

History Times: The Colonial Era

by

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC OCEAN

Imagine saying goodbye to family, friends, and familiar places to take a dangerous voyage across thousands of miles of ocean in a small wooden ship. Your destination: a strange and often hostile land. Yet, in the 1600s, thousands of Dutch, English, French, and Spanish men and women did just that because of poverty, religious persecution, or a hope that a better life lay across the Atlantic Ocean.

The first settlers arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607, eager to find gold and silver. Instead they found starvation and disease. Few of them survived. Still, more settlers came, and eventually these colonists learned how to survive in their new environment. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Virginians had discovered that they could make their fortunes growing tobacco and selling this “brown gold.”

To the north, a group of radical Protestants calling themselves Pilgrims created a small colony in 1620 that they name Plimouth Plantations. Although the rocky New England soil they farmed could not produce a marketable crop, they were thankful to be there. In Britain, they were persecuted for the way they chose to worship, but in New England, they were free to worship as they wished.

HIDE FULL ESSAY ▲

ENGLISH SETTLEMENTS

One by one, English colonies sprang up along the east coast of North America. Some, like Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, were founded to provide religious freedom for those who did not want to follow the official Church of England. Others, like the Carolinas and Georgia, were settled by colonists eager to make a new start. And one, New York, was taken by force from the Dutch as part of the long struggle for control of the New World between England and other European nations. In the end, thirteen English colonies emerged.

A visitor to the colonies could distinguish five distinct regions by 1700. To the north, New Englanders engaged in shipbuilding, fishing, and trade with England, the West India, and Africa. In the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, farmers grew wheat, and merchants and shippers in the ports of New York City and Philadelphia loaded ships with flour to send overseas and welcomed ships filled with English manufactured goods. In the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia, tobacco planters made their fortunes, while in the lower south of the Carolinas and Georgia, rice and indigo made colonists rich. And, in the western counties of every colony, the struggle to survive and establish communities repeated itself, as pioneers claimed the frontier land. In the process, the Native Americans, who had long been the farmers and hunters in the area, were driven farther west or were killed by land-hungry settlers.

By the 1700s, wealthy planters, merchants, shippers, and lawyers formed a colonial upper class. Middle-class farmers and shopkeepers could be found in every colony also, as well as poor and laboring men and women in the port cities and tenant farmers in the middle colonies. These less-fortunate men dreamed of success—and many achieved it.

But there was one group of people who could never expect to move up in this society: Africans brought to the colonies as slaves. Like other European people, the English engaged in a brutal trade that carried captured Africans to the Americas. Here, they worked without pay and with little chance of freedom on plantations and farms, on the docks, and as servants and artisans throughout the colonies. Although African slaves helped produce the wealth of America, they did not share in it.

PEOPLE AND POLITICS IN THE COLONIES

In colonial society, white men had far more freedom than their wives, daughters, or sisters. Women had few opportunities for education and could not enter most fields of work. When women became wives they lost many of the rights we take for granted today. They could not sue or be sued, keep the money they earned, or purchase or sell property. They were considered dependents of their husbands. Married or single, women could not vote or participate in colonial government.

White men who owned property, however, did have political rights. By the 1700s, every colony had a lawmaking body called an assembly, chosen by the voters, and the colonists expected these political leaders to represent their best interests. The British government was happy to leave much of the political power in the hands of the assemblies until the need for funds drove King George III and Parliament to attempt to take that power away. When they did, American colonists protested. Their rallying cry of “No taxation without representation” shows how accustomed American colonists had become to managing their own lives and deciding what was best for their communities. The original Jamestown settlers would have been amazed at how prosperous and confident the colonial world had become.

This essay is reprinted from the Gilder Lehrman Institute's American History: An Introduction, part of the History in a Box series.

METADATA

Era: Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763

Sub Era: Early Settlements, The Origins of Slavery, The Thirteen Colonies