newlanders as dangerous charlatans, and a few unscrupulous men did live down to that reputation, but most provided accurate information and valuable services.

In addition to information and guides, the emigration depended upon British merchants at
Rotterdam who saw a profitable opportunity to ship Germans to the colonies. Because of the Navigation Acts, only British (including colonial) ships could transport emigrants to the colonies. The merchants could profit by filling a ship with one hundred to two hundred emigrants at a charge of £5 to £6 per head. About two-thirds of the emigrants had sufficient means to pay their own way; the poorer third came as indentured servants. Sometimes parents could afford their own passage and that of younger children but had to indenture their adolescents, who had the highest value as laborers.

The German emigrant trade developed a relatively attractive form of indentured servitude adapted to the needs of families. Known as “redemptioners,” the Germans contracted to serve for about four to five years. Unlike other indentured servants, the redemptioner families had to be kept together by their employers and not divided for sale. Most contracts also gave the emigrant family a grace period of two weeks,
upon arrival in Pennsylvania, to find a relative or acquaintance who would purchase their labor contract. Often arranged by prior correspondence, these deals afforded the emigrants some confidence in their destination and employer. If the two-week period passed, the redemption became open to general bidding from any colonist who needed laborers. After serving out their indentures, the redemptioners became free to seek out their own farms, usually on the frontier where land was cheaper.

The system worked well, because successful German farmers in Pennsylvania needed labor, preferred fellow Germans, and favored intact families. The redemptioner system accelerated the chain migration as the early migrants succeeded, reported their gains, encouraged friends and relatives to follow, and helped finance their journey by purchasing their contracts upon arrival. No seventeenth-century indentured servants had been so fortunate.

The voyage was no picnic. The stormy North
Atlantic terrified people who had never before been to sea; the vessels were crowded, dirty, and infested with lice, and the cheap food was often spoiled and repellent. After all, the shippers made their profit by packing their vessels tightly and by holding down the cost of feeding the passengers. But it was also in their interest to keep them alive, for a dead redemptioner yielded no payment in Philadelphia. In 1750, eyewitness Gottlieb Mittelberger described a voyage at its worst:

During the journey the ship is full of pitiful signs of distress—smells, fumes, horrors, vomiting, various kinds of sea sickness, fever, dysentery, headaches, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and similar afflictions, all of them caused by the age and the highly-salted state of the food, especially the meat, as well as by the very bad and filthy water, which brings about the miserable destruction and death of many.

But he exaggerated a tad, for the overall death rate for the voyage was only about 3 percent, a bit better than the 4 percent rate for convicts and far
better than the 10 to 20 percent suffered by enslaved Africans. Germans probably risked more by staying at home in the path of the next European war. And most emigrants eventually found the journey worthwhile, for their favorable reports kept others coming.

Like the Highland and the Ulster Scots, the Germans preferred to settle in clusters and to cling to their language and customs. Most learned only a smattering of English, relying on a few bilingual leaders, usually ministers and schoolteachers, for more complicated transactions with outsiders. Their numbers and clannishness promoted a network of churches and schools conducted by fellow emigrants and coreligionists and financed by voluntary contributions. Highly literate, the Pennsylvania Germans also sustained a vibrant press that produced German-language almanacs, books, and a newspaper.

PLURALISM
Thanks primarily to the new waves of Scotch-Irish and German emigrants, Pennsylvania’s population exploded from 18,000 in 1700 to 120,000 by 1750. The Quakers became a minority in their own colony, slipping to just a quarter of the population by 1750. The Scotch-Irish accounted for an equal share of Pennsylvania’s inhabitants, and the Germans were even more numerous, about 40 percent of the total.

The non-English and non-Quaker newcomers tested the commitment of the colonial elite to William Penn’s ideal of tolerance. During the 1720s, when the emigration began, the numerous newcomers troubled the leading Pennsylvanians. In 1728 the lieutenant governor urged limiting the immigration “to prevent an English Plantation from being turned into a Colony of Aliens.” But most leading Quakers soon concluded that the newcomers were hardworking assets to the prosperous development of their colony. After considering and ultimately rejecting proposals to tax, or otherwise limit, immigration, the Pennsylvania legislature instead passed a law to
A plural society was also a challenging adjustment for most of the emigrants, who initially wished to avoid people different from themselves. The newcomers were often especially strong-willed and devout people who professed a demanding, perfectionist, and exclusive form of Protestantism. Their uncompromising convictions had irritated majorities and rulers in their homelands, and had emboldened them to venture across the Atlantic to a strange land. In Pennsylvania, they sought sufficient land to cluster in communities apart from everyone else, the better to perfect their version of the true faith.

The emigrants found, however, only half of what they sought. The seekers had escaped official persecution and often could form distinct local communities. But despite their best efforts, they could not avoid contact with an unprecedented and often shocking diversity of ethnic groups and Protestant beliefs, all pursuing their own version of purity. In 1736 the Swiss
emigrant Esther Werndtlin denounced her new home, Pennsylvania: “Here are religions and nationalities without number; this land is an asylum for banished sects, a sanctuary for all evil-doers from Europe, a confused Babel, a receptacle for all unclean spirits, an abode of the devil, a first world, a Sodom, which is deplorable.”

Although the diverse groups often disliked one another and longed for a more homogeneous society, none had the numbers and power to impose its own beliefs or to drive out others. By necessity, almost all gradually accepted the mutual forbearance of a pluralistic society as an economic boon and the best guarantee for their own faith. In 1739 a German emigrant concluded that “Liberty of conscience” was the “chief virtue of this land, and on this store I do not repent my immigration.” He added, “But for this freedom, I think this country would not improve so rapidly.”

While constraining direct and violent conflict, pluralism promoted a highly contentious politics as the ethnocultural groups jostled for patronage
and priority. By mid-century, the Quaker leaders astutely made a political alliance with most of the Germans. Chastened by their harsh experiences with European militarism and heavy taxes, the Germans endorsed the Quaker policies of pacifism, no militia, and low taxes. An opponent complained that the Quakers persuaded the Germans “that a militia will bring them under as severe a bondage to governors as they were formerly under the princes in Germany.”

With German votes, the Quaker party retained control over the Pennsylvania assembly, to the dismay of the Scotch-Irish, who felt ignored and malignedy by the new coalition. Clustered on the frontier, the Scotch-Irish especially resented the refusal of the Quakers and Germans, who dwelled safely and prosperously around Philadelphia, to fund a frontier militia to attack the Indians. Feeling abandoned by the Pennsylvania government, the Scotch-Irish resolved to fight the natives on their own harsh terms. In killing Indians, the Scotch-Irish could vent their political
resentments without overtly confronting the Germans and the Quakers.

By attracting thousands of immigrants seeking farms, Pennsylvania strained William Penn’s policy of peace with the Indians. After Penn’s death in 1718 his colony became the property of his sons, John, Richard, and Thomas, who usually remained in England, entrusting Indian diplomacy and land granting to the provincial secretary James Logan. Caring less for Indians than for the profits of land speculation, Logan and the Penn heirs steadily encroached upon the Lenni Lenape.

The settlers, especially the Scotch-Irish, invaded Indian lands even faster than the proprietors could buy them from the Lenni Lenape. Impatient over the frustrating delays of Pennsylvania’s inefficient land office, many settlers abruptly occupied Indian lands and refused to pay either the natives or the Penn family for them. In 1729, James Logan warned the Penn heirs of the “vast numbers of poor but presumptuous People, who w[i]thout any License
have entered on your Lands, & neither have, nor are like to have anything to purchase w[i]th.”

To justify their conduct, the squatters adapted the rhetoric employed to dispossess the Indians. Colonizers had long insisted that the natives did not deserve to keep their lands because they did not “improve” them in the European mode. The squatters noted that the Penns and other land speculators made even less use of the lands that they held for future sale to actual settlers. Why then, the squatters asked, did the speculators deserve to demand payment from the people who actually did the improving? The squatters bluntly told colonial officials that it was “against the Laws of God & Nature that so much land should lie idle, while so many Christians wanted it to labour on and [to] raise their Bread.”

In addition to seizing Indian lands, the squatters treated their Indian neighbors with violent contempt, often beating, robbing, cheating, or killing indiscriminately. In vain, the aggrieved Indians looked to the leaders of Pennsylvania to
honor William Penn’s legacy by removing the squatters. The proprietors preferred the cynical alternative of exploiting the squatter invasion as pressure to compel the Indians to sell the invaded tracts cheap. Then the proprietors meant to threaten lawsuits to force the squatters either to buy their homesteads or to move on.

In 1737, Thomas Penn and James Logan conducted the “Walking Purchase,” perhaps the most notorious land swindle in colonial history—which is saying a great deal. Unable to stop invading squatters, the local Lenni Lenape band agreed to relinquish a tract that would be bounded by what a man could walk around in thirty-six hours. Of course, the Lenni Lenape expected to lose only a modest parcel, but Logan and Penn had made elaborate preparations to maximize their purchase. They employed scouts to blaze a trail, and they trained three runners. On the appointed September day, the runners astonished and infuriated the Lenni Lenape by racing around a tract of nearly twelve hundred square miles,
including most of their homeland. Retail sale of farms within the tract ultimately earned the proprietors nearly £90,000.

Feeling cheated, the Lenni Lenape refused to move, thinking they were safe in the Quaker commitment to peace. But Logan and Penn sought out a third party to do their dirty work. They exploited Pennsylvania’s link to the Covenant Chain alliance that served the mutual interests of the Six Nation Iroquois and the British colonial governments, at the expense of weaker Indian peoples. In return for generous presents from Pennsylvania’s leaders, the Iroquois bluntly ordered the Lenni Lenape to move. Rather than fight the more numerous and better-armed Iroquois, the Lenni Lenape reluctantly withdrew westward. Nurturing a deep bitterness against both the Iroquois and the Pennsylvanians, Lenni Lenape raiders would return during the 1750s to take their revenge. The era of brotherly love was over in Pennsylvania—bringing that colony into line with the violent standard of the other
Contrary to popular myth, most eighteenth-century emigrants did not come to America of their own free will in search of liberty. Nor were they Europeans. On the contrary, most were enslaved Africans forced across the Atlantic to work on plantations raising American crops for the European market. During the eighteenth century, the British colonies imported 1.5 million slaves—more than three times the number of free immigrants. And almost all of the imported Africans remained slaves for life, passing the status on to their children. Only about 1 percent of the blacks living in the British colonies became free prior to the American Revolution.

The slave trade diminished the inhabitants of West Africa, who declined from 25 million in 1700 to 20 million in 1820. At least two million people died in slave-raiding wars and another six
Imperial Wars and Crisis
1739–75
The Shawnee and Lenni Lenape Indians of the Ohio Valley surrender their adopted captives, former colonial children, to Colonel Henry Bouquet in 1764. Demanded by the British commanders as a prerequisite of peace, the surrender was traumatic for the Indian families and for the youngest captives. A secretary records the names of the children while British troops loom in the right background. The engraving is based on a drawing by famed artist Benjamin West. From William Smith, An Historical Account of the Expedition Against the Ohio Indians in the Year 1764 (Philadelphia, 1766).

Between 1689 and 1763 the British Empire waged four wide-ranging wars with the French. The empires fought for predominance in Europe and for mastery of the colonies and control over the shipping lanes across the Atlantic and Indian oceans. The wars came in two cycles, on either end of a long interlude of peace. The first cycle, 1689–1713, featured the Nine Years War (1689–97) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13). That cycle so exhausted the belligerents that they avoided another major conflict for twenty-six years. In 1739 the British renewed war with
Spain, which broadened to include France five years later, spawning the second cycle of war, which endured until 1763. During the first cycle, North America was a sideshow in wars fought primarily in Europe. In the second, the colonies assumed a new military importance, especially to the British. During the ultimate imperial conflict, the Seven Years War, the British decided to expand their empire deep into North America by investing men and money as never before to conquer New France.

British success threatened the Indian peoples of the interior, for they depended upon playing off rival empires to maintain their own autonomy. Deprived of a French counterweight, the British empire could sweep settlements deep into the continent, pushing the Indians aside and transforming their land into farms and towns. The victory of the British introduced a dangerous new stage in the colonization of North America, when their large colonial population on the Atlantic seaboard would break through the Appalachian Mountains into the great heartland of the
continent, the vast Mississippi watershed.

But that new stage challenged colonial allegiance to the British empire. After making such a major investment of money and lives in North America during the Seven Years War, the British were not about to resume their former policy of benign neglect. During the 1760s, Parliament and the crown worked to strengthen imperial management of an enlarged domain that threatened to spin beyond control. Concluding that the empire was too weak and the colonists too insubordinate, the British tightened enforcement of the trade laws, maintained a permanent garrison in North America, and imposed new taxes to pay for it. That shift in imperial policy shocked the colonial leaders of the Atlantic seaboard into recognizing and defending their distinctive way of life. Push came to shove as both colonists and imperialists belatedly recognized the contradiction, long overlooked, between the growth in imperial ambition and the persistence of colonial autonomy. By 1775 a
majority of the colonial elite felt a new confidence in their ability to defy the British empire—if necessary—and to conquer and develop the continent for their own purposes.

RENEWED WAR

During the 1720s and 1730s the dominant British politician, Sir Robert Walpole, preferred stability and peace over the costly uncertainties of a renewed war with France. After the long, expensive, and destructive War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13), the British public and Parliament initially welcomed Walpole’s peace program. By the mid-1730s, however, Britons began to forget the costs of war as they instead noted, with growing alarm, the renewed wealth and power of France. The French empire grew especially rich in the West Indies, where French sugar plantations surged past the British in productivity and production. Not yet willing to challenge the French directly, British warmongers
hoped instead to catch up by plundering France’s ally Spain. By seizing Spanish shipping, ports, and islands around the Caribbean, the war party hoped to restore Britain’s predominance in the West Indies. British imperialists perceived Spain as a rich but decadent power, a bloated and tempting victim for fleecing, rather than as a dangerous adversary.

In the press and Parliament, the war party fanned public outrage over the severe treatment of British sailors and smugglers by Spanish colonial authorities. In particular, the war partisans lamented that Captain Robert Jenkins, a smuggler, had lost an ear to Spanish colonial justice. Overriding Walpole, in 1739 a belligerent Parliament ordered British warships to seize Spanish shipping as a reprisal. One of Walpole’s principal critics, Admiral Edward Vernon, commanded a British fleet that captured the valuable Caribbean seaport of Portobello in November. The victory inflamed British and colonial fantasies of easy pickings in a full-scale war with Spain. Popularly called the War of
Jenkins’s Ear, this was the first imperial conflict that began over a colonial issue and was primarily waged on the American side of the Atlantic.

Unfortunately for the British, the Spanish failed to live down to their lowly stereotype as easy victims. Resourceful commanders and valiant soldiers effectively defended well-designed fortifications to frustrate the two major British assaults: in 1740 on San Agustín in Florida and in 1741 on the Caribbean seaport of Cartagena. The British forces also suffered from bungling commanders and heavy losses to disease, especially yellow fever. Lured by fantasies of golden plunder, 3,500 colonists joined the Cartagena expedition, but fewer than half survived to return home in defeat. The debacle persuaded the surviving colonists that the British officers were incompetent martinets; the Britons concluded that the Americans were undisciplined cowards. The only significant British victory came on defense, in repelling a Spanish assault on the new colony of Georgia in 1742.
Fearing that the British would recoup their losses and expand their attacks, the French government belatedly rallied to support Spain in 1744, which widened the conflict under a new name: the War of the Austrian Succession. Thereafter the conflict shifted back to the traditional setting in Europe, where massive armies clashed in Flanders and Germany. Except for supplying a few warships, after 1744 the British left colonial warfare to the colonists, expecting nothing better than a stalemate in America. As in the past wars, the French Canadians and their Indian allies devastated the exposed frontier settlements of New England from Maine to western Massachusetts. To the immense surprise of the British, however, the New English also won the one great victory in the war: the capture of the French fortress at Louisbourg.

By the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, the French had surrendered Acadia to the British, who renamed the colony Nova Scotia. Because the Acadians
lingered and retained the best farmland, few Britons came to colonize in Nova Scotia, leaving the population small (six thousand) and overwhelmingly French. The Nova Scotia officials exercised little authority beyond their small garrison at Annapolis, and they confronted a far more formidable French position at Louisbourg, a fortified seaport built on Cape Breton Island, in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

The French designed Louisbourg to defend their long supply line up the St. Lawrence River to Quebec, to protect the lucrative French fisheries in the gulf, and to harass New English shipping in wartime. Begun in 1718, the construction cost the French 3.5 million livres, about four times the ordinary annual budget for all of New France. Surrounded by massive stone walls, bristling with cannon, and garrisoned by about 1,500 regulars, Louisbourg was the most formidable American fortress north of Cuba. Home to about 4,200 colonists, Louisbourg eclipsed Quebec as the largest town in New
France. Louisbourg shifted the front line of Canada’s maritime defense beyond Quebec into the Atlantic; any renewed British assault on New France would first have to capture the new fortress.

In 1744, upon learning of the new war between France and Britain, the Louisbourg commander attacked the fishing stations and boats of Nova Scotia, and he unleashed his privateers to seize New English ships. The able and ambitious royal governor of Massachusetts, William Shirley, seized the opportunity to win both colonial popularity and British respect by organizing an expedition to seize Louisbourg. Assisted by a British naval squadron, four thousand New English volunteers besieged and captured the formidable fortress in 1745. After so many failures in war against New France, the capture of Louisbourg thrilled the New English, who felt a new sense of pride in, and importance to, the British empire.

Consequently, they were dismayed when the
British government used the fortress as a bargaining chip in the 1748 peace negotiations. To secure a French withdrawal from conquests in India and Flanders, the British restored Louisbourg to France. Begun in 1739 in hopes of winning a golden empire in America from the Spanish, the war ended nine years later as a bloody stalemate without any colonial gains to the British. The peace treaty also proved surprisingly unpopular in Britain. Denouncing the return of Louisbourg, opposition politicians hammered the administration for neglecting the colonies. Noting the growing importance of the colonists as consumers of British manufactures, the critics charged that a sleeping administration risked losing America to French aggression. Wounded by the criticism, the imperial authorities resolved to pay closer attention to North America in the next war, and to keep any gains made there.

**BALANCE OF POWER**
Savvy imperialists recognized that Indians determined the military balance of power within North America. In 1755 an English trader observed:

The importance of the Indians is now generally known and understood. A Doubt remains not, that the prosperity of our Colonies on the Continent will stand or fall with our Interest and favour among them. While they are our Friends, they are the Cheapest and Strongest Barrier for the Protection of our Settlements; when Enemies, they are capable of ravaging in their method of War, in spite of all we can do, to render those Possessions almost useless.

Skilled at guerrilla warfare, Indians dominated the forest passages between the rival empires. They could obstruct the advance of their colonial enemy and terrify and destroy outlying settlements.

Divided into many tribes and subdivided into hundreds of autonomous villages, the Indian peoples were further riven by factional divisions led by rival chiefs. Nonetheless, the natives
shared a broad interest in exploiting and perpetuating their strategic position between the French and the British colonies. Benefiting from the competition between the traders and officials of rival empires, the Indians sought favorable prices and abundant presents from both sides.

The Six Nation Iroquois enjoyed the most strategic location along the major waterways between French Canada and the British colony of New York. In a rough and forested continent, colonial armies with cannon could barely move overland. Far better to proceed in boats via the larger rivers and lakes, which channeled most military operations along a few strategic corridors, where the colonists built forts and cultivated Indian allies. The two principal corridors ran through Iroquoia: first, the north-south passage along Lake Champlain between Albany on the Hudson and Montreal on the St. Lawrence; and second, the east-west route along the Mohawk and Oswego rivers that linked Albany with the Great Lakes.
Although numbering only about two thousand warriors in 1720, the Iroquois were disproportionately important to the French and the British empires. Both coveted Iroquois friendship and dreaded Iroquois enmity. In 1711 the governor-general of New France noted, “The Iroquois are more to be feared than the English colonies.” In 1746 a New York colonist assured his governor, “On whose ever side the Iroquois Indians fall, they will cast the balance.” To maximize their advantages, after 1701 the Iroquois cultivated a neutrality meant to preserve the balance of power between the French and the British. In New York, a British official acknowledged, “To preserve the balance between us & the French is the great ruling principle of modern Indian politics.” A rough balance of power kept presents flowing, preserved competition in the fur trade, and held invading settlers at bay.
By the mid-eighteenth century, Indian leaders could see that the British were growing more numerous and powerful than the French. In 1754, the 1.5 million British colonists immensely outnumbered the seventy thousand French in North America. That advantage was compounded by British concentration along the Atlantic seaboard, in contrast to the French dispersion over immense distances, from the Gulf of the St. Lawrence to the mouth of the Mississippi. But the British colonists dissipated their numerical
advantage by their division into fourteen distinct mainland colonies (Nova Scotia was the fourteenth, neglected by historians who speak of only thirteen). The fourteen rarely cooperated, as each tried to shunt the burdens of defense onto the others.

Superior numbers also emboldened the British to behave more arrogantly toward their Indian neighbors. John Lawson, a Carolinian, conceded:

They are really better to us than we are to them. They always give us food at their quarters, and take care we are armed against Hunger and Thirst. We do not do so by them, but let them walk by our Doors hungry, and do not often relieve them. We look upon them with scorn and disdain, and think them little better than Beasts in human shape, though, if well examined, we shall find that, for all our religion and education, we possess more moral deformities and evils than these savages do, or are acquainted with.

It was notorious that no colonial jury would convict a settler for killing an Indian.

Compared with the British, the French were
more restrained and civil. Needing Indian allies to counter the British colonial numbers, the French treated most natives with diplomatic respect, generous presents, and ready hospitality. French traders more thoroughly learned Indian ways and languages, often by marrying native women, which provided the kinship connections that facilitated alliance and commerce. Making a virtue of their small colonial population, the French usually kept their promises not to intrude on Indian lands.

French officials regarded the Indians as both indispensable and insufferable, for they were the colony’s best defense, but their demands demonstrated that they knew it. To mobilize war parties required French arms, ammunition, presents, and feasts. During expeditions with French forces, the Indians acted independently, taking no orders, fighting in their own fashion, and returning home whenever they felt insulted or weary. The officials also had to buy scalps and prisoners, at no small expense. All of these
expenditures maddened colonial officials, who were under constant pressure from the crown to economize. In 1747 one long-suffering intendant lamented:

Persuaded of their usefulness to the colony (which is true), more often than not they are so boastful as to greet our hospitable treatment with complaints. … Indeed, I could carry on forever were I to convey the ceaseless importunities with which they try us. … Still, one has to admit that their continued forays against the enemy have bred such horror as to prevent—for the time being—plots against the colony from bearing fruit.

Although native warriors cost considerably less than French soldiers, the officials of a hierarchical society resented the need to treat Indians with tact and generosity.

Grudgingly accepting these frustrations, the French shaped their military strategy in North America to construct a network of Indian alliances. Lacking settlers, the French had to rely on the natives to hold the interior against British
settlers, traders, and soldiers. To cultivate Indian support, the French established a long string of small forts and trading posts that stretched around the Great Lakes and down the Ohio and Mississippi valleys. Lightly built and garrisoned, the posts depended upon the local Indians for protection and paid for it with presents and mediation. In general, the natives welcomed the French posts as assets, instead of resenting them as threats. An Indian reassured his compatriots:

Brethren, are you ignorant of the difference between our Father [the French] and the English? Go and see the forts our Father has created, and you will see that the land beneath their walls is still hunting ground, … whilst the English, on the contrary, no sooner get possession of a country than the game is forced to leave; the trees fall down before them, the earth becomes bare.

Similarly (but more cynically) another chief preferred French neighbors because, he explained, “we can drive away the French when we please.”

In sum, by 1750 the Indians faced a greater
threat of settler invasion and environmental transformation from the numerous and aggressive English than from the few and more generous French. Noting the French advantage, Governor Shirley of Massachusetts warned, “A few Indians do more execution, as we see, than four or five times their number of our men, and they have almost all the Indians of the continent to join them.”

That Indian support, however, was soft, because the British colonists had one great countervailing advantage; although rude and intrusive, they offered superior trade goods in abundant quantities and at relatively attractive prices. Dependent upon European cloth, metals, and alcohol, native peoples often embraced the better deals that British traders offered for their deerskins and beaver pelts. In wartime, the British navy compounded the trade advantage by controlling the sea lanes and destroying French merchant shipping. A prolonged war depleted the supplies in New France and Louisiana, obliging
more Indians to make peace with British officials so that they could obtain trade goods.

THE SEVEN YEARS WAR

The peace of 1748 proved short-lived, as both the French and the British overreacted to local aggressions as if they were part of some grand power play by the other empire. In Nova Scotia, the British established a fortified town and navy base at Halifax in 1749 to counter nearby Louisbourg. Alarmed, the French promptly built two new forts at the head of the Bay of Fundy to hem in Nova Scotia to the west, which the British resented as an intrusion on their colony. Farther west, Virginia land speculators coveted the immense and fertile valley of the Ohio river which began beyond the Appalachian Mountains in western Pennsylvania and flowed southwestward into the Mississippi. And Pennsylvania traders crossed the Ohio to capture a growing share of the fur trade with the Indians.
To protect their native alliance and communications between Canada and Louisiana, in 1753–54 the French sent troops to plunder and oust the Pennsylvania traders and to build a new set of forts, principally Fort Duquesne at the forks of the Ohio (present Pittsburgh). In turn, British colonial officials interpreted the French moves as aggression: as a conspiracy to confine and strangle the coastal colonies. For both empires, the colonies had assumed a greater importance that elevated their frictions into the grounds for global war.

The climactic imperial war for North America erupted in 1754, when the British governor of Virginia, Robert Dinwiddie, tried to oust the French from the forks of the Ohio. In addition to asserting Virginia’s jurisdiction, Dinwiddie promoted his own interest in a company of land speculators determined to sell Ohio Valley lands to settlers. Dinwiddie sent a small regiment of colonial troops commanded by his fellow land speculator, the young and ambitious George Washington, to evict the French.
Embarked on his first command, Washington promptly displayed his inexperience. Although superior French numbers were building Fort Duquesne, Washington foolishly attacked and destroyed a small French patrol. Understandably upset, the main French force and their Indian allies surrounded Washington’s camp, a crude stockade that he had built in a swamp surrounded by high ground. When it began to rain heavily, his soldiers wallowed in water as the French and Indians fired on them from the hills. Compelled to surrender on July 4, Washington was fortunate to receive generous terms from the victors. Hoping to avoid a full-scale war, the French commander allowed Washington and his men to limp back to Virginia.

Imperial officials in Paris and London were already preparing for a new war, subsequently known as the Seven Years War. Informed of Washington’s defeat, the British government resolved to escalate the conflict and make war in North America its highest priority. In 1755 the
British sent unprecedented numbers of troops to the mainland colonies to seize control of their frontier from the French. One combined force of British regulars and New English volunteers won an easy but modest victory by overwhelming the two French posts at the head of the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia. The victors then deported most of the Acadian French and confiscated their farms and livestock for appropriation by New English land speculators and settlers. By treating the Acadians so harshly, the British stiffened the resolve of the Canadians to resist invasion.

Meanwhile, the primary British expedition reaped disaster. To recoup Washington’s setback, a veteran British general, Edward Braddock, marched 2,200 regular and colonial troops against Fort Duquesne. Although brave and energetic, Braddock was also arrogant, stubborn, and inexperienced at warfare in the American forests. Unwilling to adapt, Braddock expressed contempt for both Indians and colonists. He assured Benjamin Franklin, “These savages may, indeed,
be a formidable enemy to your raw American militia, but upon the king’s regular and disciplined troops, sir, it is impossible to believe they should make any impression.” They made quite an impression when Braddock marched his men directly into an ambush within ten miles of Fort Duquesne. Although the French and Indians had only half as many men, they exploited the forest, firing from behind trees and rocks into the massed and exposed British and colonial ranks. The French and the Indians suffered only about forty casualties while killing or wounding nearly a thousand men in the British force. The dead included General Braddock. The British debacle had one silver lining: George Washington inherited the command and redeemed his military reputation by resourcefully conducting a retreat that saved half the army.

Braddock had blundered into the ambush because he lacked the Indian allies needed to supply scouts and partisans for forest warfare. Only eight natives accompanied his army, and
Braddock ignored their advice. One Indian recalled, “He looked upon us as dogs and would never hear anything [we] said to him.” No expedition through the forest could prosper without significant Indian support and without heeding Indian expertise.

Braddock’s defeat emboldened the Lenni Lenape and Shawnee of the Ohio Valley to attack the hated colonial settlements in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. By the spring of 1756, the raiders had killed or captured at least seven hundred settlers. In a panic, the survivors abandoned their farms and fled eastward, pushing the frontier back to within a hundred miles of Philadelphia. The Indian raids also pinned down colonial troops, which enabled the French to take the offensive in 1756 and 1757, under the able leadership of Governor-General Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil and General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm. They mustered small but effective forces that combined French regulars, Canadian militia, and Indian warriors to capture British
forts on Lake Ontario in 1756 and on Lake George in 1757. In both cases, the nearby but alienated Iroquois provided little or no help to the British defenders. Short of men and provisions, Montcalm could not garrison the captured forts; instead he destroyed both and withdrew to Canada.

Montcalm also weakened his victories by alienating many of his Indian allies. A regular officer trained in Europe, Montcalm despised the disorder and atrocities of frontier raiding—a mode of war that the Canadian-born Vaudreuil championed as essential to the defense of undermanned New France. At Lake George, Montcalm enraged the Indians with his well-intentioned but ineffectual attempts to liberate their prisoners. The Indians promptly killed many prisoners and returned home in anger. Most refused to assist the French in future campaigns, which weakened the front lines of Canadian defense. Vaudreuil denounced Montcalm, producing a bitter feud that ruined their
cooperation—with fatal consequences for New France.

In Great Britain the embarrassing military setbacks of 1755–57 brought to power a new and more competent administration headed by William Pitt, a blunt man whose ability matched his towering ego. In 1757, Pitt boasted, “I believe that I can save this nation and that no one else can.” Despite the expansion of the war in 1756 to include Europe, Pitt clung to the America-first policy, investing even more troops and money in North America. Pitt also defused tensions between colonial governments and British commanders over their requisitions of men and supplies. Instead of ordering colonial cooperation, Pitt bought it by reimbursing in cash their expenditures, which dramatically increased the colonial contributions. Although politically expedient, Pitt’s policy was financially reckless: by augmenting the monstrous public debt, Pitt saddled the colonists and Britons with a burden that would violently disrupt the empire after the
For the North American campaign of 1758 the British employed some 45,000 troops, about half British regulars and half colonial volunteers. Against such large numbers, New France could muster only 6,800 regulars and 2,700 provincials, supplemented by volatile Indian warriors and drafted Canadian militiamen. Their morale flagged as hunger prevailed in Canada after the disappointing harvests of 1757 and 1758. The French troops received less than half their usual rations, while many habitants faced starvation. The skyrocketing price of food devastated the Canadian economy and virtually bankrupted the colonial government. Putting a higher priority on operations in Europe, the French government virtually wrote off Canada, leaving Vaudreuil and Montcalm to muddle and squabble through with their small and shrinking forces.

Pitt also appointed more competent and adaptable generals to command the growing forces deployed against New France. Regular
troops, heavy artillery, and siege warfare remained at the core of every British expedition, but the new commanders diversified their forces to counter the Canadian irregulars and Indian warriors. The British recruited colonists into new ranger units that used Indian tactics and trained some British light infantry units to use rifles and tomahawks instead of the customary muskets and bayonets.

The British war effort in North America also thrived as the royal navy won control of the Atlantic, reducing the reinforcements and supplies that reached New France. As trade goods became scarce at French posts, many Indians sought an alternative supply, especially of the guns, gunpowder, and shot needed for hunting and war. In the Ohio Valley in 1758, as a new British army advanced on Fort Duquesne, the Shawnee and Lenni Lenape deserted the French and reopened trade with the Pennsylvanians. Abandoned by the Indians, the French blew up Fort Duquesne and fled northward. To the Indians’ dismay, the
British replaced Fort Duquesne by building Fort Pitt, which was ten times larger than its French predecessor—an ominous sign of British intentions.

In 1758 a massive British fleet and thirteen thousand regulars, commanded by General Jeffrey Amherst, besieged and captured fortress Louisbourg. This cleared the way for General James Wolfe to ascend the St. Lawrence to attack Quebec, the key to Canada, in 1759. Frustrated by the massive fortifications and Montcalm’s resourceful defense, Wolfe made one last desperate gamble, scaling a cliff at night to assemble his troops on a field, called the Plains of Abraham, just outside the city walls. Lacking an easy retreat, the British forces faced destruction if defeated. Fortunately for the British, Montcalm also gambled, marching out of the relative security of the city to give battle in the open field. As European veterans, neither Wolfe nor Montcalm could resist the fatal temptation of a conventional battle: the first in the colonies. After
a half-hour battle, the French broke and ran back to Quebec.

Both Montcalm and Wolfe suffered mortal wounds, leaving other commanders to offer and receive Quebec’s surrender on September 18. In death, Wolfe became larger than life—a martyr for the British empire. The London writer Horace Walpole saw an infusion of nationalism as the “whole people … triumphed—and they wept—for Wolfe had fallen in the hour of victory!”

The British mopped up the remaining French in Canada during 1760. British regulars and colonial volunteers advanced on Montreal in overwhelming numbers from three directions: Quebec, Lake Champlain, and Lake Ontario. Convening at Montreal in early September, the British forces, led by Amherst, obliged Governor-General Vaudreuil to surrender all of New France, including the remaining forts around the Great Lakes to the west.

The British overwhelmed New France with sheer numbers of soldiers and sailors, warships
and cannon. That ability to project military power across the Atlantic reflected British superiority in shipping, finance, and organization. And that superiority reflected the more advanced nature of Britain as a capitalist society endowed with far more liquid capital and financial acumen. The British had more money, spent it with wild abandon, and concentrated their expenditures in North America (while the French had to invest most of their resources in their army in Germany). The conquest of Canada cost the British empire about £4 million, more than ten times what the French spent to defend it. Never before had any empire spent so much money to wage war on a transoceanic scale.

And the conquest of Canada was only part of a global set of British victories in the largest war ever waged by Europeans. In 1759 the British reaffirmed their naval supremacy by crippling the Spanish and French fleets in battles at Lagos, off Portugal, and Quiberon Bay, on the west coast of France. In the Caribbean, a British amphibious
operation captured the lucrative sugar island of Guadeloupe. In West Africa, the British seized the French slaving entrepôt at Senegal. The British also secured a dominant position in India by routing the French and their local allies.

Until 1762 the Spanish remained on the sidelines, but they became alarmed as continued British victories shattered the old balance of power. Instead of reversing the British victories, the Spanish entry escalated them. British forces captured Manila in the Philippines and the great port of Havana on Cuba, where the Spanish had stored much of their Mexican bullion. Another British fleet and army seized the sugar-rich French West Indian islands of Martinique, Dominica, St. Lucia, Grenada, and St. Vincent. So many victories embarrassed British diplomats striving to draw the proud French and Spanish to negotiate peace.

At last, in early 1763, the belligerents concluded the Treaty of Paris. The French conceded Canada and all of their claims east of
the Mississippi, including the Ohio Valley. The British also retained the lesser of their French West Indian conquests: Dominica, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Tobago. To mollify the French, the British returned the major islands of Guadeloupe, Martinique, and St. Lucia. The victors also restored French access to the valuable fishing waters off Newfoundland by conceding two small, unfortified islands in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. As a sop to their Spanish allies, the French gave them New Orleans and most of Louisiana (west of the Mississippi River). Although Louisiana was a troublesome money-loser, the Spanish hoped that it would enhance the security of New Spain by providing a frontier buffer zone. To regain Havana, the Spanish ceded Florida to the British. The various swaps made the Mississippi the boundary between the British and the Spanish claims in North America. Of course, most of the interior remained in the possession of Indian peoples, who denied the European power to dispose of their lands.
In preparing for negotiations, the British considered keeping most of the French West Indies and returning Canada. Although much smaller, the sugar islands were far more lucrative. But the influential British West Indian lobby did not want to weaken its advantageous position within the empire by accepting new competition from the more productive plantations on Guadeloupe and Martinique. The British West Indians lobbied to keep Canada instead, which reassured the mainland colonists, who feared a grander version of the 1748 giveaway of Louisbourg. By taking vast new territories in the Treaty of Paris, the British broke with a previous imperial policy that had sought to maximize maritime commerce while minimizing continental entanglements. Somehow they would have to raise the money to administer and garrison their expensive new domains in Canada, the Great Lakes, the Ohio Valley, and Florida.

In surprising ways, the peace benefited the war’s losers more than the British victors.
Generating scant revenue, Louisiana, New France, and Florida had drained the French and Spanish of funds and soldiers, all better spent and employed on more valuable colonies in the Caribbean. While losing little of real (immediate) value, the French and the Spanish recovered their most valuable losses: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Cuba, and access to the Newfoundland fisheries.

Humiliated by their defeats, the French and Spanish resolved to strike back and restore the balance of power at their next opportunity. Learning from defeat, they rebuilt and reformed their armies and navies. In the next conflict with Britain, the French and the Spanish would be far leaner and meaner adversaries. And in the next war, the British could not count on assistance from any European allies, for all concluded that Great Britain had grown too rich and too powerful. The British had replaced the French as the expansionist power considered most dangerous to the rest of Europe. Nor would the British be able to count on their own colonists,
who would find in the victory the grounds for their own rebellion. Instead, in the War of the American Revolution, the British would have to recruit allies from among the Indians who had formerly defended Canada and harried British America.

INDIAN REBELLIONS

The collapse of New France was dreadful news to the Indians of the interior. No longer could they play the French and the British off against one another to maintain their own independence, maximize their presents, and ensure trade competition. When British troops occupied the French forts, colonial traders flocked into the Ohio and Great Lakes countries. Most cheated and abused Indians in pursuit of immediate profit, rather than cultivating long-term relationships as the French had done. Colonial governors also did little to restrain the flood of settlers into the Carolina backcountry and the Ohio Valley. And
the British military commander, Jeffrey Amherst, cut off the delivery of presents, deeming them a waste of money, given the removal of the French competition. Amherst suffered from the imperial delusion that his scattered forces could impose a new order on the vast Indian country and its messy tangle of relationships involving diverse villages, contentious traders, rival missionaries, and intruding settlers. Feeling insulted and aggrieved by the intrusions and the cutbacks, the Indian chiefs began to cultivate a new cooperation between their peoples in search of a common redress.

The Indian discontent first erupted into war in an unexpected place: the South Carolina frontier, where the Cherokee had long allied with the colonists. Late in the Seven Years War, with the French facing defeat, reckless Carolina settlers invaded Cherokee lands and poached their deer. Some especially ruthless frontiersmen killed Cherokee to procure scalps to collect the large bounties offered by the colony of Virginia. It was impossible to tell a Cherokee scalp from that of a
hostile Shawnee—and far easier to kill an unsuspecting people than one prepared for war. The £50 bounty for an adult scalp allured settlers who rarely could make that much in a year. They rationalized that all Indians were their enemies, if not immediately, then inevitably.

In 1759, the Cherokee warriors took revenge by killing about thirty settlers. Escalating the conflict, the South Carolina authorities demanded that the Cherokee surrender the warriors as murder suspects for colonial trial and execution. The chiefs proposed the traditional alternative: they would compensate for every settler death with a French scalp or prisoner. The South Carolina governor abruptly rejected that offer, for he wanted a Cherokee submission to colonial law more than additional dead Frenchmen. His intransigence appalled the Cherokee, who recognized that submission would sacrifice their independence. The impatient Carolinians completed the rupture by seizing and executing twenty-two chiefs who had come to the colony for
A numerous people (twelve thousand) inhabiting about forty villages in the defensible valleys of the southern Appalachian mountains, the Cherokee were a formidable enemy. In 1760 they ravaged the South Carolina frontier settlements, captured a British fort (Fort Loudon), and frustrated an invasion by a mixed force of British regulars and Carolina volunteers.

In 1761, however, the tide turned against the Cherokee. British and colonial forces invaded the Cherokee country to destroy fifteen towns and their crops, sentencing the survivors to severe hunger. Cherokee resistance had faltered for want of sufficient gunpowder and shot for their guns. The Cherokee had hoped to procure a supply from the French, but the British fleet blocked French shipments to Louisiana. The Cherokee had also expected assistance from the Creek Confederacy, the most numerous and powerful set of native peoples in the southeast. The Creek, however, depended upon their Carolina suppliers for trade
goods. Showered with British presents, the Creek remained neutral. Deprived of corn, gunpowder, and allies, the Cherokee had to make peace. Although they ceded additional lands to South Carolina, the Cherokee avoided surrendering the murder suspects to colonial trial.

In Cherokee defeat, the northern Indians saw their own fate if they did not unite against the British occupation of the former French forts. But the northern Indians could also find inspiration in the Cherokee ability to take a major British fort. During the spring of 1763 the Indians in the Ohio Valley and the Great Lakes covertly prepared for war. The defiant peoples included Mississauga, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Huron, Ojibwa, Wyandot, Miami, Kickapoo, Mascouten, Lenni Lenape, Illinois, Shawnee, and even one of the Iroquois Six Nations, the westernmost Seneca. Despite their linguistic and traditional differences, the natives found a new common ground in their shared grievances against the British traders, soldiers, and settlers.
The natives also felt a new commonality as Indians, above and beyond their traditional tribal and village identities. This Pan-Indian sensibility emerged from the teaching of a new set of religious prophets, led by a Lenni Lenape named Neolin. Adapting Christian ideas selectively to update native traditions, the prophets proclaimed a double creation: one for all Indians, the others for whites. In defense of their own divinely ordained way of life, Indians were supposed to resist colonial innovations, especially the consumption of alcohol and the cession of lands.

During the spring of 1763, far-flung native peoples surprised and captured most of the British forts around the Great Lakes and in the Ohio Valley. Through the summer and fall, they also raided the settlements of western Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, killing or capturing about two thousand colonists. By routing the British and the colonists, the Indian rebels hoped to lure the French back into North America. But the Indians failed to capture the three largest and strongest
British posts: at Detroit, Niagara, and Fort Pitt.

The British preferred to blame Indian rebellions on a single mastermind, just as they had done with Metacom (King Philip) in New England in 1675 to concoct King Philip’s War. Similarly, in 1763 they called the new uprising Pontiac’s Rebellion, after an Ottawa chief prominent in the siege of Detroit. Although more influential than most chiefs, Pontiac could not command the diverse peoples dwelling in dozens of scattered villages. For their own, shared reasons and under their own chiefs, the various native peoples rose up in a rebellion that had no central command:

The brutal war hardened animosities along racial lines. Outraged by the atrocities of frontier war, the settlers treated all Indians, regardless of allegiance, as violent brutes best exterminated. In Pennsylvania, the peaceful Indians of the eastern enclaves suffered for the violence of the western frontier. Shortly before dawn on a snowy December 14, 1763, fifty armed Pennsylvania settlers surprised the Indian village at Conestoga.
Dwelling on a small reservation amid the settlements, the natives slumbered in false security. Avoiding the war, they hoped to live in peace by raising hogs, hunting deer, tending their gardens, and making and peddling brooms and baskets to their settler neighbors. But the vigilantes, known as the Paxton Boys, insisted that all Indians were their enemies. Unable to come to grips with the frontier Indians, whose raids massacred farm families, the Paxton Boys surprised and butchered the nearby sleeping Conestoga and set ablaze the bloodied cabins.

Later that day, colonists rummaged through the smoldering ashes and scorched bones to find a bag containing the Conestoga’s most precious possessions: two wampum belts and six old documents, all produced at past treaty councils to certify their status as allies of Pennsylvania. The longest and oldest document was a cherished copy of a treaty made in 1701 with William Penn, the colony’s Quaker founder. The treaty pledged that the Indians and colonists “shall forever hereafter
be as one Head & One Heart, & live in true Friendship & Amity as one People.”

Determined to be thorough, the Paxton Boys next attacked the county jail in Lancaster, where the governor had gathered fourteen surviving Conestoga for their own protection. The vigilantes broke into the jail and killed and mutilated all fourteen. Seeking more blood, in early 1764 about five hundred armed settlers marched on Philadelphia determined to kill 140 Indian refugees gathered there. Blocked by royal troops, the Paxton Boys backed down and returned home when promised immunity from prosecution. Although spared from massacre, a third of the Indian refugees died of smallpox contracted while crowded in their Philadelphia barracks.

During the summer of 1764, the western rebels ran short on gunpowder, shot, and guns. Indians could not maintain their resistance for long without a European supplier. Unable to take the major forts, most of the Indians longed to resume
a peaceful trade. At the same time, the British government eagerly sought to end the expensive and frustrating war. The crown blamed Amherst for the crisis, recalling him in disgrace. The new commander, Thomas Gage, followed the more pragmatic advice of the Indian superintendent, Sir William Johnson. Recognizing that presents and respect for Indians were far cheaper than military expeditions against them, Johnson adopted the French practices of the “middle ground” alliance. From 1764 to 1766, the various villages gradually made peace with Johnson, who distributed presents with a lavish hand.

Although they allowed the British to reoccupy the captured forts, the Indians continued to insist that they were independent peoples. In 1766, Pontiac assured Johnson:

We tell you now [that] the French never conquered us, neither did they purchase a foot of our Country, nor have they a right to give it to you. We gave them liberty to settle for which they always rewarded us & treated us with great Civility. ... [I]f you expect to keep these Posts, we will expect to have proper returns
To avoid another expensive and bloody war, British military officers practiced a new policy of presents and conciliation at their western garrisons. To further mollify the Indians, the crown tried to enforce a new boundary line, running north-south along the ridge of the Appalachians, a line meant to keep settlers east of the mountains. But the ten thousand British soldiers scattered through North America could never restrain the dozens of cunning land speculators (including most royal governors) and the thousands of determined settlers, who continued to flock westward into the Ohio Valley. British troops sometimes burned the log cabins of squatters, but the latter soon returned in greater numbers to rebuild. As a result, the ineffectual new boundary line merely irritated the colonists. But by trying to replicate the French role as generous and mediating “Fathers,” the British won numerous Indian allies in 1776, when the colonies revolted against their
The conquest of Canada, which made the Indians so anxious, initially delighted the British colonists. After so many past wars of futile bloodshed, victory lifted the danger of French and Indian raids and seemed to open a vast and fertile continent to colonial settlement. In 1763 a farmer’s almanac in New England celebrated, “But now behold! The farmer may have land for nothing. … Land enough for himself and all his sons, be they ever so many.” Of course that land would be taken from the Indians of the interior (and it would not be had “for nothing,” because settlers always found a frontier land speculator demanding payment).

The colonists felt pride in their contributions to the war effort and in belonging to such a powerful, prosperous, and relatively free empire. Celebrating the conquest of Canada, Benjamin
Franklin rejoiced “not merely as I am a colonist, but as I am a Briton.” By public subscription, the city of New York erected triumphant statues of both King George III and William Pitt. In Salem, Massachusetts, the Reverend Thomas Barnard depicted the victories as vindicating Protestant liberty against French absolutism, Catholic superstition, and savage violence. He predicted a glorious colonial future within a perpetual empire:

Safe from the Enemy of the Wilderness, safe from the griping Hand of arbitrary Sway and cruel Superstition; Here shall be the late founded Seat of Peace and Freedom. Here shall our indulgent Mother [Country], who has most generously rescued and protected us, be served and honoured by growing Numbers, with all Duty, Love, and Gratitude, till Time shall be no more.

In nearby Boston a minister foretold that British America would “become in another century or two, a mighty empire,” but he promptly added, “I do not mean an independent one.”

And yet, within thirteen years of the treaty of peace, thirteen Atlantic seaboard colonies would
revolt to wage a long war for their independence. That shocking conflict between the colonies and the mother country developed from strains initiated by winning the Seven Years War. The conquest of Canada deprived the mainland colonists and the British of a common enemy that had united them in the past. Victory invited the British to redefine the empire and to increase the colonists’ burdens. But victory also emboldened the colonists to defy British demands because they no longer needed protection against the French. In 1773 the royal governor of Massachusetts noted that had Canada “remained to the French none of the spirit of opposition to the Mother Country would have yet appeared.”

During the Seven Years War, British authorities began to pay closer attention to the North American colonies and to rethink how best to administer them. Impressed by the apparent prosperity of the free colonists, British concluded that they could pay higher taxes to support the empire that benefited them so greatly. This
seemed only fair to the British, who had spent so much blood and treasure making the continent safe for the prospering colonists. After all, British taxpayers were already paying far heavier taxes than were the colonists: in 1763 imperial taxation averaged twenty-six shillings per person in Britain, where most subjects were struggling, compared with only one shilling per person in the colonies, where most free people were prospering.

During the war, British officers and officials were also appalled to discover that the colonists routinely ignored imperial regulations that hurt their economic interest, particularly the 1733 Molasses Act. Imposed by Parliament at the request of the powerful West Indian sugar lobby, the act imposed discriminatory duties meant to prevent the New English from importing molasses from the French West Indies to make rum. Ignoring the law, New English shippers continued to trade with the French islands, even during the Seven Years War. By feeding the French colonists and their slaves, the trade prolonged
their resistance to British attacks. Shocked imperial officers and officials vowed to tighten enforcement of the trade laws, to teach discipline to the colonists, and to reap a greater revenue for the empire.

Victory had not come cheap, doubling the British debt from a prewar £73 million to a postwar £137 million. Interest payments on that debt consumed more than 60 percent of Great Britain’s annual budgets during the mid-1760s. Moreover, the expanded empire in North America was far more expensive to garrison and administer. Before the Seven Years War, the British posted only a few hundred troops in North America. In 1763, however, the crown decided to maintain ten thousand men in the colonies, primarily in Canada and the Great Lakes country. With the British people already taxed to the limit, Parliament hoped to pay for the new army by levying new taxes on the colonists.

But the colonists balked at the new taxes, detecting a dangerous precedent ominous to their
prosperity and liberties. Paradoxically, by protesting British taxation, the colonists affirmed their cherished identity as liberty-loving Britons, as they rallied behind the most cherished proposition of their shared political culture: that a free man paid no tax unless levied by his own representatives. The colonists devoutly believed that without such protection from arbitrary taxation, people gradually but inevitably became enslaved by domineering rulers. The colonists would pay taxes levied by their own assemblies but not by the distant Parliament, where no colonist sat. In 1764, Boston’s town meeting protested Parliamentary taxation:

This we apprehend annihilates our charter right to govern and tax ourselves. It strikes at our British privileges which, as we have never forfeited them, we hold in common with our fellow subjects who are natives of Britain. If taxes are laid upon us in any shape without ever having a legal representation where they are laid, are we not reduced from the character of free subjects to the miserable state of tributary slaves?
Colonists were quick to speak of “slavery” because they knew from their own practice on Africans where unchecked domination ultimately led. The conspicuous presence of slavery rendered liberty the more dear to the colonial owners of human property.

The colonists also began to recognize and defend the considerable autonomy that they had gained—despite the simultaneous growth, during the eighteenth century, of the empire’s power and ambition. The financial and military demands of the imperial wars had strengthened the government at home but weakened its power over the colonies. Desperate to raise funds and troops for war, royal governors had to appease colonial assemblies by conceding greater control over expenditures. Of course, the assemblies were loath to surrender their gains after 1763, when Parliament and the crown abruptly demanded a new subservience.

The increased British demands also coincided with a postwar depression in the colonial
economy. That crash followed the boom produced by the wartime investment of British men and money in the colonies. Long troubled by a lack of currency, the colonial economy thrived during the war from the infusion of British coin and the official indulgence of paper money issued by colonial assemblies. That boom, however, created a dependence that proved painful when Parliament stopped the transfer payments at the end of the war and forbade further issues of paper money. In the subsequent hard times of the mid-1760s, incomes fell and creditors sued for collection, just when debtors found it most difficult to pay. In 1764 a New Yorker lamented, “Everything is tumbling down, even the merchants themselves.” In sum, the new parliamentary taxes on sugar (1764) and stamps (1765) and the tighter enforcement of customs regulations all came at an especially bad time for the colonists. Struggling with public and private debts, a commercial depression, and surging litigation, the colonists resented the new policies and taxes.
Instead of seeing the new permanent army in North America as a source of protection, colonial leaders felt threatened as those troops became both the pretext for raising new taxes and the means for enforcing them. In addition, after the British made peace with the Indians, the colonists concluded that the army served to protect natives from settlers rather than to help them dispossess the Indians. Rather than preserving the North American empire, the new postwar garrisons (and their associated taxes) provoked the crisis that lost most of that empire.

From 1763 to 1776 the colonial leaders conducted a prolonged and increasingly rancorous constitutional debate with Parliament over the new taxes and the army of occupation. As never before, that debate revealed to both Britons and Americans the divergent development of their societies. In Britain, most common men were “dependents” upon a patron: either tenants reliant upon an aristocratic landlord, or landless laborers dependent upon an employer. Forgetting their
own slaves, colonial visitors were shocked at the extremes of wealth and poverty in the white population of Great Britain. Addressing the few colonists who aspired to Britain’s industrial development, Benjamin Franklin observed:

Let them with three-fourths of the People of Ireland, live the Year round on Potatoes and Butter Milk, without Shirts, then may their Merchants export Beef, Butter, and Linnen. Let them with the Generality of the Common People of Scotland go Barefoot, then may they make large Exports in Shoes and Stockings. And if they will be content to wear Rags like the Spinners and Weavers of England, they may make Cloths and Stuffs for all Parts of the World.

Compared with Britain, the American colonies offered greater opportunity for free people to become landowning farmers. In 1767, Governor Sir Henry Moore of New York explained that former indentured servants accepted frontier hardships to become landowners:

As soon as the time stipulated in their indentures is expired, they immediately quit their masters and get a
small tract of land, in settling which for the first three or four years they lead miserable lives, and in the most abject poverty. But all this is patiently borne and submitted to with the greatest cheerfulness, the satisfaction of being land holders smooths every difficulty and makes them prefer this manner of living to that comfortable subsistence which they could procure for themselves and their families by working at the trades in which they were brought up.

In sum, colonial conditions permitted most adult, free men to own sufficient land to employ themselves and their families, a cherished condition called “independence,” which starkly contrasted with the dependence of laborers and tenant farmers in Great Britain. Knowing the difference, the colonists clung to independence as a precious state in a world where dependence was the norm. Of course, this did not mean any withdrawal from market transactions into pure subsistence farming. Nor did it stop the most prosperous farmers from buying their own dependent people: indentured servants, convicts, or slaves. The best free man’s country was a hard
land for the unfree.

The imperial crisis called British official attention to the unconventional nature of the colonial social structure. To British eyes, a land of so many independent common men and so many chattel slaves seemed doubly strange and threatening to proper order. No wonder the colonists were so insubordinate: their leaders were vulgar men grown too wealthy and arrogant from dominating slaves, and yet the colonial gentlemen were also far too solicitous of their independent constituents who did not fully understand deference to their betters.

Some imperial officials became alarmed during the late 1760s and early 1770s as emigration increased from Great Britain to the colonies. From a trough at mid-century, emigration soared to new heights after the war, especially from Scotland and northern England as tenants sought the independence of American farms. Elite observers, however, saw no profit to the mother country in the loss of British laborers and tenants
into the woods of America. After all, the British economy needed many common people to keep wages low, which would keep factories and farms productive and competitive. Members of Parliament suspected that the discrepancy between Britain’s high taxes and America’s low ones encouraged emigration. Narrowing that gap would, they hoped, keep more laborers and tenants at home while rendering the colonists more dutiful.

In the ill-concealed British jealousy, leading colonists detected both their own advantages and their vulnerability to losing them. Ambitious colonists took personally the imperial efforts to tighten control. In late 1765 the young lawyer John Adams saw the Stamp Act as a plot against his own aspirations: “I have groped in dark Obscurity, till of late, and had but just become known, and gained a small degree of Reputation, when this execrable Project was set on foot for my Ruin as well as that of America in General, and of Great Britain.”
Adams expressed a widespread fear that the small new taxes set precedents that would inevitably lead to ever increasing levies that would enrich an official elite around the royal governors while impoverishing common taxpayers and obstructing their social mobility. The free colonists intently defended their property rights because property alone made men truly independent and free. In turn, the free colonists clung to their liberties as the means to protect the property that endowed their self-employed independence. Without property they would become “slaves,” a state they knew all too well from local observation. Broadly defined, “slavery” meant to labor for a master without reaping the rewards. In sum, the colonists translated the constitutional abstractions of the imperial debate into the implications for their property and social structure.

Adams and other free colonists began to see that their good fortune as middling property-holders was unusual within the empire. Inequality
and dependence were the norm in the British empire (and the rest of the world). The colonial nightmare scenario of common white people dominated by landlords and factory owners was all too real in Great Britain. And although prosperity remained the colonial norm for free people, there were nagging signs, especially in the seaports and the older farm communities, of increasing unemployment and poverty. In the context of the imperial crisis, those signs profoundly alarmed colonists of middling means who dreaded the erosion of their own good fortune. Material anxieties gave constitutional issues an intense emotional resonance.

**EMPIRE OF LIBERTY**

Until the American Revolutionary War began in 1775, few colonists aspired to national independence, for they felt great pride in the empire, derived great economic benefits from trading within its network, and dreaded the death
and destruction of a civil war. Instead of national independence, the colonists had wanted to preserve their privileged position within the empire as virtually untaxed beneficiaries of imperial trade and protection. Until the British began to tighten the empire in the 1760s, the colonists had a very good deal—and they knew it. They resisted the new taxes in the hope that the British would back down, preserving their loose relationship with the mother country. But, of course, the British would not back down, which brought on a long and bloody war that no one really wanted. That war obliged the mainland colonial leaders to declare independence, converting thirteen colonies into states with elected governments bound into a confederation.

When the civil war within the empire erupted in 1775, the less populous and more marginal colonies to the north—Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Quebec—remained loyal, for they depended upon British protection and markets. Similarly, to the south, the West Indian sugar planters felt too inhibited by their slave
majority and too reliant upon the British market for sugar to consider rebellion. By 1775, however, the Atlantic seaboard colonists felt a new confidence in their own power as they noted their growing population. Postwar immigration and continued natural increase pushed their numbers from 1.5 million in 1754 to 2.5 million by 1775. In their swelling population, colonial leaders detected an importance and maturity that deserved greater respect from Parliament. When denied that respect, many (but not all) mainland colonists felt a new capacity to reject British rule. John Adams warned that the British risked provoking a colonial rebellion: “They will find it a more obstinate War, than the Conquest of Canada and Louisiana.”

That greater colonial assurance directly clashed with its British counterpart: an imperial arrogance enhanced by so many victories over the powerful French and Spanish. British officials boasted that the conquest of Canada had depended exclusively on the royal navy and army, and that the colonial
troops had been no more than expensive cowards. Therefore the British had a dangerous certitude that their forces could easily suppress any colonial rebellion. Impressed with their own might and contemptuous of their colonists, British imperialists were blind to the compromises needed to avoid a civil war within the empire.

By 1763 the British had, at last, at great cost in money and lives, prevailed in the imperial wars to dominate North America. During the subsequent two decades, however, they promptly alienated and lost their most important colonies to rebellion. Triumphant in the War of the American Revolution (1775–83), the new United States embraced the continental expansion that the British had unleashed only to regret. Learning from the abject failure of the British to slow frontier settlement, the American leaders shrewdly dedicated their nation to creating new farms by the thousands to accommodate the proliferating population. In western lands, the Americans meant to reproduce a society of family
farmers endowed with household independence, which would postpone the dreaded emergence of a propertyless proletariat of white people. That vision of white liberty depended upon the systematic dispossession of native peoples and, until the Civil War of the 1860s, upon the perpetuation of black slavery. Thomas Jefferson aptly described the United States as an “empire of liberty,” by and for the white citizenry. The new American empire liberated their enterprise as it provided military assistance to subdue Indians and Hispanics across the continent to the Pacific.