Chapter 4- American Life in the Seventeenth Century

1607-1692

A. The Unhealthy Chesapeake

1. Life in the American wilderness was nasty, brutish, and short for the earliest Chesapeake settlers; malaria, dysentery, and typhoid took a cruel toll, cutting ten years off the life expectancy of newcomers (half of people born in early Virginia/Maryland did not survive to twenty)

2. The disease-ravaged settlements of the Chesapeake grew only slowly in the seventeenth century, mostly through fresh immigration from England; the majority of immigrants were single men in their late teens and early twenties, and most perished soon after arrival

    1. Surviving males competed for the affections of the extremely scarce women, whom they outnumbered nearly six to one in 1650

    2. Although they were still outnumbered by three to two at the end of the century, eligible women did not remain single for long

    3. Families were both few and fragile in this ferocious environment; most men could not find mates and most marriages were destroyed by the death of a partner within seven years

    4. Weak family ties showed in many pregnancies among unmarried young girls (in one area, a third of the wedded were pregnant)

3. Yet despite these hardships, the Chesapeake colonies struggled on; the native-born inhabitants eventually acquired immunity to the killer diseases that had ravaged the original immigrants

4. The presence of more women allowed more families to form and by the end of the seventeenth century, the white population of the Chesapeake was growing on the basis of its own birthrate

5. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Virginia, with some 59,000 people was the most populous colony and Maryland, with about 30,000 people was the third largest colony (after the Massachusetts colony)

B. The Tobacco Economy

1. Although unhealthy for human life, the Chesapeake was immensely hospitable to tobacco cultivation; profit-hungry settlers often planted tobacco before they planted corn; seeking fields to plant tobacco, these new immigrants plunged farther up the river valley (Indian attacks)

    1. Leaf-leaden ships annually hauled some 1.5 million pounds of tobacco out of Chesapeake Bay by the 1630s and almost 40 million pounds a year by the end of the century (18 million kilograms)

    2. This enormous production depressed prices, but colonial Chesapeake tobacco growers responded to falling in the familiar way of farmers: by planting still more acres of tobacco

    3. More tobacco meant more labor; families formed too slowly to provide it by natural population increase and Indians died too quickly on contact with whites to be a reliable labor force

    4. African slaves cost too much money; but England still had a "surplus" of displaced farmers, desperate for employment; many of them, as "indentured servants" lent their bodies for several years

    5. In exchange they received transatlantic passage and eventual "freedom dues," including good, clothes, and perhaps a bit of land

2. Both Virginia and Maryland employed the "headright" system to encourage the importation of servant workers; under its terms, whoever paid the passage of a laborer received the right to acquire fifty acres of land; masts thus reaped the benefits of landownership from the system

    1. Some masters soon parlayed their investments and servants into huge fortunes in real estate (great merchant planters)

2. These lords of vast riverfront estates that came to dominate the agriculture and commerce of the southern colonies

3. Hungary for both labor and land, Chesapeake planters brought some 100,000 indentured servants to the region by 1700; these "white slaves" represented more than 75% of all European immigrants to Virginia and Maryland in the seventeenth century

3. Indentured servants led a hard but hopeful life in the early days of the Chesapeake settlements; they looked forward to becoming free and acquiring land of their own after completing their term of servitude

4. But as prime land became scarcer, masters became increasingly resistant to including land grants in "freedom dues"

5. Misbehaving servants might be punished with an extended term of service and even after formal freedom was granted, penniless freed workers often had little choice but to hire themselves to their masters

C. Frustrated Freemen and Bacon's Rebellion

1. An accumulating mass of footloose, impoverished freemen was drifting discontentedly about the Chesapeake region by the late 17th century

    1. Mostly single young men, they were frustrated by their broken hopes of acquiring land, as well as by their gnawing failure to find single women to marry in the Chesapeake region

    2. The swelling numbers of these wretched bachelors rattled the established planters; the Virginia assembly in 1670 disenfranchised most of the landless knockabouts accusing them of "having little interest in the country" and causing "tumults at elections"

2. Virginia's Governor Berkeley lamented his lot as ruler of this rabble and Berkeley's misery soon increased in the later years

1. About a thousand Virginians broke out of control in 1676, led by a planter, Nathaniel Bacon; many of the rebels were frontiersmen who had been forced into untamed backcountry in search of land

2. They resented Berkeley's friendly policies toward the Indians, whose thriving fur trade the governor monopolized

3. When Berkeley refused to retaliate for a series of savage Indian attacks on frontier settlements, Bacon and his followers took matters into their own hands and fell murderously upon the Indians, chased Berkeley from Jamestown, and put the torch to the capital

4. Chaos swept the raw colony, as frustrated freemen and resentful servants sent on a rampage of plundering and pilfering

3. As this civil war in Virginia ground on, Bacon suddenly died of disease and Berkeley rushed the uprising with brutal cruelty, hanging more than twenty rebels; back in England Charles II complained

4. The distant English king could scarcely imagine the depths of passion and fear that Bacon's Rebellion excited in Virginia; Bacon had ignited the unhappiness of landless former servants and he had pitted the backcountry frontiersmen against the haughty gentry of the plantations

5. The rebellion was now suppressed, but these tensions remained; lordly planters, surrounded by a still-seething sea of malcontents, looked about for less troublesome laborers to toil in the restless tobacco kingdom and their eyes soon lit on Africa

D. Colonial Slavery

1. Perhaps 10 million Africans were carried in chains to the New World in the three centuries or so following Columbus's landing

    1. Only about 400,000 of them ended up in North America, the great majority arriving after 1700; most of the early human cargoes were hauled to Spanish and Portuguese South America or West Indies

2. Africans had been brought to Jamestown as early as 1619, but as late as 1670, they numbered only about 2,000 in Virginia and about 7 percent of the 50,000 people in the southern plantation colonies

3. Hard-pinched white colonists, struggling to stay alive and to hack crude clearings out of the forests, could not afford to pay high prices for slaves who might die soon after arrival (white servants)

2. Drastic change came in the 1680s, rising wages in England shrank the pool of penniless folk willing to gamble on a new life or an early death as indentured servants in America (large planters were growing more fearful of the multitudes of potentially mutinous former servants)

1. By the mid-1680s, for the first time, black slaves outnumbered white servants among the plantation colonies' new arrivals

2. In 1698 the Royal African Company lost its crown-granted monopoly on carrying slaves to the colonies and enterprising Americans, especially Rhode Islanders, rushed to cash in on the lucrative slave trade and the supply of slaves increased steeply

3. More than 10,000 Africans were pushed ashore in America in the decade after 1700, and even more in the next half-century; blacks accounted for nearly half the population of Virginia by 1750

4. In South Carolina they outnumbered whites two to one

3. Most of the slaves who reached North America came from the west coast of Africa, including the area from present-day Senegal to Angola

4. They were originally captured by African coastal tribes, who traded them in crude markets on the shimmering tropical beaches to European and American flesh merchants; usually branded and bound, the captives were herded aboard sweltering ships for the "middle passage"

5. On the gruesome journey, death rates ran as high as 20 percent and terrified survivors were virtually shoved onto auction blocks in New World ports where a giant slave market flourished for than 100 years

6. A few of the earliest African immigrants gained their freedom

    1. But as the number of Africans in their midst increased dramatically toward the end of the seventeenth century, white colonists reacted remorselessly to this supposed racial threat

    2. Earlier in the century, the legal difference between a slave and a servant was unclear; but now the law began to make sharp distinctions between the two—largely on the basis of race

    3. Statutes appeared that formally decreed the iron conditions of slavery for blacks; these earliest "slave codes" make blacks and their children the property for life of their white masters

    4. Some colonies made it a crime to teach a slave to read or white; no even conversion to Christianity could qualify a slave for freedom

    5. Slavery might have begun in America for economic reasons, but by the end of the seventeenth century, it was clear that racial discrimination also powerfully molded the American slave system

E. Africans in America

1. In the deepest South, slave life was especially harsh; the climate was hostile to health and the labor was life-draining; the widely scattered South Carolina rice and indigo plantations were lonely hells on earth where gangs of mostly male Africans toiled and perished

2. Blacks in the tobacco Chesapeake region had it somewhat easier

    1. Tobacco was a less physically demanding crop than those of the deeper South; tobacco plantations were larger and closer to one another than rice plantations (more frequent contact with friends)

    2. By about 1720 the proportion of females in the Chesapeake slave population had begun to rise, making family life possible

3. The captive black population of the Chesapeake area soon began to grow not only through new imports but also through its own births; one of the few slave societies to perpetuate itself by natural means

3. Native-born African-Americans contributed to the growth of a stable and distinctive slave cultures, a mixture of African and American elements of speech, religious, and folkways

1. On the islands off South Carolina's coast, blacks evolved a unique language, Gullah (probably from*Angola*); it blended English with several African languages, including Yoruba, Ibo, and Hausa

2. Through it many African words have passed into American speech—such as goober (peanut), gumbo (okra), and voodoo

3. The ringshout, a West African religious dance, performed by shuffling in a circle while answering a preacher's shouts, was brought to colonial American by slaves and developed into jazz

4. Slaves also helped powerfully to build the country with their labor

1. A few became skilled artisans—carpenters, bricklayers, and tanners

2. But chiefly they performed the toil of clearing swamps, grubbing out trees, and other menial tasks; slaves naturally pined for freedom

3. A slave revolt erupted in New York City in 1712 that cost the lives of a dozen whites and caused the execution of 21 blacks

4. More than fifty resentful South Carolina blacks exploded in revolt in 1739 and tried to march to Spanish Florida, only to be stopped

5. But in the end, the slaves in the South proved to be a more manageable labor force than the white indentured servants they replaced; no slave rebellion in American history matched the scale of Bacon's Rebellion

F. Southern Society

1. As slavery spread, the gaps in the South's social structure widened

1. The rough equality of poverty and disease of the early days was giving way to a defined hierarchy of wealth and status in the 1700s
2. At the top of this southern social ladder perched a small but powerful covey of great planters; owning gangs of slaves and vast domains of land, the planters ruled the region's economy (politics)
3. A clutch of clans possessed among them gigantic tracts of Virginia real estate, and together they dominated the house of Burgesses

2. Yet, these great seventeenth-century merchant planters were not silk-swathed cavaliers gallantly imitating the ways of English gentlemen
    1. They did build stately riverfront manors, occasionally rode to the hounds, and some of them even cultivated the arts, and accumulated distinguished libraries (most were a hardworking businesslike lot)
    2. Few problems were more vexations than the unruly, surly servants
3. Beneath the planters—far beneath them in wealth, prestige, and political power—were the small farmers, the largest social group
    1. They tilled their modest plots and might own one or two slaves
    2. Still lower on the social scale were the landless whites, most of them luckless former indentured servants; and beneath them were those persons still serving out the term of their indenture
    3. Their numbers gradually diminished as black slaves increasingly replaced white indentured servants toward the end of the seventeenth century; the oppressed black slaves, remained enchained in society's basement under the indentured servants
4. Few cities sprouted in the colonial South, and consequently an urban professional class, including lawyers and financiers, was slow to start
5. Southern life revolved around the great plantations, distantly isolated from one another; waterways provided the principal means of trans-portation and roads were so wretched—unlike anything in other areas

G. The New England Family

1. Nature smiled more benignly on pioneer New Englanders than on their disease-plagued fellow colonists to the south; clean water and cool temperature retarded the spread of killer microbes and in contrast to the Chesapeake, setters in New England added ten years to their life spans
    1. The first generations of Puritan colonists enjoyed, on average, about seventy years on this earth—not too different from today's rates
    2. New Englanders tended to migrate not as single individuals but as families and the family remained at the center of New England life
    3. Almost from the outset, New England's population grew from natural reproductive increase; the people were remarkable fertile
2. Early marriage encouraged the booming birthrate; women typically wed by their early twenties and produced babies about every two years
    1. Ceaseless childbearing drained the vitality of many pioneer women; though claims about the frequency of death in childbirth have probably been exaggerated but it still haunted many women
    2. A married woman could expect to experience up to ten pregnancies and rear as many as eight surviving children; a New England woman might well have children from the start of marriage to death
3. The longevity of the New Englanders contributed to family stability
    1. Children grew up in nurturing environments where they received love and guidance not only from their parents but also from family
    2. This novel intergenerational continuity has inspired the observation that New England "invented" grandparents
    3. Family stability was reflected in low premarital pregnancy rates and in the generally strong, tranquil social structure of New England

4. Still other contrasts emerged between the southern and New England

    1. The fragility of southern families advanced the economic security of southern women, especially of women's property rights

    2. Because southern men frequently died young, leaving widows with small children to support, the southern colonies generally allowed married women to retain separate title to their property

    3. But in New England, Puritan lawmakers worried that recognizing women's separate property rights would undercut the unity of married persons by acknowledging conflicting interests between husband and wife; New England women usually gave up property rights when they married; women were denied rights of inheritance

H. Life in the New England Towns

1. New Englanders evolved a tightly knit society, the basis of which was small villages and farms; this development was natural in a people anchored by geography and hemmed in by Indians, the French, and the Dutch Puritanism likewise made for unity of purpose and for concern about the moral health of the whole community (opposition to slavery)

2. In the Chesapeake region, the expansion of settlement was somewhat random and was usually undertaken by planters on their own initiative

    1. But, New England society grew in a more orderly fashion

    2. New towns were legally chartered by the colonial authorities and the distribution of land was entrusted to the hands of proprietors

    3. After receiving a grant of land from the colonial legislature, the proprietors moved themselves and their families to the designated place and laid out their town, usually consisted of a meeting house, a place of worship, and the town hall surrounded by houses

    4. Also marked out was a village free, where the militia could drill

    5. Each family received several parcels of land, including a woodlot for fuel, a tract suitable for growing crops, and a pasture for animals

3. Towns of more than fifty families were required to provide elementary education and a majority of the adults knew how to read and write

    1. In 1636, just eight years after the colony's founding, the Massachusetts Puritans established Harvard College to train local boys for the ministry; only in 1693, 86 years after the founding of Jamestown did Virginians establish their first college, William and Mary

    2. Puritans ran their own churches, and democracy in Congregational church government led logically to democracy in political government; the town meeting in which the freemen met together and each man voted, exhibited democracy in its purest form

    3. New England villagers from the outset gathered regularly in their meetinghouses to elect their officials, appoint schoolmasters, and discuss such mundane matters as road repairs (political democracy)

I. The Half-Way Covenant and the Salem Witch Trials

1. Worries plagued the God-fearing pioneers of New England settlements

    1. The pressure of a growing population was gradually dispersing the Puritans onto outlying farms, far from the control of church

    2. Although the core of Puritan belief still burned brightly, the passage of time was dampening the first generation's flaming religious zeal

    3. About the middle of the 17th century a new form of sermon began to be heard from Puritan pulpits—the "jeremiad"

    4. Taking their cue from the doom-saying Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, preachers scolded parishioners for their waning piety

    5. Especially alarming was the apparent decline in conversions—testimonials by individuals that they had received God's grace and deserved to be admitted to the church as members of the elect

2. Troubled ministers in 1662 announced a new formula for church membership, the "Half-Way Covenant" that offered partial membership rights to people not yet converted; it dramatized the difficulty of maintaining the religious devotion of the founding generation
    1. Jeremiads continued to thunder from the pulpits, but as time went on, the doors of the Puritan churches swung fully open to all
    2. This widening of church membership gradually erased the distinction between the "elect" and other members of society
    3. In effect, strict religious purity was sacrificed somewhat to the cause of wider religious participation (more and more women)
3. Women also played a prominent role in one of New England's most frightening religious episodes to ever occur in the area
    1. A group of adolescent girls in Salem, Massachusetts, claimed to have been bewitched by certain women and a hysterical "witch hunt" ensued, leading to the lynching in 1692 of twenty individuals, nineteen of whom were hanged and one whom was pressed to death
    2. Larger-scale witchcraft persecutions were then common in Europe and several outbreaks had already flared forth in the colonies but the reign of horror in Salem grew not only from the superstitions of the age but also from the unsettled social and religious conditions
    3. Most of the accused witches were associated with Salem's prosperous merchant elite; their accusers came largely form the ranks of the poorer families in Salem's agricultural hinterland
    4. This episode reflected the widening social stratification of New England, as well as the anxieties of many religious traditionalists that Puritan heritage was being eclipsed by Yankee commercialism
    5. The witchcraft hysteria eventually ended in 1693 when the governor, alarmed by an accusation against his won wife and supported by the more responsible members of the clergy, prohibited any further trials and pardoned those already convicted

4. The Salem witchcraft delusion marked an all-time high in American experience of population passions that had run wild

5. Witch hunting" passed into the American vocabulary as a metaphor for the dangerously irrational urge to find a scapegoat for resentment

J. The New England Way of Life

1. Oddly enough, the story of New England was largely written by rocks

    1. The heavily glaciated soil was strewn with countless stones, many of which were forced to the surface after a winter freeze

    2. In a sense the Puritans did not possess the soil; it possessed them by shaping their character and scratching a living from the protesting earth was an early American success story; back-bending toil put a premium on industry and penny-pinching frugality (famous for)

    3. Traditionally sharp Yankee traders, some of them palming off wooden nutmegs, made their mark; Connecticut came in time to be called "the Nutmeg State;" cynics said many people were dishonest

2. The grudging land also left colonial New England less ethnically mixed than its southern neighbors; European immigrants were not attracted in great numbers to a site where the soil was stony (religion sulfurous)

3. Climate likewise molded New England, where the summers were often uncomfortably hot and winters were cruelly cold

    1. Yet the soil and climate of New England eventually encouraged a diversified agriculture and industry; staple products like tobacco did not flourish, as in the South; black slavery could not exist profitably on small farms, especially where the surest crop was stones

    2. No broad, fertile hinterland, comparable to that of the South, beckoned people inland; the mountains ran fairly close to the shore, and the rivers were generally short and rapid waters

4. And just as the land shaped New Englanders, so they shaped the land
    1. The Native Americans had left an early imprint on the New England earth; they traditionally beat trials through the woods as they migrated seasonally for hunting and fishing
    2. They periodically burned the woodlands to restore leafy first-growth forests that would sustain the deer population
    3. The Indians recognized the right to use the land, but the concept of exclusive, individual ownership of the land was not known to them
5. The English settlers had a different philosophy; they condemned the Indians for "wasting" the earth by underutilizing its bounty and used this logic to justify their own expropriation of the land from the natives
6. Some greatest changes resulted from the introduction of livestock
    1. The English brought pigs, horses, sheep, and cattle from Europe to settlements and because the growing herds need more pastures, the colonists were continually clearing forests
    2. The animal's appetites and heavy hooves compacted the soil, speeding erosion and flooding causing changes in microclimate
7. Repelled by the rocks, the hardy New Englanders turned instinctively to their fine natural harbors; hacking timber from their dense forests they became experts in shipbuilding and commerce; they also ceaselessly exploited the self-perpetuating codfish lode off the coast
8. The combination of Calvinism, soil, and climate in New England made for purposefulness, stubbornness, self-reliance and resourcefulness; New England's impact on the whole nation has been incalculable

K. The Early Settlers' Days and Ways

1. The cycles of the seasons and the sun set the schedules of all the earliest American colonists, men as well as women, blacks and whites

1. The overwhelming majority of colonists were farmers; they planted in the spring, tended their crops in the summer, harvested in the fall, and prepared in the winter to begin the cycle all over again
2. They usually rose at dawn and went to bad at dusk; chores might be performed after nightfall if they were ”worth the candle”
3. Women, slave or free, on southern plantations or northern farms, wove, cooked, cleaned, and care for children; men cleared land, fenced, planted, and cropped it, cut firewood, and butchered livestock; children helped with all these task (sometimes schooled)

2. Life was humble but comfortable by contemporary standards; compared to most seventeenth-century Europeans, Americans lived in affluent abundance; land was relatively cheap and more money for jobs
3. The poorest members of a society may not possess even the modest means needed to pull up stakes and seek a fresh start in life; accordingly most white migrants to early colonial America came from the middle; not aristocracy nor the dregs of European society
4. Crude frontier life did not in any case permit the flagrant display of class distinctions, and seventeenth-century society in all the colonies had a certain simple sameness to it, especially in the middle colonies
    1. Yet many settlers, tried to re-create on a modified scale the social structure they had known in the Old World
    2. Resentment against the upper-class pretensions helped to spark outbursts like Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676 in Virginia and the uprising of Maryland’s Protestants toward the end of the 1600s
    3. In New York, animosity between lordly landholders and aspiring merchants fueled Leisler’s Rebellion, an ill-starred and blood insurgency that rocked New York City from 1689 to 1691
5. For their part, would-be American blue bloods resented the pretensions of the “meaner sort” and passed laws to try to keep them in their place but these efforts to reproduce the

finely stratified societies of Europe proved feeble in the early American wilderness where equality and democracy found fertile soil—at least for white people