

## Topic 2.7

# Colonial Society and Culture

*I assert that nothing ever comes to pass without a cause.*

Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of Will*, 1754

**Learning Objective 1:** Explain how and why the movement of a variety of people and ideas across the Atlantic contributed to the development of American culture over time.

**Learning Objective 2:** Explain how and why the different goals and interests of European leaders and colonists affected how they viewed themselves and their relationship with Britain.

The struggling English colonial villages at the start of the 17th century evolved by the middle of the 18th century to develop a culture distinct from any in Europe. If Americans in the 18th century constituted a new kind of society, what were its characteristics and what forces shaped its “new people”?

## Population Growth

In 1701, the English colonies on the Atlantic coast consisted of barely 250,000 Europeans and Africans. By 1775, the population was 2,500,000 people. Among African Americans, the increase was more dramatic: from about 28,000 in 1701 to 500,000 in 1775. The spectacular gains in population resulted from two factors: immigration of almost 1 million people and a sharp natural increase, caused by a high birthrate among colonial families. An abundance of fertile land and a dependable food supply attracted thousands of Europeans and supported the raising of large families.

## European Immigrants

Newcomers to the British colonies came not only from England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, but also from western and central Europe. Many **immigrants**, most of whom were Protestants, came from the kingdom of France and various German-speaking states. Many were fleeing religious persecution and wars, while others were searching for economic opportunity as farmers, artisans, or merchants. Most immigrants settled in the middle colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware) and on the western frontier

of the southern colonies (Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia). Few headed for New England where land was limited and Puritans dominated.

**English** Settlers from England continued to come to the American colonies. However, with fewer problems at home, their numbers were relatively small.

**Germans** This group settled chiefly on the farmlands west of Philadelphia, an area that became known as Pennsylvania Dutch country. They maintained their German language, customs, and religious beliefs as Lutherans, Amish, Brethren, or Mennonites. They obeyed colonial laws but took little interest in English politics. By 1775, people of German stock comprised 6 percent of the colonial population.

**Scotch-Irish** These English-speaking people were Protestants who came from northern Ireland. Their ancestors had moved to Ireland from Scotland, and they were known as the Scotch-Irish or Scots-Irish. They had little respect for the British, who had pressured them to leave Ireland. Most settled along the frontier in western Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. By 1775, they comprised 7 percent of the population.

**Other Europeans** Other groups included French Protestants (known as **Huguenots**), the **Dutch**, and the **Swedes**. These groups made up 5 percent of the population.

### ***Enslaved Africans***

The largest single group of people entering the English colonies did not come to America by choice. They were **Africans** who had been taken captive, forced onto European ships, and sold as enslaved laborers. They worked a range of occupations, such as laborer, bricklayer, or blacksmith, but the most common work was as field laborers on plantations. By 1775, African Americans (enslaved and free) made up 20 percent of the colonial population. Most lived in the southern colonies, and enslaved people formed a majority of the population in South Carolina and Georgia.

A few Africans obtained their freedom. They were either emancipated by their owner or allowed to work for money and to purchase their freedom. However, every colony passed laws that discriminated against African Americans.

### ***American Indians***

Colonial population growth created conflicts between settlers and American Indians already living in a region. Some American Indians formed alliances to protect their land, such as the Powhatan Confederation in Virginia and the Iroquois Confederation in the Great Lakes region. Others used European settlers as allies in their conflicts with rival tribes. Among the most peaceful relations between American Indians and settlers were those in Pennsylvania. William Penn often obtained land through treaties rather than violence.



This frieze showing William Penn signing a treaty with the Delaware Indians in 1683 appears on a wall in the U.S. Capitol.

**Source:** Architect of the Capitol. Wikimedia.org.

## The Structure of Colonial Society

Each of the 13 British colonies developed distinct patterns of life. However, they all also shared a number of characteristics. For example, most of the population was English in origin, language, and tradition. In all colonies, both Africans and non-English immigrants brought diverse influences that modified the culture of the majority in significant ways.

### *Liberty and Opportunity*

The colonies also offered people more self-determination than they found in Europe. This was evident in both religion and the economy.

**Religious Toleration** All of the colonies permitted the practice of different religions, but with varying degrees of freedom. Massachusetts, the most restrictive, accepted several types of Protestants, but it excluded Roman Catholics and all non-Christians. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania were the most open. Pennsylvania accepted all who believed in God, including Jews. However, only Christians could participate in government.

**No Hereditary Aristocracy** The extremes of Europe, with very wealthy nobility and masses of hungry poor, were missing in the colonies. A narrower class system, based on economics, was developing. Wealthy landowners were at the top; craft workers and small farmers made up the majority of people.

**Social Mobility** In all colonies, White residents had an opportunity to improve their standard of living and status by hard work. Acquiring land was much easier than in Europe.

### *The Family*

The family was the center of colonial life. With an expanding economy and ample food supply, people married younger and reared more children than in Europe. More than 90 percent of the people lived on farms. While life was hard, most colonists had a higher standard of living than did most Europeans.

**Men** Besides working as farmers or artisans, men could own property and participate in politics. The law gave the husband almost unlimited power in the home, including the right to beat his wife.

**Women** A colonial woman bore an average of eight children, many of whom would die at birth or in infancy. She performed multiple tasks including cooking, cleaning, making clothes, providing medical care, and educating children. She often worked next to her husband in the shop, on the plantation, or on the farm. Divorce was legal but rare, and women had limited legal and political rights. Yet the shared labors and mutual dependence with their husbands gave most women protection from abuse and an active role in decision making.

## ***The Economy***

By the 1750s, half of Britain's world trade was with its American colonies. The government limited colonial manufacturing, such as making textiles. The rich American land and British mercantilist policy produced colonies almost entirely engaged in agriculture, forestry, and fishing.

As communities grew, more people became ministers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers. The quickest route to wealth was land, although regional geography often provided distinct opportunities for hardworking colonists.

**New England** Rocky soil and long winters limited most people to **subsistence farming**, producing just enough for the family. Most farms were small—less than 100 acres—and work was done by family and an occasional hired laborer. The descendants of the Puritans profited from logging, shipbuilding, fishing, trading, and rum-distilling.

**Middle Colonies** Rich soil produced an abundance of wheat and corn for export to Europe and the West Indies. Farms of up to 200 acres were common. Often indentured servants and hired laborers worked with the farm families. A variety of small manufacturing efforts developed, including iron-making. Trading led to the growth of cities such as Philadelphia and New York. In 1750, Philadelphia was the largest city in the colonies, with a population of about 25,000 people.

**Southern Colonies** Because of the diverse geography and climate in these colonies, agriculture varied greatly. Most people lived on small subsistence family farms without slaves. A few lived on large plantations of more than 2,000 acres relying on slave labor. Colonial plantations were self-sufficient, growing their own food and using enslaved craftworkers. Products were tobacco in the Chesapeake and North Carolina colonies, timber and naval stores (tar and pitch) in the Carolinas, and rice and indigo in South Carolina and Georgia. Most plantations were located on rivers so they could ship exports to Europe.

**Monetary System** One way the British controlled the colonial economy was to limit the use of money. These limits forced colonies to use their limited gold and silver to pay for British imports that exceeded the value of colonial exports. To provide currency for domestic trade, many colonies issued paper money. However, they often issued too much money, causing it to decline in value, a process called inflation. The British government also claimed the right to veto any colonial laws that might harm British merchants.

**Transportation** Transporting goods by water was easier than over land on poor roads. Trading centers such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston were located on the sites of good harbors and navigable rivers. Gradually overland travel by horse and stagecoach became more common in the 18th century. Taverns provided food and lodging for travelers and served as social centers where people exchanged news and discussed politics. By the mid-18th century, the colonies ran a postal system using horses and small ships.

## **Religion**

Most colonists were Protestants, but each region had some religious diversity:

- In New England, most people were Congregationalists (Puritans) or Presbyterians.
- In New York, people of Dutch descent often attended the Reformed Church. Most others belonged to the Church of England and were known as Anglicans (and later, Episcopalians).
- In Pennsylvania, Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers were common.
- In Virginia and other southern colonies, Anglicans were dominant. Maryland included many Catholics and some Jews.

**Challenges** Each religious group, even the Protestants who dominated, faced problems. Jews, Catholics, and Quakers suffered from intense discrimination. Congregationalist ministers were criticized as domineering. Many people resented the Church of England and saw it as a symbol of English control because it was headed by the king.

**Established Churches** In the 17th century, most colonial governments taxed the people to support a particular Protestant denomination, an **established church**. As various immigrants increased the religious diversity, governments gradually reduced their support of churches. However, some direct tax support of some New England churches remained until the 1830s.

## **The Great Awakening**

By the early 18th century, sermons in Protestant churches tended to portray God as the creator of a perfect universe. Ministers gave less emphasis than their ancestors to human sinfulness and damnation. In the 1730s and 1740s, however, a dramatic change swept the colonies. This was the **Great Awakening**, a movement of fervent expressions of religious feeling among the masses.

**Jonathan Edwards** Among the best-known leaders of the Great Awakening was a Congregational minister from Massachusetts, Reverend **Jonathan Edwards**. When he first gave his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” to his own congregation, it excited little emotion. However, as he traveled and delivered it elsewhere it generated a fervent response. Invoking the vivid language of the Old Testament, Edwards presented a God that was angry with human sinfulness. Individuals who deeply repented would be saved, but those who ignored God’s commandments would suffer eternal damnation.



**George Whitefield** Beginning in 1739, **George Whitefield** spread the Great Awakening throughout the colonies, attracting audiences of 10,000 people. In barns, tents, and fields, he stressed that God was all-powerful and would save only those who openly professed belief in Jesus Christ. Those who did not would be damned to hell. Whitefield taught that ordinary people with faith and sincerity could understand the gospels without ministers to lead them.

**Religious Impact** The Great Awakening had a profound effect on religious practice. As sinners confessed their guilt and then joyously exulted in accepting salvation, emotionalism became more common in Protestant services. This caused splits in some denominations, such as the Congregationalists and Presbyterians, between supporters (“New Lights”) and opponents (“Old Lights”) of the new expressiveness of feeling. As people studied the Bible in their homes, ministers lost some authority over them. As a consequence, evangelical sects such as the Baptists and Methodists that often relied on traveling ministers attracted large numbers of new members. As the Great Awakening spread, new denominations challenged the Congregationalists and Anglicans. One result was that people called for stricter separation of church and state.

**Political Influence** The Great Awakening was one of the first common experiences shared by colonists as Americans. It had a democratizing effect by changing the way people viewed authority. If people made their own religious decisions without the “higher” authority of ministers, then could they also make their own political decisions without deferring to others? This revolutionary idea was not expressed in the 1740s, but 30 years later it would challenge the authority of a king and his royal governors.

## Cultural Life

In the early 1600s, the chief concern of most colonists was survival. However, 100 years later, the colonial population had grown enough that the arts could flourish, at least among the well-to-do southern planters and northern merchants.

### *Achievements in the Arts and Sciences*

In the coastal areas, as fear of American Indians faded, people displayed their prosperity by adopting architectural and decorative styles from England.

**Architecture** The Georgian style of London was widely imitated in houses, churches, and public buildings. Brick and stucco homes were built in this style along the eastern seaboard. On the frontier, a one-room log cabin was the common shelter.

**Painting** Many colonial painters were itinerant artists who traveled the country in search of families who wanted their portraits painted. Shortly before the Revolution, two American artists, **Benjamin West** and **John Copley**, went to England where they established themselves as prominent artists.

**Literature** With only a few printing facilities available, most authors wrote on serious subjects, chiefly religion and politics in the 18th century. These authors included **Cotton Mather** and Jonathan Edwards on religion. Political writings highlighting the conflict between American rights and English authority came from John Adams, James Otis, John Dickinson, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, among others. The most popular writer was **Benjamin Franklin**. His witty aphorisms and advice were collected in *Poor Richard's Almanack*, a best-selling book that was annually revised from 1732 to 1757.

The lack of support for fiction and poetry did not stop everyone. **Phillis Wheatley** was born in West Africa, enslaved, and living in Boston when she published a collection of her poems in 1773. She was freed soon after this. Her work is noteworthy both for her triumph over slavery and the quality of her verse. Charles Brockden Brown, a Quaker who was born in Philadelphia in 1771, was one of the first novelists to set his stories in North America.

**Science** Most scientists, such as the botanist **John Bartram** of Philadelphia, were self-taught. Benjamin Franklin won fame for his work with electricity and his developments of bifocal eyeglasses and the Franklin stove.

## **Education**

Basic education was limited and varied among the colonies. Formal efforts were directed to males, since females were trained only for household work.

**Elementary Education** In New England, the Puritans' emphasis on reading the Bible led them to create the first tax-supported schools. A Massachusetts law in 1647 required towns to establish primary schools for boys. In the middle colonies, schools were either church-sponsored or private. In the southern colonies, parents gave their children whatever education they could. On plantations, tutors provided instruction for the owners' children.

**Higher Education** The first colonial colleges were **sectarian**, promoting the doctrines of a particular religious group. The Puritans founded Harvard in 1636 to prepare ministers. The Anglicans opened William and Mary in Virginia in 1694, and the Congregationalists started Yale in Connecticut in 1701. During this period the only **nonsectarian** college founded was the College of Philadelphia. Founded in 1765, it later became the University of Pennsylvania. Benjamin Franklin was among its founders.

**Ministry** During the 17th century, the Christian ministry was the only profession to enjoy widespread respect among the common people. Ministers were often the only well-educated people in a small community.

**Physicians** Colonists who fell prey to epidemics of smallpox and diphtheria were often treated by "cures" that only made them worse. A doctor's training was as an apprentice to an experienced physician. The first medical college was begun in 1765 as part of Franklin's idea for the College of Philadelphia.

**Lawyers** During the 1700s, as trade expanded and legal problems became more complex, people felt a need for expert assistance in court. The most able

lawyers formed a bar (committee or board), which set rules and standards for young lawyers. **Lawyers** gained respect in the 1760s and 1770s when they argued for colonial rights. John Adams, James Otis, and Patrick Henry were lawyers whose legal arguments would ultimately provide the intellectual underpinnings of the American Revolution.

## **The Press**

News spread mainly through a postal system and local printing firms.

**Newspapers** By 1776, there were more than 40 newspapers issued weekly in the colonies. They provided month-old news from Europe, various ads for goods and services and for the return of runaway indentured servants and enslaved people, and pious essays giving advice for better living.

**The Zenger Case** Newspaper printers in colonial days ran the risk of being jailed for libel if any article offended the authorities. English common law at the time stated that it was a crime to criticize the governor, no matter whether the criticism was true or false. In 1735, **John Peter Zenger**, a New York publisher, was tried on a charge of libelously criticizing New York's royal governor. Zenger's lawyer, **Andrew Hamilton**, argued that his client had printed the truth. Ignoring the law, the jury acquitted Zenger. While this case did not guarantee freedom of the press, it encouraged newspapers to criticize the government.

## **The Enlightenment**

In the 18th century, some educated Americans felt attracted to a European movement in literature and philosophy known as the **Enlightenment**. The leaders of this movement believed that the recent past was a "dark" era in which people relied too much on tradition and God's intervention in human life. They believed that the "light" of reason could solve most of humanity's problems.

A major influence on the Enlightenment and American thinking was John Locke, a 17th-century English philosopher. Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government*, reasoned that while the state (the government) is supreme, it is bound to follow "natural laws" based on the rights that people have simply because they are human. He argued that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people rather than with the state. Furthermore, citizens had a right and obligation to revolt against a government that failed to protect their rights. Other Enlightenment philosophers adopted and expounded on Locke's ideas. His stress on natural rights would provide a rationale for the American Revolution and the principles of the U.S. Constitution.

## **The Colonial Relationship with Britain**

For all their diversity, in some ways, the colonies were becoming more like England. They built on English political traditions to develop self-governing local communities. Most colonists spoke English and could read the books and newspapers in the colonies. Many had commercial ties with England, either exporting tobacco or importing manufactured goods. Most colonists, including Puritans, Quakers, and Anglicans, were connected to England by religion.



**Colonial Identity** At the same time, the colonists were developing a distinctly American viewpoint and way of life. Their motivations for leaving Europe, the English political heritage, the diverse mixture of people, the emergence of writers and painters, and the influence of the American natural environment combined to create a culture unlike any in Europe. The colonists—especially White male property owners—exercised the rights of free speech and a free press, became accustomed to electing representatives to colonial assemblies, and tolerated a variety of religions. Observers were beginning to think of Americans as restless, enterprising, practical, and forever seeking to improve their circumstances.

**Mistrust of the British** Development of a colonial identity reflected diverging interests between the colonies and Great Britain. Colonists were eager to push westward, while the British desired peace on the frontier with American Indians. Colonists were comfortable with salutary neglect, while the British sometimes tried to enforce trade regulations. Colonists took pride in governing themselves according to English traditions of liberty, while the British claimed sovereignty over them as part of the empire. Finally, colonies were more ethnically and religiously diverse than England, which meant that many colonists did not identify from birth with the country that ruled them. These differences would become stronger after 1763.

## Politics and Government

By 1750, the colonies had similar systems of government, with a **governor** as chief executive and a **legislature** voting to adopt or reject the governor's proposed laws. In every colony, the legislature consisted of two houses:

- Members of the lower house, or assembly, were elected by White male property owners. It voted for or against new taxes. Colonists thus became accustomed to paying taxes only if their chosen representatives approved.
- Members of the upper house in the two self-governing colonies were also elected. In the other colonies, members were appointed by the king or the proprietor, and were also known as the council.
- Governors were either appointed by the crown, elected by the people (Rhode Island and Connecticut), or appointed by a proprietor (Pennsylvania and Maryland).

**Local Government** Colonists in New England established towns and villages. In these, the local government was the town meeting in which people would regularly come together to vote directly on public issues. In the southern colonies, where farms and plantations were more widely separated, towns were less common. Local government was carried on by a law-enforcing sheriff and other officials who served a large territory called a *county*.

**Voting** If democracy is defined as the participation of all people in the making of government policy, then colonial democracy was limited. Laws barred most people—White women, poor White men, slaves of both sexes,

and most free Blacks—from voting. Nevertheless, the government was beginning to remove some barriers to voting in the 18th century. In particular, religious restrictions were declining. Property qualifications often remained.

Another variable in the development of democracy was who could serve in the assemblies and councils. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses was restricted to a small group of wealthy landowners. However, in Massachusetts, the legislature was open to small farmers. Even there, the educated, propertied elite held power for generations. The common people everywhere tended to defer to their “betters” and depend upon the privileged few to make decisions.

Political life in the colonies was restricted to landowning White males only. Yet, compared with Europe, the English colonies allowed greater self-government. This made the colonial political system unusual for its time.



### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES:** *WAS COLONIAL SOCIETY DEMOCRATIC?*

Was colonial America “democratic” or not? The question is important for its own sake and also because it affects one’s perspective on the American Revolution and on the subsequent evolution of democratic politics in the United States.

**Democracy in Action** Many historians have focused on the politics of colonial Massachusetts. Some have concluded that colonial Massachusetts was indeed democratic, at least for the times. By studying voting records and statistics, they determined that the vast majority of White male citizens could vote and were not restricted by property qualifications. According to these historians, class differences between the elite and the masses of people did not prevent the latter from participating fully in colonial politics.

**Consensus over Conflict** Other historians question whether broad voting rights by themselves demonstrate the existence of real democracy. The true test of democratic practice, they argue, would be whether different groups in a colonial town felt free to debate political questions in a town meeting. In the records of such meetings, they found little evidence of true political conflict and debate. Instead, they found that the purpose of **town meetings** in colonial days was to reach a consensus and to avoid conflict and real choices. These historians believe that consensus-forming limited the degree of democracy.

**The Maritime Elite** A third historical perspective is based on studies of economic change in colonial Boston. According to this view, a fundamental shift from an agrarian to a maritime economy occurred in the 18th century. In the process, a new elite emerged to dominate Boston’s finances, society, and politics. The power of this elite prevented colonial Massachusetts from being considered a true democracy.

The question remains: To what extent were Massachusetts and the other colonies democratic? The answer depends on the definition of democracy.

**Support an Argument** *Explain two perspectives on the degree of democracy practiced in the British colonies.*

## REFLECT ON THE LEARNING OBJECTIVE

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1. Explain how the contributions of various migrant groups crossing the Atlantic influenced the growth of an American culture.

### KEY TERMS BY THEME

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#### Arts & Science (SOC)

Benjamin West  
John Copley  
Benjamin Franklin  
*Poor Richard's Almanack*  
Phillis Wheatley  
John Bartram  
ministry  
physicians  
lawyers

#### Religion (SOC)

religious toleration  
established church  
Great Awakening  
Jonathan Edwards  
George Whitefield  
Cotton Mather  
sectarian  
nonsectarian

#### The Land (GEO)

subsistence farming

#### Ethnicity (NAT)

Germans  
Scotch-Irish  
Huguenots  
Dutch  
Swedes  
Africans

#### People (MIG)

immigrants  
social mobility

#### Government (POL)

hereditary aristocracy  
John Peter Zenger  
Andrew Hamilton  
Enlightenment  
governor  
legislature  
town meetings

## MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

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Questions 1–3 refer to the following excerpt.

“To understand political power . . . we must consider what estate all men are naturally in, and that it is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions . . . within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. . . .

Whosoever therefore out of a state of nature unite into a community must be understood to give up all the power necessary to the ends for which they unite into society, to the majority of the community . . . And this is done by barely agreeing to unite into one political society. . . . And thus that which begins and actually constitutes any political society is nothing but the consent of any number of freemen capable of a majority to unite. . . . And this is that . . . which did or could give beginning to any lawful government in the world.”

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1690

1. Increases in which of the following contributed most directly to the ideas expressed in the excerpt?
  - (A) The frequency of floods, droughts, and other problems related to nature
  - (B) The criticism of the idea of absolute monarchy
  - (C) The influence of competing religious groups in politics
  - (D) The support of government for merchants who wanted to import goods
2. Locke's writings had the most direct influence on the
  - (A) American Revolution through his ideas on government
  - (B) Great Awakening through his ideas on religion
  - (C) Mayflower Compact through his ideas on community
  - (D) Zenger case through his ideas on defining what is true
3. Which of the following groups in the English colonies represented ideas most directly opposed to those expressed in the excerpt?
  - (A) Owners of plantations who kept people enslaved
  - (B) Church leaders who advocated for religious toleration
  - (C) Merchants who wanted more freedom to trade
  - (D) Women who believed that all people were born with certain rights

### SHORT-ANSWER QUESTION

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Use complete sentences; an outline or bulleted list alone is not acceptable.

1. Answer (a), (b), and (c).
  - (a) Briefly explain how ONE specific ethnic group contributed to the development of culture and society in the colonies during the period from 1607 to 1754.
  - (b) Briefly explain ONE specific cause of religious revivalism in the mid-18th century.
  - (c) Briefly explain ONE specific reason for the difference in economic developments between colonial regions during the period from 1607 to 1754.