

Society of Colonial Wars of Ohio
Scholarship Award Competition

Shaping Colonial America

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The North American colonies abruptly declared their political independence in 1776. However, their cultural independence had been ripening for decades. Creating a completely new nation was not a priority, nor even an issue, for colonial immigrants. But through the process of expansion, colonists established values and customs that would eventually become the basis of The United States of America. Generations of early Americans, though unaware of their historic roles, laid the foundation for a future independent society.

One may regard the colonies as the “child” that Great Britain sired. Founded on mercantilist principles, the colonies were originally conceived as revenue-boosters for England. Once the colonial settlements had become stable enough that starvation and assault did not threaten everyday existence, the New World attracted emigrants from all over Europe. People with various motives and backgrounds quickly widened the cultural and economic scope of the colonies. England’s “child” was growing up, becoming self-sufficient, and beginning to recognize basic differences between itself and its mother country. While the mother country’s presence had once been a comfort, it seemed more like a burden as the eighteenth century progressed.

Looking back on the colonial era, we define it in terms of its distinguishing traits. The growth of local self-government built up a tradition of self-reliance and activism that became ingrained in the American character. Social mobility – the chance to improve one’s status – was important to the developing economy. New institutions of education and religion inspired the leaders who shaped the fate of the colonies. “Americans” saw themselves in a different light after fighting a tumultuous series of wars with European and Native American powers. The vast diversity of the inhabitants underscored all the triumphs and struggles of the colonies.

The nature of England’s colonies was immediately different from that of earlier European colonies. While France and Spain had governed their overseas ventures with rigid, centralized authority, England followed an approach known as “salutary neglect.” This more casual, hands-off policy allowed the colonists to create their own society as long as they remained the loyal subjects of the King. Because England did not always assert its

supremacy in the New World, colonists became dangerously familiar with the conditions of freedom.

The Virginia House of Burgesses was created in 1629, barely a generation after the first colonists had fought tooth and nail for their survival. Only twenty-two years after the humble founding of Jamestown, the colonists had established their own legislature! The formation of the Virginia assembly inspired other regions to take similar steps. Enthusiasm for self-governance, established early, would grow ever stronger throughout the colonial period.

Alexis de Tocqueville noticed in the 1830s that Americans enjoyed uncommon social and geographic mobility. "The American... grows accustomed only to change and ends by regarding it as the natural state of man." The "change" that he spoke of was the constant expansion of American borders and the seemingly unlimited economic opportunity of the nation.

These factors were just as important to the colonial era as they were to the days of Tocqueville. When Englishmen flocked to the Chesapeake to buy fertile plantations at affordable rates, they simultaneously improved their personal wealth and extended the colonial frontier. They brought with them, or soon attracted, large numbers of indentured servants, who worked without pay for a preset period of time (often seven years) in exchange for their own land at the end of that bondage. Indentured servitude, while barbaric by modern standards, was a lucrative opportunity for many English laborers. Coming from a society that offered almost zero chance for class improvement, young English peasants took advantage of America's promise for a better future. The idea that any person could succeed by working hard and living virtuously was widely held by Americans long after indentured servitude was rendered obsolete by slavery and the wage system.

Geographic mobility was an intrinsic part of the American colonial experience. The very act of immigration was a strong affirmation of the hope that a person could improve his state of affairs by moving. Once within America, people moved to new homesteads and towns in order to find the best life possible. Often, this meant settling on the Western frontier.

A sort of pure equality ruled on the frontier. Families and individuals who set out for undeveloped regions all took similar risks in leaving the stability of the East for the

unprotected wilderness. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner has reasoned that frontier life provided the key elements of the budding American character. The drive to expand, the courage to explore, and the perseverance to progress were all nurtured by the demands of frontier living. In addition, the basic tenets of democracy and capitalism evolved naturally among pioneers: Whereas a prestigious family lineage would have ensured superiority in class-conscious Europe, it was irrelevant to survival on the frontier. Instead, success on the frontier demanded endurance and the ability to adapt. Self-interest was the catalyst for migration, settlement, and progress.

War can tear a culture to pieces. But it may also bring about a sense of unity and help define a nation. The colonies felt both the destructive and the positive impacts of war in fighting against England's European rivals and native tribes. Although Jamestown and the local tribal alliance – called the Powhatan Confederacy – enjoyed a mutually beneficial trading relationship from the beginning, the colonists' steady encroachment onto tribal lands threatened and offended the Powhatans. The tribes attacked the settlements in March, 1622, killing about one-fourth of Virginia's white population. The colonists retaliated ruthlessly, and the conflicting civilizations clashed at intervals until the natives were worn down by attrition and superior technology.

This pattern of nonchalant encroachment by land-seeking settlers, violent response by native inhabitants, and eventual triumph of the colonists was repeated in almost every region of the future United States. Great Indian leaders such as Pontiac (1763) and Tecumseh (1811) organized formidable rebellions against the never-ending stream of American colonists, but each war ended with the Indian factions on the losing side of the treaty bargains. The American colonies thus made growth a habit. Recurring conflicts with natives solidified colonial resolve to survive, succeed, and expand.

Despite the action in the Colonies, most of the world had other pressing concerns. Even England did not devote much attention to colonial affairs. In constant competition with the other Western European powers for gold, land, trading rights and military supremacy, England in the eighteenth century focused on bolstering its empire. Wars like League of Augsburg, Spanish Succession, and Austrian Succession (known respectively as King William's War, Queen Anne's War, and King George's War) involved issues of empire, some of which had repercussions in the Western Hemisphere. However, these European

conflicts demanded Britain's full attention and resources. The colonies, while bound to support the mother country if called upon, were allowed to develop freely.

The next war, the Seven Years' War (The French and Indian War), directly concerned the colonies and changed them. France, England's imperial rival, began building forts in the Ohio country in anticipation of English expansion that would enable access to France's string of profitable fur-trading settlements along the Mississippi River. When colonial forces, led by the 22-year-old George Washington, were defeated at Fort Necessity in 1754 and hopelessly ambushed at Fort Duquesne the following year, London decided to take more serious action.

After declaring war on France, England sent thousands of its own troops to fight alongside colonial militias. The English forces ultimately defeated the French under the strategic leadership of General Wolfe and William Pitt, British Secretary of State. Although colonists celebrated their victory, they felt more distant than ever from their English counterparts. Colonists who had fought alongside British soldiers felt insulted and alienated by what they perceived as arrogance, while the British seemed to consider colonial soldiers weak and undisciplined. This clash in temperament would only grow over the coming decades. Another result of the War was to diminish the value of British military support. France, the major threat to hegemony of North America, had been ousted from the continent. The colonies thus needed the King's resources less than ever. British troops stationed in America were now more burdensome than useful.

The Seven Years' War changed things on a more practical level also. War is an expensive enterprise, the more so when it lasts for years and requires a government to support faraway troops. Having waged four large-scale wars in less than a century, England's coffers were uncomfortably empty. Following the war-ending Treaty of Paris, English Prime Minister George Grenville decided to levy heavier taxes on the Colonies to help repay the war debt. As the Crown tightened its control of the Colonies, the era of salutary neglect crashed to an end. The colonists were indignant.

The Sugar Act, followed shortly by the Currency Act, struck the colonies painfully. Combined with the squeeze of a post-war depression, the new taxes smacked of financial oppression. Colonists were compelled to protest on three fronts: Colonial legislatures petitioned Parliament, activist groups such as the Sons of Liberty began meeting regularly,

and merchants organized boycotts of English products. None of these approaches moved Grenville. Still, protest efforts grew in intensity and popularity.

The office of Prime Minister bounced from Grenville to Lords Rockingham, Pitt, Grafton and North, but each of them continued to tax the colonies heavily. New England became a hotbed of activism; we still memorialize events such as the Boston Tea Party as proof of what was a growing colonial defiance. Political vigilance took many forms. Mob action was the most primitive, if persuasive, evidence of unrest. Visionary Samuel Adams created the first Committee of Correspondence, which came to symbolize the unified struggle against oppression and later helped win the Revolution. When the port of Boston was closed under the Intolerable Acts, foodstuffs and supplies came pouring in from all across the colonies. Legislatures maintained a steady front of lawful and diplomatic resistance. These measures were mostly ineffective with regard to British policy, but they signified the first stirrings of nationalism among colonists. When the struggle for colonial rights became more passionate than allegiance to the Crown, the issue shifted from loyal protest to independence.

Intellectual life in the colonies helped define the culture. Harvard College was established by the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636, only six years after the first settlers arrived in Massachusetts. This is evidence of the high importance that early Americans attributed to learning. As protest became more heated after 1763, American scholars used philosophy to support their quest for rights. The Englishman John Locke (1632-1704) was a key inspiration to revolutionaries and to the framers of the Constitution. If not for the prevalence of literacy, the colonists probably could not have achieved independence. Much of the all-important propaganda war was fought with patriotic pamphlets and tracts. Literature was a vital means of reaching and persuading colonists to take up the risky enterprise of rebellion.

Religion, though kept separate from legal issues since the Constitution, was a strong presence in colonial life. Puritans emigrated from Europe for the express purpose of practicing Calvinism without being harassed. They arrived in New England with a work ethic that future generations would inherit. In the two Great Awakenings, religion was a rallying point that brought many colonists together. The same fervor that inspired unity also gave rise to religious debate, but that only helped create more religious tolerance. The "New Lights" and Baptists were notable for challenging not only religious orthodoxy, but also

socio-political issues. In emphasizing the validity of dissent from the traditional religious establishment, they defended the right of an individual to protest authority. Obviously, this value took on extreme importance as the Revolution drew near.

Colonists began sorting out the issues that define our country long before it officially existed. Wars that were first for survival and later for expansion helped unify and strengthen the colonies, as well as distance them from Britain. A tradition of self-governance and an early enthusiasm for representation became ingrained in the national character. From the "Regulator" bands of backcountry farmers to the First Continental Congress, Americans insisted on taking political action. The abundance of fertile land on the frontier offered colonists the rare chance to improve their economic positions. A penchant for religious and academic growth stimulated political questioning. When the United States of America was born in 1776, its inhabitants already knew what it meant to be American.