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L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021
Course: Colonial History of America

4. Overview of English colonies

Objectives

After this lecture, students should:

- ✓ identify the first English settlements in America
- ✓ locate the different English colonies on a map
- ✓ give a critical judgment about the English colonies in America

Introduction

This lecture provides a general overview of English colonies in America. We will see the reasons thousands of immigrants chose to settle in America and leave their motherland once for all in the early 17th century. A map will show us the different English colonies and the year they were founded. By the end of the lecture, we will engage in a reflection about the importance of the colonies for present-day America.

1. General Overview

At the start of the 17th century, the English had not established a permanent settlement in the Americas. But over the next century they outpaced their rivals. The English encouraged emigration far more than the Spanish, French, or Dutch. They established nearly a dozen colonies, sending thousands of immigrants to populate the land.

England had experienced a dramatic rise in population in the 16th century, and the colonies appeared a welcoming place for those who faced overcrowding and grinding poverty at home. Thousands of English migrants arrived in the Chesapeake Bay colonies of Virginia and Maryland to work in the tobacco fields. Another stream of pious Puritan families, sought to live as they believed the Bible demanded and established the Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, New Haven, Connecticut, and Rhode Island colonies of New England.

The first English colony was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607.

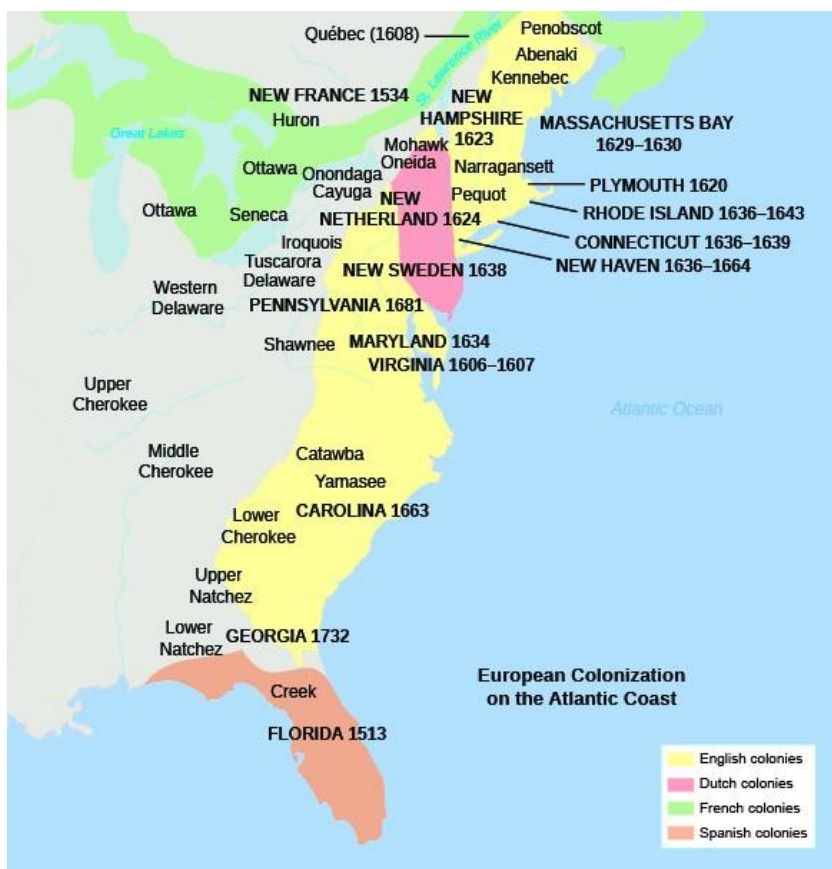
In 1620, the Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower and founded Plymouth Colony in Massachusetts. In 1681, William Penn, a wealthy Quaker, received a large tract of land, which became known as Pennsylvania.

To help populate it, Penn actively recruited immigrants, among them many religious dissenters, e.g. Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Moravians and Baptists. By 1733,

thirteen English colonies had been established along the Atlantic Coast.

2. The Chesapeake colonies: Virginia and Maryland

The Chesapeake colonies of Virginia and Maryland served a vital purpose in the developing 17th century English empire by providing tobacco, a cash crop. However, the early history of Jamestown did not suggest the English outpost would survive. From the outset, its settlers struggled both with each other and with the native inhabitants, the powerful Powhatan, who controlled the area. Jealousies and infighting among the English destabilized the colony. One member, John Smith, took control and exercised near-dictatorial powers, which furthered aggravated the squabbling. The settlers' inability to grow their own food compounded this unstable situation. They were essentially employees of the Virginia Company of London, an English joint-stock company, in which investors provided the capital and assumed the risk in order to reap the profit, and they had to make a profit for their shareholders as well as for themselves. Most immigrants initially sought to find gold and silver instead of finding ways to grow their own food.



3. Puritan New England

The second major area to be colonized by the English in the first half of the 17th century, New England, differed markedly in its founding principles from the commercially oriented Chesapeake tobacco colonies. Settled largely by waves of Puritan families in the 1630s, New England had a religious orientation from the start. In England, reform-minded men and women had been calling for greater changes to the English national church since the 1580s. These reformers, who followed the teachings of John Calvin and other Protestant reformers, were called Puritans because of their insistence on “purifying” the Church of England of what they believed to be un-scriptural, especially Catholic elements that lingered in its institutions and practices.

Many who provided leadership in early New England were learned ministers who had studied at Cambridge or Oxford but who, because they had questioned the practices of the Church of England, had been deprived of careers by the king and his officials in an effort to silence all dissenting voices. Other Puritan leaders, such as the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, came from the privileged class of English gentry. These well-to-do Puritans and many thousands more left their English homes not to establish a land of religious freedom, but to practice their own religion without persecution. Puritan New England offered them the opportunity to live as they believed the Bible demanded. In their “New” England, they set out to create a model of reformed Protestantism, a new English Israel.

4. Middle Colonies

The Middle Colonies consisted of the present-day states of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware and were characterized by a large degree of diversity - religious, political, economic, and ethnic.

The Dutch colony of New Netherland was taken over by the English and renamed New York. However, large numbers of Dutch remained in the colony, dominating the rural areas between New York City and Albany. Meanwhile, Yankees from New England started moving in, as did immigrants from Germany. New York City attracted a large polyglot population, including a large black slave population.

Pennsylvania was founded in 1681 as a proprietary colony of Quaker William Penn. The main population elements included Quaker population based in Philadelphia, a Scotch Irish population on the Western frontier, and numerous German colonies in between. Philadelphia became the largest city in the colonies with its central location, excellent port, and a population of about 30,000.

5. South Colonies

The predominant culture of the south was rooted in the settlement of the region by British colonists. In the seventeenth century, most voluntary colonists were of English origins who settled chiefly along the coastal regions of the Eastern seaboard. The majority of early British settlers were indentured servants¹, who gained freedom after enough work to pay off their passage. The wealthier men who paid their way received land grants known as headrights to encourage settlement.

The French and Spanish established colonies in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. The Spanish colonized Florida in the 16th century, with their communities reaching a peak in the late 17th century. In the British and French colonies, most colonists arrived after 1700. They cleared land, built houses and outbuildings, and worked on the large plantations that dominated export agriculture. Many were involved in the labor-intensive cultivation of tobacco, the first cash crop of Virginia. With a decrease in the number of British willing to go to the colonies in the eighteenth century, planters began importing more enslaved Africans, who became the predominant labor force on the plantations.

Conclusion

- ✓ Class discussion

¹ An indentured servant or indentured laborer was a man (almost never a woman) who took out a loan (an indenture), most often to pay for the cost of his transportation to a job location: from Europe to North America, for example. In order to pay off this loan, the employee (indenturee) agreed to work without salary for the lender for a specific number of years.