

North America in 1770

Excerpted from “Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763

By John Demos

A bird’s-eye view of the entire landscape, as of 1770, might have disclosed the following:

- Thirteen separate English colonies in varying states of growth and development (The French had been ousted from their hold in Canada, while the Spanish remained thinly entrenched in Florida and the southwest.)
- A nearly continuous wedge of settlement between the Atlantic shore and the Appalachian mountain chain, extending north and south from what is today central Maine to the lower border of Georgia
- A white population of slightly more than two million, with about a quarter in New England, nearly half in the Chesapeake and Lower South, and the rest in the middle colonies and so-called back-country
- An Indian population greatly reduced in size and pushed well back from the coast, but still a substantial presence through several inland regions—the Iroquois in central New York, the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws in the southeast
- A rapidly growing, African-born (or derived) population of close to half a million, almost all of them slaves, and heavily concentrated in the Chesapeake and Carolina.

And if the bird’s eye were able to peek as well into their thoughts and feelings, what else might have been discovered? What were their chief goals, their most cherished values, their abiding concerns? How did they think about the meaning of their lives? The Indians and Africans are unknowable at that level, but about the colonists somewhat more can be said.

Most of them gained a measure of fulfillment in two ways. First, by achieving what they called a “competence”—a sufficiently good result from farming, or craft production, or, in a few cases, professional activity (ministers, doctors, midwives) to support themselves and their families as fully independent citizens. Dependence on others was anathema to them—what they wished, most of all, to avoid. And, second, by attaining “godliness”—if not as a clear inner reality, then at least as a matter of reputation. Good reputation was always, for these folk, a pre-eminent aim.

Their cosmology, their way of being in the world, was still deeply tradition-bound and, in the literal sense, conservative. They expected always to conserve what the past had bequeathed them—not to innovate, not to experiment, not to improve on the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Experience came to them in circular form, indeed as an endless round of cycles: the diurnal cycle, day followed by night; the lunar cycle, the

waxing and waning of the moon; the annual cycle, spring, summer, autumn, winter; and—this most important of all—the life cycle, birth, childhood, youth, full manhood or womanhood, old age, death. Everything would return eventually to the point from which it had started out: in the Biblical phrasing, “ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” In this way of thinking—and of living—continuity was preferred and novelty viewed as dangerous.

Yet they, the colonial Americans, had *not* entirely come round to the same starting-point as countless generations of their forebears. And some parts of their lives were novel indeed. Without explicitly acknowledging it, they (or their parents or grandparents) had left the familiar track in order to chart a new course. No matter how often—no matter how fervently—they declared themselves to be forever “English,” they could not quite avoid seeing the arc of their difference. There was much they still shared with their cultural kin across the ocean, yet their experience no longer fit the same pattern. They were reminded of this every time they met an Indian, walked in the “wilderness,” ate cornmeal for supper, or heard the howl of a wolf at night. They were changed, inwardly as well as outwardly, and at some level they knew it.

The question then became: Why? Was it all for good? or for ill? None could say with certainty—but this much was clear: America was different from other lands; and the lives they lived within it were exceptional, were “remarkable” (a word they often used) by the standard of their time. Perhaps, therefore, they had been marked—singled out—chosen—to fulfill some special destiny. This understanding, though still quite inchoate as a new era dawned, would be passed on to their descendants, would be sharpened and owned and cherished, and would inform the American story for generations yet unborn.

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