Chapter 5: The Cultures of Colonial North America,   
1700–1780

**Chapter 4 Important Ideas:**

* Slavery lasted throughout the Americas from the late fifteenth century until the 1870s. It was the largest forced migration of any peoples in the history of the world. Slaves outnumbered European migrants by a six to one ratio.
* Over four centuries, between 10 and 12 million slaves were imported. The peak period was between 1701 and 1810 when nearly 76% of all slaves arrived. More than half went to the Caribbean; one-third went to Brazil; a tenth went to Spanish America. Five percent, nearly 600,000 individuals went to British North America. Men outnumbered women, two to one; the majority of slaves were between fifteen and thirty; and nearly every ethnic group in West Africa was accounted for in the population.
* The violent business of slave capture was left to Africans who roamed into the interior on military missions or swiftly raided enemy villages to take captives. They marched them to the coast where permanent trading centers had been established by Europeans, who often intermarried into the local community to cement their trading ties through kinship. Many times these unions resulted in new, mixed communities, which themselves controlled the slave trade over the centuries. The slaves were put into pens (barracoons), split apart from families and ethnic groups to lessen the chances of resistance. They were carefully screened and those selected for transport were branded. The treatment of the slaves to this point was no better than treatment given to animals, often leading many to conclude that they were to be killed and eaten.
* Once the slaves were boarded onto the ships they began the long “middle passage” of transport to the Americas. Slaves were packed into shelves no more than two and a half feet high, chained, and packed in side-by-side. Some captains practiced “tight-packing” where they crammed as many people in as possible, hoping for a quick voyage and that enough would survive to offset the inevitable number of deaths. The voyage itself could be as quick as three weeks or as long as three months depending upon the weather. Slaves would normally be brought above decks during the day, forced to exercise, fed twice, and returned to the hold at night. Sanitation was non-existent and the slaves were often left to lie in their own waste. Frequent illness was common, with dysentery, smallpox, measles, and yellow fever ravaging entire shiploads of slaves. One in every six slaves died enroute. Many slaves attempted to rebel under such conditions either by revolting while still near the African coast or by jumping overboard and succumbing to drowning during the voyage.
* When the ship neared the Americas, the slaves were prepared for market. They were brought above deck, washed, and sometimes fed. Those who were lucky were presold to a specific buyer. But most had to endure the humility and horrors of the slave market. Here they were, once again, treated like animals, poked and prodded, and inspected in the most invasive ways. Or they were sold at “scramble” when all they buyers would rush into the holding pen and scramble to grab the slaves they wanted. Most were destined to places where they had no family and would know only hard labor.
* The first blacks arrived in Virginia in 1619 and while their status is unclear, enslaved blacks did start arriving soon thereafter. But indentured servitude was a cheaper labor option and remained so for some time. Chesapeake slaves lived and worked side-by-side with other laborers and thus Virginia was “a society with slaves,” where the color of one’s skin did not determine the course of one’s life. But all of that changed in the last twenty five years of the 1600s as the Chesapeake became a “slave society” as land became scarce, slavery more profitable, and indentured servitude less tenable. Direct importation of slaves to the colonies also began, driving down prices and providing more slaves to meet demand. The African population of the region expanded rapidly and laws were passed to increasingly govern the rules of ownership and control of the population, institutionalizing slavery for the colonies.
* The vast majority of American slaves were used in agricultural labor. Masters barely clothed their slaves. Slaves who worked on plantations had harsher conditions than those who worked on small farms, often side-by-side with their owner, yet those who worked on large plantations often had more autonomy than their small farm counterparts.
* The slave system was predicated on the threat of violence. Slaves, however, found a way to resist and thwart the intentions of their masters through intentional ways that resulted in less productivity, by running away, and forming maroon colonies. Others, however, engaged in revolt. There were some notably violent and alarming revolts throughout the colonial period, stretching across all regions. But they were quickly put down, the perpetrators executed or sold into other slave societies, and laws passed to curtail future revolts. But the American colonies were not rife with revolts precisely because slaves were creating a community through family and kinship, resulting in a slave community often unwilling to risk the consequences of a failed revolt.

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES The Revival of Religion and Community in Northampton

In 1734, Jonathan Edwards called upon his parishioners to heed the wrath and power of God.  As he warned the congregation to fear for their salvation, they demanded to know how to follow God's path. As the wave of religious fervor spread, an all-out revival, the Great Awakening, took hold. Similar revivals occurred throughout the British North America, making the Great Awakening the first social event all of the colonies shared in common. But the revival had just as much to do with economic, political, and security issues than confronting Northampton and other New England communities. The ongoing conflict with the Indians, rising prices, decreasing availability of land, and a growing class distinction all served to drive a wedge between various groups of people and their religious beliefs.

1. NORTH AMERICAN REGIONS

Colonial Americans could not afford to neglect the wide range of settlements on the North American continent. Indians were still the majority population. British, Hispanic, and French colonists, despite their differences, also exhibited continuities with European culture as they adapted to New World conditions.

a. Indian America

Indians simultaneously traded and forged alliances with European settlers at the same time they maintained political autonomy. They adapted to new conditions—and became dependent on European goods. Although their relations were better with the French, Indians unsuccessfully battled French and British incursions into their territory. The declining population of Indians was one of several dramatic changes occurring in Indian cultures. The introduction of horses, stolen from the Spanish in New Mexico, led to the rise of the nomadic Plains Indian culture.

b. The Spanish Borderlands

New Spain flourished in and around what is now Mexico, and established buffer zones along its borders in today’s Sun Belt. In Florida the militarily weak Spanish formed alliances with local Indians and runaway slaves to create a multi-racial community. New Mexico was isolated from the mainstream of New Spain, but the population in the region expanded outward by creating cattle ranches and farms along the Rio Grande. In the 1770s, California communities were closely tied to the evolving mission system. Designed to convert Indians, the missions also coerced their labor and deployed soldiers against Indian resistance. Mission Indians were overworked, underfed, often sick, and profoundly demoralized; in coastal California, the native population fell by 74 percent under the mission system. The Catholic Church played a dominant role in community life.

c. The French Crescent

French colonists created a second Catholic empire in North America. The French allied with Indians who were part of their trading network. They created a defensive line of military posts and settlements, a crescent meant to contain the British along the Atlantic seaboard. The French set up farming communities throughout Quebec which shipped wheat to their Louisiana plantations. French communities combined French and Indian elements in architecture, dress, and family patterns.

d. New England

In New England (except for Rhode Island), Puritan congregations governed local communities. Puritans did not believe in toleration and resisted English efforts to enforce it. But by 1700 other Protestant denominations were able to practice their beliefs openly. New England towns grew rapidly. Population pressed against the available land.

e. The Middle Colonies

In contrast to New England, the middle colonies were the most ethnically diverse regions. New York had already become a cultural “salad bowl,” though immigrants who moved to the upper Hudson were likely to find a region of sharp class differences with little land for sale. In contrast, land to the south was much more accessible, encouraging more immigrants. Pennsylvania Quakers accepted a more diverse population than their Puritan neighbors to the north.

f. The Backcountry

By 1750, Pennsylvania’s population had spread to the frontier, a tract of land extending to the southwest. Indians living in the valley west of the Appalachians posed a great threat to settlers. They forged the backcountry into a distinctive region where rank was often of little concern.

g. The South

The South was a tri-racial society, with whites, black slaves, and Indians. Large plantation houses dominated both the Upper and Lower South, though small tobacco farms were widely found throughout the Upper South. The region was a patriarchal society, dominated by white males. The Anglican Church was present but had little power. In the Upper South, well-developed neighborhoods created a sense of community and white solidarity.

In the colonies, everyday life was centered on family and kinship, the church, and the local community. Americans tended to be attached to the cultures of their European homelands, and perpetuated practices and beliefs long after they had fallen out of favor in Europe. These cultures were based on oral transmission and helped to link Americans with a strong sense of community based on a medieval worldview. The community outweighed the needs of the individual. Though some commercial agriculture arose, the majority of rural North Americans were self-sufficient farmers, practicing a diversified agriculture and engaging in various crafts as sidelines. In cities, artisans were organized according to the European craft system with periods of apprenticeship leading to a journeyman status and (with luck) the chance to be an independent craftsman with apprentices and journeymen of his own. Few career opportunities existed for women, though some women (especially printers’ wives) were able to succeed their husbands in business.

Unlike in Europe, land in America was abundant and cheap. But this scarcely led to a democratic society. Forced labor, whether of African slaves or white indentured servants, was considered acceptable. Both groups suffered great hardships. Although some indentured servants eventually won freedom and prosperity, most did not. The demand for land led to wars against Indians.

1. DIVERGING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PATTERNS

Although the British colonies shared much with the French and Spanish, critical differences emerged.

a. Population Growth and Immigration

High birthrates and low death rates caused tremendous population growth in all regions. Unlike the French and Spanish, English officials encouraged immigration, even from non-English nations. Naturalization was relatively easy for Protestants. Although New England remained mainly English, by 1790 less than half of British America was English in origin. Large populations of Africans, Irish, Scots-Irish, Scots, and Germans, among others, contributed to unprecedented diversity.

b. Social Class

Colonial America was more egalitarian than the European mother countries. In New Spain and New France hereditary elites held only limited privileges. The British colonies had a more open elite based on wealth that allowed frequent entrance of new people into its ranks. A large class of poor and unfree persons was found in British North America, but so was a large “middling sort”—about 70% of the whites. These middling sorts enjoyed a standard of living higher than that of the vast majority of Europeans.

c. Economic Growth and Economic Inequality

The economies of New France and New Spain were essentially stagnant in the eighteenth century. British North America enjoyed substantial gains in per capita production. But as time passed, the gap between rich and poor was increasing, especially in cities and in commercial farming regions. In the older regions, land shortages had created a mass of “strolling poor” who wandered in search of handouts, often winding up in towns and cities.

d. Colonial Politics

Unlike the French and Spanish, the British used a decentralized form of administration. Royal governors and locally elected assemblies governed. Most adult white males could vote. But colonial politics were characterized by deference rather than democracy. It was assumed that leadership was entrusted to men of high rank and wealth. Most colonial assemblies had considerable power over local affairs because they controlled the purse strings.

1. THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA

a. The Enlightenment Challenge

The British colonies were far more open to intellectual and religious challenges than their Catholic counterparts.

Enlightenment ideas, emphasizing that scientific principles should be applied to create more human happiness, took hold in America, including the emerging American colleges. Widespread literacy also helped the spread of these ideas. The success of the *New England Primer* exemplifies the importance of books in British colonial culture; newspapers, almanacs, Bibles, and so-called “captivity narratives” were also popular. Among the upper classes in the British colonies, a more cosmopolitan culture was emerging.

b. A Decline in Religious Devotion

The growth of Enlightenment ideas occurred at the same time as a decline in religious devotion. Even the Puritan churches were suffering declining memberships. Individual commitment to the church was declining as well. Traditional Calvinist theology was challenged by Arminianism, which proposed an alternative to predestination.

c. The Great Awakening

Jonathan Edwards’ preaching began the Great Awakening in Northampton, Massachusetts. A small elite controlled wealth and power in the community. Young people had become disaffected. Edwards called for a return to the traditions of Puritanism. As the movement spread, thousands of people experienced emotional conversions. In 1738, George Whitefield toured America, inspiring audiences to groans and cries of ecstasy. Conflict developed between “New Lights” who followed the Great Awakening and “Old Lights” who distrusted the emotional enthusiasm. In the South the Great Awakening introduced Christianity to many slaves and led to the growth of Methodist and Baptist churches. As a result of the Great Awakening, church membership greatly increased.

d. The Politics of Revivalism

New Lights tended to come from the lower ranks of society who had learned to question their leaders, laying the groundwork for future political change.

V. CONCLUSION

The growth of America led to the rise of distinct colonial regions. Economic development created social and cultural tensions that in turn led to the Great Awakening that helped pave the way for future political action.

**Chapter 5 Activities:**

Vocabulary:

1. Deerfield raid

2. King William’s War

3. Juan Cabrillo

4. presidios

5. mission system

6. adobe

7. Richard Hakluyt

8. General Court

9. Roger Williams

10. John Locke

11. Toleration Act, 1689

12. Congregationalists

13. “salad bowl”

14. Quakers

15. “freeland”

16. espanotes

17. mestizos

18. mulattoes

19. French Crescent

20. New Spain

21. French Canada

22. Inquisition

23. Enlightenment

24. Cotton Mather

25. Royal Society

26. Half Way Covenant

27. Sabrook Platform

28. arminianism

29. Great Awakening

30. Jonathan Edwards

31. George Whitefield

32. Benjamin Franklin

33. William Tennent

34. Princeton University

35. New Lights

36. Old Lights

**The French Crescent:** What areas did the French crescent cover and what colonies were

included in it? What were the general reasons or purposes for the French spreading out in

this fashion? What were the characteristics of the French communities?

**New England:** What was the character of local New England communities? What was the

Puritan tradition in regard to religious freedom? What other religious views were eventually

tolerated? What was the economic basis of New England communities?

**The Middle Colonies:** What colonies made up the “Middle”? Which ones were the most

ethnically diverse? How did these communities compare to the New England ones? What

were the Quaker beliefs. How did the Quakers compare to the Puritans in community?

How was Pennsylvania the model for America’s expansion?

**The Back Country:** What and where was “back country”? How did their economic and

ethnic setup differ from more settled areas? What was distinctive about Pennsylvania-

Virginia back country as an American colonial region?

**The South:** What type of societies were the Upper and Lower South? What were their religious,

economic, and social bases as communities? How did The Upper and Lower South

differ in community? What does Drayton Hall symbolize?

**Social Class:** How did maintaining traditional European social class fare in North America

compared to working roles? What did encomienda, seigneur, and great manor have in

common in regard to social class? To what extent did traditional social class work and how

was it modified in North America? How did the Spanish, French, and British colonies

compare in structure and attitude on social rank? What did Benjamin Franklin observe

about class differences in British America and England?

**Contrasts in Colonial Politics:** How did the French, Spanish and English compare in the

rule of their colonies? Why were the British developments not democratic? Why was

democracy as viewed then not desired? What powers did colonial assemblies achieve?

What did royal governors do to protect their power? What effect did it have?

**The Enlightenment Challenge:** What were the ideas of the Enlightenment and how did

they challenge tradition? What groups did Enlightenment ideas most appeal to? Least?

How did traditional ideas and Enlightenment ideas mix in some scholars’ writings? How

did reading material reflect both sets of values? What stimulated a more cosmopolitan

culture to emerge and where was it concentrated?

**A Decline In Religious Devotion:** What was the nature of the decline in religion? What

problem was addressed in the Half-Way Covenant? What other tensions were there in

church organizations? What was Arminianism and how did it reflect more Enlightenment

than traditional Calvinist thinking? Which groups found more appeal in these “liberal”

ideas? What group was most affected by the Great Awakening?

**The Great Revival:** How was religious revival connected to Enlightenment challenge?

Which groups were most likely to embrace the Great Awakening? Who was George Whitefield

and what was his role in revival? How did this Great Awakening affect established

churches? How was it an American version of the Protestant Reformation? Did the Awakening

affect the South?