Early foundations of america

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Daniel Webster's Gaze

According to an old New England legend recorded in Stephen Vincent Benét's short story " The Devil and Daniel Webster," any visitor to the famous orator's grave in Marshfield can awaken him from death by calling out his name – but had best be prepared to answer Webster's questions about the state of the Union, or see him rise up from the ground to put things right.[1]As a student at Maine's Fryeburg Academy in 1990, the grim gaze of Daniel Webster was all-too-familiar to me, as the portrait of our most renowned former headmaster[2]glared down from the wall of my senior history classroom. The legend of the Devil and Daniel Webster was on my mind as I read the first five chapters of *Understanding the American Promise*. The story of the early European colonies in North America made me think of Jabez Stone, the harried New England farmer who trades his soul to escape a life of poverty and hardship in Benét's tale.[3]The three major regions of colonial settlement in North America developed along different lines, but all three involved the embrace of prosperity at any cost – including increasing inequality, slavery, and the steady dispossession of the native inhabitants of North America.

The First Inhabitants

The physical separation of the American continents from the African and Eurasian landmasses is probably the most significant fact in the history of the Americas, because it delayed settlement of the region by Homo Sapiens until about 15, 000 BP and ensured that early settlement would happen only from Siberia via the temporary Beringia land corridor.[4]When land access to

the Americas was cut off with the end of the Ice Age, the Paleo-Indian cultures established in the area continued to develop in isolation from developments on the other continents. After the extinction of the mammoths and other forms of big game from 11, 000 BP onward, Indian peoples were forced to develop other ways to live on the land by adapting to their specific local circumstances such as presence or absence of plentiful water, potential crops, game animals and so on.[5]

The varying geographies and climates of the Arctic, Eastern Woodlands, Meso-American, Southwestern, California, Great Basin, Northwest Coast, and Great Plains regions[6]produced several distinct families of Indian cultures.

The Meso-American region produced the powerful and urbanized Mexica empire,[7]which went on to influence the mound-building cultures in the Mississippi watershed region such as the trading and political settlement of Cahokia.[8]

In the Eastern Woodlands (where I was born and grew up), the Algonquian peoples lived as hunters of deer and small game as well as gatherers of nuts and seeds. Algonquian groups along the coast developed corn agriculture as well as pottery.[9]To the west of the Algonquians, the Iroquoian peoples developed strong settlements based on longhouse architecture and organized according to matrilineal descent in a politically powerful grouping known as the League of Five Nations.[10]In the southern woodlands, the Muskogean cultures mixed agriculture with hunting and gathering while retaining some elements of the mound builder cultures including their sun worship practices.[11]

In the Southwest, the Hohokam, Mogollon, and Anasazi cultures developed sophisticated irrigation skills and corn agriculture as well as pueblo architecture.[12]When drought broke up the Anasazi culture around 1130, the survivors formed the Hopi, Zuni, and Acoma cultures. Athapascan peoples including the Apache and Navajo entered the region around 1300. [13]

In California, the available resources for both hunter-gatherer and agricultural lifestyles allowed a huge number of cultures to flourish, including the Chumash and many others. In the Great Basin region, most cultures focused on gathering pinon nuts and other plant foods, along with some fishing and hunting activities. The village-building cultures of the Northwest Coast lived primarily by whaling and fishing from canoes.[14]

In the Great Plains region – where I live today – Archaic Indians hunted with spears to around the year 500 AD, then switched to the use of bows and arrows,[15]adopting horses only after they were introduced to the region by the Spanish from the early sixteenth century onward. Prominent tribes in this region included the Sioux, Blackfeet, Comanche, Cheyenne, and Crow.[16]

When the European colonists first arrived, they found wealthy urban societies in central and South America, but much smaller and more scattered groups of hunter gatherers and farmers in North America. While it took the new arrivals some time to understand that there were no cities of gold in North America, the relatively small and dispersed Indian population they found in the region presented them with a different resource – vast, open lands in which they could expand.[17]

The Early Colonies

Early Spanish colonies in the Caribbean, Mexico, and South America were created by adventurers and soldiers looking for gold, then maintained through the slavery of Indians working on plantations or in the mines[18]through the tributary system known as " encomienda." Because there were so few women among the Spanish colonists, many Spanish men married or partnered with Indian women, producing a mixed colonial society. [19]Although Catholic missionaries were heavily involved in the colonial project, not all missionaries were willing to accept the violent exploitation of the Indians they had been sent to convert. For instance, Friar Bartolomé de las Casas warned the Spanish colonizers that few Indians would be interested in converting with " their heads split, their hands amputated, their intestines torn open…".[20]

Due to a combination of this violent treatment and exposure to European diseases, the Indian population of the Spanish colonies dropped catastrophically during the sixteenth century and the Spanish conquerors began to import slaves from Africa in increasing numbers.[21]

The African slave trade was to have a tremendous impact on the development of English colonization in the seventeenth century, but initially the new English colonies in North America relied on indentured servants rather than slaves.[22]

Beginning with the establishment of the Virginia Company in 1606, England made protracted efforts to establish a colonial empire in North America.

Many of the early colonists of Virginia were gentlemen with no experience of hard manual labor. Disease devastated the early Virginia colony, and weakened colonists with no farming experience were in no position to successfully plant and harvest their own crops. Without the help of the Algonquian Indians under the leadership of Powhatan, the entire Jamestown colony would have starved to death. However, Powhatan's successor Opechancanough did not approve of his policy of friendship toward the Jamestown colonists, who he viewed as a growing threat due to their increasing numbers and the danger from European diseases. Opechancanough's forces attacked the colony in 1622 and massacred approximately one-third of the settlers.[23]Displeased with the management of the Virginia Colony, England's Royal government stepped in and dissolved the Virginia Company in 1624. From this point on, Virginia was a Royal Colony.[24]

Other southern colonies followed not long after the Virginia Colony, including Maryland in 1634[25]and Carolina in 1670.[26]The Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland grew tobacco for export beginning in 1612.[27]The economy of this region was based on small and relatively isolated tobacco farms worked primarily by indentured servants along with smaller numbers of African slaves.[28]In contrast, the Carolina colony was focused primarily on rice and was populated by large numbers of African slaves brought up from Barbados by the planters who founded the colony.[29]

England's northern colonies developed along different lines than the southern colonies right from the beginning. Puritan separatists founded the Plymouth Colony in 1620, and another faction of Puritan reformers founded

the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629. Both colonies were founded by deeply religious people who wanted to escape persecution in England and create a new and better society based on a rigorously Calvinist form of Protestantism. As such, their motivations were completely different from those of the Virginia settlers because they were not focused on becoming wealthy or making profits.[30]However, the Puritan settlers of New England faced some of the same problems as the Virginia colonists, including disease, near-starvation,[31]and war with the local Indian peoples.[32]

Unlike the southern colonies, the northern colonies were not based on an aristocratic model. Most of the New England settlers were either farmers or skilled workers such as carpenters.[33]As the colony expanded from Boston outward, New England became a region of small farming towns governed by a form of local democracy known as the " town meeting."[34]

The middle colonies began as the Dutch settlement of New Netherland, which was conquered by the English and renamed New York in 1664. New Jersey was established in the same year, followed by Pennsylvania in 1681. Where the northern colonies were religiously and ethnically homogenous, the middle colonies were a mix of different ethnic and religious groups. [35]No colonial government could hope to impose any sort of uniformity on such a mixed population, so New England's theocratic tendencies never developed there. Instead, the middle colonies offered an unusual degree of tolerance and freedom of religion for the time-period. Pennsylvania was founded by William Penn as a refuge for Quakers, who were persecuted by the Puritan authorities in New England. Although Quakers dominated the Pennsylvania government, the colony became known as a center of religious

freedom and one of the only colonies to make a concerted effort at maintaining friendship with the Indians.[36]

Change and Consolidation

The end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century brought both change and consolidation to England's colonies in North America. The southern colonies, originally founded as aristocracies with rich white farmers at the top and servants of all races at the bottom, became slave societies defined by a strict racial caste system. This change developed from a failed attempt to make southern society more equal. By the 1670s, the Virginia colony had become violently divided between the rich tobacco grandees who owned land and participated in government and the lower classes who did not.[37]According to colonial Governor William Berkeley most of the colonists were " poor, indebted, discontented, and armed."[38]

This discontent led to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, when Nathanial Bacon led an uprising against Berkeley to demand greater rights for the poor of Virginia – including the vote, protection against corrupt government, and the right to make war on the Indians along the frontier. The rebellion collapsed with Bacon's death and did not achieve its goals but was followed by major changes in Virginia society including a transition away from the use of indentured servants from England in favor of buying slaves from Africa.[39]In effect, the rebels had only succeeded in convincing the landed elite not to rely on the loyalty of servants who would someday become free and join the ranks of the angry poor. Instead, they began to purchase slaves in increasing

numbers until they had transformed the south into a slave society. 6, 100, 000 slaves were brought into the south between 1701 and 1810.[40]

This form of society proved more stable, because Virginia's poor whites could always console themselves that they were no longer the lowest rank in southern society. While they remained poor and relatively powerless, they had many rights the slaves did not – including the ability to buy property and improve their lives.[41]

In the northern colonies, heretical factions and sects began to split off from Puritan orthodoxy, leading to the founding of Rhode Island in 1636 and Connecticut in 1639.[42]Meanwhile, increasing numbers of New Englanders seemed to have lost their passion for religion even though many still attended church. As New England culture became increasingly secular and materialistic, deism and religious indifference became more common. The Great Awakening brought a revival of religious faith but did not prevent New England from becoming a society defined by worldly concerns such as trade. [43]

The middle colonies became even more ethnically mixed with the arrival of large numbers of German and Scots-Irish immigrants in the eighteenth century. Both groups of immigrants were trying to escape intolerable or unstable conditions at home, including poverty and mistreatment by landlords.[44]Seeking land where they could farm, these new settlers pushed further and further west into what remained of Indian territory.[45]When the Seven Years or " French and Indian" War began in 1754, many Indian tribes

sided with the French against the colonists because of this relentless pressure on their lands.[46]

Conclusions

Many of the people who came to England's North American colonies were trying to escape societies defined by material inequality, privation, and oppressive treatment by the wealthy and powerful.[47]Even for an indentured servant in 1743 Pennsylvania, the colonies seemed like " the best poor Man's Country in the World,"[48]a place where hard work and personal sacrifice could really lead to a better life.

However, this dream of freedom and prosperity could only be attained by taking away the freedom and prosperity of others. Nathanial Bacon and his rebel followers were not only fighting for their own rights – they were also fighting for the right to attack the Indians and take their land.[49]When the rebellion failed, the poor whites of Virginia accepted the system of slavery and white supremacy as a substitute for the equality they had been unable to win.[50]In the middle colonies, the same German and Scots-Irish immigrants who had come to North America to escape oppression and poverty immediately began expanding west at the expense of the Indians. [51]In the northern colonies, the Puritans who had fled England to escape religious persecution and create a " City upon a Hill"[52]established a religiously intolerant[53]yet largely secular[54]society.

England's colonies in North America began as struggling settlements barely able to keep themselves from succumbing to starvation and disease but developed into a haven for people fleeing oppression and poverty. This

unique status gave the inhabitants of the colonies a strong disposition for personal liberty and a hatred of arbitrary government that would soon result in the creation of a new country – at the cost of slavery and the dispossession of the Indians. The paradox of a society of liberty built on the oppression of others could not be easily overcome, and the consequences of that paradox are still with us today.

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