CHAPTER 4

American Life in the Seventeenth Century, 1607–1692

# Focus Questions

. How did the climate in the southern colonies influence life expectancy, family life, immigration, and economic development?

. What role did Bacon’s Rebellion play in the adoption and expansion of slavery in the southern colonies?

3. How were life expectancy, family life, immigration, and economic development different in New England as compared with the southern colonies?

4. What were the differences in the legal standing of women in the southern colonies and in the New England colonies?

5. In what ways were all American colonists similar?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** In the Chesapeake region, seventeenth-century colonial society was characterized by disease-shortened lives, weak family life, and a social hierarchy that included hardworking planters at the top and restless poor whites and enslaved Africans at the bottom.

**Theme:** By contrast, early New England life was characterized by healthy, extended life spans, strong family life, closely knit towns and churches, and a demanding economic and moral environment.

chapter summary

Life was hard in the seventeenth-century southern colonies. Disease drastically shortened life spans in the Chesapeake region, even for the young single men who made up the majority of settlers. Families were few and fragile, with men greatly outnumbering women, who were much in demand and seldom remained single for long.

The tobacco economy first thrived on the labor of white indentured servants, who hoped to work their way up to become landowners and perhaps even become wealthy. By the late seventeenth century, however, this hope was increasingly frustrated and the discontents of the poor whites exploded in Bacon’s Rebellion.

With white labor increasingly troublesome, slaves (earlier a small fraction of the workforce) began to be imported from West Africa by the tens of thousands in the 1680s and soon became essential to the colonial economy. By contrast with the South, New England’s clean water and cool air contributed to a healthy way of life, which addedten years to the average English life span. The New England way of life centered on strong families and tightly knit towns and churches, which were relatively democratic and equal by seventeenth-century standards. By the late seventeenth century, however, social and religious tensions developed in these narrow communities, as the Salem witch hysteria dramatically illustrates.

Rocky soil forced many New Englanders to turn to fishing and merchant shipping for their livelihoods. Their difficult lives and stern religion made New Englanders tough, idealistic, purposeful, and resourceful. In later years they spread these same values across much of American society.

Seventeenth-century American society was still almost entirely simple and agrarian. Would-be aristocrats who tried to recreate the social hierarchies of Europe were generally frustrated.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Explain the search for a suitable labor supply in the plantation colonies, contrasting the relative advantages and disadvantages of white indentured servants and slaves (from the planters’ point of view). Perhaps use Bacon’s Rebellion as the clearest illustration of why planters feared uncontrolled laborers and turned increasingly to slavery.

REFERENCE: Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975).

* Explore the origins of American race relations by examining the closely linked development of slavery and racial prejudice in the seventeenth century. The emphasis might be on how slavery, once established, tended to reinforce prejudice, while prejudice justified slavery.

REFERENCE: Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black* (1968).

* Provide a portrait of a typical New England town, focusing on the close connection between town and church and on family life, particularly the role of women and the relation of farming and trade in the region. Several towns have been studied in detail and the various social roles of men and women can be traced over time.

REFERENCE: Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (1995).

* Explore the Salem witch trials in more depth. The rich literature on the trials can be used to illuminate seventeenth-century New England history from numerous perspectives: town life, religion, the beliefs and actions of common people, generational conflict, and so on. Perhaps the most interesting is the light it sheds on the condition of women—both ordinary women and the extraordinary witches—and on gender relations and ideas in seventeenth-century America.

REFERENCE: Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on the nature of colonial family life, particularly as it was affected by different demographic patterns (for example, frequent childbearing, frequent remarriage, and strong competition for women). A particular focus might be on attitudes toward children in an age of large families and infant deaths.
* Discuss women’s lives in the seventeenth century, including economic functions, religion, marriage, and child raising. The focus might be on the economic and social importance of women in agrarian colonial communities, as well as on the legal and political restrictions that kept them tied to men.
* Explore the values of the traditional New Englander as both morally rigid Puritan (see boxed quote on page 69) and hard-bargaining Yankee. Examine the expansion of New England in the spread of settlements west. (Places like northern Ohio, Kansas, Oregon, and later Hawaii had a high proportion of New Englanders in their populations.)
* Review the scientific achievements that were going on in seventeenth-century Europe while the colonies were developing in North America. (Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Pascal, Huygens, Boyle, and Newton)

# character sketches

## Nathaniel Bacon (1647–1676)

Although his followers were mostly poor, landless white farmers who hated the planter aristocrats, rebel leader Nathaniel Bacon was a well-off planter.

Bacon, descended from a famous English family, immigrated to Virginia in 1674 after obtaining a gentlemanly education at Cambridge University and the Inns of Court in London. After the initial phase of his rebellion, which consisted of leading unauthorized attacks on Indians, he was arrested by Governor Berkeley but then pardoned and even appointed to the colonial council in an attempt to appease him. But he and his supporters refused to be conciliated, and when Berkeley tried to suppress them, they went on a rampage that ended in the burning of Jamestown. Bacon seemed on the verge of seizing complete control of the colony when he suddenly died of illness—a development that enabled Berkeley to crush the leaderless rebels.

**Quote:** “For having upon specious pretences of publick works raised greate unjust taxes upon the commonality for the advancement of private favorites and other sinister ends…for having wronged his Majesty’s prerogative and interesting by assuming monopoly of the beaver trade…and for having protected, favored, and imboldened the Indian’s against his Majesty’s loyall subjects…we do demand that the said Sir William Berkeley…be forthwith delivered up or surrender [himself] within four days of this notice forthwith.” (Declaration of the People, 1676)

REFERENCE: Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel* (1957).

## Cotton Mather (1662–1728)

Cotton Mather’s notorious involvement in the Salem witch trials was only one episode in his long, remarkable career, but it showed many of the contradictions of his complex personality.

The influential Puritan minister’s role in the Salem witch trials arose partly because of his strong scientific interest in spirits and the invisible world. Even before the trials, he took into his home a girl believed to be a victim of witchcraft so that he could study her case in detail. By seventeenth-century standards Mather was actually quite cautious about witchcraft. He believed that where witchcraft existed, it should be treated by prayer and fasting, not by prosecutions and executions. But once the Salem trials got under way, he defended them in public, despite his apparent private belief that the evidence was questionable and the executions unjust.

Mather was hot-tempered, arrogant, and power-hungry but also extremely introspective and given to anxiety and self-doubt. Although he sometimes experienced hallucinations and severe depressions, and engaged in harsh attacks on his enemies, some of his writings are brilliant.

**Quote:** “Albeit the business of this witchcraft may be very much transacted upon the stage of imagination, yet we know that, as in treason, there is an imagining which is a capital crime, and here also the business, though managed in imagination, yet may not be called imaginary. The effects are dreadfully real.… Our neighbors at Salem Village are blown up, after a sort, with an infernal gunpowder; the train is laid in the laws of the kingdom of darkness…. Now the question is, who gives fire to this train? And by what acts is the match applied?” (1692)

REFERENCE: Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (1984).

## Rachel Clinton (1629–1694)

Clinton is one of the few Salem witches whose biography historians have been able to reconstruct. Her childhood was extremely unhappy as, evidently, was the rest of her life. After both her parents died when she was very young, she was placed under the control of her mentally unstable stepmother. Her father had left a substantial estate, but Clinton was never able to get a fair share of it because she was constantly exploited by others, including Thomas Clinton, her brother-in-law, whom she married at age thirty-six (he was twenty-two at the time). After her divorce from Thomas Clinton, she was reduced to poverty and dependency, which likely made her extremely bitter and hostile. It is known that she threw stones at people and called them names like “hellhound” and “whoremasterly rogue.” Among the witchcraft activities she was accused of, even before the Salem trials, were taking away a girl’s power of speech for three hours, sending animals to cross people’s paths, and making beer disappear from kegs.

Although convicted in the Salem trials and imprisoned for several months, Clinton was not executed. Released from prison in 1693, she died the following year.

REFERENCE: John Demos, *Entertaining Satan* (1982).

# questions for class discussion

. Why was family life in New England so different from family life in the South? (See boxed quote on page 71.)

. Why did slavery grow to be such an important institution in colonial America?

. What was attractive and unattractive about the closely knit New England way of life?

. Were the Salem witch trials a peculiar, aberrant moment in an age of superstition, or did they reflect common human psychological and social anxieties that could appear in any age? How harshly should those who prosecuted the witches be condemned?

. Considering the extreme differences that developed during the seventeenth century between New England and the southern colonies, was the Civil War inevitable?

# Contending Voices: Nathaniel Bacon VS. William Berkeley

## Questions for Class Discussion

1. What actions or inactions by Governor Berkeley lead to Bacon’s anger? How did Berkeley view Bacon and those who followed him?

2. What does the Indentured Servant’s Contract (1746) on page 65 say about this institution of labor?

**THINKING GLOBALLY: THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE, 1500-1860**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. What does Map 4.1 show about the origins and the destinations of the 11 million Africans taken by force to the New World?

2. Why did roughly 2 million Africans die during the “Middle Passage”?

3. Who participated in and thereby profited from the Atlantic Slave Trade? In addition to people who directly participated in and profited from the Atlantic Slave Trade, what groups in both Europe and the colonies participated in and profited from this trade indirectly?

4. How and why did the trade in slaves continue even after the U.S. Congress banned the importation of slaves in 1808? Who participated in and thereby profited from this internal slave trade?