

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL LIFE OF THE COLONIES

1607-1763

Many of the political institutions of England were transmitted to the United States through their establishment during the colonial period. In America, England gained her first experience in developing a machinery for control of the colonies. Her controls were never as stringent as that of other colonial powers in America. There were many things that led to the unity of the colonies, but also many things that led to the separation of the colonies.

GOVERNMENT IN THE COLONIES

The governments of all the colonies were similar. The office of the governor originated as the head of a joint-stock company, but was transformed into the appointment by the King in the royal colony. Closely associated with the governor in his functions was his council whose members were chosen in the same way as the governor. The governor exercised the traditional executive powers, enforcing the laws, appointing officials, heading the colony's armed forces and vetoing objectionable acts of the legislature. The governor's position was a difficult one because he had to carry orders from those who appointed him to the position, but also please those who paid his salary and approved appropriations to carry out orders (the legislature).

There was no clear cut separation of powers among the three branches of government. The governor and his council also sat as the highest court. The council also served as the upper house of the legislature. The assembly, or lower house, consisted of members elected by the eligible voters. It was clearly separated from the executive. The assemblies engaged in frequent quarrels with the governors and used their power of voting appropriations for the various government expenses to force concessions from the governor. Because of this, the assemblies, and the people of the colony, came to regard the power of taxation and appropriation of revenues as powers belonging to them alone.

VOTING AND HOLDING OFFICE

Qualifications for voting and holding office were very generous for the time (restrictive today). Most adult, white males were able to vote, (this group was thought to be the only group capable of participating in government. Many, not all, of the colonies had certain religious qualifications to vote. Property was also a requirement, but the vast area of land in the colonies made this requirement easy to meet.

The basic law was the common law of England and the teachings of the Bible. Punishments in America were less severe than in England. The whipping posts, the branding iron, the stocks, and the ducking tool often took the place of the gallows and the prisons of England.

IMPERIAL CONTROL AND MERCANTILISM

In theory the colonies existed for the benefit of the mother country and were chartered by England for the economic benefit it was hoped to bring, which was to make England the richest and most powerful nation in Europe.

BRITAIN'S COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION

Britain was slow in developing machinery for the control of the colonies. Since the American colonies were the first she had, England lacked experience in establishing the machinery needed to govern them. The struggles between the king and Parliament and the peasant wars from 1640 to 1660 left the colonies relatively free in their early years. With the establishment of the Stuarts to the throne in 1660, the British government tried to begin to reign the colonies, however, the distraction of consolidating power in England left the Stuarts much more worried about England than the colonies. Because of this lack of enforcement, the colonists began a long tradition of evasion of British laws they objected to.

THE NAVIGATION ACTS

These Acts of Trade and Navigation controlled overseas commerce and shipping in the interests of the whole empire to act for the benefit of the whole empire.

The Navigation Act of 1660, intended to promote British shipping, required 1) that goods shipped within the empire be carried on ships owned and operated by British subjects (which included the colonists). 2) Certain enumerated articles could be sold only to England or to another colon: sugar, tobacco, cotton, indigo, ginger and dyewoods. To benefit the colonies the act forbade the production of tobacco in England and its importation from foreign countries. The colonists objected because everyone wanted their tobacco and they wanted to trade with foreign countries for profit.

The Navigation Act of 1663 provided that imports to the colonies from Europe must pass through England and pay customs duties. However, an elaborate system of rebates permitted colonists to buy goods as cheaply through England as if bought directly.

The Navigation of 1673 was passed to prevent evasion by the colonists of earlier laws. This act required shippers to pay the duties in the colonies or post a bond to guarantee that a given cargo would be taken only to England. However, because of the black market created by earlier Navigation Acts, the shippers found the higher price more than paid for any lost bond.

The Americans, especially in New England, evaded the Navigation Acts so that constant complaints were made by British appointed colonial customs officials to authorities in England. Because of the civil unrest of England, most of these complaints fell on deaf ears. Finally, under James II, the Stuarts eliminated threats to their power and turned to attending to the empire. The Navigation Act of 1696 resulted from this effort. The Act 1) required colonial governors to take an oath, under severe penalties, to enforce the trade regulations. 2) The laws were to be enforced by the Board of Trade and Plantations appointed by the king. 3) Customs officials could use writs of assistance (searches without cause or warrant) that authorized them to search mercantile establishments without specific court approval.

EFFECTS OF THE NAVIGATION ACTS

English control of colonial trade, especially as the Acts were loosely enforced, brought mainly benefit to the colonies. Bounties were paid for crops such as indigo and silk, which would not have been grown otherwise. From 1721 until the start of the French and Indian War in 1754, the Acts were not enforced at all under Robert Walpole's policy of salutary neglect.

THE PEOPLE OF THE COLONIES

Population growth was rapid in America. 1) Immigration brought a steady flow of people into a land that offered opportunity and freedom. 2) A high birth rate was experienced because of the high rate of infant survival, probably owing to the improved nutrition of the mother, economic factors, and social approval of large families.

IMMIGRATION OF NON-ENGLISH COLONISTS

The three main people to come to America in colonial times were 1) Palatine Germans, 2) Scotch-Irish, and 3) African slaves.

The Germans began emigrating in large numbers after 1710, when Parliament permitted the naturalization of foreign Protestants. They were ready to leave Germany because they had no comfortable home there. William Penn systematically advertised his colony and made land available on easy terms in order to coax them to settle there. These attempts were very successful. These people became known as the Pennsylvania Dutch.

The Scotch-Irish had originally been settled in Northern Ireland in an effort to drive out the native Catholic population. Changes in the Navigation Acts as they applied to Ireland created very hard times and the Scotch-Irish, largely Presbyterian, began to leave about 1700. They settled, often squatting, further west than the Germans because they lacked the means to buy land, even on Penn's easy terms.

RELIGION IN THE COLONIES

Religion and the religious outlook strongly affected the attitude of people toward all aspects of life in colonial times. Since the Protestants who came to America for refuge, America developed what Edmund Burke called “the dissidence of dissent, and the Protestantism of the Protestant religion.”

THE PURITANS OF NEW ENGLAND

Puritan characteristics have exerted stronger influence over America than those of any other religious group. Puritans believed in the doctrine from John Calvin of predestination, the belief that God had predetermined those to go to heaven. Puritans engaged in much soul-searching to learn whether or not they were the “elect.” They also attempted to spread their religion so that those who were “elected” could practice with them. The Puritans upheld tremendously high moral standards so they would not make God ashamed of “electing” them to heaven.

Although Puritans came to America to enjoy religious freedom for themselves, they persecuted anyone who refused to follow their religious or political ideas. The classic example of the lack of toleration happened in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts during the witchcraft trials. Nineteen women were hanged after being convicted of being witches. Hundreds of others were accused before the King stepped in and stopped the accusations.

RELIGION IN THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

In the tidewater region of the South the Anglican Church was dominant and was the established church of the region. The main tenant of the Anglican Church was the King of England was God’s chosen leader in both political and spiritual matters. The Anglicans were relatively easy-going, especially when compared to the straight-laced Puritans of New England. Typical of other religions, the Anglicans were not open to other religious ideas, however, most of the religious persecution in the South was in economic decisions and not it physical punishment.

THE GREAT AWAKENING

The growth of secular mindedness and disinterest in religion in the early 1700s brought a reaction in favor of religion. This movement, the Great Awakening, an evangelical religious crusade around 1750, originated from the influence of Jonathon Edwards, an able theologian from Massachusetts. From New England the religious enthusiasm spread all over America. Large numbers were converted to various Protestant religions, except for the Anglican Church.

The Great Awakening had these consequences: 1) it increased the membership of the small, dissenting evangelical churches. 2) It injected emotionalism into the debate over religion. 3) As a democratic movement, it appealed to the poorer fold and weakened the Anglican Church and as a result, British authority. 4) It aroused the thought around the rights of men everywhere, especially the right of men to choose their religion (as long as it was the right religion.)

THE INFLUENCE OF EUROPEAN THINKERS

Certain British philosophers strongly influenced American thought. Foremost among these men was John Locke. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke argued that all men were born with certain rights from God that could not be taken away. According to Locke, these rights included the rights to life, liberty and property. Further, Locke argued that if the government violated any of these “unalienable” rights, the people should revolt and form a new government to ensure their rights. French philosopher Jean Jacque Rousseau in *Social Contract* argued for a government based on the consent of people. The ideal government, according to Rousseau, would be many small local governments consented to by the “good citizens” of the community. If these governments saw the need, they could then create a higher level when needed, and take the government away if it was no longer needed. These two philosophies had a great impact on the world in later centuries, especially in the North American colonies.