**Colonial North America: 1690 - 1754**

In most history classes, the story of United States history is the story of *British* colonization. It's important to remember, however, that large sections of what we consider the US were for a long time in the 17th, 18th, and even 19th centuries part of the French and Spanish empires.

Huge tracts of the West and Southwest were Spanish, as was Florida. The French were in Canada and parts of "our" Northwest, like Ohio and Illinois. Then they were in the "Louisiana Territory," a *huge* tract of land that included most of "our" Midwest. The British colonies were only a tiny group of 13 along the Eastern coast (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, New Hampshire, New York, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia: the New England, Middle, Chesapeake, and southern colonies).

The British colonies in North America were the most settled of all the European lands there, however, and eventually the Brits would gain a victory over the entire region. So, blessed with historical hindsight, it's the British storyline that we'll now follow:

**Society**

In all the colonies, population started to boom. Around 1700 there were some 300,000 people in the colonies. By 1775 there were around 2.5 million. Colonists began to positively *swarm*the East coast.

Partly this was because the fertility rate was higher than Europe: American women had had lots of babies, and those babies were healthy. Then, of course, there were the immigrants, especially Scottish, Irish, and German people. Word began to go around that life in America was actually great: land was cheap and plentiful, and if you had the will to work you could make something of yourself.

Around 20% of those migrants, though, didn't come for opportunity. They were stolen from their homes in Africa, shoved into extremely crammed holds in ships, and subjected to the **Middle Passage,**that treacherous journey across the Atlantic Ocean during which many died. Those who arrived in America mostly went to the sugar plantations in the West Indies, or to the plantations in the South.

As the colonies grew in population, they grew in wealth, too. Careful, though, this isn't a story yet of big factories and cities: a whopping 90% of Americans lived in rural areas. This was a land of farmers, radically different from the way we imagine our country today.

In the South, the **social stratification** we saw in the 1600s only became worse. Gaps widened between rich planters on the one hand and poor **yeomen farmers,**indentured servants, and slaves on the other.

The Middle and northern colonies were a little more equal, and the elites there were mostly merchants. Most people there were small farmers, and had **subsistence** **farms**(in other words, farms that grew only what would feed the family)rather than giant plantations.

Everyone worked on the family farms: men, women, and children. Men mostly did the hard labor outside the home—the actual plowing, wood-chopping, or animal-herding—and women did the gardening and the domestic chores, helped by the little kiddies until they, too, could work in the fields. Because **common law**was instituted in England, women had very few rights: they couldn't own property, sue in court, vote, or hold political office. It actually wasn't until the Revolution that women started to secure a real place for themselves in society. Before that, they were second-class citizens.

**Economies**

The main difference between the colonies, which was also the main cause for the social differences, was the economy. You remember that Virginia and Maryland, thanks to busy John Rolph, found itself a nice little cash crop relatively quickly. The Carolinas also found out that rice and indigo grew spectacularly in their regions, and made them rich, too. These colonies focused themselves entirelyon those crops. They didn't want to waste time or space growing things like vegetables. Who cared about food when you could (figuratively speaking) grow money? So, how *did*they find everything else to survive?

That's where the North came in. The North (aka New England and the "Middle Colonies" like Pennsylvania and Delaware) didn't have the right soil or climate for cash crops. The northern economy was based on **maritime trade**. Their small farms and fisheries supplied the cash-crop colonies of the Chesapeake and South (as well as the West Indies) with food. Plus, they sent goods to Europe like furs and wood.

What appeared was a **Triangular Trade:**the triangle being the northern colonies, the West Indies, and Africa (with a trip to Europe sprinkled in). New England would send food, fish, and wood to the West Indies, in exchange for the molasses made there from the sugar plantations. That molasses would be made into rum in New England, which would be sent to Africa and Europe in exchange for slaves and European goods like textiles. Then those goods could also be sold to the southern colonies. Yup, that's right: those prudish Puritans were making their fortunes from rum.

The South had an easier system: 1) produce cash crops; 2) sell to Europe for tons of money; 3) Use money to buy slaves and stuff from North for food, clothes, and houses; and 4) repeat process.

However, the southern economy became entirely based on slavery. As indentured servitude petered out by the 18th century and Indian slaves proved themselves too likely to die of disease or overwork, southern planters turned increasingly to African slaves. They were incredibly hardy, cheaper in the long run, and amazingly resistant to diseases like malaria that ravaged swampy, yucky places like South Carolina.

In some colonies, the majority of the population consisted of African slaves. Since almost all were slaves, and since laws were passed that prevented them from having any rights and that ensured that their condition was hereditary, whites began to think that black skin represented inherent inferiority.

Even so, whites couldn't ignore the fact that slaves were numerousand that (shocker) blacks didn't seem to like slavery all that much. In 1739 a slave rebellion called the **Stono Uprising**in South Carolina desperately frightened every colony from the Carolinas to New York. Some 100 slaves stole ammunition and guns, killed white people, liberated other slaves, and then ran into Florida where they hoped the Spanish would give them freedom.

The colonial militia finally caught and executed them, but the upshot was the passage of even *more*restrictive laws against slaves and a conspiracy craze in New York when almost 40 people were executed for apparently trying to liberate slaves. Vicious circle, right? The need for slaves constantly battled with the fear that they would revolt and murder all the whites.

In the North, slavery existed, but on a far smaller scale: unlike the hundreds of slaves on southern plantations, a northern slaveholder usually only owned one or two slaves. Most were household slaves used for domestic chores, and some were skilled laborers like blacksmiths or ship-builders.

The northern and Middle colonies were **societies with slaves**: slaves existed, but they weren't essential or numerous. The Chesapeake and southern colonies were **slave societies:**their economies and societies were totally based on slaves, and without that labor, the whole system would collapse. And, blessed as we moderns are with historical hindsight, we know that these two different societies and economies would in time only grow even*more*separate—and finally result, over a hundred years later, in a Civil War.

This whole system was part of a big British plan: **mercantilism.**Know how today we talk about communism and capitalism as economic systems? Back then it was mercantilism: the idea that economic power was rooted in trade and **specie**(a fancy name for coinage)**.**

The idea was to export more than you imported—to be economically self-sufficient. You planted colonies to make sure that you only ever had to trade within your own empire, and not with foreign counties. You also hoped that these colonies would have as much gold and silver (or at least cash crops, like Britain's hugely lucrative sugar plantations in the West Indies) to fill your coffers.

The Brits were most interested in making as good of a deal from trade with their colonies as possible. For one thing, they established **protective tariffs**on foreign goods so that stuff made in other countries would be more expensive than English and colonial goods, and therefore colonists wouldn't buy it.

They also passed the **Navigation Acts**that forced colonists to 1) buy certain goods only from England, 2) to sell certain of their goods only to England, and 3) to pay a fee at English ports for any goods that *weren't*from England. Plus, the colonies weren't allowed to manufacture stuff that England already made. NOT a good deal for the colonies: so, obviously, they ignored a lot of this, and **smuggling**was rampant.

**Religion**

So many people arrived in the colonies at this time that Puritanism kind of faded. People were mostly still Protestant, but the rigid rules of Puritanism and the requirement that *everyone* belong to the church started to ebb. By the end of the 1600s, Puritans felt their power slipping: the **Glorious Revolution**in England had replaced the king, James II, with two Protestant monarchs, **William and Mary,**who in 1691 extended suffrage to*all* Protestants. Before, only Puritans could vote—now the riff-raff was flooding in.

In New England, cities like Boston were growing fat and rich off the triangular trade, and Puritans felt that people were caring a lot more about making money and a lot less about living Godly lives.

This Puritan inferiority complex is one of the reasons historians give for the onset of the **Salem Witch Trials**in 1692, when a group of teenage girls in Salem, Massachusetts started accusing hundreds of townspeople of witchcraft. It mushroomed out of control*:*over 150 people were accused of witchcraft, and 19 were hung. Finally, people realized this wasn't a "purge" of the devil's puppets—this was mass hysteria.

The trials ended, but the decrease in religious interest continued into the 1700s. It seemed to a lot of folks that people were becoming downright bored with religion. That is, until a funny-looking pudgy dude with crossed eyes and puffy hair (we're not exaggerating: check out Whitfield’s glorious poodle muffs [here](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/97/George_Whitefield_%28head%29.jpg)) named **George Whitfield** arrived from England in 1738.

He and other ministers like **John Davenport and Jonathan Edwards**totally revolutionized religion. They taught that a person could actually find out if they were saved or not—they had to be "born again," or have a major conversion experience in which they felt the presence of God washing away their sins.

These ministers taught that the established ministers were old fogies who were losing converts. They actually "stole" people out of other ministers' congregations, leading them out of the church and into empty fields and woods. Hundreds and even thousands of people would gather there to hear them preach about being born again, and having a close, emotional relationship with God.

At their meetings, people would throw themselves on the ground in fits, hear voices, sing, cry, sob, speak in tongues, and claim they were possessed by the Holy Spirit. This **revival**spread everywhere in the colonies. Yeah, it was seen by many to be completely nuts—but it was great historical importance, too. Historians often link the kind of thinking it encouraged (individualism, rebellion against authority, personal liberties, etc.) to the ideology that fueled the Revolution.

**Government**

This early period in the English colonies is known as the **Age of Salutary Neglect.**In other words, it was a time that England's policy can be summarized as "Okay kids, be good, economically beneficial little colonies and we won't bother you."

Besides regulating trade (and they werestrict about that, at least—**vice admiralty courts** were established to try people who broke the Navigation Acts, and a **Board of Trade**was created to eagle-eye the colonies' commerce) they kind of ignored the colonies. After all, there was a giant ocean between the two areas: Britain couldn't expect to keep sending rulers back and forth, and forcing all decisions to be made in London. They allowed the colonies to establish their own governments, and although there were British overseers and customs officials, colonists were allowed to elect their own rulers.

Every colony had a **governor**appointed by the king or by the colony's proprietor (like Lord Baltimore), but he actually didn't have all that much power. He had to rely on **colonial legislatures**to give him money, and these were run by the Fat Cats of the colonies who often bullied the governor into doing what they wanted.

The legislatures weren't exactly democratic, but they were participatory. They were **bicameral,**like the British Parliament: a House of Representatives was elected by white, land-owning men and an upper house was composed of appointed officials. The House had power over the purse, and the upper house advised the governor and had some power over laws and the judiciary.

What can we take from all this? The important fact is that the colonies were not at all used to British rule. The Brits never even established a central government in the colonies: each colony ruled itself, independent of its neighbors. The **New England Confederation**was created by the colonists to try to resolve disputes between themselves, but it didn't have much power. When the Brits suddenly decided that they did in face want to put their finger in the American pie, the colonists wouldn't exactly greet them with open arms.

Of course, that didn't occur until later in the 18th century: a little period you may have heard of called the Revolution. However, the Revolution didn't happen overnight. For a long time, the colonists were intensely proud of being British citizens. After all, Britain was an awesome (and by that we do mean awe-inspiring) empire at this time, a superpower with extensive territory and a cultural mecca.

A lot of things—most specifically war, taxes, and bossy behavior by the British government and army—would need to occur before the colonists finally decided that they had had enough and that somehow, at some time, they had transformed from British to American citizens.