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

Chapter Review

I. 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 be saved. As the wave of religious fervor spread, a “Great Awakening” took hold. Similar revivals occurred throughout British North America, making the Great Awakening the first colonial-wide social event. The religious revival reflected economic, political, and security issues confronting New England communities. Conflict with the Indians, rising prices, decreasing availability of land, and a growing class distinction all served to drive a wedge between various communities, both religiously and socially.

II. 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 traded and forged alliances with European settlers while trying to maintain 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 and some, such as the Iroquois, became frontier power brokers in their own right. The declining population from European diseases continued to weaken Indian communities. The introduction of horses, brought into New Mexico by the Spanish, led to the rise of the nomadic Plains Indian culture, evidence of ongoing native cultural adaptation.

MHL document: Exploring America: America and the Horse at www.myhistorylab.com

b. The Spanish Borderlands

Although Mexico was populous and flourishing, buffer zones of New Spain along its borders in today’s Sun Belt were far less developed. 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.
Russian settlement in the North Pacific led to expanding California communities closely tied to the evolving mission system by the 1770s. Designed to convert Indians, the missions also coerced labor from the Native Americans and deployed soldiers against Indian resistance. Mission Indians were overworked, underfed, often sick, and profoundly demoralized but did resist from time to time; in coastal California, the native population fell by 74 percent under the mission system. The Catholic Church played a dominant role in community life, rigorously enforcing orthodoxy.

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, from Cape Breton Island to New Orleans, a crescent meant to contain the British along the Atlantic seaboard. The French set up widespread but thinly settled farming communities that shipped wheat to their Louisiana plantations. French communities combined French and Indian elements in architecture, dress, and family patterns, but, like the Spanish, overwhelmingly identified themselves as Catholic.

d. New England

Except for Rhode Island, Puritan congregations governed local New England communities. Puritans did not believe in toleration and resisted English efforts to enforce it, while themselves persecuting Baptists, Quakers and other dissidents. John Locke in England and Roger Williams in Rhode Island promoted religious toleration which only slowly took hold. Despite pushing remaining natives onto small reservations, by the early 1700s demand for land had become more of an issue than religious conformity.

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, and many German and Scots Protestants immigrated and formed loose knit and mobile farming communities, a pattern later common on the American frontier.

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 who forged the backcountry into a distinctive, often lawless and violent region.

g. The South
The South was a tri-racial society composed of 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 organized around church and county court, while communities in the Lower South were weaker, with a vast gulf between the few rich rice planters and the many poor small farmers. Across the South white solidarity in the face of large African populations was the most significant bonding force.

III. SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PATTERNS

During the eighteenth century immigration, economic growth and provincial political struggles all drove the British colonies in new directions, diverging sharply from French and Spanish patterns.

a. The Persistence of Traditional Culture in the New World

Family, church, and the local community were the main element of life across North America. While Northampton (site of Jonathan Edward’s revival) was a conservative society closely linked to the mother country, the same was equally true of Quebec and New Mexico. While most colonists worked the land in traditional ways, colonial cities were centers of commerce and artisan trades with greater opportunities for social and economic advancement. Men dominated society, but widows had property rights and sometimes—as with Benjamin Franklin’s sister-in-law—continued to run their husbands’ urban businesses.

MHL document: *An Older Businessman Advises a Young One (1748)* at www.myhistorylab.com

b. The Frontier Heritage

While land was abundant and cheap—especially when violently appropriated from native people—and the ideal of property ownership was widespread, American societies were not as democratic as historians once believed. Labor shortages led to reliance on slavery and indentured servitude since few free people would work for wages. Eighteenth century servants who completed their indentures had greater opportunities than their seventeenth-century forbearers, leading to rising overall prosperity in British America after 1750.

c. 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.

d. Social Class

While Spanish, French, and Dutch sought to transplant feudalism and class division to their colonies, access to cheap land made these systems hard to maintain. Spanish social position was largely determined by race, with white grandees, at the top, then mixed-race middling folk, and Africans and Indians at the bottom, although these distinctions were harder to maintain in the borderlands. 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 percent of the whites. These middling sorts enjoyed a standard of living higher than that of the vast majority of Europeans, but this class was entirely absent in New France and New Spain.

MHL document: A Boston Woman Writes about Her Trip to New York (1704) at www.myhistorylab.com

e. Economic Growth and Economic Inequality

The economies of New France and New Spain stagnated in the eighteenth century, while British North America enjoyed substantial gains in per capita production. Economic growth led to greater inequality; as Northern urban elites and commercial farmers flourished, land shortages and soil exhaustion limited small farmers’ prospects and led to increases in landless poor. Only the frontier offered free or cheap land after 1750.

f. 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, and women, servants, non-English immigrants, Africans and Indians had few rights. Most colonial assemblies had considerable power over local affairs because they controlled the purse strings, leading successful governors to play colonial factions off against each other, patterns of intrigue with important implications for later American politics.

IV. THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA

Ships arriving in the Americas carried ideas along with goods and people. Spanish and French authorities banned books and resisted Enlightenment influences, but new ideas sparked a cultural transformation in the more open British colonies.

a. The Enlightenment Challenge
Enlightenment ideas, emphasizing that scientific principles should be applied to create more human happiness, took hold in British 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. While men such as Benjamin Franklin embraced Enlightenment ideas, even Puritans like Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards were influenced by new science and philosophy.

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 a growing belief in free will and the value of good works. Among the prosperous upper classes in the British colonies, a more cosmopolitan culture was emerging, although more resistance came from poorer and rural communities.

c. The Great Awakening

Jonathan Edwards’s 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 and impressing even the skeptical Franklin. 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 Baptist churches. As a result of the Great Awakening, church membership greatly increased.


*MHL document: Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield (1771)* at [www.myhistorylab.com](http://www.myhistorylab.com)

d. The Politics of Revivalism

New Lights tended to come from the lower ranks of society; by learning to question their leaders, the groundwork for future political change was laid. When Old Light elites tried to restrict the new ideas, popular resistance undermined their efforts. At least intellectually, colonial society was becoming more inclusive and open to change on the eve of the Revolution.
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 but also added to the differences between British colonists and their Spanish and French neighbors.

Learning Objectives

Students should be able to answer the following questions after studying Chapter 5:

1. What were the similarities and differences among eighteenth-century Spanish, French, and British colonies?
2. What was the impact on British culture of increasing European immigration?
3. In what ways did Indian America change as a result of contact with European customs and lifeways?
4. What were the patterns of work and class in eighteenth-century North America?
5. How did tension between Enlightenment thought and traditional culture lead to the Great Awakening?

Discussion Suggestions and Possible Answers

1. What were the similarities and differences between the principal colonial regions of North America in both the political and social realms?

Answer: North America was comprised of a number of regions, including Indian, French, Spanish as well as English. Native people sought trade alliances with Europeans while maintaining political autonomy, a difficult balance made more challenging by the declining population. Spanish settlers dominated in Mexico and in the buffer regions such as New Mexico, Florida, and California. The Spanish developed many mixed-race communities and the Catholic Church dominated throughout. The French were likewise creating a Catholic empire in North America, although there were fewer French settlers, they had numerous alliances with the Native peoples. French settlements formed a crescent around British North America.

Among the British, New England was dominated by the Puritan religion and small communities. In contrast, religious and ethnic diversity defined the middle colonies and the availability of cheap land encouraged immigrants in the eighteenth century. The South was a tri-racial society made up of whites, slaves, and Indians where the Anglican Church dominated the region’s society and culture. The rice-growing regions of South Carolina and Georgia had a black majority. In all areas local communities, family and kinship networks were most important and the church was frequently the center of social and cultural interaction.

2. Why did the British open their colonies to immigration? How did this affect their ethnic and racial make-up?
Answer: Through a combination of immigration and natural population growth, the British colonies grew very rapidly. The large number of non-English Protestants, including Scot-Irish, German, Irish, and Scots, in addition to the slaves who were forcibly immigrated, created a remarkably diverse society. The result was economic growth in British colonies, compared to the French and Spanish colonies which were stagnant. The rapid growth also meant the rise of powerful local government assemblies to administer these areas.

3. What were the principal trends among Native Americans in the eighteenth century?

Answer: Native Americans developed trade alliances with all of the European nations in their midst. Over time the Indians became dependent upon European trade goods and found themselves increasingly unable to maintain their political autonomy. They also frequently became involved in the military conflicts between the European nations, seeking economic and political gains through these actions. The Indians adapted many aspects of European culture, perhaps most notably horses from the Spanish, from which emerged a distinct Plains Indian culture.

4. How and why did class differences develop in the Spanish, French, and British colonies in the eighteenth century, and what was their impact?

Answer: Economic and political growth and expansion were the most important trends. A large class of unfree workers, both white and black, emerged, but the majority of whites would be considered from the “middling sort.” Although entry into the elite classes in French and Spanish colonies was based on heredity, upward mobility was possible in the British colonies where status was principally based on wealth.

5. What were the effects of the Great Awakening on the subsequent history of the British colonies?

Answer: Church membership, which had been declining, grew rapidly as a result of the Great Awakening. Many new congregants came from the lower ranks of society and the new Methodist and Baptist churches—the so-called “New Lights”—encouraged their members to question the established order and hierarchy. The “New Lights” would play an important role in the later political upheaval in the colonies.

Lecture Outline

American Communities: Revivals in Northampton
North American Regions
   Indian America
   The Spanish Borderlands
   The French Crescent
   New England
   The Middle Colonies
   The Backcountry
The South
Traditional Culture in the New World
The Frontier Heritage

Social and Political Patterns
The Persistence of Traditional Culture
The Frontier Heritage
Population Growth and Immigration
Social Class
Economic Growth and Increasing Inequality
Contrasts in Colonial Politics

The Cultural Transformation of British North America
The Enlightenment Challenge
A Decline in Religious Devotion
The Great Awakening
The Politics of Revivalism

Resources (Web, Films/Video)

Web
Divining America: http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/divam.htm

Films/Video
This Far by Faith. (PBS Video, 6 episodes, 2003.) Traces the spiritual journeys of African Americans across the nation’s history.

God in America: How Religious Liberty Shaped America (PBS video, 2010). This six-part series is a sweeping history of how religious faith has shaped America. Interweaving documentary footage, historical dramatizations, and interviews with religious historians, in an in-depth exploration of the historical role of religion in the public life of the United States.

My History Lab Connections

Reinforce what you learned in this chapter by studying the many documents, images, maps, review tools, and videos available at www.myhistorylab.com.

Read and Review

Read the Documents
An Older Businessman Advises a Young One (1748)
A Boston Woman Writes about Her Trip to New York (1704)
Jonathan Edwards, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God (1741)
Benjamin Franklin on George Whitefield (1771)
See the Maps
Colonial Products

Research and Explore

Read the Documents
Exploring America: America and the Horse

Read the Biographies
Martha Ballard
Benjamin Franklin

History Bookshelf
The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1788)

Watch the Videos
Chief Plenty Coups, Crow

Critical Thinking Exercises

Students might look at some of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons and compare them with contemporary televangelists. Students could write essays or make presentations on the ways that they are similar and dissimilar.