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Colonial Society

I. Introduction

Eighteenth-century American culture moved in competing directions. Commercial, military, and cultural ties between Great Britain and the North American colonies tightened while a new distinctly American culture began to form and bind together colonists from New Hampshire to Georgia. Immigrants from other European nations meanwhile combined with Native Americans and enslaved Africans to create an increasingly diverse colonial population. All—men and women, European, Native American, and African—led distinct lives and wrought new distinct societies. While life in the thirteen colonies was shaped in part by English practices and participation in the larger Atlantic World, emerging cultural patterns increasingly transformed North America into something wholly different.

Charles Willson Peale, *The Peale Family*, c. 1771–1773. Collection of the New-York Historical Society, object #1867.298.

II. Consumption and Trade in the British Atlantic

Transatlantic trade greatly enriched Britain, but it also created high standards of living for many North American colonists. This two-way

relationship reinforced the colonial feeling of commonality with British culture. It was not until trade relations, disturbed by political changes and the demands of warfare, became strained in the 1760s that colonists began to question these ties.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, improvements in manufacturing, transportation, and the availability of credit increased the opportunity for colonists to purchase consumer goods. Instead of making their own tools, clothes, and utensils, colonists increasingly purchased luxury items made by specialized artisans and manufacturers. As the incomes of Americans rose and the prices of these commodities fell, these items shifted from luxuries to common goods. The average person's ability to spend money on consumer goods became a sign of their respectability. Historians have called this process the "consumer revolution."¹

Britain relied on the colonies as a source of raw materials, such as lumber and tobacco. Americans engaged with new forms of trade and financing that increased their ability to buy British-made goods. But the

Joseph Highmore,
The Harlowe Family, from
Samuel Richardson's
"Clarissa,"
1745–1747.
Wikimedia.



ways in which colonists paid for these goods varied sharply from those in Britain. When settlers first arrived in North America, they typically carried very little hard or metallic British money with them. Discovering no precious metals (and lacking the Crown's authority to mint coins), colonists relied on barter and nontraditional forms of exchange, including everything from nails to the wampum used by Native American groups in the Northeast. To deal with the lack of currency, many colonies resorted to "commodity money," which varied from place to place. In Virginia, for example, the colonial legislature stipulated a rate of exchange for tobacco, standardizing it as a form of money in the colony. Commodities could be cumbersome and difficult to transport, so a system of notes developed. These notes allowed individuals to deposit a certain amount of tobacco in a warehouse and receive a note bearing the value of the deposit that could be traded as money. In 1690, colonial Massachusetts became the first place in the Western world to issue paper bills to be used as money.² These notes, called bills of credit, were issued for finite periods of time on the colony's credit and varied in denomination.

While these notes provided colonists with a much-needed medium for exchange, it was not without its problems. Currency that worked in Virginia might be worthless in Pennsylvania. Colonists and officials in Britain debated whether it was right or desirable to use mere paper, as opposed to gold or silver, as a medium of exchange. Paper money tended to lose value quicker than coins and was often counterfeited. These problems, as well as British merchants' reluctance to accept depreciated paper notes, caused the Board of Trade to restrict the uses of paper money in the Currency Acts of 1751 and 1763. Paper money was not the only medium of exchange, however. Colonists also used metal coins. Barter and the extension of credit—which could take the form of bills of exchange, akin to modern-day personal checks—remained important forces throughout the colonial period. Still, trade between colonies was greatly hampered by the lack of standardized money.

Businesses on both sides of the Atlantic advertised both their goods and promises of obtaining credit. The consistent availability of credit allowed families of modest means to buy consumer items previously available only to elites. Cheap consumption allowed middle-class Americans to match many of the trends in clothing, food, and household décor that traditionally marked the wealthiest, aristocratic classes. Provincial Americans, often seen by their London peers as less cultivated or "backwater," could present themselves as lords and ladies of their own communities



by purchasing and displaying British-made goods. Visiting the home of a successful businessman in Boston, John Adams described “the Furniture, which alone cost a thousand Pounds sterling. A seat it is for a noble Man, a Prince. The Turkey Carpets, the painted Hangings, the Marble Table, the rich Beds with crimson Damask Curtains and Counterpins, the beautiful Chimney Clock, the Spacious Garden, are the most magnificent of any thing I have seen.”³ But many Americans worried about the consequences of rising consumerism. A writer for the *Boston Evening Post* remarked on this new practice of purchasing status: “For ’tis well known how Credit is a mighty inducement with many People to purchase this and the other Thing which they may well enough do without.”⁴ Americans became more likely to find themselves in debt, whether to their local shopkeeper or a prominent London merchant, creating new feelings of dependence.

Of course, the thirteen continental colonies were not the only British colonies in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, they were considerably less important to the Crown than the sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Barbados, the Leeward Islands, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Dominica. These British colonies were also inextricably connected to the continental colonies. Caribbean plantations dedicated nearly all of their land to the wildly profitable crop of sugarcane, so North American colonies sold surplus food and raw materials to these wealthy island colonies. Lumber was in high demand, especially in Barbados, where planters nearly deforested the island to make room for sugar plantations. To compensate for a lack of lumber, Barbadian colonists ordered house frames from New England. These prefabricated frames were sent via ships from which planters transported them to their plantations. Caribbean colonists also relied on the continental colonies for livestock, purchasing cattle and horses. The most lucrative exchange was the slave trade.

Connections between the Caribbean and North America benefited both sides. Those living on the continent relied on the Caribbean colonists to satisfy their craving for sugar and other goods like mahogany. British colonists in the Caribbean began cultivating sugar in the 1640s, and sugar took the Atlantic World by storm. In fact, by 1680, sugar exports from the tiny island of Barbados valued more than the total exports of all the continental colonies.⁵ Jamaica, acquired by the Crown in 1655, surpassed Barbados in sugar production toward the end of the seventeenth century. North American colonists, like Britons around





the world, craved sugar to sweeten their tea and food. Colonial elites also sought to decorate their parlors and dining rooms with the silky, polished surfaces of rare mahogany as opposed to local wood. While the bulk of this in-demand material went to Britain and Europe, New England merchants imported the wood from the Caribbean, where it was then transformed into exquisite furniture for those who could afford it.

These systems of trade all existed with the purpose of enriching Great Britain. To ensure that profits ended up in Britain, Parliament issued taxes on trade under the Navigation Acts. These taxes intertwined consumption with politics. Prior to 1763, Britain found that enforcing the regulatory laws they passed was difficult and often cost them more than the duty revenue they would bring in. As a result, colonists found it relatively easy to violate the law and trade with foreign nations, pirates, or smugglers. Customs officials were easily bribed and it was not uncommon to see Dutch, French, or West Indies ships laden with prohibited goods in American ports. When smugglers were caught, their American peers

John Hinton, *A representation of the sugar-cane and the art of making sugar*, 1749. Library of Congress.

often acquitted them. British officials estimated that nearly £700,000 worth of illicit goods was brought into the American colonies annually.⁶ Pirates also helped to perpetuate the illegal trading activities by providing a buffer between merchants and foreign ships.

Beginning with the Sugar Act in 1764, and continuing with the Stamp Act and the Townshend Acts, Parliament levied taxes on sugar, paper, lead, glass, and tea, all products that contributed to colonists' sense of gentility. In response, patriots organized nonimportation agreements and reverted to domestic products. Homespun cloth became a political statement. A writer in the *Essex Gazette* in 1769 proclaimed, "I presume there never was a Time when, or a Place where, the Spinning Wheel could more influence the Affairs of Men, than at present."⁷

The consumer revolution fueled the growth of colonial cities. Cities in colonial America were crossroads for the movement of people and goods. One in twenty colonists lived in cities by 1775.⁸ Some cities grew organically over time, while others were planned from the start. New York's and Boston's seventeenth-century street plans reflected the haphazard arrangement of medieval cities in Europe. In other cities like Philadelphia and Charleston, civic leaders laid out urban plans according to calculated systems of regular blocks and squares. Planners in Annapolis and Williamsburg also imposed regularity and order over their city streets through the placement of government, civic, and educational buildings.

By 1775, Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston were the five largest cities in British North America. Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Charleston had populations of approximately 40,000, 25,000, 16,000, and 12,000 people, respectively.⁹ Urban society was highly stratified. At the base of the social ladder were the laboring classes, which included both enslaved and free people ranging from apprentices to master craftsmen. Next came the middling sort: shopkeepers, artisans, and skilled mariners. Above them stood the merchant elites, who tended to be actively involved in the city's social and political affairs, as well as in the buying, selling, and trading of goods. Enslaved men and women had a visible presence in both northern and southern cities.

The bulk of the enslaved population lived in rural areas and performed agricultural labor. In port cities, slaves often worked as domestic servants and in skilled trades: distilleries, shipyards, lumberyards, and ropewalks. Between 1725 and 1775, slavery became increasingly significant in the northern colonies as urban residents sought greater participation in the maritime economy. Massachusetts was the first slave-holding



colony in New England. New York traced its connections to slavery and the slave trade back to the Dutch settlers of New Netherland in the seventeenth century. Philadelphia also became an active site of the Atlantic slave trade, and slaves accounted for nearly 8 percent of the city's population in 1770.¹⁰ In southern cities, including Charleston, urban slavery played an important role in the market economy. Slaves, both rural and urban, made up the majority of the laboring population on the eve of the American Revolution.

III. Slavery, Antislavery, and Atlantic Exchange

Slavery was a transatlantic institution, but it developed distinct characteristics in British North America. By 1750, slavery was legal in every North American colony, but local economic imperatives, demographic trends, and cultural practices all contributed to distinct colonial variants of slavery.

Virginia, the oldest of the English mainland colonies, imported its first slaves in 1619. Virginia planters built larger and larger estates and guaranteed that these estates would remain intact through the use of primogeniture (in which a family's estate would descend to the eldest male heir) and the entail (a legal procedure that prevented the breakup and sale of estates). This distribution of property, which kept wealth and property consolidated, guaranteed that the great planters would dominate social and economic life in the Chesapeake. This system also fostered an economy dominated by tobacco. By 1750, there were approximately one hundred thousand African slaves in Virginia, at least 40 percent of the colony's total population.¹¹ Most of these slaves worked on large estates under the gang system of labor, working from dawn to dusk in groups with close supervision by a white overseer or enslaved "driver" who could use physical force to compel labor.

Virginians used the law to protect the interests of slaveholders. In 1705 the House of Burgesses passed its first comprehensive slave code. Earlier laws had already guaranteed that the children of enslaved women would be born slaves, conversion to Christianity would not lead to freedom, and owners could not free their slaves unless they transported them out of the colony. Slave owners could not be convicted of murder for killing a slave; conversely, any black Virginian who struck a white colonist would be severely whipped. Virginia planters used the law to maximize the profitability of their slaves and closely regulate every aspect of their daily lives.

In South Carolina and Georgia, slavery was also central to colonial life, but specific local conditions created a very different system. Georgia was founded by the philanthropist James Oglethorpe, who originally banned slavery from the colony. But by 1750, slavery was legal throughout the region. South Carolina had been a slave colony from its founding and, by 1750, was the only mainland colony with a majority enslaved African population. The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, coauthored by the philosopher John Locke in 1669, explicitly legalized slavery from the very beginning. Many early settlers in Carolina were slaveholders from British Caribbean sugar islands, and they brought their brutal slave codes with them. Defiant slaves could legally be beaten, branded, mutilated, even castrated. In 1740 a new law stated that killing a rebellious slave was not a crime and even the murder of a slave was treated as a minor misdemeanor. South Carolina also banned the freeing of slaves unless the freed slave left the colony.¹²

Despite this brutal regime, a number of factors combined to give South Carolina slaves more independence in their daily lives. Rice, the staple crop underpinning the early Carolina economy, was widely cultivated in West Africa, and planters commonly requested that merchants sell them slaves skilled in the complex process of rice cultivation. Slaves from Senegambia were particularly prized.¹³ The expertise of these slaves contributed to one of the most lucrative economies in the colonies. The swampy conditions of rice plantations, however, fostered dangerous diseases. Malaria and other tropical diseases spread and caused many owners to live away from their plantations. These elites, who commonly owned a number of plantations, typically lived in Charleston town houses to avoid the diseases of the rice fields. West Africans, however, were far more likely to have a level of immunity to malaria (due to a genetic trait that also contributes to higher levels of sickle cell anemia), reinforcing planters' racial belief that Africans were particularly suited to labor in tropical environments.

With plantation owners often far from home, Carolina slaves had less direct oversight than those in the Chesapeake. Furthermore, many Carolina rice plantations used the task system to organize slave labor. Under this system, slaves were given a number of specific tasks to complete in a day. Once those tasks were complete, slaves often had time to grow their own crops on garden plots allotted by plantation owners. Thriving underground markets allowed slaves here a degree of economic autonomy. Carolina slaves also had an unparalleled degree of cultural autonomy.

This autonomy coupled with the frequent arrival of new Africans enabled a slave culture that retained many African practices.¹⁴ Syncretic languages like Gullah and Geechee contained many borrowed African terms, and traditional African basket weaving (often combined with Native American techniques) survives in the region to this day.

This unique Lowcountry slave culture contributed to the Stono Rebellion in September 1739. On a Sunday morning while planters attended church, a group of about eighty slaves set out for Spanish Florida under a banner that read “Liberty!,” burning plantations and killing at least twenty white settlers as they marched. They were headed for Fort Mose, a free black settlement on the Georgia-Florida border, emboldened by the Spanish Empire’s offer of freedom to any English slaves. The local militia defeated the rebels in battle, captured and executed many of the slaves, and sold others to the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Though the rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it was a violent reminder that slaves would fight for freedom.

Slavery was also an important institution in the mid-Atlantic colonies. While New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania never developed plantation economies, slaves were often employed on larger farms growing cereal grains. Enslaved Africans worked alongside European tenant farmers on New York’s Hudson Valley “patroonships,” huge tracts of land granted to a few early Dutch families. As previously mentioned, slaves were also a common sight in Philadelphia, New York City, and other ports where they worked in the maritime trades and domestic service. New York City’s economy was so reliant on slavery that over 40 percent of its population was enslaved by 1700, while 15 to 20 percent of Pennsylvania’s colonial population was enslaved by 1750.¹⁵ In New York, the high density of slaves and a particularly diverse European population increased the threat of rebellion. A 1712 slave rebellion in New York City resulted in the deaths of nine white colonists. In retribution, twenty-one slaves were executed and six others committed suicide before they could be burned alive. In 1741, authorities uncovered another planned rebellion by African slaves, free blacks, and poor whites. Panic unleashed a witch hunt that only stopped after thirty-two slaves and free blacks and five poor whites were executed. Another seventy slaves were deported, likely to the sugarcane fields of the West Indies.¹⁶

Increasingly uneasy about the growth of slavery in the region, Quakers were the first group to turn against slavery. Quaker beliefs in radical nonviolence and the fundamental equality of all human souls made



slavery hard to justify. Most commentators argued that slavery originated in war, where captives were enslaved rather than executed. To pacifist Quakers, then, the very foundation of slavery was illegitimate. Furthermore, Quaker belief in the equality of souls challenged the racial basis of slavery. By 1758, Quakers in Pennsylvania disowned members who engaged in the slave trade, and by 1772 slave-owning Quakers could be expelled from their meetings. These local activities in Pennsylvania had broad implications as the decision to ban slavery and slave trading was debated in Quaker meetings throughout the English-speaking world. The free black population in Philadelphia and other northern cities also continually agitated against slavery.

Slavery as a system of labor never took off in Massachusetts, Connecticut, or New Hampshire, though it was legal throughout the region. The absence of cash crops like tobacco or rice minimized the economic use of slavery. In Massachusetts, only about 2 percent of the population was enslaved as late as the 1760s. The few slaves in the colony were concentrated in Boston along with a sizable free black community that made up about 10 percent of the city's population.¹⁷ While slavery itself never really took root in New England, the slave trade was a central element of the region's economy. Every major port in the region participated to some extent in the transatlantic trade—Newport, Rhode Island, alone had at least 150 ships active in the trade by 1740—and New England also provided foodstuffs and manufactured goods to West Indian plantations.¹⁸

IV. Pursuing Political, Religious, and Individual Freedom

Consumption, trade, and slavery drew the colonies closer to Great Britain, but politics and government split them further apart. Democracy in Europe more closely resembled oligarchies rather than republics, with only elite members of society eligible to serve in elected positions. Most European states did not hold regular elections, with Britain and the Dutch Republic being the two major exceptions. However, even in these countries, only a tiny portion of males could vote. In the North American colonies, by contrast, white male suffrage was far more widespread. In addition to having greater popular involvement, colonial government also had more power in a variety of areas. Assemblies and legislatures regulated businesses, imposed new taxes, cared for the poor in their communities, built roads and bridges, and made most decisions concerning education. Colonial Americans sued often, which in turn led to more



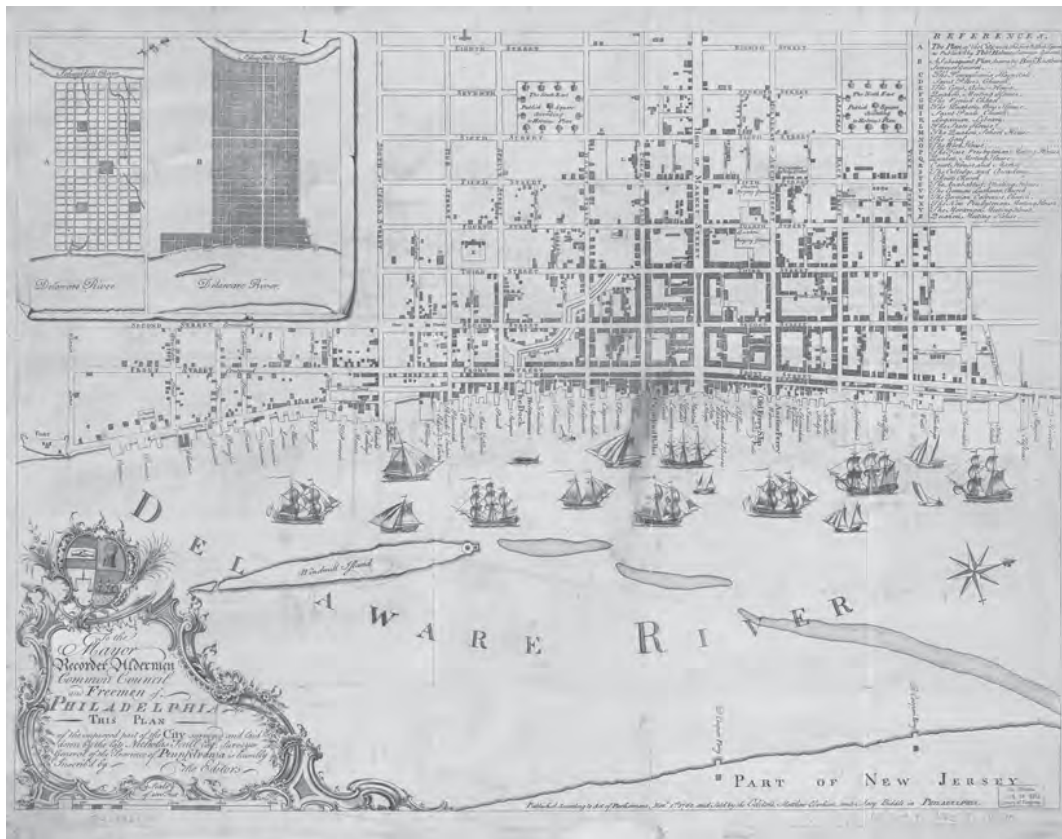
power for local judges and more prestige in jury service. Thus, lawyers became extremely important in American society and in turn played a greater role in American politics.

American society was less tightly controlled than European society. This led to the rise of various interest groups, each at odds with the other. These various interest groups arose based on commonalities in various areas. Some commonalities arose over class-based distinctions, while others were due to ethnic or religious ties. One of the major differences between modern politics and colonial political culture was the lack of distinct, stable political parties. The most common disagreement in colonial politics was between the elected assemblies and the royal governor. Generally, the various colonial legislatures were divided into factions who either supported or opposed the current governor's political ideology.

Political structures in the colonies fell under one of three main categories: provincial (New Hampshire, New York, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia), proprietary (Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey, and Maryland), and charter (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut). Provincial colonies were the most tightly controlled by the Crown. The British king appointed all provincial governors and these Crown governors could veto any decision made by their colony's legislative assemblies. Proprietary colonies had a similar structure, with one important difference: governors were appointed by a lord proprietor, an individual who had purchased or received the rights to the colony from the Crown. Proprietary colonies therefore often had more freedoms and liberties than other North American colonies. Charter colonies had the most complex system of government: they were formed by political corporations or interest groups that drew up a charter clearly delineating powers between the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government. Rather than having appointed governors, charter colonies elected their own from among property-owning men in the colony.

After the governor, colonial government was broken down into two main divisions: the council and the assembly. The council was essentially the governor's cabinet, often composed of prominent individuals within the colony, such as the head of the militia or the attorney general. The governor appointed these men, although the appointments were often subject to approval from Parliament. The assembly was composed of elected, property-owning men whose official goal was to ensure that colonial law conformed to English law. The colonial assemblies approved





Nicholas Scull,
To the mayor,
recorder, alder-
men, common
council, and
freemen of Phila-
delphia this plan
of the improved
part of the city
surveyed and laid
down by the late
Nicholas Scull,
Philadelphia,
1762. Library of
Congress.

new taxes and the colonial budgets. However, many of these assemblies saw it as their duty to check the power of the governor and ensure that he did not take too much power within colonial government. Unlike Parliament, most of the men who were elected to an assembly came from local districts, with their constituency able to hold their elected officials accountable to promises made.

An elected assembly was an offshoot of the idea of civic duty, the notion that men had a responsibility to support and uphold the government through voting, paying taxes, and service in the militia. Americans firmly accepted the idea of a social contract, the idea that government was put in place by the people. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke pioneered this idea, and there is evidence to suggest that these writers influenced the colonists. While in practice elites controlled colonial politics, in theory many colonists believed in the notion of equality before the law and opposed special treatment for any members of colonial society.

Whether African Americans, Native Americans, and women would be included in this notion of equality before the law was far less clear. Women's role in the family became particularly complicated. Many histo-