

The Thirteen Colonies

by Francis J. Bremer



William Penn's treaty with the Indians, when he founded the province of Pennsylvania in North America, 1681, based on a painting by Benjamin West, London, 1775. (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division)

The thirteen colonies that joined together to become the United States of America were but a part of the first British Empire. They were the product of a broad and dramatic expansion of England that began with the establishment of “plantations” in Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and reached a peak with the conquest of Canada and the extension of British influence over India during the 1760s. In the New World alone at the time of the American Revolution Britain had close to two dozen colonies, most in the Caribbean, apart from the thirteen rebellious ones. As was the case for other colonizing nations, this expansion was driven by a variety of factors, including religion, nationalism, and economics—often categorized as God, Glory, and Gold. Specific colonies typically combined more than one of these objectives. The Roanoke colony of 1585, for example, was intended to serve as a privateer base that would undermine Spain’s Catholic empire in America, advance the interests of England, and enrich those who would actually capture Spanish possessions.

Unlike the overseas expansion of European powers such as Spain and France, English colonization was rarely the result of government initiatives. Instead, the Crown granted charters authorizing overseas ventures to individuals and commercial corporations. Exceptions to this were colonies acquired by conquest, as when, in 1664, an English expedition seized the sprawling Dutch colony of New Netherland (which the English divided into New York and New Jersey), and when Canada joined the empire as a result of the Treaty of Paris of 1763 that ended the Seven Years’ War.

Colonial charters specified the land that an individual or corporation had the right to settle. In the case of the New World, the English government, like its European counterparts, dismissed the rights of the Native American inhabitants and claimed title as the Christian discoverers of the lands. An imprecise awareness of the actual geography of territory often led to conflicting land claims—for instance the precise border separating the lands granted to Maryland and Pennsylvania was not settled until the surveying of the Mason-Dixon line between 1763 and 1767, and the region that is now the state of Vermont was claimed by both New Hampshire and New York until the time of the American Revolution.

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The charters granted by the Crown authorized the creation of colonial governments. They had considerable autonomy but were subject to certain conditions, including a provision that they not pass any legislation which violated English law. The three types of charters are commonly categorized as proprietary, corporate, or royal.

Proprietary colonies were established by individuals who received a charter to explore, settle, and exploit a set geographical region claimed by England. The failed Roanoke colony of 1585 was sponsored by Sir Walter Raleigh. Most notable of the proprietary colonies were Maryland, settled under the terms of a charter granted to Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, in 1632; and Pennsylvania, founded by William Penn, who received his charter in 1681. Generally listed as one of the thirteen colonies, Delaware was originally part of Pennsylvania. Settled prior to 1681 by Swedes, Dutchmen, and some English, it was granted a separate assembly by William Penn in 1701 when it became evident that its residents did not share the Quaker vision or values. While proprietary charters were typically granted to individuals, the grant for the Carolinas was awarded to a group of eight Lords Proprietors in 1663. Though William Penn envisioned settling in Pennsylvania and did manage to visit on two occasions, most proprietors directed the affairs of their colonies from England, appointing governors (in the case of Maryland, occasionally a family member) to pursue their goals.

One of the disadvantages of proprietary colonies was that an individual family or small group of men bore the sole financial responsibility for the enterprise, a burden that few were able to assume. One way of sharing the risks was for those interested in colonization to band together with others to form a corporation in which financial support was spread over a large number of investors and liability was similarly dispersed. Corporations almost always based their colonial operations in England, appointing agents to carry out their policies abroad. Many who invested in these ventures were involved in more than one colonial enterprise—for example, the Somers Island Company was formed in 1615 by shareholders of the Virginia Company to govern the colony that became Bermuda. The last of the original colonies was Georgia, founded through the chartering of a corporation headed by James Oglethorpe in 1732.

Charters did not necessarily require that corporate headquarters be maintained in a specific location, and the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay

Company took advantage of this when they moved their operations, and the actual charter itself, to their colony in 1630, thus gaining some protection against royal interference. Some corporations sub-granted their territory to other groups. Other colonies founded under such a corporate aegis became semi-autonomous relatively quickly. The Plymouth colony, established by the Pilgrims and other settlers, was financed by a group of Merchant Adventurers who had received a grant from the Virginia Company of London. When it became evident that the settlement was outside the jurisdiction of the original charter, the Merchant Adventurers turned to the Council for New England for a new patent. Disheartened by the meager returns on their investment, the Merchant Adventurers sold their interest to a group of the colony's leaders.

Royal colonies were under the direct control of the English government rather than an individual or corporation. Governors were appointed by the king—or, between 1649 and 1660, the authorities governing England during the interregnum between the execution of Charles I and the restoration of the monarchy. Some of these colonies were established by conquest, as when forces sent by England's Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell captured Jamaica in 1655. Other colonies came under royal control when a proprietary or corporate charter was revoked for a failure to adhere to the terms under which it was granted. Internal dissension in the Company and unfavorable attention resulting from an Indian uprising in 1622 led King James to revoke the Virginia Company's charter in 1624, eighteen years after it was issued, and the colony came under direct Crown control.

Some colonies were formed without any official authorization. Almost a decade after they were first settled, towns in Massachusetts that had been established by dissenters came together in 1643 and received a Parliamentary charter as Rhode Island and Providence Plantations; that authorization was later confirmed by a royal charter in 1663. A bit farther south, the largely unauthorized settlements of the separate Connecticut and New Haven colonies were merged into one colony by the Connecticut charter of 1662. Other unauthorized communities were recognized by the Crown as the colony of New Hampshire in 1679.

Regardless of how they were created, the actual governance of the various colonies came to reflect local interests more than the desires of the English authorities that claimed jurisdiction. The evolution of most colonial governments up to 1775 may be categorized as involving, on the one hand, a struggle for home rule by colonists opposing proprietary, corporate, and royal efforts to impose policies on them and, on the other, a related struggle between various colonial factions over how power within a colony should be allocated. The political evolution of New England differed from that of the other mainland colonies. The puritans who settled Massachusetts brought their charter and powers of government with them, thus largely eliminating any question of English control over their affairs. Because their faith relied heavily on the participation of individual believers, they shaped their colonial institutions to reflect a broad participation in government, including popular election of governors and other officials and the creation of representative assemblies to pass laws. Though over time various economic interests created more diversity in the political sphere, the conflicts were relatively minor compared to those found elsewhere in America.

In the case of colonies founded with the expectation of control from England, history proved that persuading free Englishmen to undertake the dangerous voyage to the New World and the challenges of carving out an existence in a sometimes hostile environment required promises of land and some degree of participation in their own governance. Once in the New World, colonists sought to control the decisions that influenced their lives, often clashing with fellow colonists who had different interests. The Virginia House of Burgesses, first called into session in 1619, was an elective assembly offered as an inducement to attract new colonists. The settlers of Pennsylvania forced William Penn to make three separate modifications to his original frame of government, each one vesting greater authority in local institutions and lessening Penn's own ability to determine the course of the colony's affairs. Occasionally this pressure could threaten violence, as when Protestant settlers challenged the autocratic rule of the Catholic Calvert family in Maryland on a number of occasions in the seventeenth century. The result of such pressure was that every one of the colonies that would eventually come together to make up the United States had a legislative assembly by the 1680s, with the exception of New York, the proprietary colony of James Stuart, the Duke of York, whose arbitrary instincts would produce England's Glorious Revolution of 1688 following his ascension to the throne in 1685.

Those assemblies became the stages on which conflicting interests vied for political control. In the two Chesapeake colonies a tobacco-planter elite emerged as the dominant political force. In Virginia the planters controlled the Council (upper house) and the House of Burgesses, though their dominance was challenged in the decades leading up to the Revolution by the emergence of settlers, such as Patrick Henry, from the western parts of the colony. The Quaker elite who had wrested control of Pennsylvania from William Penn in the early decades of the colony kept the waves of non-English and non-Quaker immigrants who settled the frontier inadequately represented. New York's internal politics featured conflict between the merchant elite in New York City and the large landholders of the Hudson River Valley.

Proprietors and corporations in England did not have the resources to control the colonists who settled on their lands in America, and for most of the seventeenth century, the Crown was incapable of effectively suppressing challenges to the authorities. England was financially troubled and embroiled in religious and constitutional disputes that would result in conflict with Scotland and an English civil war. The establishment of evolving puritan regimes after the execution of the king would only end with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

Not until the colonial economies began to thrive and the powers of the monarchy began to increase was much attention paid by English authorities to the affairs of the colonies. Beginning in the 1660s and lasting until the 1690s, the governments of Charles II and James II did attempt to reverse the long history of neglect, seeking to impose an imperial vision on the various parts of the empire. The climax of that effort in North America came with the creation of the Dominion of New England, revoking all previous charters and incorporating the New England colonies and New York into a single jurisdiction controlled by an appointed governor general and abolishing all vestiges of self-government. This centralizing effort came to an end when the Glorious Revolution toppled James II and the new monarchs, William and Mary, plunged England into a series of wars with France that demanded the full attention of the government. A rebellion against the Dominion in Boston led to the granting of a new charter for Massachusetts (incorporating the former Plymouth colony) and the restoration of the remainder of the region's governments. In New York, Leisler's Rebellion divided the colonists along geographic and economic lines but did institutionalize a colonial legislature. In Maryland, a Protestant revolt led to the revocation of the Calvert family's political control of the colony.

In the decades between 1690 and the 1763 Treaty of Paris, the colonies on the North American mainland were once again left largely to determine their own affairs. Spurred by the growing prosperity of the groups that were largely represented in the lower houses of colonial legislatures, and by the ideological argument for parliamentary rights and a republican balance in government that had fueled the two seventeenth-century English revolutions, the colonial assemblies came to assume that they had the right to decide the policies that affected their people.

The idea that only colonial governments could legislate for the people of a given colony became a cherished belief of many British colonists in North America. When the English government sought to impose new laws and taxes (and enforce pre-existing ones) upon an empire that had vastly expanded with the Treaty of Paris, many colonists were determined to resist encroachments on what they'd come to view as their rights as Englishmen living in America. The colonies that would resist the most forcefully (the "thirteen") were geographically contiguous and part of a mature colonial economic system that was largely self-sufficient.

This was not necessarily the case with the British colonies elsewhere. Island colonies such as Barbados and Antigua had single-crop economies and were not self-sufficient. They were also more vulnerable to attack by other powers, and thus more dependent on the British navy. Furthermore, the large island planters were likely to actually reside in England, making them less concerned with colonial autonomy and more engaged with how to shape policy to suit their personal economic advantage as opposed to challenging those policies.

On the mainland from Georgia to New Hampshire colonial assemblies were a forum that allowed the various local interests to advance and defend their own interest, much as the House of Commons had come to serve that function in the years leading to the Puritan Revolution in England. Colonists came to view the assemblies as equivalent to the English Parliament. In the assemblies and in various local governing bodies, colonial leaders learned the art of governing that would lead them to organize a new nation.

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Theme: Government and Civics

Curriculum Subject: Government and Civics

Keywords: charters

Coverage People: Cecil Calvert, James Oglethorpe, Lord Baltimore, William Penn

Coverage Events: Glorious Revolution

Coverage Organizations: House of Burgesses, puritans, Quakers, Virginia Company of London

Coverage Geographical: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Virginia