

COLONIAL SOCIETY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

Characteristics of 18th century British Colonial America

- A. Enormous population growth: common feature.
 - 1. Demographic changes resulted in shift in the balance of power between the colonies and England.
 - 2. 1700 = less than 300K people; 2.5 million by 1775 (20% black)
 - 3. Largest colonies were Virginia, Mass., Penn., NC, and Maryland
 - 4. Only four major cities: Philadelphia, NY, Boston, Charleston
 - 5. 90% lived in rural areas.
- B. America as a melting pot
 - 1. Most mixed population in perhaps all the world despite being mainly English
 - 2. South held 90% of slaves
 - 3. African: 20% of population by 1775; mostly concentrated in the South
- C. 90% of population were farmers; most were subsistence farmers, many were tenant farmers.

Commerce and Trade

- A. **Triangular trade** (illegal trade designed to circumvent Navigation Laws)
 - 1. New Englanders exported timber, fish, cotton goods, and light manufacturing to French Caribbean in return for molasses.
 - 2. New England ships brought molasses back home to be distilled for rum production.
 - 3. Rum from New England shipped to West Indies where slave ships that had disposed of their human cargo, took rum to Gold Coast of Africa.
 - 4. Slave traders bartered with chieftains for slaves; rum used to stupefy native blacks and lure them on ships.
 - 5. Slaves transported on the Middle Passage to the colonies
- B. Land speculation made many investors wealthy
- C. Manufacturing
 - 1. Secondary in importance to farming
 - 2. Lumbering most important: shipbuilding
 - 3. Women spinners and weavers at home produced large output of cloth.
- D. Increased trade
 - 1. Growth of American population created increased demand for British goods
 - 2. Once British demand for American products peaked Americans sought other markets
- E. Transportation
 - 1. Inland transportation poor by road
 - 2. Waterways most important: Population located near rivers
 - 3. Taverns became important places to discuss politics; crystallized public opinion

Colonial Slavery

- A. Most slaves came from West African coast (Senegal to Angola)
 - 1. Originally captured by African coastal tribes who traded them to European & American buyers – Estimated 40% of slaves captured by Africans in interior died en route to coast.
 - 2. Estimated 50 million Africans died or became slaves during 17th & 18th c.
- B. Of about 10-15 million Africans sent into slavery in the New World, 400,000 ended up in North America. (Majority sent to Spanish and Portuguese South Am. or to W. Indies)
 - 1. Between 20% to 1/3 of slaves died during the “Middle Passage”
 - 2. Horrific conditions:
 - a. Slaves often chained by neck and extremities to deck floor.
 - b. Packed into spaces about the size of a coffin; lay in own excrement
 - c. In some cases, next deck only 18” above deck floor; slaves could not turn over
 - 3. Survivors eventually sold at auction blocks at ports like Newport, RI or Charleston, SC

4. A few slaves gained their freedom & some even became slave-owners; -- However, this fact should not be over-exaggerated! Constituted minuscule number relative to entire slave population.

C. **Slave Codes**

1. As Africans grew in numbers, threatened whites passed laws to severely control the slave population.
2. Most common codes stated:
 - a. blacks and their children were property for life of white masters.
 - b. it was a crime to teach literacy to slaves.
 - c. conversion to Christianity was not grounds for freedom.

D. Slavery became the root of racism in America as a distinct color line was drawn. -- *The notion of inferiority based on skin color was imbedded in U.S. law until the 1960s*

E. Slave Life

1. Slavery harshest in the deepest South (esp. SC); least harsh in the middle colonies.
 - a. Fresh import of slavery needed to sustain productivity
2. Increase of female slave populations made family life more possible by 1720.
 - a. Slave pop. increased through higher birthrate.
 - b. *America became one of few slave societies in history to grow by natural reproduction.*

F. Slave culture became a mixture of American and African folkways

1. language / music / dance
2. Religion a combination of Christianity and African rituals -- The free afterlife became a beacon of hope; story of Exodus particularly appealing

G. Slave rebellions -- approx. 250 instances when minimum of ten slaves joined in a revolt or conspiracy.

1. **Stono Rebellion** (1739): largest slave revolt in history of the 13 colonies
 - a. SC slaves tried to march to Spanish Florida after Spanish authorities offered freedom to any slave who reached Florida.
 - b. Stopped by militia after 25 whites killed; eventually scores of slave rebels killed by militia and settlers.

Southern Society -- 18th century

A. Southern class structure (from most powerful to least powerful)

1. Plantation owners at top of social ladder -- Ruled region's economy and monopolized political power.
2. Small farmers comprised largest social group.
 - a. Considered far below the prestige and power of the planter class.
 - b. Most lived meager existences; some owned 1 or 2 slaves
 - c. Modest sized plots
3. Landless Whites -- most were former indentured servants
4. Indentured Servants (lowest of whites)
 - a. Decreased in numbers as black slavery increased (esp. after Bacon's Rebellion)
 - b. Only black slaves were lower in the class structure
5. Constituted about 20% of colonial population by 1775

B. South remained underdeveloped

1. Few cities emerged
2. Life revolved around southern plantations.
3. Poor transportation -- waterways provided principal means of transportation