CHAPTER FIVE: THE CULTURES OF COLONIAL NORTH AMERICA, 1700–1780

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
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DIVERGING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PATTERNS
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THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA
   The Enlightenment Challenge
   A Decline in Religious Devotion
   The Great Awakening
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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
   *The similarities and differences among eighteenth-century Spanish, French, and English colonies
   *The impact on British colonial culture of increasing European immigration
   *Cultural changes in Indian America brought about by contact with European customs and lifestyles
   *Patterns of work and class in eighteenth-century America
   *Tensions between Enlightenment thought and the Great Awakening’s call to renewed religious devotion

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: FROM DEERFIELD TO KAHNAWAKE: CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES
   In 1704, Indians attacked the home of John and Eunice Williams in Deerfield, Massachusetts and carried off the family. Although 50 residents died in the attack and another 21 captives died along the way, residents pulled together to fend off the assault. Nevertheless, dozens of captives were delivered to the Indians’ French allies, most of whom were eventually ransomed and returned. Williams’s daughter, Eunice, refused to return and became part of Kahnawake, a community of Catholic Indians near Montreal. There, French and Indian patterns crossed boundaries in a unique experiment in bicultural living. The vignette illustrates the wide range of communities in colonial North America and the overlapping of cultures.
Colonial Americans could not afford to neglect the wide range of settlements on the North American continent. Indians simultaneously traded and forged alliances with European settlers at the same time as they sought autonomy. 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, changes that included the introduction of horses. The introduction of horses led to the rise of the nomadic Plains Indian culture.

Spain controlled the largest European colonies in North America 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 Spain, but population in the region expanded outward by creating cattle ranches and farms along the Rio Grande. Guided by the evolving mission system, California was settled in the 1770s. These communities were closely tied to the mission system. Designed to convert Indians, the missions also coerced their labor and organized the population against Indian resistance. The Catholic Church played a dominant role in community life. It also played a key role in the French areas. The French allied with Indians who were part of their trading network to set up a defensive line of military posts and settlements. The French crescent stretched from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico setting up farming communities throughout Quebec that shipped wheat to their Louisiana plantations. French communities combined French and Indian elements in architecture, dress, and family patterns.

In New England, Puritan congregations governed local communities. Puritans did not believe in toleration and banned dissidents. They also 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. In contrast to New England, the Middle Colonies were the most ethnically diverse regions. New York had already become a cultural melting pot, though immigrants who moved to the upper Hudson were likely to find a region of sharp class differences where large landholdings prevailed and little land was available 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. Unlike the tightly controlled communities of New England, Middle Colony communities were more individualistic.

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. The expanding European population led to violence and conflicts with the Indians.

The South was a tri-racial society, with whites, black slaves, and Indians. The Anglican Church was present but had little power. Large plantation houses dominated both the Upper and Lower South, though small tobacco farms were widely found throughout the Upper South. The region was dominated by white males. 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 home regions. 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 Indian servants, African slaves, or white indentured servants was considered acceptable. Both classes suffered great hardships. Although some indentured servants eventually won freedom and prosperity, most did not. The demand for land led to wars against Indians.

DIVERGING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PATTERNS Although the British colonies shared much with the French and Spanish, critical differences emerged. High birthrates and low death rates caused tremendous population growth in all regions. Africans were the largest immigrant group. Unlike the French and Spanish, English officials encouraged immigration, even from non-English nations. Around 100,000 Germans and 250,000 North Britons (Protestant Scots and Irish) emigrated to America. Although New England remained mainly English, by 1790 less than half of British America was English in origin.

Colonial America was more egalitarian than the European mother countries. In New Spain and New France, hereditary elites held privileges that amounted to less in practice than in theory. 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. 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 often wound up in towns and cities. By 1750, New England had become the most urban North American region.

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.

THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA The British colonies were far more open to intellectual and religious challenges than their Catholic counterparts. Enlightenment ideas which emphasized that scientific principles should be applied
to create more human happiness were taking hold in America. These ideas found homes in the growing number of American colleges. Widespread literacy also helped the spread of these ideas. But among the upper classes in the British colonies, a more cosmopolitan culture was emerging. 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 being questioned by Arminism which provided an alternative to predestination.

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. 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 slaves and led to the growth of Methodist and Baptist churches. As a result of the Great Awakening, church membership greatly increased. 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.

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.

Lecture Suggestions

1. The theme of the chapter is the diversity of different regions. Select several key regions and zero in on each. Examine the economy, role of religion, social organization, ethnic patterns, etc. of the people in each region. Make the connection between the discussions of these regions found in previous chapters and the discussion found in this.

2. Examine the question whether British America was becoming more or less like Britain. Examine the ethnic diversity, land/labor ratio, and existence of bound labor to emphasize the degree of difference. Examine the direction of change—the movement towards a greater emphasis on social class, the growth of inequality—to show how America was becoming more like Britain.

3. Make the connection between the discussion of economic growth in Chapter Four and this material. Examine the impact of population growth. Discuss why the American population was growing so rapidly, and how this increase affected Americans.

4. A lecture on the changing character of colonial religion can be drawn from the material in the text. Juxtapose the material on the Enlightenment with the Puritans. Emphasize how the religious fervor of the early New England settlers had died back. Look at how the Great Awakening both revived and changed traditional Puritan religion.
Discussion Questions

1. What parts of America had been undergoing the greatest changes during the colonial era?

2. Why was population growing so rapidly in America? What were the consequences of this rapid population growth?

3. Was America becoming more or less like Great Britain?

4. What was the impact of the Great Awakening on American society?

Out of Class Activity

Students might look at some of Jonathan Edwards’s sermons and compare them with contemporary televangelists. Yale University Press began publishing Edwards’s complete works in a multi-volume edition in 1957. The sermons should be available in most college libraries. Students could write essays or make presentations on the ways that they are similar and dissimilar.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio Visual Aids

“The World of Franklin and Jefferson” Traces the interlocking lives of Jefferson and Franklin. Presents the cultural, social, and economic background of the colonial and revolutionary periods, and covers fine arts and handicrafts of colonial life. (Color, 28 minutes, 1976)

“Early Americans, 1776” Describes how Americans west of the Appalachians in 1776 looked in settlements in New Mexico, Hawaii, and Spanish missions in California. (Color, 28 minutes, 1976)

“Colonial America: The Roots of Revolution, 1607-1775” Shows how the desire for independence from England varied from colony to colony and was dependent on their religious, economic, and cultural ties with the Mother country. (Color, 19 minutes, 1978)