

American colonies: substantial differences beneath broad similarities

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While founded under different circumstances, all thirteen British colonies in North America came to be structured on a parallel blueprint and shared broad similarities. All owed allegiance to England and drew European commoners seeking greater economic prosperity or religious freedom. A common language and predominantly Christian faith linked all colonies. All confronted native populations and developed economies tied to England.

Yet, beneath these broad similarities lay considerable religious, political, economic and social differences that marked the distinct character and trajectory of each colony. Protestant majorities prevailed in all colonies, yet the denominations, degree of religious freedom, and religious influence on daily life varied vastly. In New England, Puritan Separatists established a religious community at Plymouth, while Massachusetts Bay started as a business venture but also became a Puritan haven (Brinkley 41-43).

Imposing strict religious rule, the Puritans demanded conformity, did not tolerate dissent, and instituted a theocracy where public taxes funded the Church (Brinkley 44). An even stricter Puritan colony developed in Connecticut, while Rhode Island, formed by colonial Puritan dissidents, permitted more liberty (Brinkley 45). By contrast, the Middle colonies contained diverse denominations (Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Baptists, Quakers and Puritans) and were thus more tolerant and open.

In parts of New York, Dutch settlers set-up their own sect which endured alongside many other faiths (Brinkley 89). A Quaker asylum, Pennsylvania enshrined religious freedom in its Charter, reflecting the democratic nature of its society (Packet 18). Maryland, founded as a Catholic retreat, quickly adopted the religious “ Toleration Acts” after considering a growing
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Protestant majority (Brinkley 39). Created for economic rather than religious reasons, the Southern colonies featured Anglican majorities but, though the official faith, the Church of England was hardly a dominant force (Brinkley 89). Concerned primarily with growth over religious make-up, the Carolina charter granted religious freedom to all willing to come (Brinkley 49). Hence, religion played a less significant role in Southern life, which centered around the needs of the plantation.

Bound to the British Empire and heirs to England's evolving parliamentary monarchy, the colonies perhaps stood most similar politically, yet the specific structure of government differed per colony. Distance dictated that the colonies be granted considerable autonomy to govern themselves on all matters, apart from their relationship to the mother country (Packet 8). Typically, colonial government consisted of a crown-appointed governor, an elective assembly or council, and elected local governments (Brinkley 62-63). In Massachusetts, the "General Court" constituted the assembly and church membership (until 1691) afforded the right to vote or hold office (Brinkley 44, 62). Conversely, the Pennsylvania Charter permitted all "Freemen" the right to vote and established an assembly consisting of only one house (Brinkley 53, Packet 19). In New York, power vested in a governor and council rather than an assembly, but the laws created local representative governments (Brinkley 52).

In Virginia, the House of Burgesses comprised the oldest elected colonial legislature, serving as a model for the representative assemblies of other southern colonies (Brinkley 38, 49). While most colonies commenced as

commercial ventures tied by trade to England, and farming remained dominant in all, the economy of the colonies varied sharply by region due largely to environmental factors. New England's cold climate and rocky soil permitted only subsistence farming, with few excess crops for trade (Brinkley 78). Instead, fur trading, fishing and lumbering propelled the economy (Brinkley 79, Packet 25). Milder climate and fertile soil in the Middle colonies enabled wheat and corn to grow as cash crops that ultimately accounted for 70% of exports, making the region the colonies' breadbasket (Brinkley 78, Packet 25). Both New England and the Middle colonies bred commerce and industry with the growth of mills, textiles, and shipbuilding (Brinkley 78).

Iron ore mining stimulated a metals industry in each Northern colony, starting in Saugus, Massachusetts, with the largest in New Jersey employing hundreds of workers (Brinkley 79). Craftsmen and artisans flourished in Northern towns, while port cities (New York, Boston and Philadelphia) saw the ascent of a wealthy merchant class (Brinkley 78). In contrast, the Southern colonies, blessed with rich soil, developed an almost exclusively agricultural rather than a diverse commerce based economy, centered largely on single crop plantations, with tobacco (in the upper South), rice and indigo (in the lower South) serving as the region's driving exports (Brinkley 77, 83). Requiring vast land and labor, a plantation-based economy led to increased reliance on slaves over indentured servants as a cheap and self-perpetuating labor source (Brinkley 71). All colonies played their mercantile role as sources of raw materials for England, but trading patterns differed greatly. Northern merchants carried out substantial trade with the West

Indies and other European states, while the vast majority of Southern exports went to England (Packet 25).

Economic and religious circumstances dictated varying social life among the colonies. New England contained homogenous, close-knit communities tied by covenant, with life centered on church and family, and women cast in largely submissive roles (Brinkley 71, 85). Conversely, the Quakers aimed to disregard class and gender, allowing women to hold Church positions (Brinkley 52). New York and New Jersey featured the most ethnically diverse, but also a highly fractious society with wealth and power dispersed among many different types of occupations (Brinkley 52). The plantation-based economy transformed the South into separate self-contained communities far-removed from cities.

Highly stratified, Southern society was dominated by a few large landowners who formed an aristocracy over other planters and an increasing slave population that, in South Carolina, exceeded 60% of the whole (Packet 24). Wealth led to class divisions and a growing consumerism among the upper classes across the colonies (Brinkley 82). All colonists possessed a shared English heritage, the “rights” of all Englishmen and a belief in representative government. These factors eventually made it easier to unite under threat to their rights or shared interests. Beyond this, their economic pursuits and concerns varied greatly, placing them on a different development path most sharply evident between the North and South.