Colonial Society on the Eve of Revolution

1700 - 1775
Thirteen Colonies

- 1775 – Britain controlled 32 colonies in New World, from Canada to West Indies
  - 13 decided to fight for independence
  - The “why” can be found in distinctive “American” social, economic, and political structures of these 13 colonies
Conquest by the Cradle

- Huge increase in population
  - 1700 – 300,000 people in America; 20,000 blacks
  - 1775 – 2.5 million people in US; 500,000 were black
    - 400,000 were new immigrants; additional 400,000 were blacks slaves
    - Rest was natural fertility of Americans - colonists doubled their numbers every 25 years
Conquest by the Cradle

- Political importance of increasing population
  - 1700 – 20 English subjects for every American colonist
  - 1775 – 3 English subjects for every American colonist
  - Political power shifting to American colonies
Conquest by the Cradle

- 1775 – most people lived east of Alleghenies (Western part of Appalachians from Pennsylvania to Virginia)
  - Some pioneers were moving into frontier of Tennessee and Kentucky
A Mingling of the Races

- America as a melting pot
  - Many foreign groups mixed with predominant English
Immigrant Groups in 1775
A Mingling of the Races

- Germans
  - 1775 – 6% of the population (150,000)
  - Early 1700s – settled chiefly in Pennsylvania
    - Known as Pennsylvania Dutch (“Deutsch” means German)
    - Moved to backcountry and worked industriously
  - Primarily Lutheran
  - Not loyal to British crown
  - Clung to German heritage and language
A Mingling of the Races

- **Scots-Irish**
  - 1775 – 7% of the population (175,000)
  - Scottish who had been exiled to Ireland before emigration to America
  - Early 1700s – settled chiefly in Pennsylvania as squatters, but also rural Maryland, Virginia, and Carolinas
  - Quick to attack and retaliate against Indians
  - Had no loyalty to British government that had persecuted them in Europe
    - Also rebelled against colonial governments dominated by eastern elites
A Mingling of the Races

- **Other ethnic groups**
  - 1775 – 5% of the population
    - French Huguenots (Protestants), Welsh, Dutch, Swedes, Jews, Irish, Swiss, Scots Highlanders
    - Generally little loyalty to British

- **African slaves**
  - 1775 – 25% of the population
    - Heavily concentrated in South
A Mingling of the Races

- 13 colonies
  - Primarily Anglo-Saxon, but most ethnically diverse population in world at time
  - South
    - Mixed black and white (with 90% of all slaves)
  - North
    - Primarily Puritan and least ethnically diverse
  - Middle colonies
    - Most ethnically diverse (especially Pennsylvania)
Ethnic and Racial Composition of the American People, 1790

- English: 49%
- African: 19%
- Scottish: 7%
- German: 7%
- Scots-Irish: 5%
- Irish: 3%
- Dutch: 3%
- Other European: 9%
A Mingling of the Races

- Immigrant groups intermarried (with each other and with English)
  - Created a new American national identity separate from anything in Europe

- African slaves intermarried with other slaves of diverse tribes
  - Created a new African American identity
The Structure of Colonial Society

- America in 1700s land of equality and opportunity (for whites) compared to Europe
  - No titled nobility
  - No poor underclass
  - Most were small farmers
  - Skilled artisans and unskilled day laborers worked in cities
  - Hard working colonist could raise social status (impossible in England)
The Structure of Colonial Society

- Wars began to stratify American society
  - Merchants (New England and middle colonies) were enriched by war contracts (between England and France and with the Indians)
    - Lived well (imported clothing, china, silverware)
    - Seating in churches and schools according to social rank
    - Richest 10% in Boston and Philadelphia owned 2/3 of the wealth
The Structure of Colonial Society

- Widows and orphans created because of wars
  - Dependent on charity for survival
  - Poor still small compared to England (where 1/3 were poor)
The Structure of Colonial Society

- New England – descendents of original settlers faced more limited prospects
  - Supply of land dwindled (near coast and major cities and away from Indians); estates repeatedly subdivided
  - Younger sons and daughters forced to work as wage laborers or move west (beyond Alleghenies) for unclaimed land
  - Many landless poor looked to public charity for survival in major cities
The Structure of Colonial Society

- South – rich planters held power and riches because of their disproportionate ownership of slaves
  - Wealth concentrated among largest slave owners
  - Slavery widened gap between planters and poor whites
The Structure of Colonial Society

- Some indentured servants continued coming to America
  - Many ultimately achieved prosperity
- Poor and convicts involuntarily shipped to America
  - 50,000 shipped to America
  - Generally remained in lower classes
The Structure of Colonial Society

- Black slaves
  - No equality with whites
  - No hope of improving social status
  - Closest approximation to England’s oppressed lower classes
  - Real fear in South that they might rebel
  - Some in South (like South Carolina in 1760) tried to ban importation of more slaves
    - All efforts vetoed by Britain, who wanted cheap labor supply for colonies
Clerics, Physicians, and Jurists

- Clerics
  - Most respected profession
  - 1775 – less power than in early colonial days (especially New England), but still well-respected
Clerics, Physicians, and Jurists

- Physicians
  - Poorly trained, not well-respected
  - Little medical knowledge; bleeding was common (and deadly) practice
  - Apprentices worked with older trainers and then turned loose
  - Epidemics (for which doctors could do little) killed many
    - Smallpox, diphtheria
Clerics, Physicians, and Jurists

- Law profession
  - Not favorably regarded
  - Most parties in dispute presented their case themselves in court
Agriculture

- 90% of the people involved
- Chesapeake
  - Mainly tobacco
  - Wheat also spread
- Middle colonies
  - Primarily grain (the “bread” colonies)
- Americans enjoyed higher standard of living because of agriculture than in any other people in history
Workaday America

- Fishing (including whaling)
  - Principally in New England
  - Cod exported to Europe
  - Stimulated shipbuilding
  - Served as training for future navy
Workaday America

- Commerce (trade)
  - Especially in New England, New York, and Pennsylvania
  - Shipped food and forest products to Caribbean
  - Brought gold, wine, and oranges to Europe
  - Brought industrial goods from Europe to America
Triangular trade

- Rum shipped from New England to Africa and traded in Africa for slaves
- Slaves shipped to West Indies and traded for molasses
- Molasses shipped to New England and distilled into rum
Workaday America

- Manufacturing
  - Secondary because of ease of finding good land to farm and British restrictions
  - Rum
  - Beaver hats
  - Iron forges
  - Household manufacturing (spinning, weaving)
  - Carpentry
  - Lumbering was most important single manufacturing activity for shipbuilding (primarily in New England)
Workaday America

- Shipbuilding
  - Colonies had important (and relatively rare) materials such as tar, pitch, rosin, and turpentine
  - Huge trees in colonies used for British ships
The Colonial Economy
Workaday America

- As early as 1730s – trade imbalance between Britain and colonies
  - Americans (with increasing population) demanded more and more British products
  - British population reached saturation point for imports from America
  - How could colonists sell enough goods to make money to buy what they wanted in Britain?
    - By seeking foreign (non-British) markets
Workaday America

- **Foreign trade**
  - Exports to Europe had to pass through Britain (where re-exporters took a slice of the profits)
  - Most important to colonists was trade with West Indies
  - 1733 – Molasses Act
    - British West Indian planters pressured Parliament to stop American trade with French West Indies
    - Would cripple American foreign trade and hurt colonists’ standard of living
    - Colonists got around law by smuggling and bribing
Colonial Trade Patterns, c. 1770

- **NORTH AMERICAN COLONIES**: Tobacco, foodstuffs
- **WEST INDIES**: Sugar, molasses
- **ENGLAND**: Tobacco, fish, lumber, flour for English textiles, etc.
- **AFRICA**: Gold Coast of Guinea
- **ATLANTIC OCEAN**: Rum, Slaves

- Links from North American colonies to England:
  - Timber, foodstuffs
  - Sugar, molasses
- Links from West Indies to England:
  - Slaves
  - Rum
- Links from Africa to West Indies:
  - Slaves
Horsepower and Sailpower

- Transportation huge problem in America
  - Sparse population
  - Huge expanse of land
  - Scarcity of money and workers
Horsepower and Sailpower

- Roads
  - Dirt roads; dusty in summer and mud ditches in winter
  - Dangers of stagecoaches – fallen trees, rickety bridges, overturning of carriage, runaway horses
Horsepower and Sailpower

- Waterways
  - Heavy reliance on waterways because of bad roads
  - Population clustered around banks of navigable rivers
  - Also much traffic along coasts
Horsepower and Sailpower

- Taverns along the main routes
  - Amusements (gambling, bowling, pool, bars)
  - All social classes mingled together
  - Gossip (and political talk) spread through taverns
    - Important for crystallizing public opinion
    - Centers of agitation as revolutionary movement became stronger
Horsepower and Sailpower

- mid 1700s – intercolonial postal system
  - Private couriers also worked
  - Service slow and infrequent
  - Privacy a problem (mail carriers might pass the time by reading mail)
Dominant Denominations

- 2 “established” (tax-supported) churches in 1775 – Anglican and Congregational
  - Considerable part of population did no worship at any church
  - Those colonies that had “established” religion – only a minority of people belonged to it
Dominant Denominations

- Established churches
  - Congregational
    - Massachusetts (including Maine), Connecticut, New Hampshire
  - Anglican
    - Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, New York (only in NY City and 3 neighboring counties)
  - None
    - Rhode Island, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania
Dominant Denominations

- Church of England (Anglican) church
  - Propped up king’s authority in colonies
    • Royal authorities tried to expand into other colonies, but were strongly opposed
  - Faith that was less fierce (and more worldly) than Puritanism
  - 1693 – College of William and Mary founded to train better Anglican clergy
Dominant Denominations

- Congregational church
  - Grew out of individual Puritan churches
  - Established in all of New England except Rhode Island
  - Presbyterianism associated with Congregationalism, but not established in any colony
Dominant Denominations

- Religious ministers and politics
  - Presbyterianism and Congregationalism encouraged rebellion against British
  - Anglican clergymen generally supported the crown
Dominant Denominations

- Anglican church handicapped by not having a bishop in New World
  - Ministers had to travel to England to be ordained
  - Plan to ordain an American bishop was stopped by protesting colonists
    • Felt this would increase power of Anglican church (and therefore crown)
Dominant Denominations

- Religious toleration
  - People could generally worship (or not) as they pleased
  - Roman Catholics discriminated against, as in England
    - Fewer Catholics in America meant anti-Catholic laws were less strict and least enforced
The Great Awakening

- Mid 1700s – religion less fervent than in 1600s, when colonies first settled
  - Puritan church had 2 burdens
    - Elaborate doctrines
    - Compromises to liberalize membership requirements
The Great Awakening

- Elaborate doctrines
  - Puritan preachers preached overly complex, intellectual, and boring sermons, beyond the understanding of membership
The Great Awakening

- Compromises to liberalize membership requirements
  - Ministers worried members no longer motivated by hell and damnation
  - Some members questioned established doctrines
    - Good works might save people instead of predestination to heaven or hell
    - Arminians (followers of Dutch Jacobus Arminius)
      - Individual free will, not divide decree, determined a person’s eternal fate
  - Some churches (in response to these liberal beliefs) allowed non-converted members into church membership
The Great Awakening

- 1730s – 1740s – the Great Awakening
  - Spiritual revival that swept through the colonies
The Great Awakening

- 1734 – began in Northhampton, Massachusetts with Jonathan Edwards
  - “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”
  - Fought idea that good works were enough to be saved – God’s grace was only way to get to heaven
  - Preaching style was learned and closely reasoned, but used brutal doctrines to catch people’s attention
Jonathan Edwards
The Great Awakening

- 1738 – George Whitefield
  - Powerful preacher who used speaking skills to reach people
  - Traveled the colonies, preaching in outside forums to thousands of people
  - Preached message of human helplessness and divine omnipotence
  - Countless sinners converted; “saved” groaned, shrieked, and rolled around on ground under influence of God’s power
George Whitefield Preaching
The Great Awakening

- Whitefield inspired imitators
  - Attacked sinners and used emotional appeals to reach audience
  - Cackling and leaping around listeners used to inspire
The Great Awakening

“old lights” vs. “new lights”

– Old lights did not believe in the emotionalism and theatrical antics of revivalists
– New lights defended Great Awakening for revitalizing American religion
– Congregationalists and Presbyterians split on this issue
  • Congregationalists associated with old lights; Presbyterians associated with new lights
The Great Awakening

Effects of the Great Awakening
- Increased membership of “new light” churches (Baptists, Presbyterians)
- Undermined of “old light” religions (whose authority had come from education)
- Increased number and competitiveness of American religions
- Encouraged missionary work among Indians and black slaves
- “new light” universities founded (Princeton, Brown, Rutgers, Dartmouth)
- First mass movement of American people
  - Broke down sectional and denominational lines
  - Gave Americans sense that they were a single people
Schools and Colleges

- Traditional English view of education
  - Reserved for aristocratic few (leaders, and males), not for regular citizens
  - Idea only slowly broken by colonists
Schools and Colleges

- Puritan New England pushed education more than other colonies
  - Done primarily for religious reasons – to encourage learning needed for reading and understanding the Bible
Schools and Colleges

- Education in New England
  - Primarily for boys
  - Primary and secondary schools
    - Varied in quality and length of time open
    - Farming took much time
  - Many graduates from Cambridge (strongly Puritan university in England) and other English universities
Schools and Colleges

- Elementary schools existed in middle colonies and South
  - Some tax-supported, some private
- Schools in South hampered by population spread out over large areas
  - Wealthy families used private tutors
Schools and Colleges

- General atmosphere in school
  - Focus on religion and classical languages (Latin and Greek)
  - Focus on doctrine and dogma (not experiment and reason)
  - Independent thinking discouraged
  - Discipline severe (“birched” – being spanked by a branch from a birch tree)
Schools and Colleges

- College education
  - At first (especially New England) geared toward preparing men for the ministry
  - Rich families (especially in South) sent boys to England to get a “real” (refined, philosophical, worldly) education
9 colleges established during colonial era
- Enrollments of only 200 (at most)
- Curriculum leaned toward “dead” languages (Latin and Greek)
- After 1750 – trend toward more modern subjects
- Ben Franklin played major role in founding (what became) the University of Pennsylvania
A Provincial Culture

- Art and culture – America still responded to Europe
  - American painters went to Europe to paint and complete training
  - Some seen as Loyalists (pro-British) during Revolution
  - Important painters
    - John Trumbull, Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin West, John Singleton Copley
A Provincial Culture

- Architecture – America copied from Europe
  - Even “American” log cabin copied from Sweden
  - 1720 – red-bricked Georgian style introduced in America
A Provincial Culture

- Literature
  - Generally undistinguished
  - Phyllis Wheatley
    - Slave girl brought to Boston at age 8; taken to England at 20
    - Wrote poems
  - Benjamin Franklin
    - Edited Poor Richard’s Almanack (1732 – 1758)
      - Collection of quotes and sayings; homespun wisdom like “Honesty is the best policy”
      - More widely read in America than anything else but Bible
    - Also wrote famous Autobiography
A Provincial Culture

- Scientist
  - Generally behind that of Europe
  - Ben Franklin only first-rank scientist
    - Dangerous experiments like flying a kite to demonstrate that lightning was a form of electricity
    - Invented bifocal spectacles, highly efficient Franklin stove, lightning rod
Pioneer Presses

- Private libraries
  - Byrd family in Virginia had largest (4,000 books)

- Circulating libraries
  - Ben Franklin established first in Philadelphia
  - 1776 –about 50 in America

- Americans generally too poor to buy many books and too busy to read many
Pioneer Presses

- Pamphlets, leaflets, journals
  - Printed by hand-operated printing presses
  - 1775 – 40 colonial newspapers
    - Weeklies consisting of 1 large sheet, folded in 1/2
    - Long, complex essays signed with Roman-sounding names
    - “news” might lag weeks behind the event (especially overseas events)
  - Newspapers were powerful way colonists could rally support around rebellion against British
Pioneer Presses

- Zenger case
  - Arose in New York (middle colony, with many different ethnic groups jockeyed for power)
  - John Peter Zenger, newspaper printer brought to court for criticizing a corrupt royal governor
    - Charged with seditious libel (sedition means inciting to rebellion; libel means printing something that damages someone’s reputation)
  - Law said that truth or falsity of what Zenger wrote did not matter
  - Zenger’s lawyer (Alexander Hamilton) eloquently argued that “the very liberty of both exposing and opposing arbitrary power” was at stake
Pioneer Presses

- The Zenger decision
  - Jury sided with Hamilton, returning verdict of not guilty
  - Pointed way to open discussion in open society that America was becoming
  - Contrary to existing law; not immediately accepted by other judges
  - Eventually helped establish legal doctrine that true statements about public officials were not libelous
  - Made newspapers (eventually) free to publish responsible criticism of powerful officials
The Great Game of Politics

- 1775 – 13 colonies had governments with a variety of forms

- Colonial governors
  - 8 had royal governors
  - 3 (Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware) under proprietors who appointed governors
  - 2 (Connecticut, Rhode Island) elected own governors under self-governing charters
The Great Game of Politics

Colonial legislatures (assemblies)
  - Most had 2-house legislatures
  - Upper house chosen those who appointed governor (crown, proprietors, or voters in self-governing colonies)
  - Lower house chosen by people (those with enough property to qualify)
  - Backcountry voters generally underrepresented and resented governmental elites
  - Self-taxation through representation was an important privilege to voters
The Great Game of Politics

- Royal governors
  - Many good and able; a few corrupt and incompetent
  - Even best ones had trouble with colonial legislatures because they represented a far-off authority across the Atlantic
The Great Game of Politics

- Colonial assemblies attempts to assert their authority
  - Withheld governor’s salary unless he did what they wanted
    - Normally in need of money (otherwise he would not be in America)
    - Most governors gave in
  - London government should have paid governors from independent sources
    - 1767 – Townshend taxes arranged to pay governors independent of legislatures; but by that time colonists already angry over taxation became angrier over new taxes
The Great Game of Politics

- Local government
  - South – county government
  - North – town-meeting government
  - Middle – mixture between these 2
The Great Game of Politics

- **Voting**
  - Upper classes refused (and feared) full democracy
    - 1/2 of all adult males disenfranchised
  - Religious and property qualifications
    - Even stricter for office-holding
  - Ease of getting land meant fulfilling property requirement attainable by most
  - Many eligible voters did not vote
    - Allowed upper classes (“betters”) to run colonial affairs
    - Voted more to kick out bad leaders that to elect good ones
The Great Game of Politics

- Democracy
  - 1775 – America was not a true democracy
  - Far more democratic than England and the rest of Europe
  - But America was moving to democracy
Colonial Folkways

- Colonial life was drab and tedious, but compared to Europeans, Americans lived well
Colonial Folkways

- **Food**
  - Plentiful, but coarse and monotonous
  - Ate more (especially of meat) than people in Old World
  - Only lazy or sick went hungry
Colonial Folkways

- Basic comforts
  - No central heating in homes or churches
  - Drafty homes were poorly heated by inefficient fireplaces
  - No running water, no plumbing, no bathtubs
  - Candles and whale-oil lamps gave off faint light at night
  - Garbage disposal by hogs or buzzards
Colonial Folkways

- **Amusement**
  - Militia mustering (trainings) interspersed with merrymaking
  - Frontier – house-raisings, quilting bees, husking bees, apple parings
  - Funerals and weddings
  - Lotteries approved (used by churches to raise money)
  - South – card playing, horse racing, cockfighting, fox hunting, dancing, stage plays (but forbidden in North)
Colonial Folkways

- Holidays
  - Christmas (frowned on by Puritans because of association with Catholicism)
  - Thanksgiving Day became American festival, combining God and eating
Colonial Folkways

- Mid 1700s – colonies growing together, becoming more similar
  - All basically English in language, customs. Protestantism
  - Widespread presence of diversity (ethnic/religious) led to some toleration
  - Ambitious people had opportunities for social mobility that Europeans did not have
  - All had some self-government (though not democracy)
  - Communication and transportation among colonies improving
  - Separated from ruling authority by 3,000 miles