Britain and the Colonies









Key concepts

I. Life in the early colonies

Although the colonists settled in America for many different reasons, they eventually developed a common set of understandings about their government.

II. Establishing colonies

England established colonies by social compacts, through joint stock companies, and by land grants. Each method entailed a different set of social arrangements.

III. Colonists and popular sovereignty

The colonists eventually claimed a certain amount of popular sovereignty and demanded economic and political rights as English citizens.

IV. Grievances leading to rebellion

When Britain continued to deny the colonists' rights as British subjects, their grievances led to acts of rebellion.

I. Life in the early colonies

- A. American settlers came from all over Europe, but predominantly from England.
 - 1. English settlers
 - a) founded Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607

Note: The first slaves were traded in America in 1619.

b) reached Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts in 1620.

B. Government

- 1. The colonists came from varied political backgrounds.
- 2. They reached common understandings about their governance, including ideas about
 - a) popular sovereignty
 - b) the fundamental right of self-government
 - c) their rights as English subjects
- C. Colonial life was better in America than it had been in Europe.
 - 1. Colonists enjoyed economic and political liberties:
 - a) Freedom to buy and sell property
 - b) Freedom to work in any chosen occupation (no guilds)
 - c) Unrestricted wages
 - d) Freedom of movement
 - 2. Some colonies instituted religious intolerance.
 - a) Puritans
 - (1) came to America seeking religious freedom
 - (2) set up a theocracy in Massachusetts

theocracy: A government structure in which religious leaders establish the rules based on their interpretations of religious doctrine.

- b) Female religious dissenters could be tried and executed for being witches.
- c) Nine colonies set up state churches.
 - (1) Many colonists believed that they were necessary for civil order.

II. Arrangements for establishing colonies

A. Compacts

1. Social agreements made by the people to decide how to govern themselves.

Example: Mayflower Compact of 1620

sidebar: Mayflower Compact of 1620

In the name of God, Amen. We, whose names are underwritten, the Loyal Subjects of our dread Sovereign Lord, King *James*, by the Grace of God, of *Great Britain, France* and *Ireland*, King, *Defender of the Faith*, &c.

Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern Parts of Virginia; do by these Presents, solemnly and mutually in the Presence of God and one of another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation, and Furtherance of the Ends aforesaid; And by Virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame, such just and equal Laws, Ordinances, Acts, Constitutions and Offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the General good of the Colony; unto which we promise all due Submission and Obedience.

IN WITNESS whereof we have hereunto subscribed our names at *Cape Cod* the eleventh of *November*, in the Reign of our Sovereign Lord, King *James* of England, *France* and *Ireland*, the eighteenth, and of *Scotland* the fifty-fourth. *Anno Domini*, 1620.

- 2. Political power came from the people, not the king.
- 3. People made their own arrangements about how to govern.
- B. Joint stock companies
 - 1. Colonies formed by investors.

Examples: Massachusetts Bay and Virginia

- 2. British investors formed the companies to extract raw materials and ship them to England.
- 3. The colonies were governed by the company stockholders.
- 4. The colonists decided many things for themselves because of the time it took to receive instructions from London.
- C. Land grants from the Crown
 - 1. In 1632, Lord Baltimore was granted the territory that later became Maryland.
 - 2. New York, New Jersey, Carolina, and Pennsylvania were created by land grants.

III. Colonists and popular sovereignty

- A. The colonists at first had no say in how they were governed. They later began to assert the right to popular sovereignty.
- B. By the 1700s, colonists from every colony were demanding their rights as English subjects. They
 - 1. modeled their demands for rights on the British constitution

sidebar: The British constitution is a mixture of tradition, custom, and practice and has never been written down. The constitution mainly concerns the relation between the monarch and parliament.

- 2. wanted to recreate the fabric of English life
- 3. looked to the House of Commons and British common law as a model for settling political disputes

sidebar: The basis of British law is the common law, or the law established over time through custom and court decisions, not legislation. Much American law is grounded in British common law.

- 4. sought protections for individual rights under British law
 - a) Habeas corpus

habeas corpus: (Latin for "you should have the body") The right of protection against unlimited imprisonment unless formally charged by a court.

- b) The general rule of law
- c) The British legal system with public trials and juries
- d) Protection from arbitrary government

IV. Grievances leading to rebellion

A. The British controlled foreign affairs, defense, and trade.

1. The British extracted raw materials (timber, metals, wool) and sent them to England for processing.

mercantilism: Economic system of the European nations from the 16th to 18th centuries based on the theory that national wealth and power were best served by exporting finished goods to colonies and in turn extracting raw materials from them.

- 2. The Navigation Act of 1660, the Wool Act (1698), and the Iron Act (1750) prevented the colonies from trading with other countries.
- B. Britain taxed the colonies to finance their administration.
 - 1. The Sugar Act of 1764 imposed tariffs (import taxes) on sugar, coffee, wine, and other popular goods.
 - 2. The Stamp Act of 1765 imposed a tax on all kinds of printed material.

sidebar: The Stamp Act did not tax postage stamps—they would not be invented for another 75 years. It required paper goods like newspapers, legal documents, books, pamphlets, and playing cards to be printed on specially stamped (watermarked) paper.

- a) The colonists boycotted goods covered by the Stamp Act.
- b) The Continental Congress declared the act to be "taxation without representation."
- c) Parliament repealed the act in 1766.
- C. The Tea Act of 1773

sidebar: The Tea Act was intended to save the ailing British East India Company, which had 17 million pounds of unsold tea at the time. The company was a major source of tax revenue for the British government.

- 1. Taxed tea (among other things)
- 2. Led the colonists to boycott British goods
- 3. Protests over the act culminated in the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773.
 - a) Over 300 chests of tea were dumped into Boston Harbor.
 - b) The Sons of Liberty—instigators of the party—cried, "Boston harbor a tea-pot this night."
- D. British reaction

"The die is now cast. The colonies must either submit or triumph."

George III of England

- 1. Britain closed Boston Harbor and placed the Boston government under British control.
- E. Why were the colonists rebelling?

"[T]he American revolution was not fought to obtain freedom, but to preserve the liberties the Americans already had as colonists."

Samuel Eliot Morrison, Oxford History of the American People (1965)

- 1. They wanted an end to unfair taxation and regulations.
- 2. They wanted local self-government.
- 3. They wanted a continuation of their rights as English citizens.