The colonial governors were generally surrounded by a body of

office-seekers and hunters for land grants. Some of them were noblemen

of broken estates who had come to America to improve their fortunes. The

pretensions of this circle grated on colonial nerves, and privileges

granted to them, often at the expense of colonists, did much to deepen

popular antipathy to the British government. Favors extended to

adherents of the Established Church displeased Dissenters. The

reappearance of this formidable union of church and state, from which

they had fled, stirred anew the ancient wrath against that combination.

=The Colonial Assembly.=--Coincident with the drift toward

administration through royal governors was the second and opposite

tendency, namely, a steady growth in the practice of self-government.

The voters of England had long been accustomed to share in taxation and

law-making through representatives in Parliament, and the idea was early

introduced in America. Virginia was only twelve years old (1619) when

its first representative assembly appeared. As the towns of

Massachusetts multiplied and it became impossible for all the members of

the corporation to meet at one place, the representative idea was

adopted, in 1633. The river towns of Connecticut formed a representative

system under their "Fundamental Orders" of 1639, and the entire colony

was given a royal charter in 1662. Generosity, as well as practical

considerations, induced such proprietors as Lord Baltimore and William

Penn to invite their colonists to share in the government as soon as any

considerable settlements were made. Thus by one process or another every

one of the colonies secured a popular assembly.

It is true that in the provision for popular elections, the suffrage was

finally restricted to property owners or taxpayers, with a leaning

toward the freehold qualification. In Virginia, the rural voter had to

be a freeholder owning at least fifty acres of land, if there was no

house on it, or twenty-five acres with a house twenty-five feet square.

In Massachusetts, the voter for member of the assembly under the charter

of 1691 had to be a freeholder of an estate worth forty shillings a year

at least or of other property to the value of forty pounds sterling. In

Pennsylvania, the suffrage was granted to freeholders owning fifty acres

or more of land well seated, twelve acres cleared, and to other persons

worth at least fifty pounds in lawful money.

Restrictions like these undoubtedly excluded from the suffrage a very

considerable number of men, particularly the mechanics and artisans of

the towns, who were by no means content with their position.

Nevertheless, it was relatively easy for any man to acquire a small

freehold, so cheap and abundant was land; and in fact a large proportion

of the colonists were land owners. Thus the assemblies, in spite of the

limited suffrage, acquired a democratic tone.

The popular character of the assemblies increased as they became engaged

in battles with the royal and proprietary governors. When called upon by

the executive to make provision for the support of the administration,

the legislature took advantage of the opportunity to make terms in the

interest of the taxpayers. It made annual, not permanent, grants of

money to pay official salaries and then insisted upon electing a

treasurer to dole it out. Thus the colonists learned some of the

mysteries of public finance, as well as the management of rapacious

officials. The legislature also used its power over money grants to

force the governor to sign bills which he would otherwise have vetoed.

=Contests between Legislatures and Governors.=--As may be imagined, many

and bitter were the contests between the royal and proprietary governors

and the colonial assemblies. Franklin relates an amusing story of how

the Pennsylvania assembly held in one hand a bill for the executive to

sign and, in the other hand, the money to pay his salary. Then, with sly

humor, Franklin adds: "Do not, my courteous reader, take pet at our

proprietary constitution for these our bargain and sale proceedings in

legislation. It is a happy country where justice and what was your own

before can be had for ready money. It is another addition to the value

of money and of course another spur to industry. Every land is not so

blessed."

It must not be thought, however, that every governor got off as easily

as Franklin's tale implies. On the contrary, the legislatures, like

Caesar, fed upon meat that made them great and steadily encroached upon

executive prerogatives as they tried out and found their strength. If

we may believe contemporary laments, the power of the crown in America

was diminishing when it was struck down altogether. In New York, the

friends of the governor complained in 1747 that "the inhabitants of

plantations are generally educated in republican principles; upon

republican principles all is conducted. Little more than a shadow of

royal authority remains in the Northern colonies." "Here," echoed the

governor of South Carolina, the following year, "levelling principles

prevail; the frame of the civil government is unhinged; a governor, if

he would be idolized, must betray his trust; the people have got their

whole administration in their hands; the election of the members of the

assembly is by ballot; not civil posts only, but all ecclesiastical

preferments, are in the disposal or election of the people."

Though baffled by the "levelling principles" of the colonial assemblies,

the governors did not give up the case as hopeless. Instead they evolved

a system of policy and action which they thought could bring the

obstinate provincials to terms. That system, traceable in their letters

to the government in London, consisted of three parts: (1) the royal

officers in the colonies were to be made independent of the legislatures

by taxes imposed by acts of Parliament; (2) a British standing army was

to be maintained in America; (3) the remaining colonial charters were to

be revoked and government by direct royal authority was to be enlarged.

Such a system seemed plausible enough to King George III and to many

ministers of the crown in London. With governors, courts, and an army

independent of the colonists, they imagined it would be easy to carry

out both royal orders and acts of Parliament. This reasoning seemed both

practical and logical. Nor was it founded on theory, for it came fresh

from the governors themselves. It was wanting in one respect only. It

failed to take account of the fact that the American people were growing

strong in the practice of self-government and could dispense with the

tutelage of the British ministry, no matter how excellent it might be or

how benevolent its intentions.