CHAPTER 5

Colonial Society on the Eve of Revolution, 1700–1775

# Focus Questions

. How did population growth in the eventually rebellious colonies compare with England’s?

. What ethnicities contributed to the mosaic of the thirteen colonies?

3. What contributions did enslaved Africans provide the colonies?

4. How did eighteenth-century America’s social hierarchy compare with seventeenth-century America’s social hierarchy? How did both compare with the Old World’s?

5. What was the leading industry in eighteenth-century America? What other industries were important?

6. How did the Great Awakening influence religion in America?

7. Who are some of America’s noteworthy artists and writers from the eighteenth century?

8. How were the colonial governments similar and different, and how influential was England in colonial governance?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Compared with its seventeenth-century counterpart, eighteenth-century colonial society became more complex and hierarchical, more ethnically and religiously diverse, and more economically and politically developed. Despite the substantial disruption of their traditional culture and the mingling of African peoples, slaves in the Chesapeake developed a culture that mixed African and New World elements, and developed one of the few slave societies that grew through natural reproduction.

**Theme:** Colonial culture, while still limited, took on distinct American qualities in such areas as evangelical religion, education, press freedom, and self-government.

**Theme:** England’s Atlantic seaboard colonies, with their population growth and substantial agricultural exports, grew and developed in importance to the English Empire. Thus, the relationship between England and these colonies was shifting economically, politically, and culturally. Colonists sold their agricultural abundance not only to England, but also to France and the West Indies. Royal authority was checked by colonial legislatures that sometimes refused to pay governors’ salaries and the famous Zenger case. Schools and colleges emerged, and the cultural reliance on England began to fade.

chapter summary

By 1775, the thirteen American colonies east of the Appalachians were inhabited by a burgeoning population of two million whites and half a million blacks. The white population was increasingly a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups, including Germans and the Scots-Irish. Slaves in the Deep South died rapidly of disease and overwork, but those in the Chesapeake tobacco region survived longer. Their numbers eventually increased by natural reproduction and they developed a distinctive African American way of life that combined African elements with features developed in the New World.

Compared with Europe, America was a land of equality and opportunity (for whites), but relative to the seventeenth-century colonies, there was a rising economic hierarchy and increasing social complexity. Ninety percent of Americans remained agriculturalists. But a growing class of wealthy planters and merchants appeared at the top of the social pyramid, in contrast with slaves and “jayle birds” from England, who formed a visible lower class.

By the early eighteenth century, the established New England Congregational Church was losing religious fervor. The Great Awakening, sparked by fiery preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, spread a new style of emotional worship that revived religious zeal. Colonial education and culture were generally undistinguished, although science and journalism displayed some vigor. Politics was everywhere an important activity, as representative colonial assemblies battled on equal terms with politically appointed governors from England.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Expand on the economic activities and relationships of the different parts of the colonial social pyramid discussed in the text. Explain especially the trend toward greater hierarchy, with a wealthy elite on the top and “jayle birds” and others on the bottom. The focus might be on the concern this tendency would have aroused among the middle class of colonists.

REFERENCE: John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (1991).

* Show how the Great Awakening marked a key transition from the lukewarm style of religion fostered by established (tax-supported) colonial churches to the strong commitment required by the voluntary (member-supported) churches that later became the American norm. The focus might be on how a religious revival like the Great Awakening could arouse marked fervor among some colonists, while also causing opposition among those who distrusted emotional religion. Consider the arguments regarding the role that evangelical Protestantism played in promoting the American Revolution. Consider the contentions of some historians like Jon Butler that the Great Awakening did not have the extensive influence usually attributed to it.

REFERENCES: Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Religion in a Revolutionary Age* (1994); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*: *Christianizing the American People* (1990).

* Examine the ordinary social lives of colonial Americans. Consider the relationship between the way average people lived in the eighteenth century and the kinds of public concerns they had in the areas of politics, religion, economics, and culture.

REFERENCES: Stephanie G. Wolf, *As Various as Their Land: Everyday Lives of 18thCentury Americans* (1994); Bruce Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (1995).

* Explain, more fully, the evolution of colonial politics and why politics was especially important to colonists jealously trying to control their own affairs. The emphasis might be on the development of a distinctively American type of opposition politics, which was anxious to preserve local liberties and fearful of centralized or corrupt governmental power—such as the royal governors represented.

REFERENCE: Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (1967).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Compare the social structure and social life of the eighteenth century with that of the seventeenth century, as described in Chapter 4. Discuss what factors caused the transition toward greater social diversity and complexity and whether the development was an inevitable result of population growth and expansion.
* Focus on the slave trade from Africa, considering how it affected those Africans who were caught in it as well as their descendants. A particular question might be that of the survival of African cultural elements among the slaves.
* Examine what happened to Africans who were imported as slaves to New World locations such as Brazil, Spanish America, the British Caribbean, and the French Caribbean. Compare that with what happened to Africans imported as slaves to England’s Chesapeake and southern colonies in North America.
* Focus on the issue of racial, ethnic, and religious diversity in the colonies. (See boxed quote on page 80.) The discussion might emphasize the question of how diverse the colonies really were, since the ethnic groups were all northern European—except for blacks—and the religious groups almost all Protestant.
* Select a particular colonial occupation and consider how the activities of those who performed it might differ from those of later, twentieth-first-century practitioners. Among the occupations that could be discussed in this way: farmer, merchant, lawyer, minister, printer, schoolteacher, and doctor. Benjamin Franklin as printer might form a good focus, with further emphasis on how he combined this role with so many others, such as scientist, politician, and diplomat.
* Use the example of Jonathan Edwards as preacher, pastor, theologian, and educator to explain the motivations and impact of the Great Awakening. A sermon such as “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (which some students know from literature classes) might be compared with some of Edwards’s other writings.
* Examine the other British colonies in the eighteenth century (Canada, the Floridas, various Caribbean islands). In what ways were they similar and different than the thirteen Atlantic seaboard colonies? What clues does this provide about why only the thirteen sought independence?
* Review the scientific achievements that were going on in eighteenth-century Europe while the colonies were developing in North America (Halley, Fahrenheit, James Bradley, Celsius, Watt). How does Benjamin Franklin compare with his European counterparts?
* Review the literary and musical achievements that were going on in eighteenth-century Europe while the colonies were developing in North America (Bach, Handel, Pope, Vivaldi, Defoe, Voltaire, Johnson, Fielding, Haydn, Mozart).

# character sketches

## Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758)

Edwards was the great preacher, revivalist, theologian, and philosopher of eighteenth-century New England. Even as a child he showed personal piety and intellectual brilliance: at age seven he began leading other children into the woods for prayer, and by age fourteen, he was reading John Locke and Isaac Newton.

Despite his later learned writings on subjects like the nature of the mind and its relation to the natural world, he remained a parish pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts. In 1734, his intense preaching, first considered old-fashioned, began producing emotional conversions that soon numbered thirty a week. His fame spread throughout the colonies. By 1741, he became concerned about the excesses of the Great Awakening, especially as conducted by uneducated revivalists, but he still defended it strongly.

Tall, slender, with piercing eyes and a soft but perfectly modulated voice, Edwards rose daily at 4:00 a.m. and devoted thirteen hours to study. His later years were absorbed by controversies with parishioners who objected to his strong moral demands on them. In 1750, a majority voted to dismiss him, and he was left jobless and in debt. In 1757, he was appointed president of Princeton University but died of a smallpox inoculation before taking office.

**Quote:** “All will allow that true virtue or holiness has its seat chiefly in the heart, rather than in the head: it therefore follows.…that it consists chiefly in holy affections.…Now if such things are enthusiasm, and the fruits of a distempered brain, let my brain be evermore possessed of that happy distemper! If this be distraction, I pray God that the world of mankind may be all seized with this benign, meek, beneficent, beatifical, glorious distraction!” (1742)

REFERENCE: J.E. Smith, *Jonathan Edwards: Puritan, Preacher, Philosopher* (1992).

## Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790)

Franklin, the most famous American of the eighteenth century and a great cultural hero in Europe as well as in his own country, was born to a Boston soapmaker. In 1718, he became a printer’s apprentice under his brother James. At age seventeen, he moved to Philadelphia, which became his permanent home.

Once Franklin had made a substantial fortune from *Poor Richard’s Almanack* and other publishing business ventures, he concentrated on science, philosophy, and politics. Although largely self-taught (he learned five languages on his own), he was immensely knowledgeable in many areas. Besides electricity, he studied meteorology, hydrology (water), geology, and demographics (population).

While serving as a colonial agent in England in the 1760s, he considered permanently moving to that country, and in America, he was suspected of favoring the Stamp Act until he testified against it in Parliament. When he served as minister to France during the Revolution, his portrait was put in shop windows and on medals, rings, watches, snuffboxes, and bracelets. His charm and simple democratic manners endeared him to everyone, especially aristocratic French ladies. Practical, skeptical, cool-minded, insatiably curious, sexually passionate, uninhibited, plainspoken, and above all humorous, Franklin was at ease with all kinds and levels of people, from kings to tavern maids.

**Quote:** “It was wise counsel given to a young man, ‘Pitch upon that course of life which is most excellent, and custom will make it the most delightful.’ But many pitch on no course of life at all, nor form any scheme of living, by which to attain any valuable end; but wander perpetually from one thing to another.” (From *Poor Richard,* 1749)

REFERENCE: H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (2000).

## Charles W. Peale (1741–1827)

Peale was one of the best-known American painters of the eighteenth century and one of the few to make his career in the United States rather than Europe. Originally apprenticed as a saddler, he was forced out of that trade because he joined the Sons of Liberty and most of his customers were Loyalists. He then became interested in art and studied under John Singleton Copley in Boston and Benjamin West in London. Besides being an artist, he was a prominent museum curator, essayist, civic leader, silversmith, and landscape gardener. Because of his diverse talents, he was sometimes called “the American Leonardo da Vinci.”

Serving as an army captain during the Revolution, he executed numerous portraits of his fellow officers. He painted Washington from life seven times and made more than fifty other portraits of him as general and president. He usually portrayed Washington more realistically and less heroically than other painters, showing his high cheekbones, sloping shoulders, and long arms and legs. Yet his portraits were very popular with Washington and others.

**Quote:** “A good painter of either portrait or history must be well acquainted with the Grecian or Roman statues, to be able to draw them at pleasure by memory. … these are more than I shall ever have time or opportunity to know.” (1772)

REFERENCE: Charles Coleman Sellers, *Charles Willson Peale* (1969).

## Phillis Wheatley (c. 1753–1784)

Wheatley, the gifted black poet who published admired verse in late-eighteenth-century America and England, was brought as a slave from Africa to Boston in 1761, when she was about eight years old, and bought by John Wheatley, a tailor. She was made Mrs. Wheatley’s personal servant but quickly impressed her master with her remarkable intelligence, which he cultivated.

She began writing poems at age thirteen; the first is called “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Her first published poem (on George Whitefield’s death) was composed at age seventeen, and she soon gained renown in Boston and then elsewhere. Her master’s daughter took her to England in 1773, where she was introduced to many literary people.

Four years after her return to America in 1774, she contracted a disastrous marriage to John Peters, a black baker. He apparently treated her badly, and she wrote no more poems. She bore three children, two of whom died before her own death in 1784.

**Quote:** “On Being Brought from Africa to America”

“’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land

Taught my benighted soul to understand

That there’s a God, that there’s a savior, too;

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

‘Their color is a diabolic lie.’

Remember, Christians, Negroes black as Cain

May be refined and join the angelic train.”

(1766)

REFERENCE: Julian D. Mason Jr., *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley* (1966).

# questions for class discussion

. How democratic was colonial American society? Why was it apparently becoming less equal?

2. What were the effects of slavery on Africans who were brought to the New World? What were the effects of Africans on the New World?

3. How were the various occupations and activities of colonial America related to the nature of the economy? Why were such occupations as lawyer, printer, and artisan taking on greater importance?

4. What were the causes and effects of the Great Awakening? How did such an intense religious revival affect those who experienced conversion as well as those who did not? (See boxed quote on page 91.) How did the Awakening help to create a sense of shared American identity?

5. In what ways was colonial life attractive, and in what ways would it seem tedious and dull to the average twenty-first-century American? How were the educational, cultural, and leisured sides of colonial life affected by the basic nature of the economy?

6. To what degree was a unique American nationality developing in the eighteenth-century colonies? Were regional differences in the colonies growing more pronounced or retreating in the eighteenth century?

7. What shaped how ordinary colonists thought? What were important sources of influence on an ordinary colonist? Did England control these sources or did the colonists? What implications did this have for the future England and the colonies?

**CONTENDING VOICES: SAMUEL SEWALL VS. VIRGINIA SLAVE CODE of 1705**

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What arguments did Sewall make against African slavery? Why did Sewall prefer white indentured servants to African slaves?

2. How did the Virgina Legislature define the legal status of slaves as well as the exemptions of masters? How did the Legislature limit the possibilities of all Africans, whether enslaved or free?

**MAKERS OF AMERICA: FROM AFRICAN TO AFRICAN AMERICAN**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did African Americans work to adapt their native traditions under the conditions of New World slavery? What kinds of traditions were most successfully preserved?

2. What enabled African Americans in the Chesapeake region to develop societies where—unusually for the history of slavery—the population reproduced and grew through natural increase? What does this suggest about the nature of families under slavery? How might these circumstances have affected the relationship between slaves and slaveholders?

## Suggested Student Exercises

* Use photographs of art objects or other materials from one of the particular cultures or regions of Africa from which a substantial number of slaves came to America (e.g., the Guinea Coast, Benin, Ivory Coast, or Angola), and have students consider characteristics that may have passed into African American culture.
* Examine some of the areas along the Atlantic coast where economic and social conditions, including the density of slave populations, made for a more extensive survival of African elements within African American cultures. (The most famous and well-studied is the Gullah culture on the Georgia and South Carolina sea islands.)

# varying viewpoints

# Expanding the View

* Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee* (1967).

A view of eighteenth-century society as becoming more open and democratic:

“The law and authority embodied in governing institutions gave way under the impact first of economic ambitions and later of the religious impulses of the Great Awakening.… As, in the expanding eighteenth century, merchants and farmers felt free to pursue wealth with an avidity dangerously close to avarice, the energies released exerted irresistible pressures against traditional bounds. When the Great Awakening added its measure of opposition, the old institutions began to crumble.”

* Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible* (1979).

A view of eighteenth-century society as becoming more closed and undemocratic:

“What has led early American historians to avoid questions about class formation and the development of lower-class political consciousness is not only an aversion to Marxist conceptualizations of history but also the myth that class relations did not matter in early America because there were no classes.… By the end of the Seven Years’ War, poverty on a scale that urban leaders found appalling had appeared in New York and Philadelphia. Many urban Americans, living amidst historical forces that were transforming the social landscape, came to perceive antagonistic divisions based on economic and social position; … they began to struggle around these conflicting interests; and through these struggles they developed a consciousness of class.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. Where do both viewpoints agree concerning eighteenth-century society and where do they disagree?

. What might each of these historians see as the social background of the American Revolution?

. Are these viewpoints primarily focused on society in the middle and northern colonies? How would these perspectives appear if slavery is included in the equation? Does Edmund Morgan’s belief that slavery actually promoted equality and solidarity among whites offer a serious challenge to these views of colonial America?