

Unit 2 - Colliding Cultures

Focus Questions

1. Discuss different European justifications for colonization (power and empire, military, religious, economic, etc.) and compare and contrast their patterns of conquest of the New World. How do you explain the similarities and differences?
2. Why did the Jamestown settlement struggle initially, and how did tobacco change things? How did concepts of superiority first threaten the colony, then become the foundation for defeating the Powhatan and setting a pattern for English conquest of the New World?
3. How and why was the concept of race a fluid one during the early years of the Atlantic slave trade, and how did perceptions of “the other” contribute to the formation of racial identities and hierarchies in the Americas?
4. How and why were English Puritan settlements so different from other settlements in the Americas? What contributed to their increasing success?

Key Terms

Apalachee

“Black Legend”

“Middle Ground”

Richard Hakluyt

Jamestown

Tobacco

Indentured servants

Puritan



Theodor de Bry, "Negotiating Peace With the Indians," 1634, Virginia Historical Society.

Introduction

As described in the previous chapter, the Columbian Exchange transformed both sides of the Atlantic but with dramatically disparate outcomes. New diseases wiped out entire civilizations in the Americas, while newly imported nutrient-rich foodstuffs enabled a European population boom. Spain benefited most immediately as the wealth of the Aztec and Incan Empires strengthened the Spanish monarchy. Spain used its new riches to gain an advantage over other European nations, but this advantage was soon contested. Portugal, France, the Netherlands, and England all raced to the New World, eager to match the gains of the Spanish. Native peoples greeted the new visitors with responses ranging from welcoming cooperation to aggressive violence, but the ravages of disease and the possibility of new trading relationships enabled Europeans to create settlements all along the western rim of the Atlantic world. New empires would emerge from these tenuous beginnings, and by the end of the seventeenth century, Spain would lose its privileged position to its rivals. An age of colonization had begun and, with it, a great collision of cultures commenced.

2.1 – Spanish America

Spain extended its reach in the Americas after reaping the benefits of its colonies in Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. Expeditions slowly began combing the continent and bringing Europeans into the modern-day United States in the hopes of establishing religious and economic dominance in a new territory. Juan Ponce de León arrived in the area named La Florida in 1513 where he found between 150,000 and 300,000 Native Americans. However, two and a half centuries of subsequent contact with European and African peoples—whether through war, slave raids, or, most dramatically, foreign disease—decimated Florida's indigenous population. European explorers, meanwhile, had hoped to find great wealth in Florida, but reality never aligned with their imaginations.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Spanish colonizers fought frequently with Florida's Native peoples as well as with other Europeans. In the 1560s Spain expelled French [Protestants](#), called Huguenots, from the area near modern-day Jacksonville in northeast Florida. In 1586 English privateer Sir Francis Drake burned the wooden settlement of St.

Augustine. At the dawn of the seventeenth century, Spain's reach in Florida extended from the mouth of the St. Johns River south to the environs of St. Augustine—an area of roughly 1,000 square miles. The Spaniards attempted to duplicate methods for establishing control used previously in Mexico, the Caribbean, and the Andes. The Crown granted missionaries the right to live among Timucua and Guale villagers in the late 1500s and early 1600s and encouraged settlement through the *encomienda* system (grants of Indian labor).¹



1513 Atlantic map from cartographer Martin Waldseemüller. Wikimedia.

In the 1630s, the mission system extended into the **Apalachee** district in the Florida panhandle. The Apalachee, one of the most powerful tribes in Florida at the time of contact, claimed the territory from the modern Florida-Georgia border to the Gulf of Mexico. Apalachee farmers grew an abundance of corn and other crops. Indian traders carried surplus products east along the Camino Real (the royal road) that connected the western anchor of the mission system with St. Augustine. Spanish settlers drove cattle eastward across the St. Johns River and established ranches as far west as Apalachee. Still, Spain held Florida tenuously.

Farther west, in 1598, Juan de Oñate led four hundred settlers, soldiers, and missionaries from Mexico into New Mexico. The Spanish Southwest had brutal beginnings. When Oñate sacked the Pueblo city of Acoma, the “sky city,” the Spaniards slaughtered nearly half of its roughly 1,500 inhabitants, including women and children. Oñate ordered one foot cut off every surviving male over age fifteen, and he enslaved the remaining women and children.² By 1608 the Spanish declared New Mexico a royal province and Santa Fe (“holy faith” in Spanish) became the capital for New Mexico, the first permanent European seat of government in what would become the United States, in 1610. Few Spaniards relocated to the Southwest because of the distance from Mexico City and the dry and hostile environment. Thus, the Spanish never achieved a commanding presence in the region. By 1680, only about three thousand colonists called Spanish New Mexico home.³ There, they traded with and exploited the local Puebloan peoples, and established extensive [missions](#) for indigenous relocation and Catholic conversion; in 1680 there were fifty Catholic monasteries and churches in New Mexico. These changes had wrought significant distrust and devastation among Native Americans in the region, as well as oppressive persecution of traditional practices and beliefs. In 1680, a spiritual healer named Popé launched a simultaneous uprising of Native American villagers and mission inhabitants throughout the region. This Pueblo Revolt (also called Popé’s Rebellion) focused on destroying Spanish mission authorities: Popé and his followers burned Catholic churches, destroyed relics, and executed more than 400 Spanish settlers (21 of whom were priests). The Pueblo Revolt is considered the greatest defeat for European colonizers in North America, and the Spanish would not regain control of the New Mexico province for twelve more years. Despite Popé’s victory, indigenous inhabitants of New Mexico could not maintain after decades

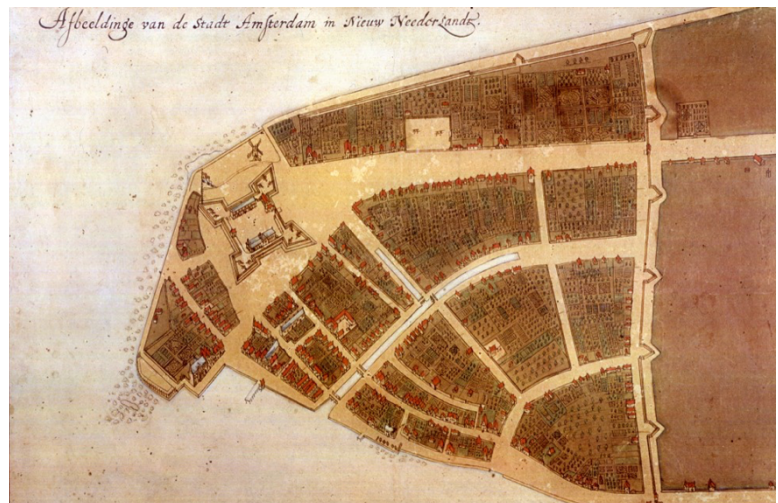
of hardship and devastation. The region's Puebloan population had plummeted from as many as sixty thousand in 1600 to about seventeen thousand at the time of the Pueblo Revolt.⁴

Spain shifted strategies after the military expeditions wove their way through the southern and western half of North America. Missions became the engine of colonization in North America. Missionaries, most of whom were members of the Franciscan religious order, provided Spain with an advance guard in North America. Catholicism had always justified Spanish conquest, and colonization always carried religious imperatives. By the early seventeenth century, Spanish friars had established dozens of missions along the Rio Grande and in California.

2.2 – Spain's Rivals Emerge

While Spain plundered the New World, unrest plagued Europe. The Protestant Reformation threw England and France, the two European powers capable of contesting Spain, into turmoil. Long and expensive conflicts drained time, resources, and lives. Millions died from religious violence in France alone. As the violence diminished in Europe, however, religious and political rivalries continued in the New World.

The Spanish exploitation of New Spain's riches inspired European monarchs to invest in exploration and conquest. Reports of Spanish atrocities spread throughout Europe and provided a humanitarian justification for European colonization. An English reprint of the writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas bore the sensational title "Popery Truly Display'd in its Bloody Colours: Or, a Faithful Narrative of the Horrid and Unexampled Massacres, Butcheries, and all manners of Cruelties that Hell and Malice could invent, committed by the Popish Spanish." An English writer explained that the Indians "were simple and plain men, and lived without great labour," but in their lust for gold the Spaniards "forced the people (that were not used to labour) to stand all the daie [sic] in the hot sun gathering gold in the sand of the rivers. By this means a great number of them (not used to such pains) died, and a great number of them (seeing themselves brought from so quiet a life to such misery and slavery) of desperation killed themselves. And many would not marry, because they would not have their children slaves to the Spaniards."⁵ The Spanish accused their critics of fostering a "**Black Legend.**" The Black Legend drew on religious differences and political rivalries. Spain had successful conquests in France, Italy, Germany, and the Netherlands and left many in those nations yearning to break free from Spanish influence. English writers argued that Spanish barbarities were foiling a tremendous opportunity for the expansion of Christianity across the globe and that a benevolent conquest of the New World by non-Spanish monarchies offered the surest salvation of the New World's pagan masses. With these religious justifications, and with obvious economic motives, Spain's rivals arrived in the New World.



The earliest plan of New Amsterdam (now Manhattan), 1660. Wikimedia.

2.3 – The French

The French crown subsidized exploration in the early sixteenth century. Early French explorers sought a fabled Northwest Passage, a mythical waterway passing through the North American continent to Asia. Despite the wealth of the New World, Asia's riches still beckoned to Europeans. Canada's St. Lawrence River appeared to be such a passage, stretching deep into the continent and into the Great Lakes. French colonial possessions centered on these bodies of water (and, later, down the Mississippi River to the port of New Orleans).



A depiction of New Orleans in 1726 when it was an eight-year-old French frontier settlement. Jean-Pierre Lassus, *Veüe et Perspective de la Nouvelle Orleans, 1726*, Centre des archives d'outre-mer, France. Wikimedia.

French colonization developed through investment from private trading companies. Traders established Port Royal in Acadia (Nova Scotia) in 1603 and launched trading expeditions that stretched down the Atlantic coast as far as Cape Cod. The needs of the fur trade (focused on beaver pelts) set the future pattern of French colonization. Founded in 1608 under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain, Quebec provided the foothold for what would become New France. French fur traders placed a higher value on cooperating with the Indians than on establishing a successful French colonial footprint. Asserting dominance in the region could have been to their own detriment, as it might have compromised their access to skilled Indian trappers, and therefore wealth. Few Frenchmen traveled to the New World to settle permanently. In fact, few traveled at all. Many persecuted French Protestants (Huguenots) sought to emigrate after France criminalized Protestantism in 1685, but all non-Catholics were forbidden in New France.⁶

The French preference for trade over permanent settlement fostered more cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships with Native Americans than was typical among the Spanish and English. Perhaps eager to debunk the anti-Catholic elements of the Black Legend, the French worked to cultivate cooperation with Indians. Jesuit missionaries, for instance, adopted different conversion strategies than the Spanish Franciscans. Spanish missionaries brought Indians into enclosed missions, whereas Jesuits more often lived with or alongside Indian groups. Many French fur traders married Indian women.⁷ The offspring of Indian women and French men were so common in New France that the French developed a word for these children, *Métis(sage)*. The Huron people developed a particularly close relationship with the French, and many converted to Christianity and engaged in the fur trade. But close relationships with the French would come at a high cost. The Huron were decimated by the ravages of European disease, and entanglements in French and Dutch conflicts proved disastrous.⁸ Despite this, some Native peoples maintained alliances with the French.

Pressure from the powerful Iroquois in the East pushed many Algonquian-speaking peoples toward French territory in the mid-seventeenth century, and together they crafted what historians have called a **“middle ground,”** a kind of cross-cultural space that allowed for native and European interaction, negotiation, and accommodation. French traders adopted—sometimes clumsily—the gift-giving and mediation strategies expected of Native leaders. Natives similarly engaged the impersonal European market and adapted—often haphazardly—to European laws. The Great Lakes “middle ground” experienced tumultuous success throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth

centuries until English colonial officials and American settlers swarmed the region. The pressures of European expansion strained even the closest bonds.⁹

2.4 – The Dutch

The Netherlands, a small maritime nation with great wealth, achieved considerable colonial success. In 1581, the Netherlands had officially broken away from the [Hapsburgs](#) and won a reputation as the freest of the new European nations. Dutch women maintained separate legal identities from their husbands and could therefore hold property and inherit full estates.

Ravaged by the turmoil of the Reformation, the Dutch embraced greater religious tolerance and freedom of the press than other European nations.¹⁰ Radical Protestants, Catholics, and Jews flocked to the Netherlands. The English Pilgrims, for instance, fled first to the Netherlands before sailing to the New World years later. The Netherlands built its colonial empire through the work of experienced merchants and skilled sailors. The Dutch were the most advanced [capitalists](#) in the modern world and marshaled extensive financial resources by creating innovative financial organizations such as the Amsterdam Stock Exchange and the East India Company. Although the Dutch offered liberties, they offered very little democracy—power remained in the hands of only a few. Moreover, slavery was an essential part of Dutch capitalist triumphs; the Dutch advanced the slave trade and brought African slaves with them to the New World.

Sharing the European hunger for access to Asia, in 1609 the Dutch commissioned the Englishman Henry Hudson to discover the fabled Northwest Passage through North America. He failed, of course, but nevertheless found the Hudson River and claimed modern-day New York for the Dutch. There they established New Netherland, an essential part of the Dutch New World empire. The Netherlands chartered the Dutch West India Company in 1621 and established colonies in Africa, the Caribbean, and North America. The island of Manhattan provided a launching pad to support its Caribbean colonies and attack Spanish trade.

Spiteful of the Spanish and mindful of the Black Legend, the Dutch were determined not to repeat Spanish atrocities. They fashioned guidelines for New Netherland that conformed to the ideas of Hugo Grotius, a legal philosopher who believed that Native peoples possessed the same natural rights as Europeans. Colony leaders insisted that land be purchased; in 1626 Peter Minuit therefore “bought” Manhattan from Munsee Indians.¹¹ Despite the seemingly honorable intentions, it is likely the Dutch paid the wrong Indians for the land (either intentionally or unintentionally) or that the Munsee and the Dutch understood the transaction in very different terms. Transactions like these illustrated both the Dutch attempt to find a more peaceful process of colonization and the inconsistency between European and Native American understandings of property.

Like the French, the Dutch sought to profit, not to conquer. Trade with Native peoples became New Netherland’s central economic activity. Dutch traders carried wampum along Native trade routes and exchanged it for beaver pelts. Wampum consisted of shell beads fashioned by Algonquian Indians on the southern New England coast and was valued as a ceremonial and diplomatic commodity among the Iroquois. Wampum became a currency that could buy anything from a loaf of bread to a plot of land.¹² In addition to developing these trading networks, the Dutch also established farms, settlements, and lumber camps. The West India Company directors implemented the [patroon system](#) to encourage colonization. This system granted large estates to wealthy landlords, who subsequently paid

passage for the tenants to work their land. Expanding Dutch settlements correlated with deteriorating relations with local Indians. In the interior of the continent, the Dutch retained valuable alliances with the Iroquois to maintain Beverwijck, modern-day Albany, as a hub for the fur trade.¹³ In the places where the Dutch built permanent settlements, the ideals of peaceful colonization succumbed to the settlers' increasing demand for land. Armed conflicts erupted as colonial settlements encroached on Native villages and hunting lands. Profit and peace, it seemed, could not coexist.

Labor shortages, meanwhile, crippled Dutch colonization. The patroon system failed to bring enough tenants, and the colony could not attract a sufficient number of workers to satisfy the colony's backers. In response, the colony imported eleven company-owned slaves in 1626, the same year that Minuit purchased Manhattan. Slaves were tasked with building New Amsterdam (modern-day New York City), including a defensive wall along the northern edge of the colony (the site of modern-day Wall Street). They created its roads and maintained its all-important port. Fears of racial mixing led the Dutch to import enslaved women, enabling the formation of African Dutch families. The colony's first African marriage occurred in 1641, and by 1650 there were at least five hundred African slaves in the colony. By 1660, New Amsterdam had the largest urban slave population on the continent.¹⁴

As was typical of the practice of African slavery in much of the early seventeenth century, Dutch slavery in New Amsterdam was less comprehensively exploitative than later systems of American slavery. Some enslaved Africans, for instance, successfully sued for back wages. When several company-owned slaves fought for the colony against the Munsee Indians, they petitioned for their freedom and won a kind of "half freedom" that allowed them to work their own land in return for paying a large tithe, or tax, to their masters. The children of these "half-free" laborers remained held in bondage by the West India Company, however. The Dutch, who so proudly touted their liberties, grappled with the reality of African slavery, and some New Netherlanders protested the enslavement of Christianized Africans. The economic goals of the colony slowly crowded out these cultural and religious objections, and the much-boasted liberties of the Dutch came to exist alongside increasingly brutal systems of slavery.

2.5 – The Portuguese

The Portuguese had been leaders in Atlantic navigation well ahead of Columbus's voyage. But the incredible wealth flowing from New Spain piqued the rivalry between the two Iberian countries, and accelerated Portuguese colonization efforts. This rivalry created a crisis within the Catholic world as Spain and Portugal squared off in a battle for colonial supremacy. The pope intervened and divided the New World with the Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494. Land east of the Tordesillas Meridian, an imaginary line dividing South America, would be given to Portugal, whereas land west of the line was reserved for Spanish conquest. In return for the license to conquer, both Portugal and Spain were instructed to treat the natives with Christian compassion and to bring them under the protection of the Church.

Lucrative colonies in Africa and India initially preoccupied Portugal, but by 1530 the Portuguese turned their attention to the land that would become Brazil, driving out French traders and establishing permanent settlements. Gold and silver mines dotted the interior of the colony, but two industries powered early colonial Brazil: sugar and the slave trade. In fact, over the entire history of the Atlantic slave trade, more Africans were enslaved in Brazil than in any other colony in the Atlantic World. Gold mines emerged in greater numbers throughout the eighteenth century but still never rivaled the profitability of sugar or slave trading.

Jesuit missionaries brought Christianity to Brazil, but strong elements of African and Native spirituality mixed with orthodox Catholicism to create a unique religious culture. This culture resulted from the demographics of Brazilian slavery. High mortality rates on sugar plantations required a steady influx of new slaves, thus perpetuating the cultural connection between Brazil and Africa. The reliance on new imports of slaves increased the likelihood of resistance, however, and escaped slaves managed to create several free settlements, called *quilombos*. These settlements drew from both African and Native slaves, and despite frequent attacks, several endured throughout the long history of Brazilian slavery.¹⁵

Despite the arrival of these new Europeans, Spain continued to dominate the New World. The wealth flowing from the exploitation of the Aztec and Incan Empires greatly eclipsed the profits of other European nations. But this dominance would not last long. By the end of the sixteenth century, the powerful Spanish *Armada* would be destroyed, and the English would begin to rule the waves.

2.6 – English Visions of Colonization

Spain had a one-hundred-year head start on New World colonization, and a jealous England eyed the enormous wealth that Spain gleaned. The Protestant Reformation had shaken England, but when Elizabeth I assumed the English crown in 1558 she oversaw the emergence of England's so-called golden age, which included the expansion of trade, exploration, and scientific and literary achievements. English *mercantilism*, a state-assisted manufacturing and trading system, created and maintained markets. The markets provided a steady supply of consumers and laborers, stimulated economic expansion, and increased English wealth.



Nicholas Hilliard, *The Battle of Gravelines*, 1588. Wikimedia.

However, wrenching social and economic changes unsettled the English population. The island's population increased from fewer than three million in 1500 to over five million by the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ The skyrocketing cost of land coincided with plummeting farming income. Rents and prices rose but wages stagnated. Moreover, movements to enclose public land—sparked by the transition of English landholders from agriculture to livestock raising—evicted tenants from the land and created hordes of landless, jobless peasants that haunted the cities and countryside. One quarter to one half of the population lived in extreme poverty.¹⁷

New World colonization won support in England amid a time of rising English fortunes among the wealthy, a tense Spanish rivalry, and mounting internal social unrest. But supporters of English colonization always touted more than economic gains and mere national self-interest. They claimed to be doing God's work. Many claimed that colonization would glorify God, England, and Protestantism by Christianizing the New World's pagan peoples. Advocates such as **Richard Hakluyt** the Younger and John Dee, for instance, drew upon *The History of the Kings of Britain*, written by the

twelfth-century monk Geoffrey of Monmouth, and its mythical account of King Arthur’s conquest and Christianization of pagan lands to justify American conquest.¹⁸ Moreover, promoters promised that the conversion of New World Indians would satisfy God and glorify England’s “Virgin Queen,” Elizabeth I, who was seen as nearly divine by some in England. The English—and other European Protestant colonizers—imagined themselves superior to the Spanish, who still bore the Black Legend of inhuman cruelty. English colonization, supporters argued, would prove that superiority.

In his 1584 *Discourse on Western Planting*, Richard Hakluyt amassed the supposed religious, moral, and exceptional economic benefits of colonization. He repeated the Black Legend of Spanish New World terrorism and attacked the sins of Catholic Spain. He promised that English colonization could strike a blow against Spanish heresy and bring Protestant religion to the New World. English interference, Hakluyt suggested, might provide the only salvation from Catholic rule in the New World. The New World, too, he said, offered obvious economic advantages. Trade and resource extraction would enrich the English treasury. England, for instance, could find plentiful materials to outfit a world-class navy. Moreover, he said, the New World could provide an escape for England’s vast armies of landless “vagabonds.” Expanded trade, he argued, would not only bring profit but also provide work for England’s jobless poor. A Christian enterprise, a blow against Spain, an economic stimulus, and a social safety valve all beckoned the English toward a commitment to colonization.¹⁹

This noble rhetoric veiled the coarse economic motives that brought England to the New World. New economic structures and a new merchant class paved the way for colonization. England’s merchants lacked estates, but they had new plans to build wealth. By collaborating with new government-sponsored trading monopolies and employing financial innovations such as [joint-stock companies](#), England’s merchants sought to improve on the Dutch economic system. Spain was extracting enormous material wealth from the New World; why should not England do the same?

Joint-stock companies, the ancestors of modern corporations, became the initial instruments of colonization. With government monopolies, shared profits, and managed risks, these money-making ventures could attract and manage the vast capital needed for colonization. In 1606 James I approved the formation of the Virginia Company (named after Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen).

2.7 – Early Attempts at English Settlement

Rather than formal colonization, however, the most successful early English ventures in the New World were a form of state-sponsored piracy known as privateering. Queen Elizabeth sponsored sailors, or “Sea Dogges,” such as John Hawkins and Francis Drake, to plunder Spanish ships and towns in the Americas. Privateers earned a substantial profit both for themselves and for the English crown. England practiced piracy on a scale, one historian wrote, “that transforms crime into politics.”²⁰ Francis Drake harried Spanish ships throughout the Western Hemisphere and raided Spanish caravans as far away as the coast of Peru on the Pacific Ocean. In 1580 Elizabeth rewarded her skilled pirate with knighthood. But Elizabeth walked a fine line. With Protestant-Catholic tensions already running high, English privateering provoked Spain. Tensions worsened after the execution of Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots. In 1588, King Philip II of Spain unleashed the fabled Armada. With 130 ships, 8,000 sailors, and 18,000 soldiers, Spain launched the largest invasion in history to destroy the British navy and depose Elizabeth.

An island nation, England depended on a robust navy for trade and territorial expansion. England had fewer ships than Spain, but they were smaller and swifter. They successfully harassed the armada, forcing it to retreat to the Netherlands for reinforcements. But then a surprise storm, celebrated in England as the “divine wind,” annihilated the remainder of the fleet.²¹ The destruction of the armada changed the course of world history. It not only saved England and secured English Protestantism, it also opened the seas to English expansion and paved the way for England’s colonial future. By 1600, England stood ready to embark on its dominance over North America.

English colonization would look very different from Spanish or French colonization. England had long been trying to conquer Catholic Ireland. Rather than integrating with the Irish and trying to convert them to Protestantism, England more often simply seized land through violence and pushed out the former inhabitants, leaving them to move elsewhere or to die. These same tactics would later be deployed in North American invasions. English colonization, however, began haltingly. Sir Humphrey Gilbert labored throughout the late sixteenth century to establish a colony in Newfoundland but failed. In 1587, with a predominantly male cohort of 150 English colonizers, John White reestablished an abandoned settlement on North Carolina’s Roanoke Island. Supply shortages prompted White to return to England for additional support, but the Spanish Armada and the mobilization of British naval efforts stranded him in Britain for several years. When he finally returned to Roanoke, he found the colony abandoned. What befell the failed colony? White found the word *Croatan* carved into a tree or a post in the abandoned colony. Historians presume the colonists, short of food, may have fled for a nearby island of that name and encountered its settled native population. Others offer violence as an explanation. Regardless, the English colonists were never heard from again. When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, no Englishmen had yet established a permanent North American colony.

After King James made peace with Spain in 1604, privateering no longer held out the promise of cheap wealth. Colonization assumed a new urgency. The Virginia Company, established in 1606, drew inspiration from Cortés and the Spanish conquests. It hoped to find gold and silver as well as other valuable trading commodities in the New World: glass, iron, furs, pitch, tar, and anything else the country could supply. The company planned to identify a navigable river with a deep harbor, away from the eyes of the Spanish. There they would find an Indian trading network and extract a fortune from the New World.



Incolarum Virginiae piscandi ratio (The Method of Fishing of the Inhabitants of Virginia), c. 1590. The Encyclopedia Virginia.

2.8 – Jamestown

In April 1607 Englishmen aboard three ships—the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery*—sailed forty miles up the James River (named for the English king) in present-day Virginia. The uninhabited peninsula they selected for settlement was upriver and out of sight of Spanish patrols. It offered easy defense against ground assaults, was uninhabited, and located close to many Indian villages and their potentially lucrative trade networks. But the location was a disaster. Indians had ignored the peninsula for two reasons: terrible soil hampered agriculture, and brackish tidal water led to debilitating disease. Despite these setbacks, the English built **Jamestown**, the first permanent English colony in what would become the United States.

The English had not entered a wilderness but had arrived amid a people they called the Powhatan Confederacy. The **Powhatan**, Wahunsenacawh, led nearly ten thousand Algonquian-speaking Indians in the Chesapeake. They cleared brush and burned vast acreage to create sprawling artificial parklike grasslands so they could easily hunt deer, elk, and bison. The Powhatan raised corn, beans, squash, and possibly sunflowers, rotating

acreage throughout the Chesapeake. Without plows, manure, or draft animals, the Powhatan produced a remarkable number of calories cheaply and efficiently.

Jamestown was a profit-seeking venture backed by investors. The colonists were mostly gentlemen and proved entirely unprepared for the challenges ahead. They hoped for easy riches but found none. As John Smith later complained, they “would rather starve than work,”²² and did. Disease and starvation ravaged the colonists, thanks in part to the peninsula’s unhealthy environment and the fact that supplies from England arrived sporadically or spoiled. Fewer than half of the original colonists survived the first nine months. Smith, a yeoman’s son and capable leader, took command of the crippled colony and promised, “He that will not work shall not eat.” He navigated Indian diplomacy, claiming that he was captured and sentenced to death but Powhatan’s daughter, Pocahontas, intervened to save his life. She would later marry another colonist, John Rolfe, and die in England.

The Powhatan kept the English alive that first winter. He had welcomed the English and placed a high value on metal ax-heads, kettles, tools, and guns and eagerly traded furs and other abundant goods for them. With ten thousand confederated natives and with food in abundance, the Indians had little to fear and much to gain from the isolated outpost of sick and dying Englishmen.



John White, “Village of the Secotan,” 1585. Wikimedia.

Despite reinforcements, the English continued to die. Four hundred settlers arrived in 1609, but the overwhelmed colony entered a desperate “starving time” in the winter of 1609–1610. Supplies were lost at sea and relations with the Indians deteriorated, leading the colonists to a drawn-out guerrilla war with the Powhatan. Disaster loomed for the colony and its settlers ate everything they could, roaming the woods for nuts and berries. They boiled leather and dug up graves to eat the corpses of their former neighbors. One man was executed for killing and eating his wife. Some years later, George Percy recalled the colonists’ desperation during these years, when he served as the colony’s president: “Having fed upon our horses and other beasts as long as they lasted, we were glad to make shift with vermin as dogs, cats, rats and mice . . . as to eat boots shoes or any other leather. . . . And now famine beginning to look ghastly and pale in every face, that nothing was spared to maintain life and to doe those things which seem incredible, as to dig up dead corpses out of graves and to eat them.”²³ Archaeological excavations in 2012 exhumed the bones of a fourteen-year-old whose remains exhibited signs of cannibalism.²⁴ All but sixty settlers would die by the summer of 1610.

2.9 – Tobacco Cultivation in Virginia

Little improved over the next several years. By 1616, 80 percent of all English immigrants who had arrived in Jamestown had perished. England’s first American colony was a catastrophe. But the colony was reorganized and the 1614 marriage of Pocahontas to John Rolfe eased relations with the Powhatan. However, the colony still limped along as a starving, commercially disastrous enterprise. The colonists were unable to find any profitable commodities and

remained dependent on the Indians and sporadic shipments from England for food. Ultimately, the cultivation of **tobacco** would save Jamestown. By the time King James I described tobacco as a “noxious weed . . . loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, and dangerous to the lungs,” it had already taken Europe by storm. In 1616 John Rolfe crossed tobacco strains from Trinidad and Guiana and planted Virginia’s first tobacco crop. In 1617 the colony sent its first cargo of tobacco back to England. The “noxious weed,” a native of the New World, fetched a high price in Europe and the tobacco boom began in Virginia and then later spread to Maryland. Within fifteen years American colonists were exporting over five hundred thousand pounds of tobacco per year. Within forty years, they were exporting fifteen million.²⁵

Tobacco saved Virginia from ruin, incentivized further colonization, and laid the groundwork for what would become the United States. With a new market open, Virginia drew not only merchants and traders but also settlers. Colonists came in droves, mostly young, mostly male, and mostly **indentured servants** who signed contracts called indentures that bonded them to employers for a period of years in return for passage across the ocean. But even the rough terms of servitude were no match for the promise of land and potential profits that beckoned English farmers. But still there were not enough of them. Tobacco was a labor-intensive crop and ambitious planters, with seemingly limitless land before them, lacked only laborers to escalate their wealth and status. The colony’s great labor vacuum inspired the creation of the “headright policy” in 1618: any person who migrated to Virginia would automatically receive fifty acres of land and any immigrant whose passage they paid would entitle them to fifty acres more. In 1619, the Virginia Company established the House of **Burgesses**, a limited representative body composed of white landowners that first met in Jamestown. That same year, a Dutch slave ship sold twenty Africans to the Virginia colonists and the institution of slavery was born in English North America.

Soon the tobacco-growing colonists expanded beyond the bounds of Jamestown’s deadly peninsula. When it became clear that the English were not merely intent on maintaining a small trading post but sought a permanent, ever-expanding colony, conflict with the Powhatan Confederacy became almost inevitable. The Powhatan died in 1622 and was succeeded by his brother, Opechancanough, who promised to drive the land-hungry colonists back into the sea. He launched a surprise attack and in a single day (March 22, 1622) killed over 350 colonists, or one third of all the colonists in Virginia.²⁶ The colonists retaliated and revisited the massacres on Indian settlements many times over. The massacre freed the English to drive the Indians off their land and the governor of Virginia declared it colonial policy to achieve the “expulsion of the savages to gain the free range of the country.”²⁷ War and disease destroyed the remnants of the Chesapeake Indians and tilted the balance of power decisively toward the English colonizers. In 1622, at the dawn of the tobacco boom, Jamestown had still seemed a failure. But the rise of tobacco and the destruction of the Powhatan turned the tide. Colonists escaped the deadly peninsula and immigrants poured into the colony to grow tobacco and turn a profit for the Crown.

2.10 – Slavery in Early Colonial North America

English colonists brought to the New World particular visions of racial, cultural, and religious supremacy. Despite starving in the shadow of the Powhatan Confederacy, English colonists nevertheless judged themselves physically, spiritually, and technologically superior to Native peoples in North America. Christianity, metallurgy, intensive agriculture, transatlantic navigation, and even wheat all magnified the English sense of superiority. This sense of superiority, when coupled with outbreaks of violence, left the English feeling entitled to indigenous lands and resources.

Spanish conquerors established the framework for the Atlantic slave trade over a century before the first chained Africans arrived at Jamestown. Even Bartolomé de Las Casas, celebrated for his pleas to save Native Americans from colonial butchery, for a time recommended that indigenous labor be replaced by importing Africans. Early English settlers from the Caribbean and Atlantic coast of North America mostly imitated European ideas of African inferiority. Concepts of “race” and racial hierarchies followed the expansion of slavery across the Atlantic world. Skin color and race suddenly seemed fixed and some English equated Africans with categorical blackness and blackness with Sin, “the handmaid and symbol of baseness.”²⁸ An English essayist in 1695 wrote that “a negro will always be a negro, carry him to Greenland, feed him chalk, feed and manage him never so many ways.”²⁹ More and more Europeans embraced the notions that Europeans and Africans were of distinct races and that, according to the Old Testament of the Bible, black people had been doomed to perpetual enslavement.

However, in the early years of American slavery, ideas about race were not yet fixed and the practice of slavery was not yet codified. The first generations of Africans in English North America faced miserable conditions, but, in contrast to later American history, their initial servitude was not necessarily permanent, heritable, or even particularly disgraceful. Africans were definitively set apart as fundamentally different from their white counterparts and faced longer terms of service and harsher punishments, but, like the indentured white servants whisked away from English slums, these first Africans in North America could also work for only a set number of years before becoming free landowners themselves. The Angolan Anthony Johnson, for instance, was sold into servitude and arrived in Virginia in 1621 but fulfilled his indenture and became a prosperous tobacco planter himself.³⁰ It was not until the 1660s that the Virginia colony formally defined the children of enslaved mothers as slaves themselves, even if their fathers were free and/or white or if those children had been baptized. Economic and social conditions in both England and the Atlantic World—including a decline in indentures and the chartering of the Royal African Company as a slaving enterprise in 1672—would further increase the transportation of African slaves to North American English colonies and influence further solidification of racial and socioeconomic hierarchies.

2.11 – The Puritan Origins of New England

The English colonies in New England established from 1620 onward were founded with loftier goals than those in Virginia. Although migrants to New England expected economic profit, religious motives directed the rhetoric and much of the reality of these colonies. Not every English person who moved to New England during the seventeenth century was a **Puritan**, but Puritans dominated the politics, religion, and culture of New England. Even after 1700, the region’s Puritan inheritance shaped many aspects of its history.

The term *Puritan* began as an insult, and its recipients usually referred to each other as “the godly” if they used a specific term at all. Puritans believed that the [Church of England](#) did not distance itself far enough from Catholicism after Henry VIII broke with Rome in the 1530s. They largely agreed with European Calvinists—followers of theologian Jean Calvin—on matters of religious doctrine. Calvinists believed that humankind was redeemed by

God’s grace alone, and that the fate of an individual’s immortal soul was predestined; the happy minority that God had already chosen to save were known among English Puritans as the Elect. Calvinists also argued that the decoration of churches, reliance on ornate ceremony, and corrupt priesthood obscured God’s message. They believed that reading the Bible was the best way to understand God and supported its translation from Latin into vernacular languages like French, German, and English. Puritans were stereotyped by their enemies as dour killjoys, and the exaggeration has endured. It is certainly true that the Puritans’ disdain for excess and opposition to many holidays popular in Europe (including Christmas, which, as Puritans never tired of reminding everyone, the Bible never told



Seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. *The History Project (UC Davis).*

anyone to celebrate) lent themselves to caricature. But Puritans understood themselves as advocating a reasonable middle path in a corrupt world. It would never occur to a Puritan, for example, to abstain from alcohol or sex.

During the first century after the English Reformation (c. 1530–1630) Puritans sought to “purify” the Church of England of all practices that smacked of Catholicism, advocating a simpler worship service, the abolition of ornate churches, and other reforms. They had some success in pushing the Church of England in a more Calvinist direction, but with the coronation of King Charles I (r. 1625–1649), the Puritans gained an implacable foe that cast English Puritans as excessive and dangerous. Facing growing persecution, the Puritans began the Great Migration, during which about twenty thousand people traveled to New England between 1630 and 1640. The Puritans (unlike the small band of separatist “Pilgrims” who founded Plymouth Colony in 1620) remained committed to reforming the Church of England but temporarily decamped to North America to accomplish this task. Leaders like John Winthrop insisted they were not separating from, or abandoning, England but were rather forming a godly community in America that would be a “City on a Hill” and an example for reformers back home.³¹ The Puritans did not seek to create a haven of religious toleration, a notion that they—along with nearly all European Christians—regarded as ridiculous at best and dangerous at worst.

2.12 – Expansion and Social Development in New England

While the Puritans did not succeed in building a godly [utopia](#) in New England, a combination of Puritan traits with several external factors created colonies wildly different from any other region settled by English people. Unlike those heading to Virginia, colonists in New England (Plymouth [1620], Massachusetts Bay [1630], Connecticut [1636], and Rhode Island [1636]) generally arrived in family groups. Most New England immigrants were small landholders in England, a class that contemporary English called the “middling sort.” When they arrived in New England they tended to replicate their home environments, founding towns composed of independent landholders. The New England climate and soil made large-scale plantation agriculture impractical, so the system of large landholders using masses of slaves or indentured servants to grow labor-intensive crops never took hold.

There is no evidence that the New England Puritans would have opposed such a system if it had been possible; other Puritans made their fortunes in the Caribbean sugar islands, and New England merchants profited as suppliers of provisions and slaves to those colonies. By accident of geography as much as by design, New England society was much less stratified than any of Britain's other seventeenth-century colonies. Although New England colonies could boast wealthy landholding elites, the disparity of wealth in the region remained narrow compared to the Chesapeake, Carolina, or the Caribbean. Instead, seventeenth-century New England was characterized by a broadly shared, modest prosperity based on a mixed economy dependent on small farms, shops, fishing, lumber, shipbuilding, and trade with the Atlantic World.

A combination of environmental factors and the Puritan social ethos produced a region of remarkable health and stability during the seventeenth century. New England immigrants avoided most of the deadly outbreaks of tropical disease that turned the Chesapeake colonies into graveyards. Disease, in fact, only aided English settlement and relations to Native Americans. In contrast to other English colonists who had to contend with powerful Native American neighbors, the Puritans confronted the stunned survivors of a biological catastrophe. A lethal pandemic of smallpox during the 1610s swept away as much as 90 percent of the region's Native American population. Many survivors welcomed the English as potential allies against rival tribes who had escaped the catastrophe. The relatively healthy environment coupled with political stability and the predominance of family groups among early immigrants allowed the New England population to grow to 91,000 people by 1700 from only 21,000 immigrants. By contrast, 120,000 English went to the Chesapeake, and only 85,000 white colonists remained in 1700.³²

The New England Puritans set out to build their utopia by creating communities of the godly. Groups of men, often from the same region of England, applied to the colony's General Court for land grants.³³ They generally divided part of the land for immediate use while keeping much of the rest as "commons" or undivided land for future generations. The town's inhabitants collectively decided the size of each settler's home lot based on their current wealth and status. Besides oversight of property, the town restricted membership, and new arrivals needed to apply for admission. Those who gained admittance could participate in town governments that, while not democratic by modern standards, nevertheless had broad popular involvement. All male property holders could vote in town meetings and choose the selectmen, assessors, constables, and other officials from among themselves to conduct the daily affairs of government. Upon their founding, towns wrote covenants, reflecting the Puritan belief in God's covenant with his people. Towns sought to arbitrate disputes and contain strife, as did the Church. Wayward or divergent individuals were persuaded, corrected, or coerced. Popular conceptions of Puritans as hardened authoritarians are exaggerated, but if persuasion and arbitration failed, people who did not conform to community norms were punished or removed. Massachusetts banished Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and other religious dissenters like the Quakers.

Although by many measures colonization in New England succeeded, its Puritan leaders failed in their own mission to create a utopian community that would inspire their fellows back in England. They tended to focus their disappointment on the younger generation. "But alas!" Increase Mather lamented, "That so many of the younger Generation have so early corrupted their [the founders'] doings!"³⁴ The jeremiad, a sermon lamenting the fallen state of New England due to its straying from its early virtuous path, became a staple of late-seventeenth-century Puritan literature. Yet the jeremiad could not stop the effects of prosperity. The population spread and grew more diverse. Many, if not most, New Englanders retained strong ties to their Calvinist roots into the eighteenth century, but the Puritans (who became Congregationalists) struggled against a rising tide of religious pluralism. On December 25, 1727, Judge Samuel Sewall noted in his diary that a new Anglican minister "keeps the day in his new Church at Braintree: people flock thither."³⁵ Previously forbidden holidays like Christmas were celebrated publicly in church and privately in homes. Puritan divine Cotton Mather discovered on Christmas 1711 that "a number of young people of both sexes, belonging, many of them, to my flock, had . . . a Frolick, a reveling Feast, and a Ball, which discovers their Corruption."³⁶

Despite the lamentations of the Mathers and other Puritan leaders of their failure, they left an enduring mark on New England culture and society that endured long after the region’s residents ceased to be called “Puritan.”

2.13 – Conclusion

The fledgling settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts paled in importance when compared to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean. Valued more as marginal investments and social safety valves where the poor could be released, these colonies nonetheless created a foothold for Britain on a vast North American continent. And although the seventeenth century would be fraught for Britain—religious, social, and political upheavals would behead one king and force another to flee his throne—settlers in Massachusetts and Virginia were nonetheless tied together by the emerging Atlantic economy. While commodities such as tobacco and sugar fueled new markets in Europe, the economy grew increasingly dependent on slave labor. Enslaved Africans transported across the Atlantic would further complicate the collision of cultures in the Americas. The creation and maintenance of a slave system would spark new understandings of human difference and new modes of social control. The economic exchanges of the new Atlantic economy would not only generate great wealth and exploitation, they would also lead to new cultural systems and new identities for the inhabitants of at least four continents.

2.14 – Reference Material

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