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**The American Revolution: Lecture 1 Transcript**

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**Professor Joanne Freeman:** Now, I'm looking out at all of these faces and I'm assuming that many of you have probably arrived here with some preconceived notions about the American Revolution. I'm assuming that at least some of you are sitting there and in the back of your mind you're thinking--Declaration of Independence, a bunch of battles, George Washington, a little bit of Paul Revere thrown in--and all of those things are going to appear in the course but obviously the real American Revolution is a lot more complex than that. It's more than a string of names and documents and battles, and as a matter of fact in many ways the American Revolution wasn't just a war. If you went back to the mid-eighteenth century, went back to the period of the Revolution or maybe just after it, and you asked people how they understood what was happening, many of them would tell you that the war was actually only a minor part of the American Revolution. Some would tell you the war actually wasn't the American Revolution at all and you'll see the--I should mention that the syllabus is finally up online so it's there for you, but you will see when you look at the syllabus that at the very start of it there are two quotes and I want to read them here because they make this point really well.

So the first quote is from a letter by John Adams and he's writing to Thomas Jefferson in 1815 and he's heard about an attempt to write the history of the American Revolution so this is what Adams has to say about that. "As to the history of the Revolution, my ideas may be peculiar, perhaps singular, but what do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution." There is the moment where you go "Huh?" "It was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington."

Okay. So there we have John Adams saying that the war was actually no part of the Revolution. It's a pretty famous quote but it's a pretty interesting statement. Now I want to mention here, and it's very early in the course for me to have worked you in to liking John Adams and I'm going to talk more about John Adams in a few minutes, but I will mention here since I've just read that quote if partway through the semester you decide you're just dying to read dead people's mail, which is basically what historians do for a living, a great volume to read is actually the letters that Jefferson and Adams sent back and forth to each other over the course of their lives. They've all been pulled together into one volume and the best part of that volume is the end section, the letters in which these guys were writing to each other in their old age. So you have these two Founder figures, former presidents, and they're just basically letting it rip in these letters. They're talking about everything. They're talking about all the things actually you probably wouldn't talk about normally: religion, politics, who they hate, who they like, what they thought of the Revolution, what they thought of their own presidency, what they thought of the other guy's presidency, the top ten Founder funerals. Actually, there's a little section, although I think it's the top three Founder funerals, but it's a weird, really interesting range of stuff and it's just these two people really excited about the fact that they've retired and all they need to do now is write to each other and really get to know each other better. So it's a great volume. It's edited by Lester Cappon. The last name is C-a-p-p-o-n if you're interested.

Okay. So that quote I just read you is actually from that series of letters, Adams saying that the war was no part of the Revolution. Adams does say, "Well, maybe my ideas are a little bit peculiar" but he's not the only one spouting that kind of thought. So here is Benjamin Rush, who I guess in a way you could say was doctor to the stars. He was actually this renowned doctor from the revolutionary and early national period and he had a lot of high-placed political friends. So here's Benjamin Rush writing in 1787: "There is nothing more common than to confound the terms of the American Revolution with those of the late American war. The American war is over but this is far from being the case with the American Revolution. On the contrary, nothing but the first act of this great drama is closed." So there you have Benjamin Rush saying that boy, this is a common problem. A lot of people mix up American Revolution with American war and they're not just one and the same thing. The war is over. The Revolution goes on, and Rush is saying this even as late as 1787. It's four years after the treaty that ended the war, we're heading in to Constitution territory, and to Rush, the Revolution is continuing.

So what do these people mean? Well, in part, they are expressing part of what this class is going to be exploring. They're basically suggesting that the American Revolution represented an enormous change of mindset as loyal British colonists--right?--long-standing loyal British colonists, were transformed gradually into angry revolutionaries and ultimately into Americans. Like John Adams suggests, the beginnings of this transformation predate the actual fighting, and like Benjamin Rush suggests, it doesn't just come to a close when you sign a peace treaty. So when you look at things from this broad view, the Revolution actually becomes the beginning of a period in which the American nation was really inventing itself, and this is a really dramatic kind of invention. You have--In a sense we're just little pipsqueaks at this point, and so you have these little pipsqueaks and they are actually saying, "Okay. We reject monarchy. We're going to turn towards a democratic republic." They're saying, "Yeah. Well, we know the power's been at the imperial center forever. We're going to turn our backs on that and pull power in to what's basically the margins of the British empire." They're turning away from an assumption that the few are in power and they're saying, "Well, what if we try putting the many in power?"

Those are pretty dramatic changes and they aren't of course the only changes. People--Colonists began to think about themselves differently. It's really easy to underestimate the degree to which individual colonies at that time were really like little independent nation-state colonies. They were not united in any sense of the term. There wasn't any tradition of colonies being able to communicate between each other. It was actually in some ways easier to communicate with the mother country than to get some kind of news up and down the Atlantic seaboard. Colonists often knew more about the mother country than they knew about people from other colonies. They--When you look at correspondence from this period, people often refer--Northerners will refer to Southerners as though they're people from a strange, alien country who have weird accents. It's hard to know what they are saying; they dress so strangely. It's amazing to think about the differences, the degree to which colonies really stood alone in this time period. And this idea, that there really is pretty much no reason to assume that these colonies would have been able to join together, that's pretty much going to be in the first two or three lectures of the course. What we talk about is we try and get a sense of who these colonists are, and how they're ending up moving their way into a revolution. So this scattered group of independent colonists gradually came together to form one united nation, not the goal but the outcome.

Given everything that I just said, you can see why this idea that there might be a united nation is actually a pretty big surprise. You can see why a lot of people assumed that it could never work. You can actually also assume why a lot of people might not even have liked it as an idea, and you can even see why after the Constitution goes into effect and the government is getting under way, even then people were really just not sure this thing was going to work. They really--They referred to it as an experiment, which is really how they viewed it. And it's amazing when you look at letters from the 1790s you'll see these little throwaway comments like "If this government lasts more than five years, here's what I think we should do." Okay, there--It's a completely weird mindset and it's not something that we would assume is there, but this is pretty much a high-stakes experiment.

So this class is going to explore this big shift in mindset, and the war will be at the center of this shift, and it's going to do this from a participant's point of view. It's going to really grapple with how things made sense at the time to the people who were there. And I'm going to go more in to that in a minute or two.

I want to talk for just a second about how the course is organized and just for a minute or two about some of the readings for the course. The course is partly chronological and partly thematic so we do proceed along, we follow the narrative of events of how things evolved, all those nasty acts, people protesting, have a war, try to figure out what to do after the war. We do follow that sort of trajectory, but we're also going to once in a while step back and look at the big picture, so that we're not just following events; we're going to be always putting events in context.

And the readings for the course go in that same direction. We're going to read Gordon Wood's *Radicalism of the American Revolution,* which is a really great overview of this time period and also presents an argument, obviously as you could tell from the title, that the Revolution was really radical. Some people agree with that and some disagree, and actually one of the discussion sections is geared around discussing that very idea, and by the end of the course you'll probably have some pretty strong ideas not necessarily agreeing with mine but, based on what you've read and what I've said and what you've thought, you'll probably have some strong ideas about how radical was the American Revolution.

We're going to be reading Robert Gross's *The Minutemen and Their World,* which you can hear is right along the lines of what I was just saying. It really gives you a sense of what it was like at the time for people who ended up doing things like fighting at Lexington and Concord.

We're going to read Bernard Bailyn's *Faces of Revolution,* which includes an array of chapters on different people who played a major role in the Revolution as well as chapters on the ideals and the ideology or basically the logic of American independence, and Bailyn is really well known as sort of--He wrote this amazing book on the ideology of the American Revolution, and what you're going to be reading; he basically took a big, meaty chunk from that book, the part that everybody really focuses on, and put it in this book, *Faces of Revolution,* so we will be reading that as well as part of the readings for the course.

We're also going to be reading Ray Raphael's *A People's History of the American Revolution,* which does just what the title would suggest. It does--It looks at how different kinds of people, Native Americans, average rebels, African Americans, Loyalists, women, how all of these different people of different types experienced the Revolution.

And then in addition to reading historical scholarship, we're going to be reading some of the literature of the period. We're going to be reading Thomas Paine's *Common Sense,* which I love. How many of you have read *Common Sense* before? A good number of you, not--yeah, some of you. I love *Common Sense.* I think it's an amazing piece of writing, and I think when you read it for this course you'll get a sense of why it had such a huge influence at the time.

We're going to read some essays from *The Federalist* written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison and John Jay, but we are not going to read them as--You may have read them before. You may have encountered *The Federalist* essays as the grand source of authority on the Constitution. Right? How could it not be that when you have Founder-type guys talking about the Constitution and they were the guys who were at the convention? Well, the fact of the matter is *The Federalist* essays weren't intended to be an objective document. They're actually really subjective, and we're going to look at them in this course as what they were written to be, which is a really big commercial advertisement for this new experimental Constitution. They were actually trying to sell people on an idea, and because of that, as we'll see when we read that for this course, there are things in there that maybe are a little bit exaggerated and things in there that maybe aren't talked about in great detail and one or two things that probably aren't really true but it was in a good cause. Right? These guys are saying, "I really think this Constitution is the way to go. Let me say something that's going to really calm you so that we can go ahead with this experiment."

And of course we're going to be reading the Declaration of Independence. We're going to be reading the Constitution. We're going to be reading a lot of documents and letters and other kinds of assorted items to really give us a sense of the period, and at one point I'm even going to bring in a newspaper from the period so that we can actually look at it and get a sense of how people are getting news of the war at that moment. A lot of these documents we're going to pull from a book called *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution,* and it's a nice collection of primary documents and essays about sort of related themes. It always makes me laugh when I say that title because it's part of a series of books and the books are *Major Problems in the Revolution, Major Problems in the Early National Period, Major Problems in the Civil War,* so basically all of American history appears to be a major problem, [laughter] which--It kind of gives me pause, but despite that, it's a nice collection of things and we'll be using that for the class.

So that gives you a sense of how the course is going to flow and what these readings are going to do, which brings me to the portion of the lecture that I'm going to call Freeman's Top Five Tips for Studying the American Revolution, and I want to explain before I launch into them what the heck I mean. Basically, when I was preparing this lecture and thinking to myself what do I want you to know about right at the outset before we even start talking about the Revolution itself. And I ended up with a list of things that as I talk about them here may seem obvious, but the more I talk about them I think the less obvious they'll appear, and they're actually really important to consider in a course that deals with something like America's founding. There's a lot wrapped up in that. Just that phrase. Just think about the phrase--right?--the 'Founding Fathers,' the 'Founding Period.' You just can see the capital letters. [laughs] You don't even need to see it in writing. In your mind it's always capitalized. We assume a lot of things about this time period, and it's sort of an iconic period when you think about American history.

To us, a lot of the people and events of this time period and the documents of this time period are kind of what America is all about, which is understandable, but to think about the founding period as historians, we need to think differently. We need to be aware of all of those assumptions, all of that cultural baggage that we bring when we're looking at something like the American Revolution, we need to be aware of them, and then we need to get past them so that we can really begin to understand the people and events of the Revolution for what they were. And that's how I got to Freeman's Top Five Tips for Studying the American Revolution; five things that you should bear in mind when studying this period, five things obviously that will be useful to remember throughout the course, basically all of them aimed at just shaking the assumptions right out of us. And the first tip is actually really related to that point.

The first tip is: Avoid the dreaded Revolutionary War fact bubble. And what I mean by that is you're going to be sitting here and over the course of the semester you're going to hear a lot of familiar names and events, Boston Tea Party, George Washington, the greatest hits of the Revolution, the things you know and love and learned in high school. They're all going to be here and hearing all of these beloved greatest hits you may be tempted to sort of sit back in your seat and drift along with the happy, familiar events. Aaah, the story of the American Revolution; I love the story of the American Revolution. Well, I love the story of the American Revolution but there's a different story of the American Revolution besides all these names, facts, and dates that you probably have arrived here with in your head. It's a really good dramatic story but it's not a string of facts, so thus the fact bubble. It's not a fact bubble. The Revolution obviously is a lot more than that and you need to sort of almost be aware of the fact and then allow yourself to step back and look at the big picture. And John Adams and Benjamin Rush and others like them would have been the first to tell you the facts in a sense are the least of it.

So that's--Tip number one is don't get lost in the dreaded Revolutionary War fact bubble, which I have to say it makes me think of the first time that I taught this course. I was actually a brand new professor and I had just come to Yale and it was my first course and it was my first lecture in my first course and I'm [sound cuts out] It actually was in Connecticut Hall, which, for those of you who don't know, dates back to the period when this course is talking about and was Nathan Hale's--essentially his dorm. So there I am. I'm a brand new professor to Yale and I'm teaching a course about the Revolution and it's in a building that dates to the Revolution, so I'm having sort of a "wow" Yale moment as it is, and I'm off, I'm giving my lectures, and I'm really excited. I give about three of them and someone raises their hand after about three lectures and they have kind of a puzzled expression on their face. I said, "Yes?" And he says, "Excuse me, Professor Freeman. What are we supposed to be memorizing? Where are the facts and dates?" [laughs] So as a new professor my first impulse was: Darn! I forgot the facts and dates. [laughter] I got it wrong. [laughs] But actually, the fact of the matter is, they're not the star of the show. Certainly, dates are not the star of the show. There are dates you're going to have to remember so don't think Easy Street; there's not a date I have to know. There will be some dates, but this isn't a story about dates. It's obviously something a lot more interesting and a lot broader than that. Okay. Avoid fact bubble.

Tip number two: Think about the meaning of words. Now on the one hand, this may seem really obvious and you may be sitting here thinking oh, great, this is going to be a semester of Freeman saying: "What does revolution mean? What does war mean?", which would be a really, really, really long semester, and that's actually maybe--There might even be a point where I'll say, "What does revolution mean?" I even kind of, sort of said it already, but that's not what I mean when I say think about the meaning of words. What I really mean here is be careful what you assume about words because what seems obvious in meaning to you now probably meant something really different in 1776 or 1787, and I want to look at one example because it's a really striking one and that's the word "democracy." Okay. So sitting here in this room, by our standards, democracy is a good thing. Right? Democracy is a good thing. Every once in a while as a professor you say something and then you think with horror about how it's going to look in your notes. So you'll have all these notes, and then it will say "democracy is a good thing," [laughs]--a really sophisticated class we're teaching here at Yale. But to us it's good, and to people in the founding generation, not so much. They weren't so sure about it. To them the word "democracy" signaled a kind of government in which every single person participated personally, not a government based on representation. We're talking mass politics, in the minds of most people in the founding generation just the definition of what chaos was.

So just listen to a sentence in one of the last letters written by Alexander Hamilton, 1804, the night before his duel with Aaron Burr. So he's sort of speaking to posterity in case he should die and this is what he writes in this letter. "I will here express but one sentiment, which is that the dismemberment of our empire"--I love the fact that America's an empire in 1804--"will be a clear sacrifice of great positive advantages without any counterbalancing good, administering no relief to our real disease, which is democracy." Okay. Our real disease is democracy, Alexander Hamilton.

Now admittedly, Hamilton might not be the shining example of the point I'm trying to make here because he's not exactly Mr. Democracy so you wouldn't really expect him to be clapping his hands for it. But now listen to Thomas Jefferson, who maybe you would brand Mr. Democracy. So Jefferson in 1816 is chatting away with someone in a letter about what America's trying to do and whether America's actually achieving it, and he says, 'Actually, democracy is pretty impractical.' He can imagine it in a town but outside of one town it just won't work; again, really clear. Their sense of what that word means is really different from our sense of what that word means. Now Jefferson immediately goes on to add that democratical--a democratical but representative government is a good thing. Right? A democracy, not so much, but democratical, which is a great--In the eighteenth century they were always adding "ical" on to the end of things, which could end perfectly happily with a "c." [laughs] This is a great eighteenth-century-sounding word, "democratical." A democratical representative government is a good thing, but democracy not.

So the moral of this story is don't fall in to what I call 'democraspeak.' Don't write papers where you toss around terms like "democracy," "liberty," "freedom," without really thinking about what you mean and what they meant. As Americans we're used to tossing those words around, but to early Americans, if you think about it, to early American slave holders, words like "liberty," other such words, have a much more complicated meaning.

So tip number two: Think about the meaning of words. Which brings us to tip number three: Remember that Founders were people. Now as I was writing this I thought oh, that's another one of those things I don't want to see in people's notes: [laughs] Democracy is good, Founders are people. [laughs] Such a highfalutin' course I'm teaching here. Again it sounds really obvious, but what I really mean here is we tend to forget this pretty simple fact.

We forget that the Founders were people. We assume that they were these all-knowing demigods who were sort of calmly walking their way through the creation of a new model nation. We kind of deify them. We put them up on this sort of -- aah--founder mountaintop of American history, and it's--really it's easy to do. Sometimes just listening to their words or reading their words would inspire you to want to do that. Here is a random phrase. I thought what could I write here that would be sort of inspiring Founder talk and this was the one--two sentences that I came up with just because they always stick in my mind because they sound kind of amazing. This is actually Thomas Paine, *Common Sense.* In the middle of it he writes, "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. The birthday of a new world is at hand."

Okay. That's really--That's inspiring stuff. That's fine writing, but that's inspiring talk and it's supposed to be obviously because Paine's trying to convince people that independence is a really good idea, but these kinds of words, this sort of glorious rhetoric, shouldn't block out the simple fact that the Founders were people. They were regular human beings. They were well educated, they were thoughtful, they were sometimes well-meaning, they were sometimes hard-working, maybe sometimes not so much, they were people aiming high, they were people who did feel responsible to posterity, but still they were people.

And to me this is one of the really exciting things about history generally and about this time period specifically. We're talking about people trying to figure things out. We're talking about the most basic things about America--right?--its existence, [laughs] that it is a nation, that it has a constitution, and we're looking at people trying to figure out how all that stuff is going to be created and how it's going to work. These are people who are scared. These are people who make dumb mistakes on occasion. They're figuring it out as they go.

The history of this period is a history of decisions of various kinds, and these were hard decisions and they were being made by people who did not know the answers. They're making it up as they go along. I think that's just fascinating when you just read their correspondence and get a sense of how much they're really in the dark. There's--Actually, when you read letters from the period, a lot of them say the same thing right when the government launches. I think George Washington and James Madison and a Pennsylvania senator almost say the exact same thing. It's almost like they went in to a room and said, "So how will we express being scared at this moment? Aah, here's a good sentence." They all say basically, "I feel like I'm walking on hollow ground. I feel like the ground's going to break beneath my feet." They've just launched this Constitution and they all are sort of standing there on the national stage thinking, what if this all explodes? Do we actually know what we're doing? That's a really fascinating part of this period to me.

Now of course sometimes people did try to figure out the answers in a wonderful sort of Enlightenment way, and my favorite example of this is James Madison who prepared himself ultimately for the Constitutional Convention by studying all governments across all time. [laughs] Can you imagine? Well, I'd better go study all of government ever [laughter] to get ready for this convention, but he does. It's a great sort of Enlightenment thing to do. He's thinking I will now discover the eternal pattern of politics and he's thinking if I can do that then I can reach for the best, I can avoid the worst, and whatever we're going to do when we make a new government maybe we're going to actually do something better than what's come before. So there's a logic to it; as ambitious as it is there's a logic. And he was serious about it so it wasn't even just I wonder what happens if I read a lot about government. He actually was serious about it. He even made a kind of a little chart in which he listed the governments and then listed pros and cons. You know, like what did I think of Sparta? He's sort of [laughter] amazing, across all time, so I love the fact that he did that Founder-like thing to do, but there you see a person, a really intellectually ambitious person, trying to figure things out like how do we know what to make? [laughs] What's this constitution supposed to look like? How are we going to figure that out? Okay. I'll just study all of government and let you know.

So when we talk about the American Revolution we're talking about people and this course takes this idea really seriously. Part of what we're going to be doing over the course of the semester is looking at the Revolution from the vantage point of participants, trying to see how people at the time understood the events unfolding around them. How did the colonists understand themselves as British subjects? How did they feel about the British empire or about the King or about Parliament? How did they come to put American-ness in the foreground? How did rebelling against their own country make sense?

And that's something I think we also tend to forget about the Revolution. We think of it as our war; it's us against them and them equals the British, but of course we were the British. So it's something that you don't think about but people at the time, certainly in the 1790s, people referred to this as "the Civil War" because that's what it was. It's just not the way we happen to think about it because in our mind we've already traveled down the road and we're already "us" but in their mind it was in a sense brother against brother; it was us against us. So we're going to try to keep that sort of thing in mind as we explore how the events of this time made sense at that time. And I will say here we are not going to forget about the British so we're not going to have a patriot-centric course. The British have a logic to what they're doing, whether they're making policy or whether they're fighting battles, and we will definitely look at the logic of what the British are doing as well as what the colonists are doing.

Now I will admit right here up front that I will be offering you a sampling of really arrogant British quotes about crude colonists, and I'm doing that partly because there's just so many good, really arrogant quotes about [laughs] American colonists that I can't resist sprinkling them through my lectures and I can't resist that so much that I have two here that I just randomly added in because I have a reason to and so I will. But it's just--it gives you a sense of how at least some of the British were thinking and looking at really these little upstarts on the margins of empire. So random arrogant British quote number one, and this is from a customs official: "American colonists are a most rude, depraved, degenerate race, and it is a mortification to us that they speak English and can trace themselves from that stock." [laughter] Wow. [laughter] Just--Even English is a problem. That's a statement.

Okay. Arrogant quote number two, and this one I picked just because it's about George Washington, and it's hard to imagine people saying something arrogant about George Washington who seems to be Mr. Symbol of Authority, but here's another British official who met with George Washington and then wrote back home about what he thought. And he says, "Somehow, and I can't imagine how, he's learned the basics of how to behave in a court society." It's like, 'ooh.' [laughter] That must have been a really fun interview, too, if that's the attitude this guy had. So there'll be a sprinkling of that because at dramatic moments in the war there's always someone who steps forward and offers that point of view.

That said, we are going to do justice to the British side of the dispute, to the logic behind the policy that they were making, because it's not as though they make a bunch of dumb policies that make absolutely no sense and we're righteously outraged and then there's a war. Their policies made sense to them. They didn't happen to always make sense to the colonists but they made sense to them, and the same thing goes with British battle plans which, looking back in the long view of time when we start talking about them, might seem a little goofy but there's actually a lot of logic for what they were trying to do when they were attacking the colonies.

Oh, and I will also mention -- I guess I probably don't have time to talk about it now. When I was preparing this lecture, casting around, trying to figure out what will I put in the lecture, I don't know how I came across it but I discovered the Battle of New Haven. Did anyone know about the Battle of New Haven? Because I did not know. And I know there's hostilities around--and I don't know if there's Yale lore that of course you're all sitting there saying, "Well, of course we all know about the Battle of New Haven," [laughter] but I--[laughter] I'm the only one who doesn't know about the Battle of New Haven, but it's --actually it's a good story. I'm not going to tell it now. I'm going to leave you in suspense. It will appear when we start getting in to the fighting of the Revolution, but let me just give you the sneak preview, which is it does involve the president [correction: a professor] of Yale College with a gun in his hand running to fight the British, so it's [laughter] a Yale moment that we have, so I will talk about the Battle of New Haven.

Okay. So we aren't going to be looking at a story of good guys versus bad guys. We will be reconstructing opposing points of view, trying to figure out how those points of view made sense and then obviously we'll be able to step back and say, "What happens when you put those two opposing points of view in contact with each other?"

So tip three: Founders are people. Which brings us to tip four: We're not just talking about Founders. The Revolution was not just a quiet conversation between a bunch of guys wearing wigs and knee britches. Right? We sort of have this image that the Revolution is guys in short pants with wigs in a room doing this. [poses] No. [laughter] That's the entire founding I think in our minds sort of. I'll say that right. So that's not the Revolution. Right? That's not what happened. We're talking about a revolution, a popular uprising by vast numbers of colonists fought on American ground by Americans of all kinds, and it meant different things to different kinds of people. This is not to say that the Founders aren't important, far from it, and as you will gather very quickly in this course I love these guys. Right? I love talking about these guys, I love writing about these guys, so I'm certainly not saying, "Who cares about Founders?"

But what I am saying is that they're not the only ones who mattered. They didn't have their own revolution while everybody else watched. We're talking about a popular revolution grounded on the ideas and actions of people throughout many different levels of society. Now somewhat conversely this brings us to John Adams. As I promised at the beginning, John Adams is coming and here's John Adams. You'll be hearing from him more than once this semester and actually you already heard from him once so I can promise that that's true. This isn't because I think that John Adams is the most important figure from the period. It's not because I think that he's always right. In fact, the reason I quote him a lot is he's a brilliant, blunt, really direct commentator with--and this is all-important; you almost need a drum roll here--he has a sense of humor. John Adams has a sense of humor. It's not every day that you find a Founder with a sense of humor. [laughs] I can vouch. There aren't a lot of chuckling Founders. Certainly on paper there's not a lot of chuckling going on among the Founders. Probably in person there was, but on paper not a lot of them commit humor to paper and John Adams does. He's even self-deprecating sometimes, which--Nobody wants to be self-deprecating on paper when they know that they're going to be a Founder, but John Adams sometimes is, and I'm going to offer one little, tiny dumb example, the first thing that popped in to my mind when I thought, 'well, what am I going to say to show John Adams' sense of humor?'

So this is actually from that same series of letters in their old age when they're writing back and forth to each other. So Adams is writing to Jefferson and he signs his letter with this: "John Adams in the eighty-ninth year of his age, too fat to last much longer," [laughter] which is not typical Founder talk. [laughs] George Washington is not signing his letters that way but Adams commits that sort of stuff to paper. What that means is not only is he blunt, direct, and intelligent but he also even gets to be humorous as well. So in Adams we have this sort of cantankerous, sometimes bemused, more often irritated, occasionally self-aware, sometimes really not, stubborn, book-steeped, event-experiencing, action-taking tour guide. He's not going to be there all the time. There are going to be long stretches of the course where we don't find John Adams but he's definitely going to make repeat appearances, and in the middle of the course he'll even get to tell a really good story which he actually basically wrote down and said, "Let me tell you this story." So that's--As a historian, what's better than historical characters doing exactly what you want them to do? 'Here's a cool story on the Revolution. You can quote it in your lecture courses.' [laughter]

Oh, and this actually makes me think of another John Adams-related thing before I get to tip number five, which I will get to. Partly I'm curious about this and partly I want to mention something. How many of you saw the HBO mini-series on John Adams? Okay, a goodly number of you. I mention that for a specific reason. Now I will say I of course watched it and the period when it was airing was a really interesting period for me because as an eighteenth-century historian this may be the only time I've ever been culturally relevant to popular culture. [laughter] I was like: it's my moment. Right? People are coming up to me and saying, "I've got a question about John Adams." Wow. [laughter] This is great. So it was an interesting moment when people actually were thinking about John Adams, and I will say also I watched it with a few historians and we were prepared to throw popcorn at the screen and we ended up pretty much liking it and we were surprised. About halfway through we all looked at each other and said, "It's actually pretty good." So I don't--I mean, of course there are always things that any kind of TV or movie production about history gets wrong, so I won't say that there's nothing wrong in it.

However, there is one thing that is wrong and I'm going to mention it because if you have pictures in your mind from the mini-series as you sit here in this course it could be a bad thing to think that they are accurate, and what I'm talking about is actually the--I think it's the first episode. It is of course the first episode, and that's the episode where the Revolution is beginning and you see people milling about sort of with fists. Right? That represents the Revolution. You see the beginning of the Revolution. The bizarre thing about the way that they depict it is apparently according to the producers of this mini-series, if there was something happening in the early stages of the Revolution, John Adams apparently was there. Boy, they're shooting at Lexington and Concord. Adams races across the countryside [laughter] to get to Lexington and Concord. Boston Massacre--John Adams staring at the-- [laughter] Well, the idea is really that John Adams somehow is never off his horse, riding around Massachusetts trying to be an eyewitness to every [laughter] historical event. Now I understand that probably the people who made this thought: how the heck are we going to communicate Boston Massacre, Lexington and Concord? This is a film about Adams and we can't say, "Put Adams over here while we now turn to random people on a field shooting." [laughter] So I understand narrative-wise why they needed to do this, but Adams was not at every historical event [laughs] in the Revolutionary War. He was at many and he definitely had an insider's view of the Boston Massacre, but he was not everywhere in Massachusetts.

Okay. That oddly enough brings me to tip number five in the Freeman Guide, and tip number five is: remember contingency. Again, an obvious thing but something we don't think about. People at the time didn't know what was going to happen, so Adams could not race to places where he didn't know the things that happened yet: "Something might be happening at Lexington." People didn't know what was going to happen.

Think for a moment about all of the things that we assume about the Revolution. We assume that the colonists were right and that the British were wrong. We assume that a Revolution was inevitable. We assume that there was broad agreement at any one time about what should be done. Right? Of course we need to declare independence. Of course the colonists are going to win the war. Of course there should be a national union. Those are all the sorts of things that I think we do assume and that's a lot of assumptions; that's a lot of "of courses," but in fact it's important to remember that people didn't know what was going to happen.

You really need to allow for contingency because literally what they assumed was: anything can happen. Anything can happen. Again one of the things that I love about this time period is that the emotions are so heightened. If you're in an atmosphere where everything's up in the air and you're in the middle of a revolution or you're trying to create a government and you literally don't know what's coming next and anything can happen, 'maybe I'll get hanged by the king, maybe I'll get shot going home, maybe America will hate the Constitution so much they will throw rocks at my head.' I mean, I don't know what they were thinking -- 'maybe the Constitution will last four days and then collapse.' Whatever they're thinking, the fact is because they literally think anything can happen, anything could fall apart at any second, the emotions are really raised and it's why a lot of the rhetoric in this period is so extreme. It's not that these guys are trying to be dramatic. They actually are dramatic; they're feeling that this is a dramatic kind of a moment, and I don't think you get that sense, I don't think you get that idea unless you remind yourself about contingency, about the fact that there are no predetermined outcomes and that anything can happen. I think particularly when you're studying a revolution it's really important to remember contingency, and we will discover what contingency means in this time period over the course of the semester. And I will end there. I will see many of you perhaps on Thursday. I will probably know next week better about the reality of when we'll be meeting for discussion sections.

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**The American Revolution: Lecture 2 Transcript**

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**Professor Joanne Freeman:** Today we're going to be talking about being a British colonist, which means we're going to be discussing how you would feel if you were part of the British Empire in the mid-eighteenth century, living in the North American colonies shortly before the onset of the Revolution. And for those of you who were not here on Tuesday, I talked for a little while--I'll just mention it here--about how this course was really going to be exploring the mindset of the people who were experiencing the Revolution to really try to get at the logic behind both what the British colonists and the British authorities were doing, and how that ultimately resulted in a war.  So we're really -- we're going to try to really kind of create two opposing forms of logic and understand how they came to oppose each other and how that ended up leading in to conflict.

So it makes sense that as a starting point we're going to start by essentially talking about some of the basics about being a British colonist in North America: what their world would have been like, what your world would have been like if you had been a colonist, what your feelings would have been about yourself as part of the British Empire if you were a colonist in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Now I'll note here just in passing that the first part of Gordon Wood's *Radicalism--*which I already mentioned once--that actually deals a lot with a topic that I'll be talking about today and I think in one or two more lectures, the sort of idea about what the colonies were like prior to the Revolution. That book overall presents an argument about how the colonies went from monarchy--The first third of the book is monarchy and then the second third of the book is republicanism and then the third is democracy, and I think I said--Tuesday I said, "Think about what words mean," and I'm sure that will come into play in Gordon Wood, but the monarchy section not surprisingly goes into some depth about some of the things I'm going to be talking about today and on Tuesday, which is, kind of:  life in the colonies before the war, sort of just basically what did it mean, how did it work, how did society function.

Okay. So let's actually start with some of the basics. The first and most basic:  If you were a British colonist here in North America, you would be living somewhere along the Atlantic seaboard. The colonial population was largely clustered right along the shoreline for really practical reasons. I'm sure you don't have to be very imaginative to think why. Obviously, for reasons of trade, for reasons of shipping and even just for reasons of communication it made sense, not to mention the fact that people had a pretty healthy fear of potentially unfriendly Indians who were not particularly pleased with the idea of losing land to potentially advancing settlers.

Now if you were male, you might very well be a small landholder because about sixty percent of the white male colonists owned land and, as I'll talk about down the road a little bit, that's--actually when you compare that with the rates of land ownership in Europe, that's actually pretty high, it's a pretty high rate of ownership, and even in today's lecture you'll see how that actually has an impact on how things are functioning in the American colonies. You probably would be a small landholder. You might be if you were living in one of the small cities along the coast maybe a merchant or an artisan. As a non-enslaved person, you would probably have decent clothes. You'd probably have a decent home. You probably would have some degree of economic and personal independence, and right around the turn--let's say 1770--you would be one of about two million North American colonists, which is actually if you think about it--Certainly, if you--if I asked you to guess how many colonists there were in 1770, you probably would not say two million. It's a lot.  And that includes both free people and slaves, and you would have been living in a society that was so booming with prosperity that between the years 1700 and 1770--so we're just talking about a seventy-year period--the population increased from 200,000 to over two million in just a seventy-year period, which is amazing. So basically, things were increasing. Every decade the population was increasing at a rate of roughly thirty to forty percent. That's a huge rate of growth.

You would be living in the midst of a host of British colonies, so it's not just you along the seaboard but obviously to the north there is Canada, to the south there were British islands in the West Indies which were known as the Sugar Islands, and to the west was the vast 'scary wilderness' populated by potentially unfriendly Indians with what felt to you as though it was an entirely foreign culture, and then of course to the east--there is civilization to your east. There is the metropolis, there is England, there is culture in the minds of the colonists and probably to many people in England as well, the height of cultural and political sophistication.  When you looked to the east, and it really was--if you were a colonist it was looking to the east towards England that you really got a sense of yourself as a British colonist and really felt that you belonged to something that was powerful and admirable and world-shaping and victorious. Basically, you understood yourself as being part of an empire by identifying with that center of empire to the east.

As an example of this, just listen to someone who ends up being a rather prominent American revolutionary, and I mentioned him as a matter of fact on Tuesday. I called him the doctor to the stars and that's kind of unfair to him, but Benjamin Rush. He actually was a really prominent man of science at the time. He moved in very high political circles. When I was thinking about this lecture today I remembered, or at least I hope I remembered--I think I'm not leading you astray--I think that actually Rush helped Thomas Paine edit *Common Sense,* and I think he edited out a sentence that I wished Paine had left in, so I don't like Rush as an editor very much. I think I'll--we'll wait until we get to *Common Sense* but--and supposedly, allegedly, it's Rush who came up with the title *Common Sense,* that Paine was going to call it *Plain Truth,* and Rush--I think Rush wins on that. I think *Plain Truth* is not as snazzy as *Common Sense* but either way--So Rush -- The--My main point here in blathering happily about Rush is he's not some little modest humbug of a guy. Right? He's someone of status.

So this is Rush's response when he saw the throne of the King of England.  So Rush said, "I felt as though I were on sacred ground. I gazed for some time at the throne with emotions that I cannot describe."  Okay. He's just dumbstruck at the throne of the King of England, just looking at it. Now we sit here and we think back. We're: "Oh, boy, aren't those monarchists really cute,"  [laughs] "those cute monarchists, those silly people who are amazed at a throne," which is pretty much I think what I thought was--wow, what an interesting phase in American history when they were dazzled by a throne.

Then, a couple of years ago I ended up being lucky enough to have a Member of Parliament show me around the Houses of Parliament.  And I was excited; it was pretty neat and I'm being all American historian-ish, you know: "Oh, how similar, how interesting when you compare." So I'm doing the geeky historian thing and then this member of Parliament who's showing me around takes me in to what he describes to me as the robing chamber for the Queen where she puts on her crown and ceremonial robes before she goes in to the House of Lords, which I gather she does at the beginning of every session of Parliament. Okay. So I walk in to [laughs] the robing chamber and at the head of that room there's a throne, sort of an elevated throne, so instantly, without even thinking, in my head, I'm thinking: wow, [laughs] that's the throne, [laughs] and then I thought, I just became Benjamin Rush. Just like that, I went right into the monarchy vortex. It didn't really take me very long, so I can't chortle at Rush anymore. So there is something impressive, and particularly at this moment if you had been a colonist--and not that many people I should say necessarily even got to travel to Europe; I'll talk a little bit about that later on too--but you certainly would have been awestruck and impressed by something like the throne of the King of England.

Okay. So, as suggested by Rush quavering in front of the throne, as a colonist you would be proud to be British. You would have a really deep affection for the mother country and it would be an affection that was really rooted in bonds of culture and tradition and language. Basically, you would really consider yourself lucky to belong to a powerful nation that granted its citizens, you believed, more liberty than any nation on earth.

Unlike other modern empires at the time, England seemed, particularly to the English, to be an empire that was bound together not by force but by bonds of interconnectedness and affection as well as a joint appreciation, a real love, of liberty and order. And we're going to come back to this idea of liberty a little bit later in the course where we start to really talk about the logic of revolution, but for now I'll just highlight the fact that if you asked an English-speaking person of the eighteenth century about liberty he or she would have told you that liberty was worth more than life. Right? Liberty was it. Liberty was what mattered. It was the most important possession of a civilized people, and of course the British people, colonists and all, felt that they were at the peak of the civilized world. As somebody at the time wrote, "What signify riches?  What signifies health, or life itself without liberty?  Life without liberty is the most errant trifle, the most insignificant enjoyment in the world." Okay, extreme, but something to think about. I suppose it's related to what I said on Tuesday.

I think it's also easy to hear some of this talk that sounds really inflated and to dismiss it as mere rhetoric, and I'm sure there is some mere rhetoric floating around here, but it's important I think not to dismiss things that sound extreme and emotional as simply emotional and extreme. Some of this actually represents sincere thought so I think before you think these guys are sort of overexcited about things, think to yourself that they actually honestly may be overexcited; it might just be that they're dramatic, but that they sincerely feel these things.

There was a time when historians did assume that a lot of revolutionary rhetoric from the colonists was actually kind of inflated, kind of for propaganda purposes, and it took a while--Actually, the *Faces of Revolution* book by Bailyn, part of the book that I mentioned before that comes from his larger book on the ideology of the Revolution, he's the guy who said, "I've read several hundred Revolutionary War pamphlets and I actually think they're serious. I think we have to take them seriously. I don't think it's propaganda or rhetoric. I think they actually feel these things."  So again, to us it might sound a little inflated but their feelings are really strong, and again liberty is one of the things that we'll find they're feeling very strongly about.

So as a colonist, you would be proud to be British, you would be really obviously proud of British liberties, and you would have been particularly proud about being British after the French and Indian War in the 1760s, when North American colonists fought right alongside the British army and helped them defeat England's great enemy, the French--and more on that to come for sure, but that was a really proud moment for the colonists, that they felt that they were right there with the British army fighting against the French.

Above all else, as British colonists you would of course consider yourselves to be British subjects through and through, equal to all other British subjects, even those living off in the east in the metropolis. You were a British subject and you deserved the rights of a British subject, but as a colonist living on the peripheries of the British Empire, on the edge of what was perceived at the time to be a howling wilderness, which is one of those great eighteenth-century ways of referring to North America, you also would be a little nervous about your status as a British subject, worried about how you rated in comparison with people living in the mother country at the center of the empire.

Everything seemed more sophisticated in England, and I suppose everything was more sophisticated [laughs] in England, but it definitely seemed that way to the colonists. The clothes were more fashionable; the homes were grander and more stately; the intellectual life was rich and challenging. In comparison with the sophisticated people in England, you as a North American colonist pretty much felt like a country bumpkin; you felt kind of dull, kind of primitive, somewhat rude, and certainly you felt potentially irrelevant. You really did feel that you were on the edge of a howling wilderness.

So in essence, like most British colonists in North America, if you were there at the time, you would have had an ongoing inferiority complex. Now there were a number of ways in which you might deal with your insecurities. One way to deal with that would have been to become really apologetic for what would have been labeled as American speech patterns or American manners, and I've already given you one arrogant British quote by that fellow on Tuesday who said that he was mortified that these crude colonists spoke English and could trace themselves to us because they speak our language. So that's sort of the ultimate nasty stab at the colonists.

So you actually for good reason might feel kind of embarrassed about your manners and your speech. You probably would feel equally embarrassed at the meanness of your architecture, your buildings--they're smaller and less impressive--at the pallor of your intellectual life, at the relative unimportance of your public affairs. Like a lot of colonial writers who wrote pamphlets or books addressed to an English audience, you probably would apologize for the poor quality of your work by reminding readers, as one writer did, "I live in the uncultivated woods of America, far from the fountains of science and with but very rare opportunities of conversing with learned men."  That almost sounds like someone who feels sorry for himself. 'I am so far from civilization.'

Or, you might boast about colonial society, not claiming to be better than the mother country but instead bragging that the colonies represented Britain in miniature; that colonial legislatures in this sense were kind of like mini-Parliaments. Or, you might admit that the colonies were different from England but boast that in the same way that England once had been pure and virtuous, you in the colonies were maintaining the sort of pure, virtuous England, and that England itself was becoming corrupt and its cities were becoming cesspools, but there in the colonies you were preserving the true British heritage.

Still, whichever you chose to rationalize or understand your status as a colonist, you could not escape the fact that you were a colonist and that you were far away from the center of the civilized world. As the young John Dickinson of Pennsylvania put it, and we're going to meet John Dickinson again for sure later on in the course, he wrote to his father while he was studying law in London and he said that when colonists went to England and saw "the difference between themselves and the polite part of the world they must be miserable." He actually thinks if people--any colonist goes to London and sees what the polite part of the world lives like, they'll never be able to hold their head up in the colonies ever again.

And Jefferson felt the same way. Thomas Jefferson actually--as much as he adored being particularly in France, he actually said more than once that he thought that young American men should not be allowed to go to Europe because if impressionable young men went to Europe they would be so impressed by Paris and London that they would never be able to hold their heads up in Massachusetts or Virginia. It would look so puny and insignificant in comparison that they would never be good Americans ever again and that they'd have to go back to Europe.

Now of course the British agreed generally with this assessment of colonial society. Colonists obviously were inferior and rough and rustic and crude, so as promised, here is yet another arrogant British quote in my series of arrogant British quotes. In this case one British observer noted, "American colonists may try to ape British habits and customs but they're no more than ruffled dunces."  I just think there's--these guys have a real vim and vigor for finding the little zippy, stingy, nasty statement. I think "ruffled dunces" is a pretty good one.  "What else could be expected from aggrandized upstarts in those infant countries of America who never have an opportunity to see, or if they had, the opportunity [correction: capacity] to observe the different ranks of men in polite nations?" Notice how the colonies are never polite. [laughs] There are the polite nations, and then there's these scary, howling wilderness colonists.

Along these same lines, there's actually another professor here at Yale, Kariann Yokota, and some of her work shows--I found this really fascinating--that the British regularly sent damaged or second-rate goods to the colonists because they figured the colonists wouldn't know the difference. They just kept the first-rate stuff for themselves, like:  Broken? Massachusetts. [laughs] They'll never know. Last week's, last year's style?  Massachusetts. So basically all of this shows that if Americans had an inferiority complex, they had some reason to have one.

Now let me add at this point that this anxiety about how the colonists rated in comparison with England, specifically in Europe, the polite world, generally doesn't end with the Revolution. It's not as though suddenly we win the Revolution and we don't really care what the rest of the world thinks. Even after the colonies and then the states had fought and defeated the great power of the British empire and successfully created a new national constitution, Americans were still worried about looking sophisticated enough in the eyes of the world.

And my favorite example of this--It's a little bit down the road from the moment that we're at in this course but I just can't resist adding it in because it's just--it makes me happy and it's John Adams--and it's actually from 1789. It's right when this new national Constitution has gone into effect and the Senate is debating what the title should be for the new national executive. Right? We know there's going to be a national executive. We don't know what we're going to call him. And so the Senate is debating this, and someone in the Senate says, "Well, why don't we call him President of the United States?"  Okay. This horrifies John Adams, absolutely horrifies him, and as he says at the time--He says, "For God's sake, there are presidents of cricket clubs." [laughs] President of the United States: and I'll quote him exactly here. He does say there are presidents of cricket clubs but he says in the Senate--Where is it here?--"What will the common people of foreign countries, what will the sailors and soldiers say?  George Washington, President of the United States?  They will despise him to all eternity."  [laughter]  Right? So Adams is thinking in a world where you have His Royal Highness, protector of the realm: President of the United States--he's just thinking that there's no comparison; it doesn't rank.

So as we're going to be seeing in future weeks of this course, there's a constant thinking about what--how we are being looked upon and that doesn't go away. It shifts, it's different, but it remains for quite some time. America in one way or another always assumes they're being watched and judged. In the 1760s, we'll see soon how these sort of colonial feelings of inferiority would help fuel the hypersensitivity of the colonists to infringements on their rights by the mother country.

Now despite all of this anxiety, all of this inferiority complex that I'm talking about here, as a colonist you did share a base of assumptions and values with your counterparts in England. So, first of all, as an individual you assumed that you lived in a great hierarchy, a sort of natural order, everyone in his or her place, deferent to those that were beneath you, respected but--I'm sorry--deferent to those above you--That's a nifty order, to be deferent to those beneath you and respected. You would be respectful to those above, and people below you would be deferential to you, so basically everyone is in their place and everybody is acting respectful and deferential as they properly should, and this--you'll see a lot of this in Gordon Wood.

Now of course the American version of this great social order, this great hierarchy, is different in some ways from its British equivalent because the colonies lacked both the top-most and the bottom-most rungs of society in England. So in the colonies there wasn't a titled entrenched aristocracy and there wasn't an entrenched peasant class. Instead the colonies had what some called a middling society which was populated mostly by either middling folk, logically enough, who had migrated from England to better their lot in life, by the English poor who hoped to better themselves, and by some of the lower ranks of the English gentry like third or fourth sons of the English gentry, who basically knew they weren't going to inherit anything in England and so their thought was: well, maybe if I head out to the colonies I-- it'll be easier for me to get some land there; I'll be able to better myself; I'll be able to basically make something of myself there easier than I can here.

Now if you were thinking about going to the colonies and you really wanted to get rich quick, the West Indies was the place to go, though it also offered some of the absolute worst living conditions in the British colonial world. Life there was extremely hard. There was unbearable heat. All energies were focused on gaining money and little else. West Indian planters were so focused on money, money crops, they actually didn't even bother to grow their own food. They imported food because they didn't want to waste land, energy, and resources on growing their own food. They were really focused on their money crop. If you went to the Indies to get rich quick, typically you either made it big or failed miserably, and either way typically what happened is you would go to the Indies, you would establish a plantation, you would find an overseer, you would put him in charge, and then you would flee back to England and be an absentee landlord and let the people live in misery in the West Indies while you collected the profit off of your sugar crop back home in England. Now the Indies, not surprisingly, might seem a little intimidating. If you wanted to get rich quick, you might choose not to go down to the scary sugar islands.

You might decide instead to go to the southern colonies to get rich quick, and for example it was largely sons of the lesser gentry in England who went to Jamestown at the start of the seventeenth century in Virginia. And, logically enough, since these are sons of the lesser gentry and they consider themselves to be above hard labor, they show up to this rather primitive new colony in Jamestown, they refuse to work to grow their own food, and they starve to death.  [laughs] That's a serious commitment to your status. 'I'm sorry. I'm above plowing. I'm going to die now.'  [laughter]  You think sooner or later they kind of figure:  a little plowing--life. It's kind of--I don't know.

At any rate, there's a reason why Jamestown didn't do so well and there's--a great example of this weird mentality is Nathaniel Bacon, who is a gentile colonist. He's a younger son of a member of the British gentry and in the seventeenth century sure enough he migrates, he ends up in Virginia, and he arrives in Virginia like a lot of people assuming that he deserved power, he deserved land, and he deserved status. He's among the lesser gentry but he still is among the upper crust in England and now he's arriving among the rude, ruffled dunces [laughs] of the colonies. He assumes he's someone who deserves what he wants. Lo and behold, he gets there and he finds that actually in Virginia there's a kind of an inner core of men, self-made men, who had been there for awhile, or their families had been there for awhile, and basically they controlled most of the land, they controlled most of the government offices, they had most of the power, and thus they could exclude Bacon and others from getting what they wanted.

Bacon obviously is a person who's much more interested in making money than in the good of the colony so he responded to his frustration at not being able to get land or power by surrounding himself with a pack of equally-frustrated angry young men who also wanted land and also wanted power, and eventually they came up with the brilliant idea that they would stage an enormous attack on Indians, massacre them all and steal their land. Brilliant plot.

So Bacon and his pack of guys sort of go off and actually start this in action. The governor of the colony sees that this is rapidly spinning out of control and becoming wild, crazy Indian warfare so he tries to stifle it and Nathaniel Bacon and his friends did what I suppose appeared logical to them at the time. They burned Jamestown to the ground because they were angry.  [laughs]  Well, that's serious anger. 'Oh, you're going to stop us?  We'll just destroy the capital.' [laughter]  'You're gone.'  Now the story is kind of anticlimactic because Bacon ultimately dies miserably of dysentery while running away from authorities so there's not a lot of glory [laughs] in Bacon's ultimate end, but he's definitely a really good example of greedy self-interest and of the sense of deservedness because of his social rank and this disgust at the power of these self-made men in Virginia. There were some gentry who would have migrated to the colonies who would have had some kind of a similar feeling about what they saw and what they expected.

But the gentry was only a minority of the people who migrated to the colonies. Most were lower in status, some were of the lowest rank of all, landless people and sometimes criminals. So if you committed a crime in England, you might be offered the option between prison in England and being sent to the colonies, and to some this was actually a really hard choice. Right? 'Prison, the colonies, prison, the colonies. I don't know.'  The howling wilderness was very scary. Now some people opted for the howling wilderness, obviously, and some people, poorer people, decided to take their chances on the colonies, sold themselves into servitude as indentured servants for five to seven years at a time, and in exchange their passage was paid, they owed a certain amount of work, and at the end of their time of indenture they would get some plot of land. So there were a good number of indentured servants, and as a matter of fact some of those Virginia power mongers who were blocking Bacon out had started out actually as indentured servants. That's--When you talk self-made you're really talking self-made, people who came, did their indenture, got some land and then really built their way up. So self-improvement obviously is one reason to head to the colonies.

Another reason, another thing that might drive you to head off to the colonies, would have been if you belonged to a religious minority that was seemingly increasing unpopular in England. So if you were a Puritan, if you were a Quaker, if you were Catholic, again probably middling in status, you might decide to try your luck in the colonies where either you thought there might be more religious tolerance, or just as likely there'd be land so empty of people that it wouldn't really be a worry of yours. There wouldn't be people around there to be intolerant of you and so it probably would be better than what you were experiencing in England. Obviously, a lot of New England was settled by Puritans with that mindset. Pennsylvania had the Quaker faith at its cure--at its core. It was founded by William Penn, who was actually a member of the aristocracy. He became a Quaker and then he used his high connections to get a royal charter from the King to found a colony for Quakers. And Maryland began as a place that was distinctly friendly to people of the Catholic faith.

Now out of all of these kinds of colonists that I'm talking about here, what was missing was a titled, sort of to-the-manor-born, established aristocracy of dukes and duchesses unshakably of the highest rank in society. This doesn't mean that colonial society didn't have an established elite, because certainly every colony had certain great families that controlled large amounts of power and land. And as a colonist, and an average colonist, you would have had no problem differentiating these gentlefolk from the common masses--right?--these sort of gentlemen and gentlewomen. They dressed differently; they held themselves differently; they spoke differently; you addressed these people by Mister or Madame or Esquire. You actually visibly could tell who the sort of upper-crust people in society were. Some families held obvious power but again not in the unquestionable way that the aristocracy remained in control in England. A lot of these people that I just mentioned had worked their way into positions of prominence, so ultimately the line dividing sort of upper-crusty people from less upper-crusty people was less sort of absolute. It was less distinct than it would have been in a country or in a place where there was a really established aristocracy.

So basically even though you could tell who the elite are and you could tell who the masses are, there is slippage up and down between the two. It's not as though there is a dividing line and you could never hope to become an aristocrat. It's a little blurrier; it's again a middling society; it's part of what that means. And because of that, things like formal titles and fine clothing were of extreme importance in the colonies--and in a lot of ways more important in the colonies than they were in England--because they really were ways of proving your status in a place where you felt the need to prove your status.

If you think about it, your status would have been just a matter of common agreement. You were only as lofty in status as people believed you were and if someone felt compelled to call you by a title or if you were wearing fine clothing that people knew they themselves couldn't afford, that could go a long way towards convincing people of your status and importance. So for example, if you had any military service at all, even for the briefest moment you'd served in the military, and you were an officer, you would insist forever after to the end of your days that you be called always by your title like Colonel So-and-So or Captain So-and-So. That military title counted for a lot. That was really a sort of unquestioned symbol of rank and authority, and in fact some people joined the military just because they knew by doing so they would get a title and then they would be able to hang on to that title to really claim a place for themselves in society.

And when I was researching my first book I came across a case where there were these two guys--it sounds like a bad joke--two guys in a tavern. There were these two guys in a tavern and one of them is a military officer and one of them isn't, and I guess the guy who wasn't a military officer wasn't so clear on the whole rank thing and he called the fellow by a lower rank than he was: well, Captain Something instead of Colonel Something--and the guy was so insulted that his title had been lowered by who-the- hell-was-this-person that he actually challenged him to a duel right there. 'I'm sorry, but I'm willing to kill you now.'  [laughs] 'You called me Captain. You die.'  [laughter] It was a serious insult, a dread insult--and also he might have just been a crazy person but--[laughs] That's possible too, but still it actually was a serious insult.

And because military titles and status went hand in hand, sometimes strangers who seemed to be high-ranking were just called Colonel or General because they seemed important and thus they must have a military rank. And I actually found a diary of someone, this sort of member of the South Carolina elite, and he was wandering around in the backcountry. And he says in his diary, no matter where he went, he was called Colonel, which amazed him because he said not only had he never had any military service but --and I don't know what this means; I don't know enough about him to know--but he kept saying over and over again, 'I really don't look like a military person, nothing about me,' so I'm imagining this sort of sloppy, scary guy who's wandering around in the back country of South Carolina and people are saying, 'Colonel,' [laughs],--wow--and people usually loved that. This made him happy. He wrote about it in his diary because he liked it so much; this made him a happy guy. So obviously titles, status, they're important and they go hand in hand.

Now if you were in college in the colonies--so if you were at Yale, if you were at Harvard, if you were at King's College, which is now Columbia--these kinds of distinctions of rank and status would have been a part of your everyday life, because when you entered college you were listed as a member of your class in the order of your social rank. Okay. So the person of the highest social rank is listed at the top of the class and the person of the lowest social rank is listed at the bottom of the class, and at commencement ceremonies or graduation ceremonies the highest in rank was the one who got to speak the longest and give the longest public address--and obviously because, as I've been saying, things are less entrenched, what this meant was lots of really petty, nasty squabbling at a lot of universities because everybody had a complaint. 'Well, I'm not on the bottom. Well, I certainly have a better rank than him. He should be at the bottom. I should be at the--'

So certainly it's a contentious issue at colleges, and what this meant, oddly enough, is that when the grading system--when people actually figured out that you could have a grading system and base--judge people based on grades, then unbelievably this was seen as a great relief. This made people really--Grades made people really, really happy, because it meant that you could be judged based on merit and not based on rank or social class. So you can give thanks to the democracy of grades. Remember that during this semester. I'll remind you. Give thanks for your grades.

Okay. So we've talked about some of the similarities and differences in social rank between colonists and people living in England.

I want to just take a few minutes to talk about some assumptions about government and about rights, about individual rights, because one of the periods of great migration to the colonies, which was the mid-to-late-seventeenth century, was also a period in which Parliament asserted its dominance in England. So while all Englishmen believed in the importance of political liberty and legislative representation and the rule of law and all of these things I've started to talk about, the colonies were full of people who either themselves had left England or were descended from people who had left England when that kind of belief was at an all-time high, so colonial governments embodied that spirit to a really extreme degree. And it's important to realize that colonial talk of liberty wasn't some kind of colonial innovation. It was the most heartfelt of British traditions --as I've suggested just in this lecture, and as we're going to see in future weeks--it's the precise meaning of liberty as translated into the colonies from England--and as this slowly shifts over time, it's going to help raise conflict between the colonies and the mother country. But questions about the precise meaning of liberty wouldn't really become an issue until the 1760s, after the French and Indian War when, as we'll soon see, the British would end what had been a long period of what's often called a period of salutary neglect, a period when the British largely just left the colonies alone to regulate themselves.

And throughout that period of neglect colonists had lived immersed in their sense of English rights and privileges, unaware of the ways in which the colonial experience--just the experience of living in the colonies--had suddenly altered their understanding of these rights. They've been able to live in that kind of a freedom largely because of the nature of the British imperial administration. Typically, rather than exerting great control over the colonization process the British Crown tended to leave colonization largely to private enterprise, so like a joint-stock company would get a grant to establish a colony, and off they'd go, and it wasn't really necessarily the Crown that had its hand on everything. It was these private companies that were often taking care of the colonization efforts, and on a few occasions when the Crown did pass trade regulations they didn't enforce them very rigorously, which basically allowed widespread smuggling and bribery. So in a sense, the success of the British imperial system up until the 1760s was largely due to what was not really a policy, but the absence of a policy--right?--this neglect of the colonies by the mother country.

Not until the British began to actively regulate the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century did it really become apparent that colonial and British ideas about the role of the colonies and the rights of colonists had really begun to drift apart. Had the colonists forfeited some of their English liberties by migrating to the New World or not?  Were they dependent on the mother country or were they just contributors to the greater empire?

And some colonists would come to have a clear answer to those kinds of questions. They would argue--and we're going to see this in weeks to come, and specifically people writing this argument and offering it to the public--that the original settlers of the colonies had been free-born subjects of England who had left England with the authorization of the monarchy and, taking a good many personal risks, had created thriving English settlements at little cost to the English government, bringing England great riches in the process.

So essentially some colonists would argue not only were they English, but they made personal sacrifices for England; they had tamed a wilderness for England, for the sake of the empire. And ironically it would be that mentality--that kind of outcry for the rights of Englishmen--that would help lead the colonists to revolt against England. As we'll see, in a sense, the colonies were never as English as when they rebelled against the mother country for the rights of Englishmen. And I will stop there. On Tuesday we will be looking at some things that were distinctly American about the colonial experience. Have a good weekend.

[end of transcript]