

The Making of the Colonial America
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In today's session we are going to examine the themes, i.e., historical forces of the 17 century that helped develop the nature and direction of Colonial America. In the process of looking at these themes we will be developing an analysis concerning the growth and development of the American society. At the same time there are a series of questions that should be considered as we examine those themes.

1. **Anglo America imitated many features of the Old World but copied them imperfectly.** The intent of settlers was to create a New England. They brought with them institutions, customs, values and behaviors that, they naively believed, could easily be transplanted from one continent to the next. However, upon their arrival to the New World, they were totally unprepared for what was in store for them. What they discovered is that they absolutely knew nothing about this environment. They had not been prepared for generations of a continuous struggle against a

hostile environment—being engaged in a contest that they would more often than not lose.

The English settlers also discovered that there was already established indigenous populations and cultures. They quickly realized that their survival depended upon their relationship with the indigenous populations. Their destinies were intertwined. Added to this mix was the arrival of, perhaps, the most reluctant of all immigrants to the New World, the African. The intertwining of the destinies of the descendants of Asia, Europe and Africa was critical to survival in this strange land.

As the settlers tenaciously attempted to establish those institutions and cultural values they left behind, they underwent a cultural shock. Some of the social and cultural attributes of the native country took hold. Others withered away. The terrain, climate, and resistance of the indigenous populations, to what was perceived as an invasion, forced the new settlers to create new institutions and adapt to new ways of doing things that would help facilitate their survival in this new land. This fact

combined with the absence of crucial English institutions as well as the character, of the New World environment and first generation of settlers, determined that the Anglo American would follow a course of development far different from that of the mother country. Hence, the colonial institutions, although they “adopted or closely resembled their English models, took on an appearance native to and reflective of the new land and people.” The early settlers possessed a unique “American” character that increasingly influenced colonial institutions, ideas, customs and values.

2. **From the very beginning Anglo America fostered a type of economic radicalism.** The early settlers were economic radicals, in part, because they were allowed an unprecedented degree of individual freedom in economics as well as religious and social pursuits. **They inadvertently created a society that measured social status based on wealth-not heredity.** Because economic opportunity fell within the grasp of most individuals, Anglo America afforded upward mobility.

3. The scarcity of labor and abundance of land led to the introduction of slave labor in North America. Even though slavery existed all over the colonies it took root primarily in the South. However, the number of slaves was relatively small – labor problems during the first century of settlement were solved by family members and indentured servants.

4. Because of the availability of land, Anglo Americans experienced a certain degree of democratization of their political institutions. In the colonies voting rights were extended to a far greater segment of the colonial population than in England. Whereas the imposition of property qualifications for voting in England severely limited, the number of men allowed to vote. In Anglo America, where land was abundant, the opposite effect was true. The broader the base of participation, the more democratic that society is.

5. Perhaps the most significant aspects of Old World culture brought to Anglo- America was the heritage of Protestantism. Rather than representing a cross section of European religion, the

British portion of the New World championed a peculiar brand of religious nonconformity. That is, North America– and especially the colonies north of the Chesapeake– attracted settlers who not only opposed Catholicism but who refused to “conform to the beliefs and practices of certain Protestant state churches in England. Often persecuted or at least disdained for their beliefs, many nonconformists fled to America to find religious freedom. They sought to escape the evil and corruption they saw all around them. Convinced that they were living in the last days before the end of the world, they believed that they as God’s chosen remnant had a Christian obligation to preserve the true, pure church from corruption. (Lucas, p.53-54)

The intent of these religious reformers was to build a fortress in the wilderness– A New Jerusalem– that would not only protect religious freedom, but would also hold forth God’s truth against the forces of Satan and the Antichrist. However, the harshness of their new life, compounded by the reality of the indigenous people, the incommensurable climate, disease and

threats from the Catholic powers France and Spain conditioned the people to see their lives in the light that Protestant ideology purported.

Religion played a vital role in the lives of the settlers. It explained their origins, their place in the scheme of things and their destiny. It served as a basis for most theories of political, economic and personal behavior. Consequently, even as the settler became more prosperous and more materialistic they developed a siege mentality that manifested itself in colonial culture— not only in religion, but in secular life as well. In addition, ideas of Protestantism led the colonist in two conflicting directions. One toward conformity to a pure established church and the other toward freedom to follow the lead of one's own consciousness. Both tendencies left their mark on Anglo-American thought, behavior, values and the religious as well as secular institutions. By the 18th century the impulse toward autonomy became the dominant force in Anglo-America.

In looking back at the 17th century world of British North

America it becomes apparent that it was shaped by forces that caused it to develop into a world quite different from that of England. Both the absence of critical institutions, as well as the evolving character of the settlers and the ideas they brought with them ensured that they would travel a different course than that of the Old World. But even if the colonists had successfully transplanted their native culture intact, they would have deviated from the old pattern simply because the colonies were created by both personal ambitions and English imperial goals.

The 17th century colonial world reflected the determination and purpose of its founders. Those who risked the perils of colonization did so because they had dreams of freedom— a better life. They came seeking wealth, or higher social status, religious freedom , or perhaps a godly society. Some colonies began as economic ventures, others as religious experiments. But what- ever the dream, America gave them a chance to realize it, something the English society could not do. But by the middle of the 17th century, as the settlers pursued personal

ambitions, perhaps unintentionally, they began to feel the impact the imperial purpose that justified the colonial existence to the English Crown and England.

The colonies were a welcomed enterprise. Individual success contributed to the general prosperity of the colonies. A mutual relationship developed between the colonies and England. The colonies sold raw materials to England and bought English manufactured goods— and arrangement that benefitted both, in terms of economic growth. Personal goals achieved imperial ends. In final analysis, what distinguished the English colonies from the French and Spanish colonies was the harmony with which personal goals achieved imperial ends. The imperial mission, like the personal mission of each settler, proved highly successful. The prosperity of each colonist enhanced the general prosperity of England. Because they so successful, North American colonies were left free to govern and regulate their growth and development.