

Gaining control of political and economic institutions in colonial america: 1607-...

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



The first successful British colony in North America, Jamestown was created in 1607. Though at first the American colonists were heavily dependent on Britain for their financial and governmental needs, they soon developed their own cultural and societal ideals. These ideals were not deterred until after the French and Indian War, when the English recognized the need for more royal authority in the colonies. The gradual weakening of British control over the colonies until this point allowed Americans to acquire relative control of their political and economic institutions throughout the years 1607 and 1763.

Politically, Americans grew steadily more independent from Britain as the colonies progressed from 1607 to 1763. When the colony of Jamestown was first founded in 1607, settlers relied on the London Company and English government officials. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, English settlers continued to believe that they were re-creating in North America the practices and institutions of their homes in Britain. However, they inevitably created a very different political landscape in the New World. One of the reasons for this unintentional change was the scarcity of English-trained politicians and lawyers.

It was only after 1700 that English authorities attempted to impose the common law of Britain upon the provinces; far too late to have any significant effects. Though the essential elements of the English legal system were adopted by the American legal system, various differences were also established. For example, punishments for crimes were different and court procedure tended to be simpler in America. An important difference in the law of America and Britain was the freedom of the press which was

influenced by John Peter Zenger's 1734-1735 trial. Unlike in Britain, American colonists began to believe that law was a consequence of the natural order.

Numerous other differences between the American and English political systems emerged as well. As a result of a lack of involvement on the part of the royal government, Americans created a group of institutions of their own. These institutions gave themselves a large measure of self-government. A lack of authoritative interference in the management of colonial affairs became common due to the English government's preoccupation with troubles in Britain. The powers held by the Parliament in England were exercised by the colonial assemblies in America. Also, though provincial governors who were appointed by the crown had copious powers on paper, their influence in the colonies was extremely limited.

Such influence was, in actuality, in the hands of local colonial leaders and the British government. As a result of the lack of influence of the provincial governors, the local colonial assemblies grew accustomed to functioning mostly independently of Parliament. These differences and misunderstandings created several problems in the 1760s because the English did not wield the authority they assumed they possessed. When the British fought alongside the Americans in the French and Indian War, they discovered this problem. However, when the English attempted to tighten control over the American colonies after the Seven Years' War ended in 1763, a great imperial crisis was developed.

Between 1607 and 1763, the colonists of America steadily acquired more control of their economic institutions. Almost all English colonies began as commercial ventures and were crucially tied to the economy. They developed substantial trade with the natives of North America, with the French settlers to the north, and, somewhat, with the Spanish to the south and west. The colonies progressed to become a critical aspect of the budding Atlantic economy of the 17th century. In the early 1600s, just after Jamestown was established, tobacco established itself as the basis of the economy in the Chesapeake region. A lack of understanding concerning the economic theories of supply and demand resulted in a “boom and bust” pattern in the tobacco economy throughout the 17th century.

In the economies of South Carolina and Georgia, rice and indigo production became the staples. The nature of rice cultivation made the planters in these areas even more dependent on African slaves than those in other regions. Because of the South's early dependence on cash crops, the southern colonies proceeded to develop less of a commercial or industrial economy than the colonies of the north. At first, the trading of tobacco and rice was conducted mostly by merchants in London, and therefore resulted in the southern colonists being dependent on Britain in terms of their economy. Later, however, the control of tobacco and rice trade transferred from London merchants to the merchants of the northern colonies, nullifying the South's main economic reliance on England.

Agriculture in the North was much more diverse than it was in the south. This was due to the unfavorable farming conditions in the North, especially New

England. Conditions for agriculture were better in the more temperate regions of the North, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut. Unlike in the South, agriculture did not remain the only major economic activity of the North. Many northern colonists engaged in some industry at home. These home industries provided families with surplus goods they could trade or sell. In northern colonies, craftsmen and artisans were able to establish themselves as cobblers, blacksmiths, rifle makers, cabinetmakers, silversmiths, and printers. Ironworks also became a significant industry in the 1640s in Massachusetts, and gradually became an important part of the colonial economy.

However, the ironworks industry of America did not become as successful as that of England because of an increase in the involvement of the British in the 1750s, close to the Seven Years' War. At this time, the English imposed the Iron Act, which restricted metal processing in the colonies. Such regulations were also imposed on other goods. In addition, many industries which exploited the natural resources of the Americas became important to the northern colonial economy. Though the fur trade declined, lumbering, mining, and fishing trades became more substantial. These industries provided commodities that could be exported to England in exchange for manufactured goods, and also created an important commercial class in the northern economy. However, this meant that the northern colonies did rely on Britain for certain aspects of their economy in the mid to late 1700s.

By analyzing the evidence presented, it is apparent that the political and economic dependence of the Americans on the British fluctuated throughout

the course of American colonial history. When, in 1607, Jamestown was first created by the British, it relied heavily on English political authority and London merchants for its cash crop economy. American settlers had been slowly severing cultural ties with England for over a century, but it was only after the British came to North America to fight in the French and Indian War that they realized the need for further English influence in the colonies. As of the establishment of the first British colony in 1607 and until the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, American settlers gained essential control of their economic and political institutions.