

The Middle Colonies

Society in the middle colonies was far more varied, cosmopolitan and tolerant than in New England. In many ways, Pennsylvania and Delaware owed their initial success to William Penn.

Under his guidance, Pennsylvania functioned smoothly and grew rapidly. By 1685 its population was almost 9,000. The heart of the colony was Philadelphia, a city soon to be known for its broad, tree-shaded streets, substantial brick and stone houses, and busy docks. By the end of the colonial period, nearly a century later, 30,000 people lived there, representing many languages, creeds and trades. Their talent for successful business enterprise made the city one of the thriving centers of colonial America.

Though the Quakers dominated in Philadelphia, elsewhere in Pennsylvania others were well represented. Germans became the colony's most skillful farmers. Important, too, were cottage industries such as weaving, shoemaking, cabinetmaking and other crafts.

Pennsylvania was also the principal gateway into the New World for the Scots-Irish, who moved into the colony in the early 18th century. "Bold and indigent strangers," as one Pennsylvania official called them, they hated the English and were suspicious of all government. The Scots-Irish tended to settle in the back country, where they cleared land and lived by hunting and subsistence farming.

As mixed as the people were in Pennsylvania, New York best illustrated the polyglot nature of America. By 1646 the population along the Hudson River included Dutch, French, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, English, Scots, Irish, Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Portuguese and Italians -- the forerunners of millions to come.

The Dutch continued to exercise an important social and economic influence on the New York region long after the fall of New Netherland and their integration into the British colonial system. Their sharp-stepped, gable roofs became a permanent part of the city's architecture, and their merchants gave Manhattan much of its original bustling, commercial atmosphere.

Source: Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Country Studies/Area Handbook Series sponsored by the U.S. Department of the Army between 1986 and 1998.

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