

The Commercial North

MAIN IDEA

The Northern colonies developed a predominantly urban society, based on commerce and trade.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The states that were once the Northern colonies remain predominantly urban today.

Terms & Names

• Enlightenment • Jonathan Edwards
• Benjamin Franklin • Great Awakening

One American's Story

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colonies.

After growing up on a Massachusetts farm, John Adams found city life in Boston distracting. In 1759 he wrote,

A PERSONAL VOICE JOHN ADAMS

"Who can study in Boston Streets? I am unable to observe the various Objects that I meet, with sufficient Precision. My Eyes are so diverted with Chimney Sweeps, Carriers of Wood, Merchants, Ladies, Priests, Carts, Horses, Oxen, Coaches, Market men and Women, Soldiers, Sailors, and my Ears with the Rattle Gabble of them all that I cant think long enough in the Street upon any one Thing to start and pursue a Thought."

—The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams

Adams's description illustrates the changes that transformed the New England and Middle colonies during the 18th century. The growth of thriving commercial cities made the North radically different from the agricultural South. In addition, interest in education was on the rise, partially due to intellectual and religious movements. These movements brought about social changes that contributed to the colonies' eventual break with England.



John Adams

Commerce Grows in the North 1

The theory of mercantilism held that colonies existed to help the home country amass wealth. However, the American colonies found their own economy prospering more. From 1650 to 1750, the colonies' economy grew twice as fast as Great Britain's economy did. Much of this growth occurred in the New England and middle colonies.

A DIVERSIFIED ECONOMY Unlike farms in the South, those in the New England and middle colonies usually produced several crops instead of a single one. Cold winters and rocky soil restricted New Englanders to small farms. In the more fertile areas of the middle colonies, such as New York and Pennsylvania,

farmers raised a variety of crops and livestock, including wheat, corn, cattle, and hogs. They produced so much that they sold their surplus food to the West Indies, where raising sugar cane produced such tremendous profits that planters did not want to waste land growing food for the slaves who worked their fields.

A diverse commercial economy also developed in the New England and Middle colonies. Grinding wheat, harvesting fish, and sawing lumber became thriving industries. Colonists also manufactured impressive numbers of ships and quantities of iron. By 1760, the colonists had built one-third of all British ships and were producing more iron than England was. While at times the North's economy dipped, many colonists prospered. In particular, the number of merchants grew. By the mid-1700s, merchants were one of the most powerful groups in the North.

URBAN LIFE The expansion in trade caused port cities to grow. Only one major port, Charles Town, existed in the South. In contrast, the North boasted Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. In fact, Philadelphia eventually became the second largest city (after London) in the British empire. Philadelphia was the first large city since ancient Roman times to be laid out on a gridlike street plan. For colonists accustomed to the winding medieval streets of European cities, this kind of rational urban planning must have appeared startling and new. Influenced by Sir Christopher Wren's designs for the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666, Philadelphia included a number of open squares intended for public use. Both the grid plan and the parklike square would become important elements of American urban design in the centuries to come.

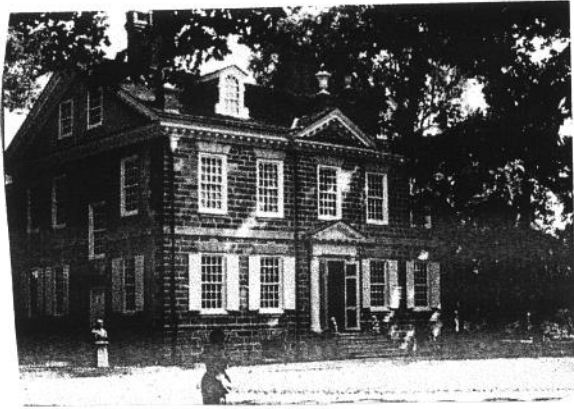
With its parks, police patrols, paved streets, and whale-oil lamps to light the sidewalks, Philadelphia was a sophisticated city. However, the high concentration of people without adequate public services caused problems. Firewood and clean water could be hard to come by, whereas garbage was abundant.

Daily Urban Life in Colonial Times

By the mid-18th century, colonial cities were prosperous and growing. Brick rowhouses were replacing the wooden structures of the 17th century, while large mansions and churches, built of brick or stone, were rising everywhere.

English colonists had brought with them a preference for houses (as opposed to apartments, which were the norm in the cities of other European countries). As in Britain, the size of the house indicated the social position of its occupant.

In contemporary Philadelphia, Elfreth's Alley preserves the scale and appearance of a mid-18th-century city street. A neighborhood like this could have commercial and residential uses. Many people lived above the shops where they worked.



◀ The house known as Cliveden, also in Philadelphia, was built in 1767. In contrast to the artisan or lower-middle-class housing Elfreth's Alley, this large, freestanding mansion shows the kind of building that the rich could afford.

Northern Society Is Diverse 2

Northern society was composed of diverse groups with sometimes conflicting interests. Groups whose interests clashed with those of the people in power included immigrants, African Americans, and women.

INFLUX OF IMMIGRANTS

Even more so than those in the South, the Northern colonies attracted a variety of immigrants. The Germans and the Scots-Irish were the largest non-English immigrant groups. Germans began arriving in Pennsylvania in the 1680s. Most were fleeing economic distress, but some, such as the Mennonites, came to Pennsylvania because of William Penn's policy of religious freedom and because they shared the Quakers' opposition to war.

The Scots-Irish—descendants of Scottish Protestants who had colonized northern Ireland in the 1600s—entered mostly through Philadelphia.

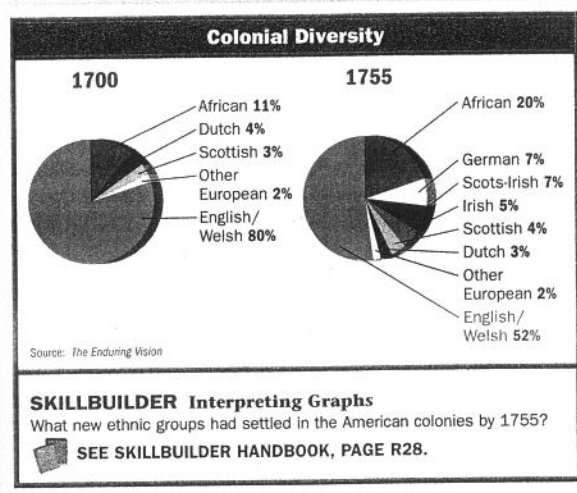
They commonly arrived as families. Many established farms in frontier areas such as western Pennsylvania, where they often clashed with Native Americans.

Other ethnic groups included the Dutch in New York, Scandinavians in Delaware, and Jews in such cities as Newport and Philadelphia. The different groups did not always mix. Benjamin Franklin, echoing the sentiments of many English colonists, made the following complaint in 1751.

A PERSONAL VOICE BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

“Why should the [Germans] be suffered to swarm into our Settlements and, by herding together establish their Language and Manners to the Exclusion of ours? Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them?”

—“Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.”



Skillbuilder Answer
 Germans, Scots-Irish, Irish

In spite of this fear of being swamped by non-English speakers, English colonists found ways of getting along with their new neighbors, thus furthering the evolution of a truly diverse American society. **B**

SLAVERY IN THE NORTH Because raising wheat and corn did not require as much labor as raising tobacco or rice, Northerners had less incentive to turn to slavery than did Southerners. However, slavery did exist in New England and was extensive throughout the Middle colonies, as were racial prejudices against blacks—free or enslaved.

While still considered property, most enslaved persons in New England enjoyed greater legal standing than slaves elsewhere in the colonies. They could sue and be sued, and they had the right of appeal to the highest courts. As in the South, however, enslaved persons in the North led harsh lives and were considered less than human beings. Laws forbade them to gather or to carry weapons, and there were no laws to protect them from cruel treatment. Reacting to the harsh conditions, slaves sometimes rebelled. An uprising occurred in 1712 in New York,

leading to the execution of 21 people. In 1741, a series of suspicious fires and robberies led New Yorkers to fear another uprising. They decided to make an example of the suspected ringleaders, burning alive 13 persons and hanging 18.

WOMEN IN NORTHERN SOCIETY As in the South, women in the North had extensive work responsibilities but few legal rights. Most people in the colonies still lived on farms, where women faced unceasing labor. A colonial wife had virtually no legal rights. She could not vote. Most women could not enter into contracts, buy or sell property, or keep their own wages if they worked outside the home. Only single women and widows could run their own businesses.

In New England, religion as well as law served to keep women under their husbands' rule. Puritan clergymen insisted that wives must submit to their husbands, saying, "Wives are part of the House and Family, and ought to be under a Husband's Government: they should Obey their own Husbands."

WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN SALEM The strict limitations on women's roles, combined with social tensions, the strained relations with the Native Americans, and religious fanaticism, contributed to one of the most bizarre episodes in American history. In February 1692, several Salem girls accused a West Indian slave woman, Tituba, of practicing witchcraft. In this Puritan New England town of Salem, where the constant fear of Native American attacks encouraged a preoccupation with violence and death, the girls' accusations drew a great deal of attention. When the girls accused others of witchcraft, the situation grew out of control, as those who were accused tried to save themselves by naming other "witches."

Hysteria gripped the town as more and more people made false accusations. The accusations highlighted social and religious tensions. Many of the accusers were poor and brought charges against richer residents. In addition, a high proportion of victims were women who might be considered too independent.

The accusations continued until the girls dared to charge such prominent citizens as the governor's wife. Finally realizing that they had been hearing false evidence, officials closed the court. The witchcraft hysteria ended—but not before 19 persons had been hanged and another person killed by being crushed to death. Four or five more "witches" died in jail, and about 150 were imprisoned. **C**

3 New Ideas Influence the Colonists

The Salem trials of 1692 caused many people to question the existence of witchcraft. During the 1700s, individuals began to make other changes in the way they viewed the world.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT Since before the Renaissance, philosophers in Europe had been using reason and the scientific method to obtain knowledge. Scientists looked beyond religious doctrine to investigate how the world worked. Influenced by the observations of Nicolaus Copernicus, Galileo Galilei, and Sir Isaac Newton, people determined that the earth revolved around the sun and not vice versa. They also concluded that the world is governed not by chance or miracles but by fixed mathematical laws. These ideas about nature gained prevalence in the 1700s in a movement called the **Enlightenment**.

Enlightenment ideas traveled from Europe to the colonies and spread quickly in numerous books and pamphlets. Literacy was particularly high in New England because the Puritans had long supported public education to ensure that everyone could read the Bible.

One outstanding Enlightenment figure was **Benjamin Franklin**. Franklin embraced the notion of obtaining truth through experimentation and reasoning. For example, his most famous experiment—flying a kite in a thunderstorm—demonstrated that lightning was a form of electrical power.

The Enlightenment also had a profound effect on political thought in the colonies. Colonial leaders such as Thomas Jefferson used reason to conclude that individuals have natural rights, which governments must respect. Enlightenment principles eventually would lead many colonists to question the authority of the British monarchy. D

THE GREAT AWAKENING By the early 1700s, the Puritan church had lost its grip on society, and church membership was in decline. The new Massachusetts charter of 1691 forced Puritans to allow freedom of worship and banned the practice of permitting only Puritan church members to vote. Furthermore, many people seemed to be doing so well in this world that they paid little attention to the next. As Puritan merchants prospered, they developed a taste for material possessions and sensual pleasures.

Jonathan Edwards, of Northampton, Massachusetts, was one member of the clergy who sought to revive the intensity and commitment of the original Puritan vision. Edwards preached that church attendance was not enough for salvation; people must acknowledge their sinfulness and feel God's love for them. In his most famous sermon, delivered in 1741, Edwards vividly described God's mercy.

A PERSONAL VOICE

JONATHAN EDWARDS

"The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors [hates] you, and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else but to be cast into the fire; . . . and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment."

—"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God"

Other preachers traveled from village to village, stirring people to rededicate themselves to God. Such traveling preachers attracted thousands, making it necessary for revival meetings to be held outdoors. The resulting religious revival, known as the **Great Awakening**, lasted throughout the 1730s and 1740s.

KEY PLAYERS



BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
1706–1790

Benjamin Franklin was one of the leading champions of Enlightenment ideals in America. Like other scientists and philosophers of the Enlightenment, Franklin believed that human beings could use their intellectual powers to improve their lot.

Franklin's observations and experiments led to a number of inventions, including the lightning rod, bifocals, and a new kind of heating system that became known as the Franklin stove. Inventions like these proved that knowledge derived from scientific experiment could be put to practical use.

Franklin's achievements brought him world renown. In 1756 British scholars elected him to the Royal Society, and in 1772 France honored him with membership in the French Academy of Sciences.



JONATHAN EDWARDS
1703–1758

Descended from a long line of Puritan ministers, Jonathan Edwards denied that humans had the power to perfect themselves. He believed that "however you may have reformed your life in many things," as a sinner you were destined for hell unless you had a "great change of heart."

Edwards was a brilliant thinker who entered Yale College when he was only 13. His preaching was one of the driving forces of the Great Awakening. Ironically, when the religious revival died down, Edwards's own congregation rejected him for being too strict about doctrine.

Edwards moved to Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in 1751, where he lived most of his remaining years as missionary to a Native American settlement.

The Great Awakening brought many colonists, as well as Native Americans and African Americans, into organized Christian churches for the first time. As the movement gained momentum, it also challenged the authority of established churches. Some colonists abandoned their old Puritan or Anglican congregations. At the same time independent denominations, such as the Baptists and Methodists, gained new members. The Great Awakening also led to an increased interest in higher education, a several Protestant denominations founded colleges such as Princeton (originally the College of New Jersey), Brown, Columbia (originally King's College), and Dartmouth to train ministers for their rapidly growing churches.

While the Great Awakening and the Enlightenment emphasized opposing aspects of human experience—emotionalism and reason, respectively—they had similar consequences. Both caused people to question traditional authority. Moreover, both stressed the importance of the individual—the Enlightenment by emphasizing human reason, and the Great Awakening by de-emphasizing the role of church authority.

These movements helped lead the colonists to question Britain's authority over their lives. The separation between Britain

and the colonies was further hastened by another significant event, a North American war between Great Britain and France, in which the colonists fought on Britain's side.