



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2003 Volume II: Everyday Life in Early America

Introduction

The seminar was designed to present, and explore, a variety of themes related to ordinary 'everyday' experience in the premodern period of American history. For practical purposes, 'premodern' was taken to mean before the Industrial Revolution of the early 19th century. The sequence of topics--arranged on a week-by-week basis--moved from the general to the particular, and the structural to the personal.

After an introductory session in which we considered questions of 'evidence and inference' in historical work, we began our substantive agenda by considering the environment encountered by the first European 'settlers' of North America, and their developing interaction with it. At the same time, we contrasted European patterns with prevalent Native practice in this respect. Our next session took up issues of demographic history, including the catastrophic experience of Native groups in the face of 'foreign' disease pathogens, and the growth of an increasingly diverse--indeed multiethnic and multiracial-- population throughout the British colonies.

From this we turned to questions of politics and society, broadly understood: the characteristically premodern 'consensus' approach to governance (so different from our own), the extent and use of the suffrage, the role and responsibilities of leadership, the widespread acceptance of class-based hierarchies, the development nonetheless of social mobility, and the tensions confronting traditional community models when situated in a 'new' context. This led directly to our next topic-- the 'moral economy' of premodern times, and attendant factors of labor scarcity, subsistence as well as cash-crop production, and the faint, first stirrings of capitalism. We concluded the more 'structural' part of our agenda by investigating the prevalent cultural system, including literacy and print communication, information networks, education, and the centrality of face-to-face encounters.

Our remaining sessions were devoted to more 'personal' aspects of premodern history--to individuals' experiences within the structure of society. Thus, for example, we examined the circular dimension of work and family (geared, as virtually all of it was, to the daily cycle, the seasonal cycle, and the life cycle). We then turned in a direct way to questions of race and gender. We considered, in particular, the forced introduction of African-American laborers (and their subsequent enslavement), and the step-by-step accommodation of Native groups to British (and European) dominance. We also explored the experience of early American women within an everyday regime of 'flexible patriarchy.' Our concluding topic was cosmology-- all the ways in which early Americans sought to make sense of their world (including religion and magic, witchcraft and Providence, and various forms of practical knowledge).

We traveled this route through shared readings and discussions. We sampled both secondary and primary sources, insofar as possible; the latter included material artifacts brought both by the seminar leader and by

the Fellows. The leader did some lecturing of an informal kind, but there was ample time as well for discussion.

Of course, too, the Fellows were at work from the beginning on their individual curriculum units. And, as the seminar proceeded, these were shared with the entire group. The final array, assembled in this volume, was impressive. Topics addressed in these units include death and dying, early childhood, Native American women, cultural practices of the Plains Indians, and the early history of New Haven.

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