

3

Diversity in Colonial Times



“The Scold” (1885) is an engraving by an unknown artist that depicts a New England colonial street scene with a woman wearing a scold’s bridle. Those who blasphemed, lied, or gossiped excessively had to wear this iron mask with a flat spike to curb their tongues.

What most people remember about early U.S. history is that the 13 English colonies fought for their independence from the “Mother Country” of England. Because the English held cultural and political preeminence in the colonial and early national periods, this myth of cultural homogeneity arose. The actions and/or writings of contemporary English American leaders, historians, and literary figures enhanced the myth, and their dominance and influence cast a long shadow across subsequent generations.

The Larger Context

Colonial America existed on the periphery of the “civilized world.” Although England was dominant in its cultural, economic, and political influence, Europe also exerted a profound impact. For example, the Age of Enlightenment—an 18th-century philosophical movement that embraced rationalism, emphasized learning, and encouraged a spirit of skepticism and practicality in social and political thought—guided the Founding Fathers in their thinking and eventual formulation of a new nation. Before the new republic became a reality, however, what occurred in colonial thoughts, words, and actions reflected, for the most part, the dominance of European culture, both abstract (values, ideas) and material (fashions, manufactured goods).

Beginning mostly as commercial enterprises or feudal proprietorships thanks to royal land grants, the colonies eventually became royal colonies. However, England was too absorbed in its civil war (1642–1649) and Oliver Cromwell’s Puritan rule to engage in any effective colonial policy. Even after restoration of the Stuart dynasty with Charles II becoming king, England still did not pursue any centralized administrative policy.

Yet 18th-century colonial politics closely resembled those of England. Colonial legislatures, like the English Parliament, held powers to initiate legislation and to vote on taxes and expenditures, often bringing them into clashes with the royal governors who sought to impose their own will. This battle of wills and evolving notion of self-government set the stage for the rebellion that would follow in the latter part of the century.

Colonial cultural norms reflected European patriarchal values, which became embedded in English law. For example, a woman’s marriage automatically transferred the legal ownership of the bride’s personal property—money, land, household goods, and clothing—to her husband. If he died, the property went to the children, not her, with male heirs receiving larger inheritances than their sisters. Even children could become the wards of the father’s male relatives and not of his widow. In the rare instance of a divorce, the father indisputably retained custody of the children.

Cultural Pluralism

As to the composition of the colonial population under English rule, the presence of non-English colonial Americans at first was not a significant factor. In commenting about the population composition of the 17th century, historian Mildred Campbell remarked,

For despite the Dutch on the Hudson, and small groups of Swiss, Swedes, Finns, and French Huguenots pocketed along the coast, the small vessels which set out on the American voyage were chiefly English built and English manned. Their cargoes, moreover, consisted largely of Englishmen and, later and in smaller numbers, Englishwomen. Even the Scots and Irish, who in the next century would crowd the harbors of the New World, were a minority in the first century.¹

By the early 18th century, however, an important change in immigration dramatically altered the population mix. As Stephen Steinberg observed,

The simple truth is that [the] English were not coming in sufficient numbers to populate the colonies. . . .

If there were no compelling “pull” factors luring Englishmen to America, neither were there potent “push” factors. In fact, after 1718 labor shortages at home induced the British government to place restrictions on emigration, especially of skilled artisans and other laborers needed in Britain’s nascent industries. It was this scarcity of emigrants from Britain that induced colonial authorities to permit the immigration of non-English nationalities.²

Historians Bruce Catton and William B. Catton described the new colonial immigration as continually increasing:

Homogeneity was altered in a different way by the increasing infusion of non-English elements into the colonial bloodstream. This did not become noticeable until late in the seventeenth century and assumed its largest proportions in the eighteenth, when the seaboard colonies entered upon their great period of sustained growth. Of greatest significance was the large-scale influx of men and women of African descent. Next in importance were those from the Rhine Valley and the north of Ireland. (p. 165)³

The Cattons also provide some insight into differences among the so-called British immigrants, a theme introduced earlier in the first chapter with reference to the Dillingham Flaw, which I further develop in this chapter:

42 Diversity in America

The Scotch-Irish added something special to the colonial brew. They tended to be hard cases politically—unyielding Presbyterians, schooled and scarred by generations of turmoil in Ireland, caught in the middle between oppressed Irish Catholics and the Anglican establishment, hated from both sides, returning the hatred at compound interest. (p. 166)

One of their other observations relates to the social distance the ethnic groups deliberately set between themselves:

These people did not all want the same things, beyond the elemental notions of escape and a fresh start. If, for a determined handful, this meant social engineering and creating communities, for untold larger numbers it meant simply a vague but compelling desire to go where they could be left alone. “Get off my back” is a piece of twentieth-century slang, distinctively American, which well summarized the prime motivation and prevailing mood among immigrants to Britain’s mainland colonies. (p. 168)

Some social scientists, while admitting the continued presence of cultural pluralism up to the Revolutionary War, suggest that it was minimal and that assimilation was virtually complete, even among non-English-speaking ethnic groups. Lawrence Fuchs, for example, asserted that

by the time of the Revolution, most of the children and grandchildren of Dutch, French, German, and Swedish immigrants in the colonies spoke English and were otherwise indistinguishable from the children and grandchildren of English settlers, although in Albany, where the Dutch predominated, it was difficult to assemble an English-speaking jury, and several counties in Pennsylvania were overwhelmingly German-speaking. Hostility toward speakers of Dutch and German and toward the English-speaking Scotch-Irish, the newest large immigrant group, was widespread. (p. 12)⁴

Fuchs’s claim of indistinguishable characteristics among these four groups is questionable for reasons beyond his own inclusion of contradictory examples, illustrating both cultural pluralism and intergroup tensions. Many Dutch, French, and Germans continued to live in social, sometimes even geographic, isolation within culturally distinct ethnic communities apart from English American society. Moreover, Fuchs cites *To Seek America* (1977) by Maxine Sellers as the source of his Dutch and German “exceptions.” Yet in the chapter on which Fuchs draws, Sellers argues that, although by the outbreak of the Revolution, “The Swedes . . . had become indistinguishable in language and lifestyle from the dominant English . . . [o]thers—including some Jews, some French Huguenots, many Dutch, and many more Germans, had not.”⁵

This minimization of ethnic diversity that overstresses English American cultural and political hegemony illustrates the Dillingham Flaw. So, too, do claims that English numerical superiority reflects cultural homogeneity. Stephen Steinberg, for example, presets this view by stating, “Three-fourths of the white population in 1790 had their origins in the English-speaking states of the British Isles.” (This statement ignores the different cultures, religions, and Gaelic and Scottish languages.) Then after saying the other immigrants were mostly from northern or western Europe with “important cultural affinities to the English majority” (a claim many Scandinavians, Germans, and French might question), he adds,

At its inception, the United States had a population that was remarkably homogeneous in terms of both ethnicity and religion [Protestant]. Devoid of its invidious implications, the claim that the nation was founded by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants is reasonably accurate.

To be sure, there was some ethnic differentiation in terms of both population and patterns of settlement. New York still reflected its Dutch origins, and had a far greater ethnic mix than did New England. Pennsylvania had sizable concentrations of Germans and Scotch-Irish, and the Southern states, which a century later would become the last bastion of “ethnic purity,” were characterized by a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity, at least in comparison to New England. But it would be a mistake to construe this as evidence of a rudimentary pluralism, at least in a political sense. Not only were the English predominant numerically, but they enjoyed a political and cultural hegemony over the life of the fledgling nation.

Non-English colonials were typically regarded as aliens who were obliged to adapt to English rule in terms of both politics and culture.⁶

Steinberg is correct in saying that political pluralism did not exist. However, cultural pluralism did exist in a real sense. Non-English colonials, often clustered in their own ethnic communities, did not necessarily feel any compulsion to forego their language and culture, nor did officials force them to do so. Furthermore, the English were not as cohesive a group as one might think, as the following pages illustrate.

The colonies were not a culturally homogeneous launching pad for the new nation, which only later received several waves of “different” immigrants. Colonial America was a rich mixture of racial and ethnic heterogeneity right up to the Revolutionary War. As Gary B. Nash states, “Any attempt to portray the colonies as unified and homogeneous would be misguided.”⁷

Colonial Beginnings

Coming in the 17th century to a land already populated by indigenous people of many cultures was a steady stream of adventurers, debtors, opportunists, social outcasts, and desperate people, all risking a perilous 3-month journey across an often-stormy ocean to forge a better life for themselves in the New World. Sickness, disease, and death were common traveling companions on those voyages, and many never completed their journey, their lives ending with burial at sea.

A Patchwork Quilt of Ethnic Settlements

Those who successfully completed their journey came from many parts of the European continent, speaking different tongues and varying in their religious beliefs, customs, skills, and talents. When they settled in this new land, they sometimes intermingled, but more often they clustered together with their own kind, creating a mosaic of subcultural enclaves, at first on or near the coast and later inland.

The names given to areas by early settlers reflected this ethnic mix by colony (New Belgium, New England, New France, New Netherland, New Spain, and New Sweden). Settlement names were either new versions of their homeland—New Amsterdam (Holland), New Orleans (France), and New Smyrna, Florida (Greece)—or simply the same as in their native land—Cambridge (England/Massachusetts), Guttenberg (Germany/New Jersey), Haarlem (Holland/New York), Hamburg (Germany/New Jersey), and Plymouth (England/Massachusetts). At first fairly self-contained and separate from one another, most were culturally homogeneous within their boundaries, but together they constituted a patchwork quilt of ethnic diversity. Two early settlements, however, attracted a variety of people almost from their inception.

Diversity in the Early Settlements

Philadelphia and its adjoining area offered one example of cultural pluralism. Still a small village in 1700, its population was mostly English and Welsh, but this area also included Danes, Dutch, Finns, French, Germans, Irish, Scots, and Swedes. Even within these individual groups, further diversity could be found.⁸ The 300 or so Germans, for example, were a mixture of Lutherans, Mennonites, and Quakers, each group remaining separate from the others.

The greatest concentration of cultural diversity, however, was in New Amsterdam, where 18 languages were spoken on Manhattan Island as early as 1646. The Dutch, Flemish, Walloons, French, Danes, Norwegians, Swedes, English, Scots, Irish, Germans, Poles, Bohemians, Portuguese, and Italians were among the settlement's early inhabitants. After the English takeover in 1664, New York's slave population became the largest north of the Chesapeake region. In 1720, the city's Black population numbered 20,000, one third of the total; by 1741, slaves were still a substantial proportion, one sixth of the population.

Elsewhere in the colonies, some European ethnic mix could be found in most small cities. For the most part, however, the various groups clustered together, at first on the outskirts of the municipality and then more and more to the west along the edge of the frontier.

By the late 17th century, the English dominated all 13 colonies. By 1689, the population of colonial America had reached an estimated 210,000 Europeans, about 80 percent of them "transplanted Englishmen." After that, however, the proportion of English Americans declined. Between 1689 and 1775, the population increased twelvefold to about 2.6 million, with only a small portion due to natural increase. Rather, the rapid growth of African slavery and the influx of hundreds of thousands of non-English immigrants in the mid-18th century significantly changed the character of the colonial population.

Geographic Variances in Diversity

Three geographic regions developed distinct population mixtures and cultures. The following data are based on information from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, as well as 1790 census data extrapolations and anthropological estimates about the Native American population at that time.⁹

The New England Colonies

The greatest degree of cultural homogeneity was in the New England colonies, with English Americans representing about 70 percent of all inhabitants (see Fig. 3.1). In Massachusetts, home to two of every five New Englanders, lived the greatest concentration of English Americans of all 13 colonies, with 82 percent of the more than 250,000 people being English. The lowest proportion of English was in Maine, with 60 percent, but its population was only about 31,000. Scots accounted for about 4 percent and the

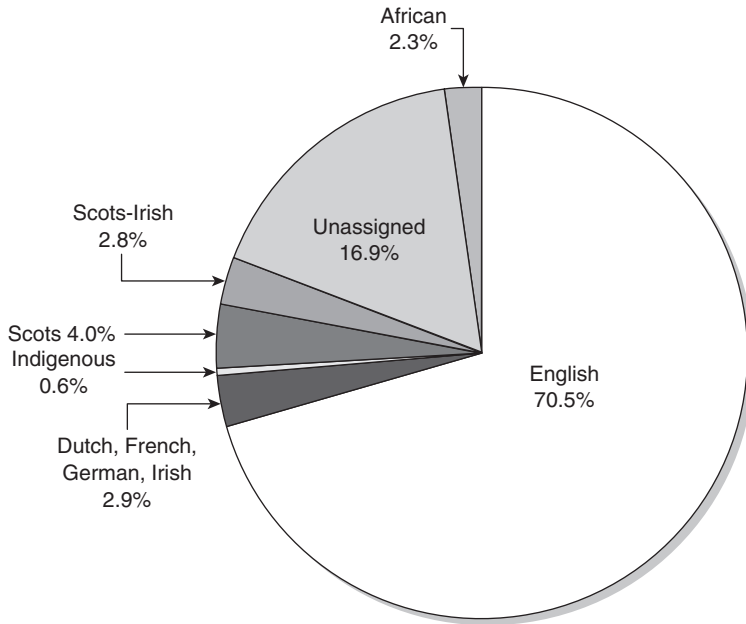


Figure 3.1 New England Colonies, Approximate Population in 1776

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part II, Series Z 20-132* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

Scots-Irish for about 3 percent. Interestingly, the 16,000 Africans in New England represented slightly more than 2 percent of the total, which was more than the combined numbers of Irish, Dutch, and Germans also living in New England at that time.

By 1775, this region contained a greater share of fifth- and sixth-generation Americans than the Middle or Southern Colonies. Most of these New England inhabitants had coalesced into reasonably unified communities, shaped in part by their consensus-driven town meetings that allowed widespread public participation in the discussion of local issues.

The Middle Colonies

The Middle Colonies were the most diverse of the three regions (see Fig. 3.2). Here, the English, totaling almost 41 percent, did not constitute a numerical majority. About 15 percent were German, and more than 12 percent were African. The Dutch, Scots, and Scots-Irish were each slightly more than

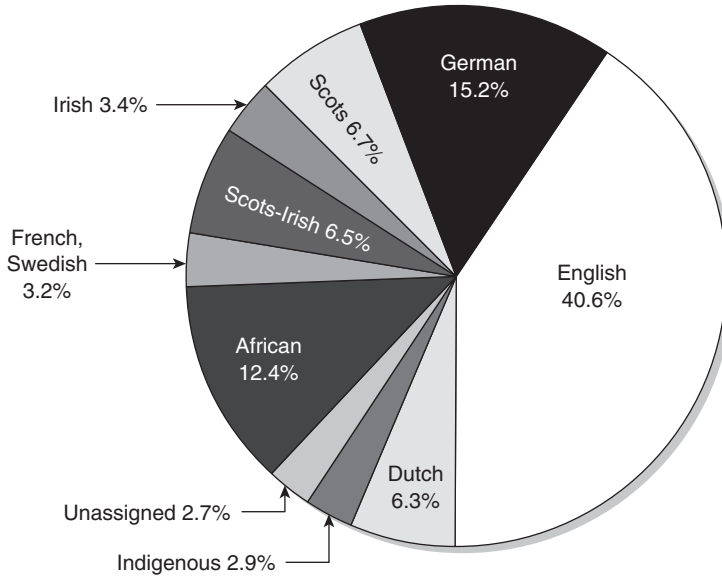


Figure 3.2 Middle Colonies, Approximate Population in 1776

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part II, Series Z 20–132* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

6 percent of the total. Notably, ethnic clannishness prevented any cohesive cultural evolution as occurred in New England.

Throughout the New York–New Jersey region, the Dutch remained socially insulated and maintained ethnic solidarity up through the Revolutionary period. Buoyed by their numbers (one in six residents in New York and New Jersey was Dutch), their culture flourished. Amid the steep-roofed houses—with double doors, blue-tiled fireplaces, and built-in cupboards—stood the Dutch Reformed churches and parochial schools. Endogamy was the norm, and Dutch endured as an everyday language, with English not even introduced into Dutch schools until 1774.

President Martin Van Buren illustrated Dutch endogamy and social isolation during the colonial and federal periods when he wrote in his autobiography that his family was “without a single intermarriage with one of different extraction from the time of the arrival of the first emigrant to that of the marriage of my eldest son, embracing a period of over two centuries and including six generations.”¹⁰

Van Buren’s comment could have applied to most of the Dutch families and other ethnics of his time. Fluent in Dutch, Van Buren was chided, rather

unfairly, by critics such as John Randolph for his inability to “speak, or write, the English language correctly,” a complaint often made today about newcomers.¹¹

It was in Pennsylvania, the most heavily populated of the Middle Colonies with almost 300,000 residents, where the most ethnic and religious diversity existed on the eve of the Revolution. With its Quaker-inspired religious tolerance and liberal land policies serving as important lures, Pennsylvania superseded all other colonies in attracting a mixed group of non-English immigrants. In 1766, Benjamin Franklin reported to the House of Commons that the Germans and Scots-Irish each comprised one third of Pennsylvania’s population.

The Germans were splintered into numerous religious groupings. They were Lutherans, Reformed, or pietists: Quakers, Moravians, Mennonites, and Dunkers. Like the Dutch, the different German groups lived in community clusters, persevering as vibrant, distinct subcultures. Countering German pacifist sentiments were Scots-Irish Presbyterians, whose fierce anti-Anglican feelings and swift alignment with the rebel cause were key elements in tipping the Pennsylvania colony into a revolutionary posture.

Although some, like the French Huguenots and Welsh, were quickly absorbed into the dominant Anglo-American mainstream, others, such as the Germans and Scots-Irish, created separate and distinct communities for themselves where they maintained cultural cohesiveness, despite their close proximity to other ethnic groups nearby. United by their strong ethnic ties, they practiced a voluntary allegiance to their own distinct social groups. The Scots-Irish would eventually assimilate more quickly than the Germans, who remained clustered within a persistent subculture for several more generations.

In Delaware, the lowest populated colony with slightly more than 41,000, the Swedes were the second largest ethnic group, with about 9 percent of the total. Delaware was where the short-lived colony of New Sweden (1638–1655) existed before Dutch takeover. The English were clearly dominant, however, with 60 percent of the total, and the Scots were a close third at 8 percent.

The Southern Colonies

In the Southern Colonies, the English, at 37 percent of the total, also were in the numerical minority, but, as in the Middle Colonies, they were the largest single group. From a sociological viewpoint, they were the dominant group in terms of power and control in both regions.

Slavery made the Africans the largest group, at 39 percent (see Fig. 3.3). Virginia, the most populated colony with more than a half-million inhabitants,

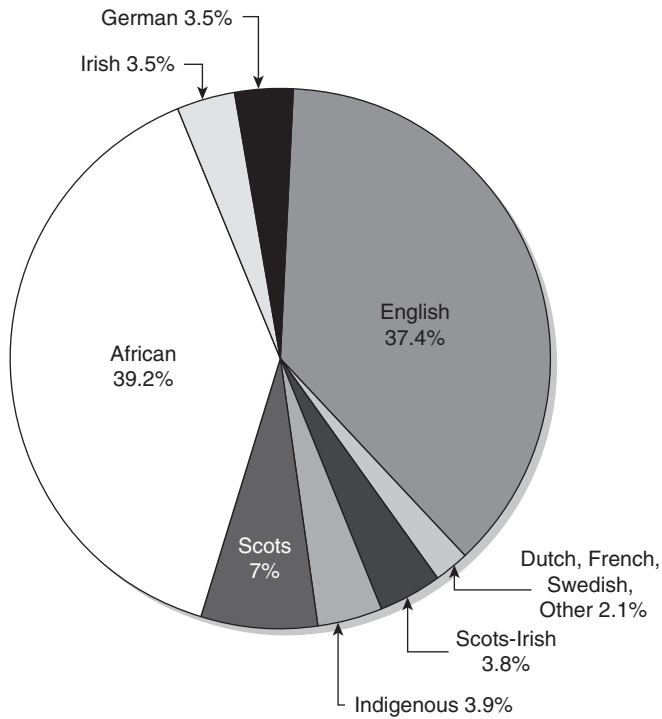


Figure 3.3 Southern Colonies, Approximate Population in 1776

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part II, Series Z 20-132* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976).

had about two fifths of all slaves in the region, but in South Carolina, the Africans outnumbered the Europeans. If we include the approximately 40,000 Native Americans estimated to be living in the Southern Colonies at the time, this figure makes the Southern Colonies the most racially diverse of the three regions. Here, the non-White population was about 42 percent, or two of five inhabitants. The remaining 21 percent of the inhabitants were non-English Whites. Numbering more than 300,000, they were mostly Scots, Scots-Irish, Germans, Irish, and French Huguenots.

African Diversity on the Plantations

Cultural diversity also existed among the African slaves, who came from different tribal backgrounds in western Africa—particularly Angola, the

Gold Coast, Nigeria, and Senegambia. Because of this cultural mixing, no tribe or language group predominated, with the newly transported slaves speaking about 100 languages or dialects. The colonists, however, did not look on the Africans as a diverse group, instead viewing them as a single racial collectivity as well as less than human.

It was not simply the slave system that caused the colonists to ignore African diversity and generalize because they did the same thing with Native Americans. Nor was it simply a racist response or a premodern lack of sophistication. Ingroup members typically generalize about outgroups, failing to note their diversity. Other examples of unnoticed diversity are when Americans a few generations ago viewed the many diverse people from central, southern, and Eastern Europe as a single entity or people today generalize about all Asians or Hispanics.

In colonial times, the Africans adapted to their harsh new reality and, interacting with one another, soon overcame their tribal barriers through the process of ethnogenesis.¹² The Africans became bilingual, even trilingual, conversing in their native tongue to members of their tribe or language group and in broken English to their owners. To converse with other slaves in the Carolinas, the Africans created *Gullah*, a dialect amalgamating some English and many African words into an African grammatical structure.¹³

By the 1730s, an African American culture began to evolve that became more cohesive after the end of the legal slave trade in 1808. In a harsh, arbitrary world separated along racial lines, enslaved Blacks developed a peasant-like culture. Like European peasants, they, too, formed close-knit communities based on family and kinship, with religion as an important center of their lives. Although Gullah gradually faded away, many elements of African origin remained in music, dance, marriage rituals, and housing floor plans (front-to-back rooms instead of two rooms side by side in front). Africans held on to their incest taboo as well. Rarely did marriage occur between cousins, unlike such common practice among the slave owners, who usually did so to maintain inherited property and power.

Three Regional Cultures

By 1725, regional differences in the New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies led to distinct cultures evolving in each of these areas.¹⁴

New England, with its unified farming societies, maintained a strong religious orientation. Its high educational standards, even in rural areas, resulted in a literacy rate of about 90 percent for men and 50 percent for women in 1790. Here, a more integrated society functioned and shared, for the most part, a common ancestry.

In the Southern Colonies, a different culture emerged. Most adult White women and more than one third of the White men could not read or write, not even their own names. Illiteracy occurred because a large number of White people, mostly tenant and small, independent farmers, lived in poverty and had little or no formal schooling. A small aristocratic elite ruled this socially stratified and racially divided region, with its ethnically distinct back-country inhabitants, over others for whom education was a low priority.

Within the Middle Colonies, the ethnic clannishness of the diverse groups prevented any cohesive regional culture from developing. Thus, 18th-century colonial America was literally a multicultural place, a fact frequently commented upon by European visitors and congressional representatives in the 1790s, who noted the significant cultural differences among the three regions.

Throughout the three regions, regional residence and social class greatly affected the quality of women's lives. Most spun thread and made clothing, candles, and soap, but rural women had to be even more self-sufficient in a variety of productive tasks. These tasks might include milking goats or cows, churning butter, working in the fields, or other farm chores.¹⁵

Women in affluent families had servants to do menial tasks while they devoted their free time to such activities as playing a musical instrument, creating fine embroidery, or perhaps reading good books, particularly Scripture. Working-class women more likely produced goods for sale (cheese, cloth, shoes, yarn) or rendered services (working as cooks, domestics, or possibly servers at inns, restaurants, or taverns).

Ethnic background was another important variable in determining women's place in the social order. Those of English descent were most likely to be found indoors, either engaged in duties in and about the house or, if working class, in such public establishments as those mentioned previously. Those ethnic groups living even just a short distance away from these English-dominated settlements—the Germans, Scots-Irish, and French-Canadians especially—would normally have their women performing a variety of agricultural tasks, as they worked in the barns, fields, meadows, and stables, wherever they were needed.¹⁶

Religious Diversity

Religious diversity was another significant component of cultural pluralism throughout colonial America. Religion played a major role in colonial life, from its importance as a force for initial settlement by many different Christian groups to its influence on the everyday lives of the settlers. Clergy

were highly honored members of the community, and their advice extended beyond spiritual matters to include economic and political concerns, as well as gender relations.

Religious values—echoing such teachings as Paul’s assertion that “wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Ephesians 5:24)—greatly influenced social norms in most colonial communities. When Anne Hutchinson, a middle-aged midwife and wife of a merchant, challenged both her subordinate status and the traditional teachings of Puritan clergymen by holding weekly prayer meetings in her house, she was banished in 1637 for heresy. Afterwards, Governor John Winthrop declared that she could have lived “usefully and honorably in the place God had set her . . . if she had attended her household affairs, and such things as belong to women.”¹⁷

Most women were the social products of their times and did not challenge the pervasive male authority promulgated by the clergy. Illustrative is *The Well-Ordered Family* (1712), in which its author, Reverend Benjamin Wadsworth, counsels his female readers,

To possibly thou has greater abilities of mind than he has, are of some high birth, and he of a more mean extract, or didst bring more Estate to Marriage than he did; yet since he is thy Husband, God has made him the head and set him above thee.¹⁸

What a woman could only do, he admonished, was to fulfill her “duty to love and reverence him.”

Religious Intolerance

Seventeenth-century religion was an all-encompassing force that helped people endure the hardships and sacrifices of daily life in settlements. Moreover, colonial religiosity instilled a narrow, intolerant view of other faiths. The expulsion of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson from the Massachusetts colony as religious dissidents is well known. Less known is the fact that many colonies at this time enacted discriminatory legislation against Catholics and Jews usually by banning their immigration or right to vote.

Seventeenth-century English settlers were mostly Puritan in New England, Anglican in the South, and a variety of religious sects in the Middle Colonies, reflecting the population diversity and liberal stance of the governments, particularly in Pennsylvania. The American beginnings of the Baptist Church commenced in 1639 in Rhode Island with Roger Williams. After that time, Baptists became the most persecuted sect in New England for the rest of the

century. Fines, beatings, and whippings were not uncommon. Not until 1708 could Baptists legally have a house of worship in Connecticut. In contrast, Baptists thrived in the more tolerant Middle Colonies, establishing in Philadelphia by 1700 the strongest Baptist center in the colonies. When the 1691 Massachusetts charter extended “liberty of conscience” to all Christians, including Baptists, it specifically excluded “Papists” (Catholics).

Dislike of Catholics was one common ground on which all the Protestants could agree. The Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, German Reformed, and Lutherans along the “frontier” were intolerant of one another, yet often shared a strong dislike of Anglicans. The Anglicans, strongest in Virginia but prevalent throughout the South, disdainfully looked down on the New England Puritans, while the New Englanders reciprocated and jealously guarded their communities against the Anglicans achieving any inroads.

By the 18th century, secular forces lessened the force of religion, although it remained an important social influence. A lessening of religious devotion and church attendance, together with the advance of humanitarianism and rationalism in this Age of Enlightenment, combined to make this so. As a consequence, religious tolerance increased, but only slightly. There were still conflicts to come.

The Great Awakening

A momentous, far-reaching religious revival movement in the 1740s, known as the Great Awakening, brought even more conflict and diversity onto the American religious scene.¹⁹ It was initiated by Massachusetts preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), who proclaimed that an individual’s “born again” spiritual awakening was strong evidence of a predestined life of heavenly bliss. Other clergy picked up this theme, but the most influential was George Whitefield (1714–1770), an eloquent English evangelist who tirelessly and effectively spread this message of revivalism from Maine to Georgia.

The new movement generated much bitterness between “Old Light” traditionalists and the “New Light” evangelists. The emotional preaching and theme of individual salvation through the Bible appealed to many and challenged the formal services and conservatism of the churches dominated by the elite. The movement spread rapidly, with memberships increasing dramatically among the evangelical sects. Baptists benefited the most from these gains, often at the expense of Anglicans and Congregationalists. The Great Awakening also caused schisms in the Congregationalist, Dutch Reformed, and Presbyterian churches, further increasing the bitterness of the established churches against the dissenting sects.

Significantly, the Great Awakening brought democratization to religion as the general public gained a larger voice in the church. In doing so, it strengthened the trend toward liberty of conscience as it raised fundamental questions about the nature of God and human behavior, about moral and political authority, and about economic comportment. Another interesting consequence was that revivalists boldly went into any hospitable church regardless of creed. Thus, they helped break down provincial barriers to create a more unified evangelical Protestantism that became part of the American character. Furthermore, the Great Awakening reinforced strong community values held by Americans outside the coastal towns and cities.

During this tumultuous religious period, every major Christian sect, concerned about preserving its faith and transmitting its values and beliefs to future generations, took steps to ensure its survival. Each established its own college to educate new clergy and, as noted historian Daniel J. Boorstin states, “to save more Americans from the untruths of its competitors.”²⁰

The Legacy of Religious Pluralism

No single religion dominated, and the proliferation of sects and the growth of religious enthusiasm in 18th-century America produced an unplanned and often undesired religious tolerance. Religious pluralism slowly, sometimes painfully, led to tolerance because no one group was powerful enough to coerce the others. One example is the early creation of interdenominational boards of trustees at the previously mentioned denominational colleges, partially in response to the reality that no single sect could supply its entire student body from the limited population base in its area.

United by their nationalism after winning their war for independence, the colonists put aside their prejudices by institutionalizing that tolerance and establishing a bedrock principle of U.S. culture: separation of church and state. Freedom of religion was more an act of practical necessity than of democratic ideals. It is one legacy from America’s multicultural past.

A Kaleidoscope Society

Some historians have found colorful expressions to describe the diversity of colonial America on the eve of the Revolution (see Fig. 3.4). Michael Kammen calls it an “invertebrate” society composed of disconnected religious, ethnic, and racial groups lacking a “figurative spinal column.”²¹

James Stuart Olson describes the colonies in 1776 as “a cultural kaleidoscope of three races and dozens of ethnic and religious groups.”²²

English Americans may have held political power in the 13 colonies, but they constituted less than half the total population. In the Middle and Southern Colonies, they were decisively outnumbered by the combined racial and ethnic groups and in South Carolina by African slaves alone. However, the Anglo-Americans were the dominant group: They held political and economic power and were backed by the English military. Their language and culture constituted the mainstream, but the English did not force other White ethnics to assimilate, allowing them instead to retain their own schools to teach their children in their native languages.

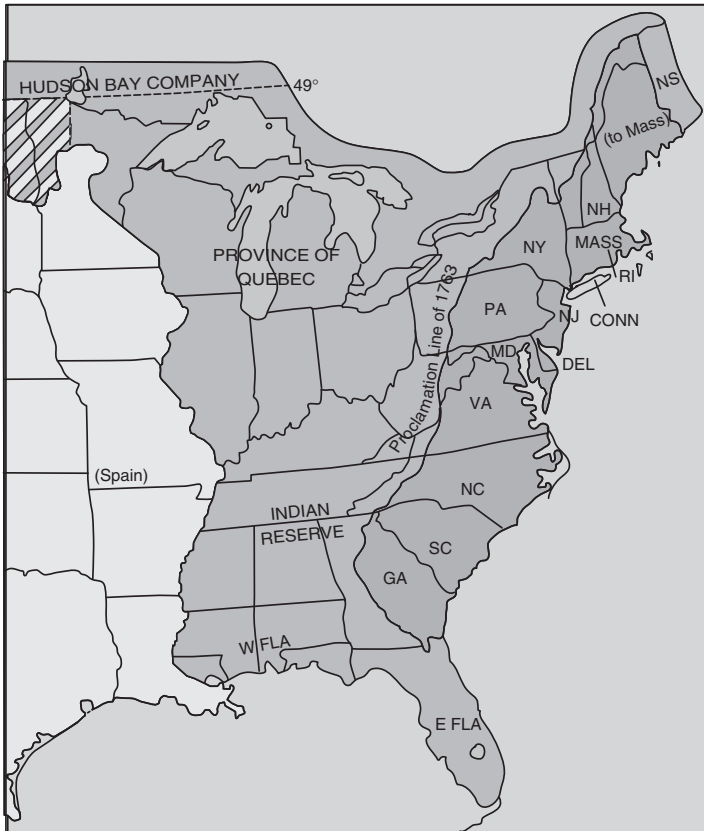


Figure 3.4 United States in 1775

Minority Separatism

Ethnic colonials thus lived under this tolerant English rule, typically residing apart in culturally distinct ethnic communities. If geographically isolated, they also remained culturally insulated. If living within the English American cities, they adapted as urban ethnics always have, but also retained many vestiges of their ethnicity and maintained an ingroup solidarity among their own kind.

Native Americans also desired to live among their own kind and maintain their way of life, but, unlike White ethnics, they were not left alone to do so. African Americans, mostly enslaved, had no voice in their own welfare, but, within the slave communities, they developed their own subculture. Although relegated to a subjugated existence, racial diversity remained a reality in colonial America.

The separate White groups gave at least grudging tolerance to one another, united as they were in their fear and defense against the native peoples and the French. Later, with the threat from England, they put aside their differences to fight for their freedom and to maintain their rights through local politics.

The Multicultural Revolutionary Army

The success of Washington's troops in defeating the English lies partly in the multicultural elite, who played key roles in military training, strategy, and leadership. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben (Prussia), Gen. Casimer Pulaski and Gen. Thaddeus Kosciuszko (Poland), and Marquis de Lafayette and Baron de Kalb (France) were the most prominent volunteers from Europe who were of great value to the American cause, although de Kalb's death in 1780 at the Battle of Camden, South Carolina, was a major blow to American efforts to recapture the South at the time.

Just as the military leadership consisted of non-English individuals, so, too, did the ranks of fighting men. More than 5,000 Blacks served in the colonial forces, fighting in every major battle from Lexington in 1775 to Yorktown in 1781. Some distinguished themselves in combat, such as Peter Salem and Salem Poore at the Battle of Bunker Hill and Lemuel Haynes at the Battle of Fort Ticonderoga. James Lafayette, a Virginia slave, was so effective in gaining strategic intelligence about the English for Lafayette's troops that the Virginia Assembly purchased his freedom as a reward.

Patriotic groups formed within ethnic communities, often cooperating or even merging with similar nonethnic groups out of necessity. Numerous ethnic communities recruited their own companies or regiments, staffed with

their own officers. Soon they mixed with other ethnic groups or those of English ancestry as they united against a common enemy. Then the cultural barriers and suspicions between groups faded as they shared common dangers, common hardships, and, ultimately, common victories.

The Next Horizon

The American Revolution would have both obvious and subtle consequences. Most obvious would be the birth of a nation, but one of the subtle outcomes would be the gradual acculturation of the ethnic minorities of that time. Scots-Irish and French Huguenots, both Calvinists who adapted easily to the individualistic, success-oriented society developing in the English colonies, would assimilate quickly. They did not maintain the ethnic isolation of the Dutch and Germans, whose cultural pluralism endured, but even for these ethnics, the cultural barriers and social distance would be reduced.

A process of cultural homogenization among the Whites would begin, bolstered by the attempt to build a national identity, but it would be short-lived. The catalyst was the new nation's audacious declaration that leaders ruled only by the consent of the governed and that all men were created equal and entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Those rights and privileges were not yet to be fully extended to women and racial minorities, but the promise of freedom and opportunity would soon attract thousands of hopeful others. Ethnic communities would be revitalized and new ones would form, rejuvenating diversity in a land where it had always flourished.

Notes

1. Mildred Campbell, "Social Origins of Some Early Americans," in *Seventeenth-Century America*, ed. James M. Smith (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 63.
2. Stephen Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 10.
3. Bruce Catton and William B. Catton, *The Bold and Magnificent Dream: America's Founding Years, 1492-1815* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 165, 166, 168.
4. Lawrence H. Fuchs, *The American Kaleidoscope: Race, Ethnicity, and the Civic Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press of New England, 1990), 12.
5. Maxine Sellers, *To Seek America: A History of Ethnic Life in the United States* (New York: James S. Ozer, 1977), 37.
6. Steinberg, *The Ethnic Myth*, 8.

7. Gary B. Nash, ed., *Class and Society in Early America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 19.
8. Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).
9. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Part II* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976), 1168–72.
10. Donald B. Cole, *Martin Van Buren and the American Political System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 14.
11. See John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* (New York: DaCapo, 1973), 9.
12. See Richard D. Alba, “Models for Viewing American Catholicism,” chap. 1 in *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 9–12.
13. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1952).
14. Lawrence H. Fuchs, “True Americanism: The Foundations of the Civic Culture,” chap. 1 in *The American Kaleidoscope*.
15. See Nancy Woloch, *Women and the American Experience* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984); Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women of Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Random House, 1982).
16. Nash, *Class and Society in Early America*.
17. James A. Henretta et al., *America’s History to 1877* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1987), 54–5.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
19. Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
20. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1958), 179.
21. Michael Kammen, *People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 49.
22. James Stuart Olson, *The Ethnic Dimension in American History* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 51.