Course Learning Outcomes for Unit II

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

3. Describe the characteristics of the divided regions of Colonial America.

8. Discuss the evolution of American philosophies or ideals.

Reading Assignment

Click here for the Unit II Journal Assignment reading.


The articles cited in the unit lesson are required reading. You may be tested on your knowledge and understanding of that material as well as the information presented in the unit lesson.

Unit Lesson

Pre-1600 colonization of the Americas, in short, would be at first inspired by a desire to find quicker trade routes to the distant orient, but would unexpectedly lead to the uncovering of a world that was new to the European mind. Exploration of the land mass in the western Atlantic, dominated by the Spanish, included explorers, navigators, and conquistadores searching to fulfill the temptations of God, gold, and glory. A brief recap (set to a familiar TV sea shanty) follows:

The 1500’s tell the tales
That stem from one historic ship
It began with Ferdinand and Isabelle
And the financing of a trip

Columbus was fearless with a plan
His navigation was true and sure
The goal was a new trading route
To the lucrative Asian shore
The lucrative Asian shore

Each month at sea was increasingly tough
His crew was cross and blue
But luck would spot virgin land one day
In 1492
In 1492

Indian lands, the crew was sure of this
Exploration would prove futile
There was no trade
He had missed his mark
Back in Spain, he was dismayed
His find a farce
He would again sail the seas
Dying on an American isle

A legacy though was cast that day
Like God’s golden, glorious chime
A brand new world with the best of things
An adventure sure to find

Ponce de Leon, de Soto, too
Vespucci undercut the rest,
Cortés & Pizarro, with disease
Spain’s claim proved the best

Explorers, navigators, conquistadores
in search of luxury
Religion was carried with them
To convert the primitives they seek

Millions died, much society was lost
History records some as vile
The impact of each explorer’s step
marked another Spanish mile

Exploration was not without reason. Europe was fracturing on the grounds of new beliefs challenging the often oppressive Catholic Church. What started as the publishing of a series of complaints on the door of Wittenberg in 1517 by devout follower Martin Luther would soon spiral into what is today known as the Protestant Reformation. Following Luther’s lead, other (and generally more dissatisfied) Protestant leaders such as Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, whose followers were called Huguenots, would emerge to spread their doctrines across Europe and inspire migration to the new world for a chance at worship without oppression.

Lastly, Spain’s dominance in the Americas would not be exclusive to one area. The series of voyages had successfully charted a North, South, and Mesoamerica region, and even discovered a successful (though very dangerous) passage around the locked continents to once again begin the attempt to circumnavigate the globe and find new trading routes to the Orient.

Colonization Attempts

Spain’s successes with establishing religion, free lands, and riches in the Americas would not go unnoticed, and soon others would join the claim. England (1576) was among the first in the claiming of American lands, but with much less initial success than anticipated, including the fate of the ill-fated first Roanoke colony (1585).

Despite early troubles, myth and legend would continue to inspire English and French exploration for their crowns. Englishman Sir Walter Raleigh, for example, would embark on his own deliberate attempt to search for myth to claim the spoils. For Raleigh, his passion would be the legendary City of Gold, El Dorado, which was thought to exist somewhere in South America’s vast jungles. The legend that had first famously gained the interest of noted Spanish trailblazer Francisco de Orellana, who coined the name “Amazon River,” failed to bear fruit in the West. As a result, Raleigh’s expedition for the lost city would take to the East, but that also would come up empty.

Interestingly, his larger passion—staking England’s claim to the riches of South America—would eventually be a factor in his execution, as he endangered more than himself raising British colors in Spanish-controlled seas. This infamous search, though, would also inspire future artistic masters to make this tale an allegory for other such desperate attempts at riches. These artists included poet Edgar Allan Poe, whose description of the Gold Rush and desperation of the miner provides a keen, supernatural take on the human’s determined psyche:
Today, El Dorado remains a favorite story and a real-life magnet for those searching for American treasures. Although the only “proof” is far from convincing, essentially on a par with Plato’s descriptions of the lost city of Atlantis, this does not deter the explorers still trying to make their name, fortune, or influence in the world.

Permanent Settlement

Entering the seventeenth century, the American continents, North, South, and Mesoamerica, were feeling the initial effects of European influence. Though the “discovery” of North America by European sailors could have been considered a mistake, since it resulted from their intended search for trade routes, these lands quickly became prizes in and of themselves. As Europe’s population continued to grow, its materials, resources, and opportunities continued to shrink. Also, as European populations became more accepting and knowledgeable of the New World, those who felt the oppressions of the Old World discovered for themselves the opportunity that this new land opened for them.

In America, new periods of opportunity and oppression would emerge in the form of frontier conflicts, but these also occurred within the European settlements themselves. Progressing into this unit, it is imperative to focus on the changing experiences, expectations, and roles among all those invested in the English colonies, including women, labor groups, and Native Americans. To adequately cover this change, our focus will, from this point on, remain on North America, with brief jaunts to the south as prudent.

During this era, the “known” North America could be separated into a few major regions of note (examples can be seen in the Suggested Readings). The East Coast, ranging from what is now Savannah, Georgia, to Nova Scotia, and roughly as far west as the Appalachian Mountain range, would become known as English Colonial America. This was due to the large number of primarily English speaking areas to emerge, even though not all were strictly under the jurisdiction of the crown. In addition, much of what is now modern Canada would accept English influence, especially with trade options.

To the west, following the Mississippi and its tributaries to the north, stretching from modern New Orleans, Louisiana, to the Acadian provinces, would be the French Crescent. This was mostly made up of a series of
French missions, hunters, foragers, and trappers who engaged in civilized and mutually beneficial trade with the Native Americans of those regions. Here, groups such as the Huguenots found a region where they could freely practice their beliefs, but they did this with respect to the neighboring tribes, as forcing European ideals often led to negative results. Further out west would be large sections of understood frontier territory. The area was dominated by Native Americans, and there was little European presence. Those who dared try to establish a residence were often on their own and at the mercy of neighboring tribes.

Lastly, sticking primarily to the south and west were Spanish claims, including modern Florida, much of Texas, and the greater American Southwest and Pacific Coast. Though loosely enforced, compared to the colonized East, these were heavily protected territories thought to hold vast riches for those who could find them.

Early attempts at colonization were shaky at best. As previously introduced to the ill-fated Roanoke colony, and despite the mysterious circumstances therein, the English would again attempt to colonize America’s Atlantic Coast. This time, however, the colonies would be closely tied to the crown’s economic interests.

While the English would initially travel to the familiar Chesapeake shores, this would come with the support of private investors, most notably the Virginia Company, who would not trust the colony to its fate again. To read this article, click the link below:


Though the experience for these particular investors would ultimately prove unsuccessful, this renewed interest would help to ensure these colonies’ success by drawing the interest of the crown. This caused North America to develop stronger imperial potential than even what the Spanish had found in South America and Mesoamerica.

**English Colonial America**

The English colonies, not including much of modern Canada, are generally divided into four regions based on commonalities in religion, population, economics, and general culture. We will look at a few of those elements here.

**New England**

America’s northernmost colonies, often referred to as New England due to the similarity of their climate and strong settlements to their ancient namesake, urbanized quicker than other regions. The term is still used today to describe the cluster of small states. The population of this region, which would retain an overwhelmingly English ancestry, included the colonies of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. With the common heritage, so too came a strong effort to ensure the success of religious communities. Most notable were the Puritans, who were among the earliest settlers of this region. The Puritans were sometimes criticized for acting overzealously, especially compared to more southern regions, but they would dominate the religion of this region. Their main disagreement was with the Catholics, whose traditional views and authority from the Vatican had also been previously driven from the English mainland.

Soon, however, religious tolerance would be legally enforced, but only in an effort to ensure safety and opportunities of the masses, not to restrict the religious freedoms that so many colonists came to the New World demanding. A decree from the crown called for religious tolerance and an end to the aggressive reactions. Still, the strong Puritan, and growing Quaker, populations of these vastly important colonial regions would leave an indelible mark on the culture of the American law and endear reverence to a Protestant core.

The familiar conditions and seasons of the New England region provided a sense of comfort for the colonists. The seasonal change was unlike the rich agricultural regions further south, and there was less chance of contracting an unknown disease, such as malaria. In the same way, because these colonies had few Spring and Summer months, produce was greatly limited compared to their southern counterparts. Still, there were important crops such as gourds and corn, and other trades supplemented the economy—notably fishing,
whaling, and shipping. This region was perhaps so popular because its climate was so very similar to England, where the majority of its population originated.

With this, the city also allowed for the allocation of new professions, such as clothiers, doctors, and dealers of other such luxuries. Because of population growth, however, farmable land was at a premium. Soon, families did not have the resources to provide an inheritance for all offspring, and quickly the measure of a family’s status became more about accumulated wealth than standing in the community. This atmosphere of free enterprise and entrepreneurism, of course, would only expand interests in American commerce. It would eventually sow seeds of growing contempt, however, when new regulations, such as the practice of mercantilism and individual acts levied by the crown, would regulate, threaten, or even steal from these profits.

**Mid-Atlantic**

The region immediately south of New England, incorporating the colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware, was commonly known as the Middle Colonies or Mid-Atlantic. It, too, would benefit from the great population growth, but unlike New England, its populations would come largely from other prominent European nations, such as the Netherlands, Scotland, Ireland, and Germany. New England was among the most pure in one heritage, the Mid-Atlantic was just the opposite; this more temperate region would host a wide collection of creeds, races, and religions.

This more multicultural collection would be the setting for a drastically different type of inclusive society. The overwhelming motivation for movement to this region of America was opportunity, and some would seek religious or political freedoms that were unavailable in their locations of origin. These travelers were commonly considered middle class, or had limited opportunities available for those not in the upper class, but could pay their way to America.

Many new cultures emerged in this region, and as part of that, distinctive religions including the first American synagogue in New York City and a strong Catholic community that would be instrumental in the founding of the southern border colony, Maryland. This region best exemplified the idea of the “melting pot” of cultures that would become a prominent nationalistic theme in the nineteenth century.

Economically, there was a wider range of produce able to grow in this climate, and from it would come many items that would be desired in great quantity in Europe. This set the stage for careful trade laws and money-making opportunities for the crown. Though much more common further south, some migrants were forcibly exposed to years of extreme labor to pay off their debts. In this region, these laborers were called redemptioners; their services would be returned in a generally livable climate and for less time than some of their southern servant brethren.

Part of the reason for this limited use of servants was simply the lack of need. The Mid-Atlantic region was too cold for many of the cash crops that allowed plantations to be successful in the South, and generally agricultural families were large enough to handle the yearly crop yield on their own. The advantage to having servants, and less often, slaves, was that the cost would be significantly less than hiring free help, but for the typical large family, that too was unnecessary. Even in the cities, families would commonly grow to a large size, which was helpful in ensuring that the father could pass on his trait, shop, or profession, and sometimes even gain extra income working in factories or shipping plants.

Also significant to consider is the role of status and “superiority” complexes of the time. Many families did not welcome association with those outside of their social class, either from fear of community pressure or because of misguided expectations of aggressive/impulsive behaviors by “less civilized” parts of society.

The success of family farms would help to feed these early colonies, much in the same way as the Mid-West has/does today for the full United States. Some who did not fit in, or who did not adhere to social expectations, would try their luck outside of society. Regions to the unincorporated west can be called *Backcountry*; though officially under colonial legislation, those areas would have little or no political, religious, or government oversight, which was appealing to some.

This Mid-Atlantic region, too, would have a very specific relationship with philosophy and religion. Whereas New England was often very specified and cut off, parts of the Mid-Atlantic welcomed a much greater level of diversity. Especially in the colonies of Pennsylvania and New York, there was a heavy Dutch and German
influence. Today, the influence that religious freedom in America provided then can still be seen in communities such as the Amish and Mennonite, but the larger presence was that of the Quakers (Shakers), who greatly influenced the shaping of the early U.S. government through political leadership and social teachings. Like the Puritans, though, they too are commonly misunderstood for overzealous practice. The Quaker codes, including teachings of citizenship, behaviors, and social qualities, made them natural leaders and diligent professionals.

South Atlantic Coast and Caribbean

The remaining colonies, from Maryland and south, are generally collectively known as “the South,” but within this region, there is still great geographical and cultural distinction that has led to further division. Generally the most common terms are “the Chesapeake,” in reference to the Chesapeake Bay region, or upper South, which included Maryland, Virginia, and parts of North Carolina. The remaining colonies are often known as the lower South, or “Plantation South,” for the common use of the rich farmlands. These were generally the least populated regions of Colonial America. In addition to the mainland colonies, this plantation atmosphere would carry directly into major Caribbean islands, including the modern nations of Haiti, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, which were hotbeds for sugarcane.

The main difference between these two southern regions is what the climate allowed the planters to grow. The Chesapeake had a mild climate that was too hot for European farms, but perfect for one of their most desired imports: tobacco. Generally there was a high (in comparison) population rate in this region, in addition to large planter families. There was also a thriving slave population.

Chesapeake

The ideal tobacco growing conditions of Maryland and Virginia would become the first national jewel, highlighted by the semi-inland port city of Jamestown. Success would not come easy to Jamestown, as the climate and poor management doomed wave after wave of misguided settlers.

Arguably the greatest success only came from the unlikely hospitality of the neighboring Algonquians, who received only aggression in return for their aid. In 1624, after three lackluster contracts with the Virginia Company, James I would finally confiscate the Jamestown settlement and put it directly under the direction of the crown’s rule as a royal colony. The one major success of the Jamestown settlement would be the almost unexpected 1612 discovery of a successful West African cash crop: tobacco. To read this article, click the link below:


Being such a successful crop, due to the extreme diversity in the climate from almost any European nation, tobacco would soon become the most desired commodity in Europe. Being the most economically powerful, it would dominate the market with sprawling plantations and massive armies of labor in the form of servants and slaves—who would be shipped from the same West African nations that shared the climate.

Lower South

Encompassing South Carolina, and (eventually) Georgia, this region would have a striking difference in population from their northern brothers. Slaves drastically outnumbered Europeans, and there was little call for luxuries or urban development. Land was at a premium, but this region was hostile to the majority of European immigrants. It was partially this issue that would enhance the slave trade from West Africa. Because of these two world regions (South Carolina and West Africa) having a striking similarity in climate, African slaves would be valuable resources in South Carolina, not only as labor, but for their resistance to the heat and diseases, and their familiarity with the items farmed.

Tobacco was not the only gem that the Americas produced. The semi-tropical climate of the Lower South, and even warmer weather in the Caribbean, would also provide great economic opportunities. At this time, rice and indigo were of great importance to the colonial merchants, but would only grow in these tropical climates.

Rice, a cheap and sustainable foodstuff, as well as scattered inedible cash crops such as indigo, a blue plant used for dyes, thrived in the southeastern climates. This led to early market capitals, such as Charles Towne,
becoming surrounded by sprawling plantations eager to cash in. Being such a cheap and easily replenished source of food, rice was quickly a major industry, especially to help feed the quickly growing labor populations in the cash-crop capitals. Further south, the island of Barbados would become the first of multiple Caribbean-based plantation economies from which sugarcane would become an export equal to, or perhaps even more lucrative than, tobacco. It was the source of molasses, the main ingredient in rum, sweeteners, and other luxury products that would be desired throughout Europe by all classes.

These new opportunities were not without their own dangers and problems, however. Being in a significantly warmer climate than the Europeans were used to, they had little protection against diseases such as malaria, which thrived, especially in the Southeastern swamps and rice fields. In addition, due to the lack of disease resistance Native Americans had to the Europeans (as introduced in the previous unit), their mass enslavement was not a viable labor option in North America. This labor problem, coupled with the refusal to forego the economic opportunities that America presented, fed one of the most controversial early American institutions: the Atlantic slave trade.

**Regional Effect on Labor**

To develop the labor point introduced earlier, there are some important notes. The discovery of successful cash crops would usher in the first major labor migration to the colonies in contracted indentured laborers. These laborers were often of lower class and/or without other choice. They would be put to work in the New World by a plantation owner for up to seven years in exchange for the cost of their travel and some promised “freedom dues,” which might include land, tools, food, or clothing, upon completion of their service. The planter would also be granted a headright benefit of land to encourage this sale and production, both of which greatly benefitted the colony in terms of trade, stability, and interest to the crown. These “servants” would, however, only be a short-lived aspect of the colonies. Soon, land was no longer in ample supply to give out, and many servants simply returned home, knowing the harsh realities of service and quickly limited opportunities.

Needless to say, with this labor program, a wide socio-economic gap between social classes in the colonies would emerge, and the economic concept of mercantilism took precedence over all. Regional governors no longer felt responsible to their people as the crown passed economic reforms (such as the Navigation Acts of 1650 and 1651) guaranteeing that the kingdom’s interests were a monopoly called mercantilism, and these colonies were firmly under the thumb of a monarch half a world away.

A growing distrust and discontent would spark among the colonists, especially the lower classes, and would continue to compound over the next century, eventually erupting into a war for independence. Independent rebellions, however, were already visible along the Atlantic coast. Probably the most well-known example is Bacon's Rebellion of 1676, which would lead to a devastating fire in Jamestown. Others, such as Culpeper's Rebellion, would also highlight the instability and failures in the colonies. The crown reacted to these threats as simply the fallout of frontier wars and other such conflicts with the Native Americans, such as King Philip's War and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.
The Slave Trade

The slave trade thrived due to the decrease of European indentured servitude and the negative response disease had on Native Americans as a labor force. Though skin color would quickly become a major qualification, with the decline of indentures, it should be noted that initially, the major difference between servants and slaves was length of service. Servants were contracted labor with a set release, whereas slaves were considered the property of their owner until that owner deemed otherwise, often either from transaction or a slave’s inability to work. With the expansion into devastating climates, and with many of the early contracts maturing, the servant trade was quickly losing support. Plantation owners did not want to part with their valuable tracts of land or share profits with another European family, and the usable land in the colonies was quickly running out. On the heels of Bacon’s Rebellion, those lessons taught that a new labor option was necessary for the success of the nation—that option would become the Middle Passage, an essential leg of the greater Columbian Exchange (a.k.a. Triangle Trade), as seen in Figure 1 above. Slaves would be taken from the relatively similar West African climate, forced onto large cargo ships, and carted to America with little concern about health, hygiene, or safety, to ports along the Chesapeake, Lower South, and Caribbean.

In 1663, successful Bahamian planters founded the first Carolina settlement. This land, granted by King Charles II, would be a southern border for the English colonies, expanding the holdings of the English and further defining the borders of the Spanish settlements in Florida. This Chesapeake region would be the stage that the slave trade needed to guarantee its success, not as much for the hands as for the climate.

Africa had long been used for slave trafficking prior to American settlement, but mainly on its Eastern border. What appealed to American planters was the similar climate that the American Southeast and African Northwest share, including many crops, diseases, and conditions that the ancient West African tribes had evolved to survive. These were conditions that were not as friendly to Europeans. Also, there was one other major benefit in that Europeans and Africans were not as susceptible to disease from one another as the Native Americans had been. Centuries of trading had provided the necessary adaptation to allow community, and with that, the Atlantic slave trade began. By the dawn of the eighteenth century, approximately three decades after the Carolinas were granted colony status, the Chesapeake was quickly growing in numbers and divided by race. This affirmed that people were segregated, meaning that laws, rights, and opportunities were now clearly separated by skin color.

To gain this labor force, slaves would be literally stolen from their families, sometimes betrayed by their own leaders, in exchange for European cargo—often weapons. This trade would begin the Middle Passage. Once in America, those who survived would be hosed down, barely covered, and taken one by one to be sold to the highest bidder in the public square. There was no account for family, children, or even language — young men cost more than women, and children would generally require a pre-existing community to ensure they would grow up to pay back the investment.

During the course of the trade, which would last well into the new nation, millions would be carted over from their native lands—thousands would die either in captivity waiting to board, from the putrid conditions of the weeks of travel, or from the abusive tendencies of owners who demanded obedience and ceaseless effort. A small minority would be fortunate enough to have masters who cared for their literacy, even breaking the law to teach them basic math and reading. It is the memoirs of these few that modern historians have to carry on these stories to future generations in hopes that we never repeat these mistakes.
The Middle Passage

The movement of slaves to the Americas was only one part of a larger trade network better known as the Middle Passage, seen in Figure 2 below. In all, the Triangle Trade was a series of common expeditions, which explains how goods came and went between Colonial growers and tradesmen, British merchants and industrialists, and African tribes. Each of the three areas would continuously depend on the other two to ensure their personal needs and growth, and the British Empire was the largest beneficiary of this trade through their regulation of ports and the taxes/levies on any and all imported/exported goods on or at British ships or ports through the Navigation Acts.

Without a doubt, the biggest loser in this trade was the common African tribesman. European traders from seafaring nations turned this interest in American labor needs to their advantage by transporting slaves. The travel of slaves to America was atrocious; they were cramped beside and atop one another from hull to deck, with netting rigged on the sides of the boats, just in case a slave was to get free and try to commit suicide by jumping. Several thousand slaves would be coerced, taken, or violently removed from their tribal lands in West Africa and taken to the colonial ports in America and the Caribbean. This process was so violent that for every one slave taken, there was also approximately one casualty. This may be due to conditions of the capture, the shipment, or from being left in a coastal “holding cell” for weeks waiting for the boat to return for the next voyage.

Once in the Americas, slaves were subject to new dangers in the form of European disease and a high potential for cruelty. Part of this sentence was due to laws forbidding them to be educated and ensuring that they were considered nothing above property of their master—an attitude that was believed to ensure “superiority” over the now faceless laborers.

It is important then to address the question: why was there a change from servant to slave labor? A few key points to note include the following:

1. Monetarily, the cost to purchase a slave was approximately twice that of a servant, because the purchaser also had to cover passage costs and processing. This is not including the renewing cost of food, clothing, shelter, medicine, any promised goods, and other basics for living to get back the investment. As settlements became stronger and conditions better, the life expectancy of laborers also became longer. This meant that the original cost meant less in time, and that the costs for a temporary laborer, who was likely to survive indenture, were becoming equivalent to those for a permanent laborer. Men were valued more than women. Most slaves were late teens/early adult, and generally the further south, the worse the conditions were for slave or servant.

2. Stories about the reality of indentured servitude got back to Europe. Servants who had once signed away their freedoms for the promise of some benefit from their service, such as a plot of land, tools, etc., would sometimes finish their indenture only to find those promises not kept. With the growing need for land and the entrepreneurial spirit, the land quickly became more profitable to planters than the person it was promised to. Many servants would simply go back to Europe, feeling that there was even less opportunity in America than had been in Europe to begin with.

3. A solid amount of servants did use the indenture process to earn their way to a chance at a better life, and many early servants succeeded in doing so. However, not all servants were volunteers. As labor became scarcer, shippers found new means for obtaining bodies to fill their ships, including the purchasing of prisoners from jails, emptying orphanages, pulling the poor off of the street, and even some whispers of outright kidnapping. These laborers did not have the motivations of the signed indentures, and all too often, the return did not come on the investment paid for them.

4. The law did not favor the slave, and owners could act however they felt was best with their property. It is important to note that there was an expected decorum for families in America, including Christian morals, and owners did not want to lose their investment. Even as gruesome as many actions were, it
was to the benefit of the owners to treat their labor humanely. Food, shelter, clothing, social presence, and such would rarely be equal, but they were provided to ensure that the investment was beneficial.

5. It became convenient to be able to determine a social class based on skin color alone. In the early years of the slave trade in America, there is record of some slaves earning/buying their freedom, and even starting their own plantations, with slaves of their own. As this labor system evolved, however, in the eyes of the law, those of color, which sometimes included Native Americans or other migrants to the American colonies, did not have what would later be dubbed “inalienable rights.” This meant, in principle, that the rights of one culture would no longer be privy to the basic rights of their fellow man only because of the color of their skin. This difference was so monumental that it even overshadowed economic class in many cases.

6. With the increase of adult slaves came also an increase in slave families. Though slaves had no rights, the masters encouraged families as they felt it made slaves less rebellious and more prone to procreate. Children born of slaves were slaves, so realistically, prosperous owners could ensure the success of their plantations for generations without any additional purchases, trade, or contracted labor.

All of these factors increased the domination of the slave system and ensured the increased subjugation of African Americans (i.e., generations of African descendants born in America), a topic that will be of paramount importance in this and all remaining units. There were some examples of rebellion, such as that in Stono, SC, but life for the overwhelming majority of African descendants was harsh and difficult. Today’s historians are lucky to have significant records about these experiences, thanks to testimonial accounts and diaries of slaves and abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano, who, after his enslavement, worked feverously against this labor system. Equiano would be a major figure in the dissolving of the slave trade in Britain; this is a topic that we will explore again in later units.

Religion and the Colonies

Change, however, was not entirely monopolized by economics in this time. Religion was also an essential part of the daily life of most British citizens, and we will discuss a few issues, both in Britain and in the Americas.

In Europe, Protestantism was a growing force. As we have discussed, new leaders arose on the heels of Luther’s posting of his 95 Theses at Wittenberg in 1517. Similarly, England’s King Henry VIII would abdicate Catholic support in 1534 over a political power struggle with then-Pope Clement VII. From that point on, England was a Protestant nation under the guise of the Church of England, headed by the absolute monarch. Unlike the results brought about by Luther, not much would change about how and where the Anglican Church would operate. However, it would become the state religion, and its following would be an essential part of the law, especially in areas like the Chesapeake and Lower South, which had limited option or urban refusal.

This would change again during the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In short, the Stuart dynasty had long refused to include Parliament in the decisions of the nation, and their absolutist ideals irritated leadership. What would finally put the support of the people against them, however, would be a continued desire to rejoin the pontiff in Rome and return to Catholicism. The people of England feared an international monarch with so much influence, and it did not help that the hated Spanish and French remained two of the most loyal Catholic nations on earth.

In 1688, King Charles II would have a son. Fearing a continuation of his absolutist actions, the political leaders usurped Charles, who fled to France. This “Glorious Revolution,” thus named for its bloodless nature, guaranteed Parliamentary power in all aspects of English politics.

It also provided a bill of rights and saw the ascension of William (heir to the Protestant Dutch crown) and Mary (eldest daughter of Charles II, and with his abdication, rightful heir) to the throne. With this change, the era of absolutism in England ended. With the ousted monarchy, any remaining Catholic sentiment in England, including her colonies, was immediately the subject of public aggression. In America, news of the revolution made waves. Not only was this a revival of the rights of English citizens, but it would also mean the removal
of several unfavorable appointments by Charles II and other Catholic leaders and a reestablishment of the Church of England as a religious, political, and government arm of the crown.

For many Americans, nationalistic teachings begin with the Mayflower’s destination at Plymouth (Plimoth) Rock. However, as discussed so far, there was quite a bit of European influence before that voyage, but the influence of these new English sailors is still very significant to the nation’s development. This fateful voyage would eventually lead to the founding of Massachusetts Bay, and from there, the larger New England region as it is understood today.

The main motivation for this passage was religious freedom of a small, yet highly devout, conservative Calvinist religious group known as the Puritans (who we have addressed earlier). In 1620, the Puritans would come ashore at what is now Massachusetts, and in 1629, they would set up a self-governed community guided by the preservation of their beliefs from what they considered the corrupt Church of England. It was here in 1630 that Governor Winthrop’s famous “covenant with God” speech would inspire the now multiple generations’-worth of Puritans to form a religious utopia, free from the destructive combination of church within state—a concept that would also become central to a new nation 150 years later.

While Puritanism would lose much of its rigor with succeeding generations, other religious groups, such as the Quakers led by William Penn, would also migrate to this region, stirring some aggression among the conformist Puritans. From this charged atmosphere originated a series of unbelievable accounts in the last decade of the seventeenth century that would challenge the strong religious influence which founded these colonies: the Salem Witch Trials. The fallout of these trials would include numerous unfortunate deaths as well as a question about if the Puritan church had indeed contaminated itself like the church it had initially fled due to its close association with the State.

Eventually, this renewed atmosphere and large migrations would bring a new opportunity for tolerance and political balance, which was not without its own trials. The middle colonies would be the first to open their arms to all creeds, especially under the temporary Dutch rule, but it too would insinuate the need for a strong government of “good men,” another theme that would become central to the founding of a new nation less than a century later. With these districts now in place, the English had successfully built a permanent empire in America to rival that of Spain, but was it stable enough to last like other, smaller colonies throughout the world?

It is important to note that the Enlightenment challenged the structure of religious authority, not religion itself. A final example of religious cultural expression we will introduce here is the Great Awakening. Taking place primarily in the early 1700s and throughout the colonies, this revival would preach the abdication of older faiths if it meant the interference of a personal association with religion. Among the more notable leaders included the next generation of major religious figures, such as Jonathan Edwards (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”), and inspiring speakers and revivalists, such as George Whitefield and William Tennent. These men would once again fill pews with their inspiring messages, which appealed to all classes and challenged all dissenters of the faith. This reintroduction of the faith was one that challenged the need for faceless tradition to live a Christian life and encouraged following scriptures to choose to be saved or damned.

Among those who would find inspiration are figures such as Benjamin Franklin, American Founding Father and noted multiculturalist, philanthropist, and controversial statesman, as well as the aforementioned Olaudah Equiano. This new telling of the ancient scriptures would literally divide congregations between traditionalists (Old Lights) and revivalists (New Lights). It challenged the faith of many, but it would also eventually lead to a series of new denominations in America, including some that directly descended from the experiences of slaves and freemen in a prejudiced America. Open to all, and especially focused on appealing to women, these sermons were instrumental in bringing people back to the church after what had been a very powerful wave of Enlightenment philosophy, highlighting the differences between strict tradition and a personal association with God.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the 1600s and early 1700s were a period of great change and growth in the American colonies. With each settlement desiring to create one form of utopia or another, these colonies quickly became a melting pot of opportunity, while becoming at the same time a divided gathering of ideals. Looking back, it is important to recognize perspective from all accounts: Northern, Southern, rich, poor, White, Black, Native
American, and European. To its beholder, each account would be as valid and as justified as the next. Using this understanding, it is highly suggested to look again at the laws, governments, religions, and ideals of the different groups: what kind of society was desired in America, and were the differences really so different from one another? Was division inevitable due to differences, or could stronger management have appeased all sides? These are questions that will lead directly into the brewing conflict and defining crisis that would institute a new nation.

Reference