**Part Four: Life in the 13 Colonies**

**T***ransported to the 18th century, the underlying structure of life in the thirteen American colonies develops with detail and dynamism. This pivotal period set the groundwork for the birth of a new nation, as each colony contributed a unique essence to the collective identity that later became the United States. Varied experiences characterized the colonies, from the bustling urban centers of Boston and Philadelphia to the expansive plantations of Virginia and South Carolina.*

The 18th century marked a time of dynamic growth and evolving societal structures, featuring distinct regional economies, social hierarchies, and cultural practices that molded the daily lives of colonists. Throughout this era, the intricate threads of colonial existence unravel, exposing the challenges, triumphs, and the gradual emergence of a shared American identity. This part of the lesson delves into the 18th-century colonies, where the seeds of independence and the spirit of revolution quietly took root in the hearts and minds of those who called these lands home.

**Generally speaking**, Life in the 13 Colonies in the 18th century was characterized by distinct regional differences and a growing sense of identity separate from Britain. The New England Colonies, including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut, were known for their focus on industry, maritime trade, and urban life. The Middle Colonies, such as Pennsylvania and New York, were ethnically diverse and known for their fertile farmland and religious tolerance. The Southern Colonies, including Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas, were characterized by large plantations, slavery, and a more hierarchical society.

**1. Population Growth**

At the start of the new century, in 1701, the English colonies on the Atlantic Coast had a population of barely 250,000 (not counting the Native Americans). By 1775, the figure had jumped to 2,500,000, a tenfold increase within the span of a single lifetime. (Among African Americans, the population increase was even more dramatic: from about 28,000 in 1701 to 500,000 in 1775.)

The spectacular gains in population during this period were the result of two factors: immigration of almost a million people and a sharp natural increase, caused chiefly by a high birthrate among colonial families. An abundance of fertile American land and a dependable food supply attracted thousands of European settlers each year and also encouraged the raising of large families.

* ***European Immigrants***

Newcomers to the British colonies came not only from Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland) but also from other parts of Western and Central Europe, especially large numbers of Protestants from France and German-speaking people from various German kingdoms and principalities. Their motives for leaving Europe were many. Some came to escape religious persecution and wars. Others sought economic opportunity either by farming new land or setting up shop in a colonial town as an artisan or a merchant.

* Most immigrants settled in the middle colonies (Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Delaware) and on the western frontier of the southern colonies (Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia). In the 18th century, fewer immigrants headed for New England because the lands in this region were both limited in extent and under Puritan control.
* ***Africans:*** By far the largest single group of non-English immigrants did not come to America of their own free will. They were Africans—or the descendants of Africans—who had been taken captive, forced into the holds of European ships, and sold as slaves to southern plantation owners and other colonists. Some Africans were granted their freedom after years of forced labor.

1. By 1775, the African-American population (both slave and free) made up fully 20 percent of the colonial population. An overwhelming majority—90 percent—lived in the southern colonies in a state of lifelong bondage. African Americans formed a majority of the population in South Carolina and Georgia and significant minorities in North Carolina, Virginia, and Maryland. Outside the South, thousands of African Americans worked at a broad range of occupations, some as slaves and others as free wage earners and property owners. In every colony, from New Hampshire to Georgia, there were laws that discriminated against African Americans and placed limits on their rights and opportunities.

* **Each of the 13 British colonies developed along different lines and adopted its own unique institutions. However, the colonies also shared a number of characteristics in common.**

**2. General Characteristics**

* **Dominance of English culture**: The great majority of the population was English in origin, language, and tradition. At the same time, however, both Africans and European immigrants were creating a diversity of culture that would gradually modify the culture of the majority in significant ways.
* **Self-government**: The government of each colony had a representative assembly that was elected by eligible voters (limited to white male property owners). Only in two colonies, Rhode Island and Connecticut, was the governor also elected by the people. The governors of the other colonies were either appointed by the crown (for example, New York and Virginia) or by a proprietor (Pennsylvania and Maryland).
* **Religious toleration:** All of the colonies permitted the practice of different religions, but with varying degrees of freedom. Massachusetts, the least tolerant, excluded non-Christians and Catholics, although it accepted a number of Protestant denominations. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania were the most liberal.
* **No hereditary aristocracy**: The social extremes of Europe, with nobility that inherited special privileges and masses of hungry poor, were missing in the colonies. A narrower class system, based on economics, was developing. Wealthy landowners were at the top; craftspeople and small farmers made up the majority of the common people.
* **Social mobility**: With the major exception of the African Americans, everybody in colonial society had an opportunity to improve their standard of living and social status by hard work.
* **The Family:** The family was the economic and social center of colonial life. With an expanding economy and ample food supply, people were marrying at a young age and rearing more children. Over 90 percent of the people lived on farms. While life in the coastal communities and on the frontier was not easy, it did provide a higher standard of living than in Europe.
* **Men:** While wealth was increasingly being concentrated in the hands of a few, most men did work. Landowning was primarily reserved to men, who also dominated politics. English law gave the husband almost unlimited power in the home, including the right to beat his wife.
* **Women:** The average colonial wife bore eight children and performed a wide range of tasks. Household work included cooking, cleaning, clothes making, and medical care. Women also educated the children. A woman usually worked next to her husband in the shop, on the plantation, or on the farm. Divorce was legal but rare, and women had limited legal and political rights. Yet the shared labors and mutual dependence with their husbands gave most women protection from abuse and an active role in decision-making.

**3. The Economy**

* The British Empire established a strong and thriving trade network that included the 13 colonies, and through mercantilism practices and the Triangular Trade Route, the British Empire and the Colonies became wealthy.
* The colonial economy was divided into three unique regions: New England colonies, Middle Colonies, and Southern Colonies, each with its own economic characteristics. Correspondingly, the economic system in the 13 colonies was primarily centered around agriculture and trade.
* The colonies developed their economies through a vast British trade network, but each colonial region had its own distinct economic focus. The New England colonies focused on shipping, the Middle Colonies focused on industry, and the Southern Colonies focused on agriculture, with large plantations that grew tobacco or cotton and required slave labor. The Southern Colonies had a one-crop economy, while the Northern Colonies had small family farms.
* The economic system in the colonies was influenced by the mercantilist framework, which governed colonial trade. The colonies were important to Britain because they produced raw materials for the mother country and provided an outlet for exports, which increased jobs and industrial development at home.
* The British government regulated colonial trade to maximize profits under the mercantilist system, and the Navigation Acts were passed to restrict colonial trade in favor of English mercantilist policies.

By the 1760s, almost half of England’s world trade was with its American colonies. The government in England permitted limited kinds of colonial manufacturing, such as making flour or rum, but it restricted efforts that would compete with English industries, such as textiles. The richness of the American land and British mercantile policy produced a society almost entirely engaged in agriculture. As the people prospered and communities grew, increasing numbers became ministers, lawyers, doctors, and teachers.

The quickest route to wealth was through the land, although regional geography often provided distinct opportunities for the hardworking colonists. The mercantilist system created a dependence on enslaved people to provide the manual labor needed to maintain production, leading to the growth of slavery in the American Colonies. It also contributed to the tensions that eventually led to the American Revolution, as the colonists felt that the mercantilist policies were unfair and restrictive. The mercantilist system was eventually repealed, but it had a significant impact on the economic development and political history of the 13 colonies.

* **Mercantilism**: 17th century economic policy of mercantilism looked upon trade, colonies, and the accumulation of wealth as the basis for a country’s military and political strength. According to mercantilist doctrine, a government should regulate trade and production to enable it to become self-sufficient. **Mercantilism began to be applied to the English colonies, however, only after the turmoil of England’s civil war had subsided**.
* **Acts of Trade and Navigation**: England’s government implemented a mercantilist policy with a series of Navigation Acts (1650 to 1673), which established three rules for colonial trade:
* Trade to and from the colonies could be carried only by English or colonial-built ships, which could be operated only by English or colonial crews.
* All goods imported into the colonies, except for some perishables, could pass only through ports in England.
* Specified or “enumerated” goods from the colonies could be exported to England only. Tobacco was the original “enumerated” good, but over a period of years, the list was expanded to include most colonial products.
* **Monetary system:** A major English strategy in controlling the colonial economy was to limit the use of money. The growing colonies were forced to use much of the limited hard currency—gold and silver—to pay for the imports from England that increasingly exceeded colonial exports. To provide currency for domestic trade, many of the colonies issued paper money, but this often led to inflation. The government in England also vetoed colonial laws that might harm English merchants.
* **Transportation:** Transporting goods by water was much easier than attempting to carry them overland on rough and narrow roads or trails. Therefore, trading centers like Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston were located on the sites of good harbors and navigable rivers. Despite the difficulty and expense of maintaining roads and bridges, overland travel by horse and stage became more common in the 18th century. Taverns not only provided food and lodging for travelers but also served as social centers where news was exchanged and politics discussed. A postal system using horses on overland routes and small ships on water routes was operating both within and between the colonies by the mid-18th century.
* **New England**: With rocky soil and long winters, farming was limited to subsistence levels that provided just enough for the farm family. Most farms were small—under 100 acres—and most work was done by family members and an occasional hired laborer. The industrious descendants of the Puritans profited from logging, shipbuilding, fishing, trading, and rum-distilling.
* **Middle colonies:** Rich soil attracted farmers from Europe and produced an abundance of wheat and corn for export to Europe and the West Indies. Farms of up to 200 acres were common. Often, indentured servants and hired laborers worked with the farm family. A variety of small manufacturing efforts developed, including iron-making. Trading led to the growth of such cities as Philadelphia and New York.
* **Southern colonies:** Because of the South’s varied geography and climate, farming ranged from small subsistence family farms to large plantations of over 2,000 acres. Cash crops were mainly tobacco in the Chesapeake and North Carolina colonies, and rice and indigo in South Carolina and Georgia. On the plantations, a shortage of indentured servants led to the increased use of slaves. Most plantations were self-sufficient—they grew their own food and had their own slave craftspeople. The Carolinas also exported large quantities of timber

and naval stores (tar and pitch). Most plantations were located on rivers so that their cash crops could be shipped directly to Europe.

4. **Religion**

Although Maryland was founded by a Catholic proprietor, and many larger towns like New York and Boston attracted some Jewish settlers, the overwhelming majority of colonists belonged to different Protestant denominations. The Presbyterians were especially well represented in New England. People of Dutch descent in New York attended services of the Dutch Reformed Church. Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers were the most common Protestant sects in Pennsylvania.

* ***Protestant Dominance:*** In the 17th century, certain colonial governments had taxed the people to support one of the Protestant denominations. Churches financed in this way were known as established churches. There were two such established churches in the early colonies: the Church of England (or Anglican Church) in Virginia and the Congregational Church in Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut. As various immigrant groups increased the religious diversity of the colonies, the governments gradually changed their policies on tax-supported churches. In Massachusetts and Connecticut, by the time of the Revolution, members of other established religions were exempt from supporting the Congregational Church. Some direct tax support remained until the 19th century. In Virginia, all tax support for the Anglican Church ended shortly after the Revolution.
* **Anglicans:** Colonial members of the Church of England tended to be prosperous farmers and merchants in New York and plantation owners in Virginia and the Carolinas. There was no Anglican bishop in America to ordain ministers. The absence of such leadership hampered the church’s development. Because the Church of England was headed by the king, it was viewed as a symbol of English control in the colonies.
* **Congregationalists:** As successors to the Puritans, members of the Congregational Church were found mainly in New England. Protestant critics of this church thought its ministers were domineering and its doctrine overly complex.

**5. Political system**

* In the 18th century, the political system in the 13 Colonies was characterized by a high degree of self-governance and active local elections, resulting in resistance to London's increasing demands for control. **The colonies had three forms of government: provincial (also known as royal), proprietary, and charter.** Royal colonies were directly controlled by the King, with a governor appointed as the administrator. Proprietary colonies were under the control of individual proprietors or small groups, while charter colonies enjoyed self-governance and the highest level of independence.
* **The legislative branch** in each colony was divided into two houses: a governor's council and a representative assembly. Property owners exclusively elected the assembly, limiting voting and participation to white men who owned property. This arrangement reflected the colonists' evolving sense of identity, distinct from Britain, which eventually culminated in the resistance that led to the American Revolution.
* In royal colonies, both the governor and council were appointed by the British government, whereas in proprietary colonies, these officials were appointed by proprietors. Charter colonies followed an elected system. Despite a considerable degree of self-governance in domestic affairs, the British government retained veto power over colonial legislation. Matters such as diplomatic affairs, trade policies, and wars with foreign powers were handled by the British government. The tension between the colonies and Britain, exacerbated by these control measures, ultimately fueled the American Revolution.

***The American Revolution marked a significant turning point, leading to the replacement of colonial governments by temporary provincial congresses and, eventually, the establishment of republican constitutions. The political system in the colonies, featuring a governor exercising executive power and a bicameral legislative body, was heavily influenced by the British constitution.***

**6. Cultural Life**

In the early 1600s, the chief concern of most colonists was economic survival. People had

neither the time nor the resources to pursue leisure activities or create works of art and

literature. One hundred years later, however, the colonial population had grown and matured

to the point that the arts and other aspects of civilized living could flourish, at least among the

well-to-do southern planters and the merchants of the northern cities.

Achievements in the Arts and Sciences

In the coastal areas, as fear of the Native Americans faded, people of means could display

their prosperity and success by adopting architectural and decorative styles from England.

* Architecture: In the 1740s and 1750s, the Georgian style of London was widely imitated in colonial houses, churches, and public buildings. Brick and stucco homes built in this style were characterized by a symmetrical placement of windows and dormers and a spacious center hall flanked by two fireplaces. Such homes were found only on or near the eastern seaboard. On the frontier, a one-room log cabin was the common shelter.
* **Painting:** Many colonial painters were itinerant artists who wandered the countryside in search of families that wanted their portraits painted. Shortly before the Revolution, two American artists, Benjamin West and John Copley, went to England where they acquired the necessary training and financial support to establish themselves as prominent artists.
* **Literature**: With limited resources available, most authors wrote on serious subjects, chiefly religion and politics. There were, for example, widely read religious tracts by two Massachusetts ministers, Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. In the years preceding the American Revolution, a large number of political essays and treatises attempted to draw a line between American rights and English authority. Writers of this important literature included John Adams, James Otis, John Dickinson, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson. By far the most popular and successful American writer of the 18th century was that remarkable jack-of- all-trades, Benjamin Franklin. His witty aphorisms and advice were collected in Poor Richard’s Almanack, a best-selling book that was annually revised from 1732 to 1757. The lack of support for literature did not stop everyone. The poetry of Phillis Wheatley is noteworthy both for her triumph over slavery and the quality of her verse.
* **Science**. Most scientists, such as the botanist John Bartram of Philadelphia, were self-taught. Benjamin Franklin’s pioneering work with electricity and his more practical developments of bifocal eyeglasses and the Franklin stove brought him international fame.
* **Education**: Basic education was limited and varied greatly among the colonies. Formal efforts were directed to males, since females were to be trained only for household work.
* **New England**. The Puritans’ emphasis on learning the Bible led them to create the first tax-supported schools. A Massachusetts law in 1647 required towns with over fifty families to establish primary schools for boys, and towns with over a hundred families to establish grammar schools to prepare boys for college.
* **Middle colonies**. Schools were either church-sponsored or private. Often, teachers lived with the families of their students. Southern colonies. Parents gave their children whatever education they could. On plantations, tutors provided instruction for the owners’ children. Higher education. Harvard, the first colonial college, was founded at Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1636 in order to give candidates for the ministry a proper theological and scholarly education. Two other early colleges were William and Mary in Virginia (opened in 1694 and Yale in Connecticut (1701). Like Harvard, both were sectarian, meaning that they existed to promote the doctrines of a particular religious sect. William and Mary was founded by Anglicans and Yale by Congregationalists.
* For perhaps the first hundred years of colonial life (1607–1707), **Christian ministry** was the only profession to enjoy widespread respect among the common people. In the course of the 18th century, however, other professions gradually acquired respectability and social prominence.
* **Physicians**: The thousands of colonists who fell prey to epidemics of smallpox and diphtheria were treated by a cure that only made matters worse. The common practice then was to bleed the sick, often by employing leeches or bloodsuckers. For a beginning doctor, there was little to no formal medical training other than acting as an apprentice to an experienced physician.
* **Lawyers:** Often viewed as talkative troublemakers, lawyers were not commonly seen in the colonial courts of the 1600s. In that period, individuals would argue their own cases before a colonial magistrate. During the 1700s, however, as trade expanded and legal problems became more complex, the need for expert assistance in court became apparent. The most able lawyers formed a bar (committee or board), which set rules and standards for aspiring young lawyers. Lawyers gained further respect in the 1760s and 1770s when they argued for colonial rights. John Adams, James Otis, and Patrick Henry were three such lawyers whose legal arguments would ultimately provide the intellectual underpinnings of the American Revolution.
* **The Press:** News and ideas circulated in the colonies principally by means of a postal system and local printing presses.
* **Newspapers**: In 1725 only five newspapers existed in the colonies, but by 1776 the number had grown to more than 40. Issued weekly, each newspaper consisted of a single sheet folded once to make four pages. It contained such items as month-old news from Europe, ads for goods and services and for the return of runaway indentured servants and slaves, and pious essays giving advice for better living. Illustrations were few or nonexistent. The first cartoon appeared in the Philadelphia Gazette, placed there by (you guessed it) Ben Franklin.
* **The Zenger case**. Newspaper printers in colonial days ran the risk of being jailed for libel if any article offended the political authorities. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, a New York editor and publisher, was brought to trial on a charge of libelously criticizing New York’s royal governor. Zenger’s lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, argued that his client had printed the truth about the governor. According to English common law at the time, injuring a governor’s reputation was considered a criminal act, no matter whether a printed statement was true or false. Ignoring the English law, the jury voted to acquit Zenger. While this case did not guarantee complete freedom of the press, it encouraged newspapers to take greater risks in criticizing a colony’s government.
* **Emergence of a National Character**

The colonists’ motivations for leaving Europe, the political heritage of the English majority,

and the influence of the American natural environment combined to bring about a distinctly

American viewpoint and way of life. Especially among white male property owners, the

colonists exercised the rights of free speech and a free press, became accustomed to electing

representatives to colonial assemblies, and tolerated a variety of religions. English travelers

in the colonies remarked that Americans were restless, enterprising, practical, and forever

seeking to improve their circumstances.

**In sum**, Life in the thirteen colonies during the 18th century was marked by a tapestry of diverse experiences, reflecting the distinct social, economic, and cultural characteristics of each region. In New England, the rocky soil and harsh climate influenced a predominantly agrarian society, with subsistence farming and maritime activities playing pivotal roles. The Middle Colonies, including Pennsylvania and New York, thrived as commercial hubs, fostering a more ethnically diverse population engaged in trade, commerce, and agriculture. The Southern Colonies, such as Virginia and the Carolinas, relied heavily on large-scale plantation agriculture, predominantly cultivating tobacco, rice, and indigo, which in turn shaped a society dependent on enslaved labor. The colonists faced challenges ranging from periodic conflicts with Native American populations to tensions with British authorities over issues like taxation without representation. As the century progressed, the seeds of discontent sowed by these challenges would eventually culminate in the American Revolution, marking a transformative period in the history of the thirteen colonies.