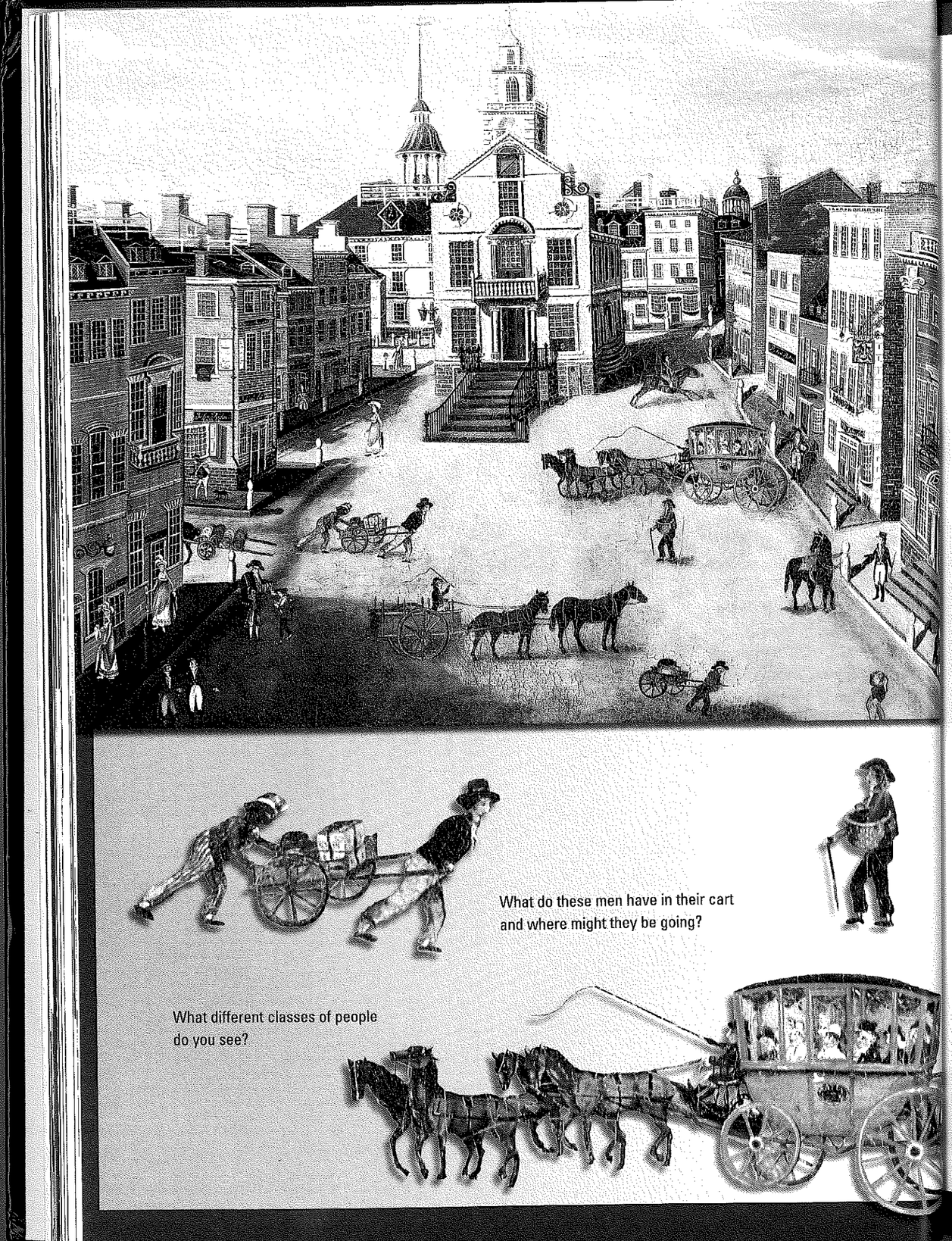


What do these men have in their cart and where might they be going?

What different classes of people do you see?

CHAPTER

4

Life in the Colonies

4.1 Introduction

In 1723, a tired teenager stepped off a boat onto Philadelphia's Market Street wharf. He was an odd-looking sight. Not having luggage, he had stuffed his pockets with extra clothes. The young man followed a group of "clean dressed people" into a Quaker meeting house, where he soon fell asleep.

The sleeping teenager with the lumpy clothes was Benjamin Franklin. Recently, he had run away from his brother James's print shop in Boston. When he was 12, Franklin had signed a contract to work for his brother for nine years. But after enduring James's nasty temper for five years, Franklin packed his pockets and left.

In Philadelphia, Franklin quickly found work as a printer's assistant. Within a few years, he had saved enough money to open his own print shop. His first success was a newspaper called the *Pennsylvania Gazette.*

In 1732, readers of the *Gazette* saw an advertisement for *Poor Richard's Almanac.* An *almanac* is a book, published annually, that contains information about weather predictions, the times of sunrises and sunsets, planting advice for farmers, and other useful subjects. According to the advertisement, *Poor Richard's Almanac* was written by "Richard Saunders" and printed by "B. Franklin." Nobody knew then that the author and printer were actually the same person.

In addition to the usual information contained in almanacs, Franklin mixed in some proverbs, or wise sayings. Several of them are still remembered today. Here are three of the best-known:

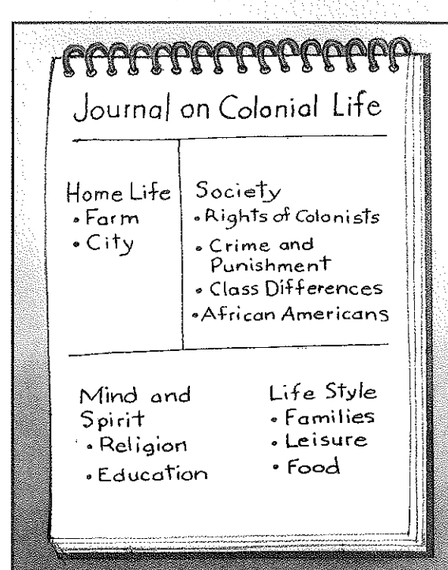
"A penny saved is a penny earned."

"Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise."

"Fish and visitors smell in three days."

Poor Richard's Almanac sold so well that Franklin was able to retire at age 42. A man of many talents, he spent the rest of his long life as a scientist, inventor, political leader, diplomat, and national postmaster.

Franklin's rise from penniless runaway to wealthy printer was one of many colonial success stories. In this chapter, you will learn what life was like for people throughout the colonies in the early 1700s.



Graphic Organizer: Journal
You will use a journal to organize information about various aspects of colonial life.

Although most farmers lived in one-room farmhouses, they held out hope that they would achieve wealth like that pictured above.

4.2 Life on a Farm

The colonists developed an **economy** based on farming, commerce (buying and selling goods), and handcrafts. Nine out of ten people lived on small family farms. Most farm families either raised or made nearly everything they needed. One farmer wrote with pride about a typical year: "Nothing to wear, eat, or drink was purchased, as my farm provided all."

economy the way a society organizes the manufacture and exchange of things of value, such as money, food, products, and services

The first and hardest task facing farm families was to clear the land of trees. The colonists had only simple, basic tools. They cut down trees with axes and saws. Then they used the same tools to cut square timbers and flat planks for building houses, barns, and fences.

Imagine living on a colonial farm. Your home is a single large room with a chimney at one end. In this room, your family cooks, eats, and sleeps. Your parents sleep in a large bed built into one corner. Your younger brothers and sisters sleep in a smaller "trundle" bed, a bed that can slide under the big bed during the day. At bedtime, you climb a ladder next to the chimney to sleep in an attic or a loft. As your family grows, you help to build another room on the other side of the chimney.

The fireplace is the only source of heat for warmth and cooking. So, keeping a supply of firewood is important. The fire is kept burning all the time because, without matches, it is very difficult to light a new one.

Cooking is one of the most dangerous jobs on your farm. Food is cooked in heavy iron pots hung over an open fire. While lifting or stirring these pots, your mother might burn her hands, scorch her clothes, or strain her back.

Life on your farm starts before sunrise. Everyone wakes up early to share the work. Chores include cutting wood, feeding animals, clearing land, tending crops, building fences, making furniture and tools, gathering eggs, spinning thread, weaving cloth, sewing clothes, making candles and soap, cooking, cleaning, and caring for babies.

How does this compare with life in your home today?

4.3 Life in Cities

In 1750, one colonist out of 20 lived in a city. Compared to the quiet farm life, cities were exciting places.

The heart of the city was the waterfront. There, ships brought news from England as well as eagerly awaited items such as paint, carpets, furniture, and books.

Just beyond the docks, a marketplace bustled with fishermen selling their catch and farmers selling fresh eggs, milk, and cheese. Close by were taverns, where food and drink were served. People gathered there to exchange gossip and news from other colonies.

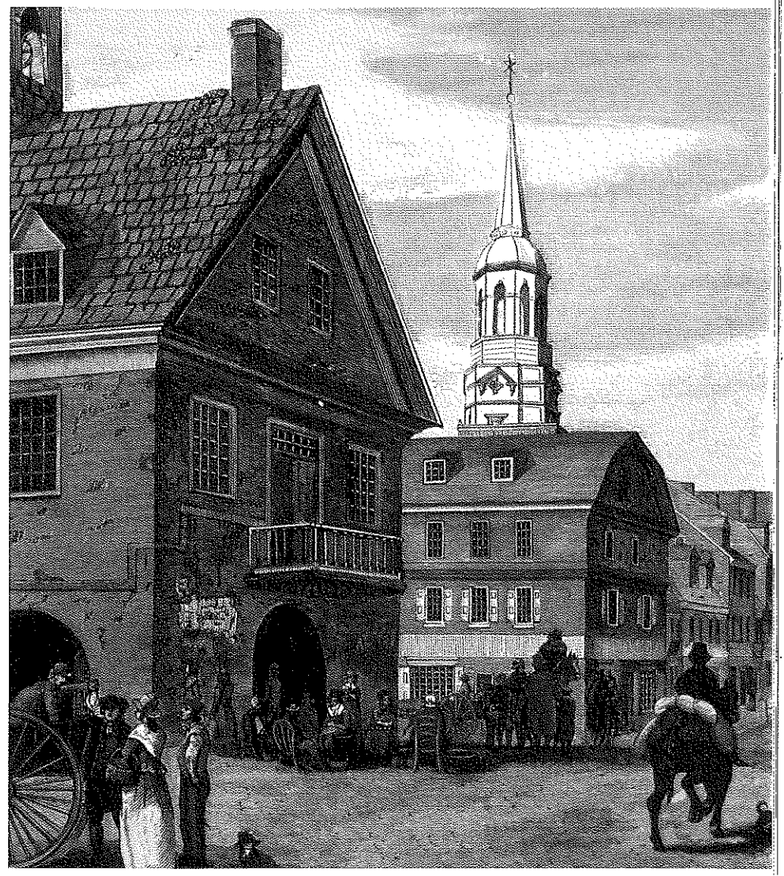
The nearby streets were lined with shops. Sparks flew from the blacksmith's block as he hammered iron into tools. Shoemakers, clockmakers, silversmiths, tailors, and other craftspeople turned out goods based on the latest designs from England. There were barbers to cut colonists' hair and wigmakers to make it look long again.

Cities were noisy, smelly places. Church bells rang out daily. Carts clattered loudly over streets paved with round cobblestones. The air was filled with the stench of rotting garbage and open sewers, but the colonists were used to it. Animals ran loose in the street. During hot weather, clouds of flies and mosquitoes swarmed about.

City homes were close together on winding streets. Most were built of wood with thatched roofs, like the houses the colonists had left behind in Europe. Their windows were small, because glass was costly.

For lighting, colonists used torches made of pine that burned brightly when they were wedged between hearthstones in the fireplace. Colonists also burned grease in metal containers called "betty lamps" and made candles scented with bayberries.

With torches and candles lighting homes, fire was a constant danger. Colonists kept fire buckets hanging by their front doors. When a fire broke out, the whole town helped to put it out. Grabbing their buckets, colonists formed a double line from the fire to a river, pond, or well. They passed the buckets full of water from hand to hand up one line to the fire. Then the empty buckets went hand over hand back down the opposite line to be filled again.



Colonial cities were very small by today's standards. Boston and Philadelphia, the two largest, had fewer than 20,000 people in 1700.

4.4 Rights of Colonists

rights powers or privileges that belong to people as citizens and that cannot or should not be taken away by the government

Parliament the lawmaking body of England, consisting of representatives from throughout the kingdom

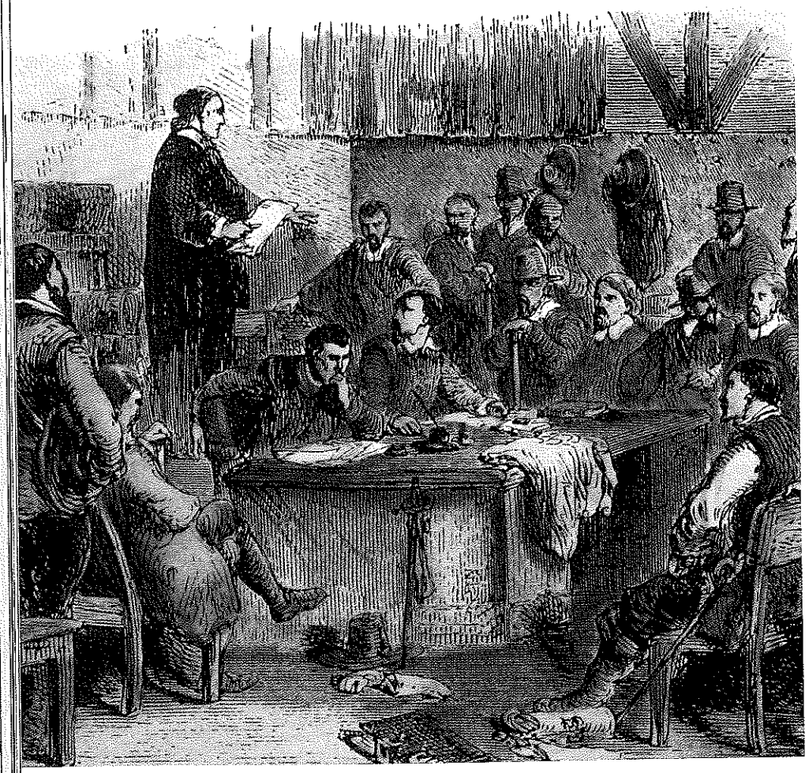
petition (verb) to make a formal demand or request

Colonists in America saw themselves as English citizens. They expected the same **rights** that citizens enjoyed in England. The most important of these was the right to have a voice in their government.

The Magna Carta The English people had won the right to participate in their government only after a long struggle. A key victory in this struggle came in 1215, when King John agreed to sign the Magna Carta, or "Great Charter." This agreement established the idea that the power of the monarch (ruler) was limited. Not even the king was above the law.

The next major victory was the founding of **Parliament** in 1265. Parliament was made up of representatives from across England. Over time, it became a lawmaking body with the power to approve laws and taxes proposed by the king or queen.

The Granger Collection, New York



Colonists established assemblies to promote citizen rights. The English tradition of self-government thrived in all 13 colonies. Here we see a depiction of the first colonial assembly of Virginia in 1619.

In 1685, James, the Duke of York, became King James II. As you read in Chapter 3, King James did not want to share power with an elected assembly in New York. Nor did he want to share power with an elected Parliament in England. When he tried to rule without Parliament, James was forced off his throne. This event, which took place without bloodshed, is known as the Glorious Revolution.

The English Bill of Rights In 1689, Parliament offered the crown to Prince William of Orange and his wife, Mary. In exchange, they had to agree to an act, or law, known as the English Bill of Rights. This act said that the power to make laws and impose taxes belonged to the people's elected representatives in Parliament and to no one else. It also included a bill, or list, of rights that belonged to the people. Among these were the right to **petition** the king and the right to trial by jury.

English colonists saw the Glorious Revolution as a victory not only for Parliament, but for their colonial assemblies as well. They wanted to choose the people who made their laws and set their taxes. After all, this was a cherished right of all English citizens.

The Granger Collection, New York

Courts, like the one pictured above, were important to social life in the colonies. This painting depicts a woman being tried for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692.

4.5 Crime and Punishment

Each colonial assembly passed its own laws defining crimes and punishments. However, most crimes were treated similarly in all the colonies.

Certain very serious crimes could be punished by death. These included murder, treason (acts of disloyalty toward the government), and piracy (robbery at sea). Puritans in New England added other crimes to this list based on their understanding of God's law in the Bible. In New England, colonists could be put to death for "denying the true God" or for striking or cursing their parents.

Crimes such as theft, forgery, and highway robbery carried harsh punishments in every colony. For these crimes, people might be jailed, whipped, or branded with hot irons.

Lesser crimes, such as drunkenness and breaking the Sabbath (working or traveling on Sunday), were punished with fines, short jail terms, or public humiliation. A colonist caught breaking the Sabbath, for example, might be locked in the town stocks. Stocks were a heavy wooden frame with holes for a person's neck, wrists, and ankles. Lawbreakers were locked for hours in this device in a public place where others might make fun of them.

No group had firmer ideas about right and wrong than New England's Puritans. The Puritans required everyone to attend church on Sundays. They also forbade anyone to work or play on that day. The Puritans wrote their Sunday laws in books with blue paper bindings. For this reason, these rules came to be known as *blue laws*. Some blue laws persist to this day. In Massachusetts, for example, it is still illegal to sell liquor on Sundays.

The Puritans were constantly on the watch for signs of Satan (an evil angel who rebelled against God). Satan was thought to work through witches. In 1691, fear of witchcraft exploded in Salem, Massachusetts, when several young girls were seen acting strangely in church. When they were questioned, the girls accused their neighbors of being witches and putting spells on them. Twenty accused witches were put to death in the Salem Witch Trials before calm was restored and the townspeople realized that the girls' accusations were not true.

class A part of society defined by such qualities as wealth, occupation, and inherited titles or honors. A society may have an upper class, a middle class, and a lower class.

4.6 Class Differences

Like many people today, those living in colonial times were eager to "move up in the world." In England, "moving up" was difficult. A person's **class,** or place in society, was determined largely by family, inherited titles (such as "duke" or "baron"), and wealth.

In colonial America, however, titles and family background meant little. Most colonists started out poor. Those with ambition could use their brains and talents to climb the social ladder. A poor boy, for example, might turn into an upper-class gentleman by becoming a successful planter, merchant, or lawyer. A poor girl could move up by marrying a man of a higher social class. In America, what set the classes apart was not family background, but money.

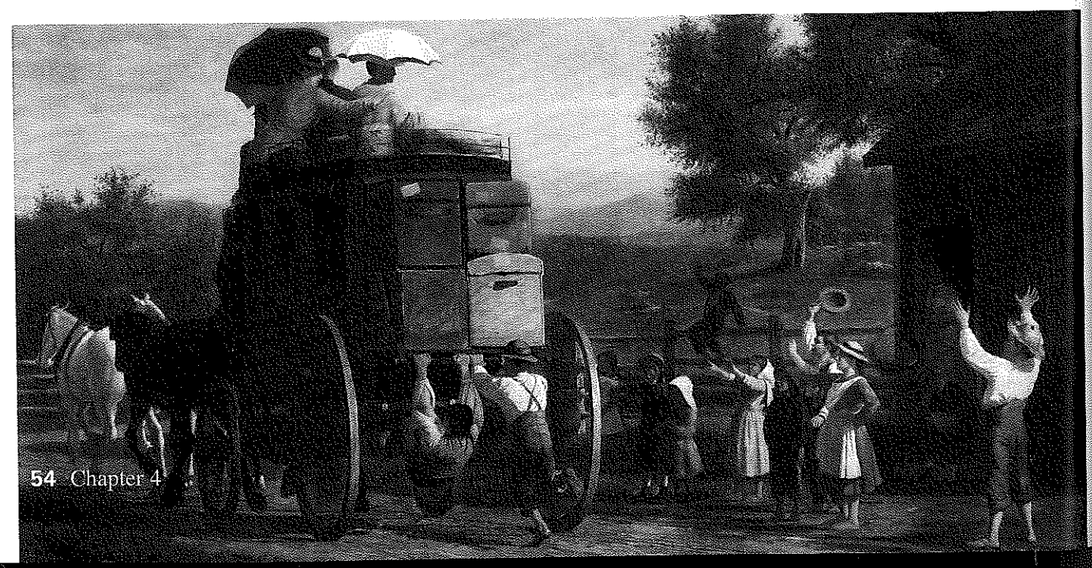
"Clothing makes the man!" This old saying aptly describes colonial society. In the colonies, people's clothes showed their social position. Only the gentry, or wealthy class, wore gold or silver, colored lace, buttons, boots, and wigs. Some colonies forbade ordinary citizens from wearing such "excess apparel" (clothing) and even fined those who disobeyed.

The middle class was made up of farmers and artisans (skilled craftspeople). These were people who owned their own land or businesses. Many had enough property to qualify to vote. During the week, people of the middle class wore plain but brightly colored clothes. On Sundays, they wore dark, somber clothing.

The lower class was mostly made up of farmhands and other workers. Members of this class depended on others for their wages. With little or no property of their own, they were not allowed to vote. Some were able to save enough money to buy land or start a business and rise to the middle class. Others remained wage earners their entire lives.

At the bottom of colonial society were indentured servants and slaves. Indentured servants made up a third of New England's settlers, and almost half of those who settled the Middle Colonies. Some eventually saved enough money to buy land and rise to the middle class. Others became wage earners. But even the poorest white laborers were better off than most African Americans.

Class divisions are apparent in this painting. The wealthy sit high on a wagon, surrounded by stacks of trunks carrying their many possessions. The children of the farmhands and servants bid the travelers farewell.



The Granger Collection, New York

4.7 Life for African Americans

You read in Chapter 3 how slavery first came to Virginia. From there, it spread both north and south. By the early 1700s, enslaved Africans were living in every colony. Even Benjamin Franklin owned slaves for a time. But like most people in the New England and Middle Colonies, Franklin found that hiring workers when he needed them cost less than owning slaves.

In the Southern Colonies, however, slavery expanded rapidly. From Virginia to Georgia, slaves helped raise tobacco, rice, indigo, and other cash crops.

The Atlantic Slave Trade Most of the slaves who were brought to the colonies came from West Africa. Year after year, slave ships filled with cloth, guns, and rum sailed from the colonies to the coast of West Africa. There, these goods were traded for Africans. The ships then returned to the Americas carrying their human cargoes.

For the Africans packed onto slave ships, the ocean crossing—known as the Middle Passage—was a nightmare. Olaudah Equiano was just ten years old when he was put onto a slave ship. He never forgot "the closeness of the place...which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself." Nor did he forget "the shrieks of the women, and groans of the dying." The terrified boy refused to eat, hoping "for the last friend, Death, to relieve me."

Although Equiano survived the voyage, many Africans died of sickness or despair. Even so, the Atlantic slave trade was very profitable. Many colonial merchants built fortunes trading in human beings.

Work Without Hope The slaves' masters in America demanded hard work. Most enslaved Africans were put to work in the fields raising crops. Others worked as nurses, carpenters, blacksmiths, drivers, servants, gardeners, and midwives (people who assist women giving birth). Unlike other colonists, slaves had little hope of making a better life. Their position was fixed at the bottom of colonial society.

Some slaves rebelled by refusing to work or running away. But most adapted to their unhappy condition as best they could. Slowly and painfully, they began to create a new African American way of life.

The first slaves were brought to the United States in 1619 to help produce tobacco in the Virginia colony. Above, we see slaves tending tobacco while their owner relaxes, feet up, smoking his pipe.

First Great Awakening a revival of religious feeling and belief in the American colonies that began in the 1730s

4.8 Religion

Religion was an important part of colonial life. Most colonists tried to lead good lives based on their faith. Children grew up reading the Bible from cover to cover several times over.

Puritan Church Services In New England, the sound of a drum or horn called Puritans to worship on Sunday morning. "Captains of the Watch" made sure everyone was a "Sabbath-keeper." Sometimes, houses were searched to ensure that everyone was at church.

Church services were held in the town meetinghouse. This was the most important building in the community and was used for all public meetings. Inside were rows of wooden benches called *pews,* and a pulpit (a platform where the preacher stood). A "Seating Committee" carefully assigned seats, with the best ones going to older, wealthy people.

Services could last as long as five hours. At midday, villagers would go to "noon-houses" near the church to warm themselves by a fire, eat, and socialize. Then they returned to church for the long afternoon sermon.

Colonial society had a strong religious flavor. Above, we see colonial citizens gathered around a church on Sunday.

The First Great Awakening Beginning in the 1730s, a religious movement known as the **First Great Awakening** swept through the colonies. This movement was spurred by a feeling that people had lost their religious faith. "The forms of religion were kept up," a Puritan observed, but the "power of Godliness" was missing.

To revive people's religious spirit, preachers traveled from town to town holding outdoor "revival" meetings. There they delivered fiery sermons to huge crowds. Their words touched the hearts and souls of many colonists. Benjamin Franklin wrote about the change he observed in Philadelphia: "It seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms [Bible songs] sung in different families of every street."

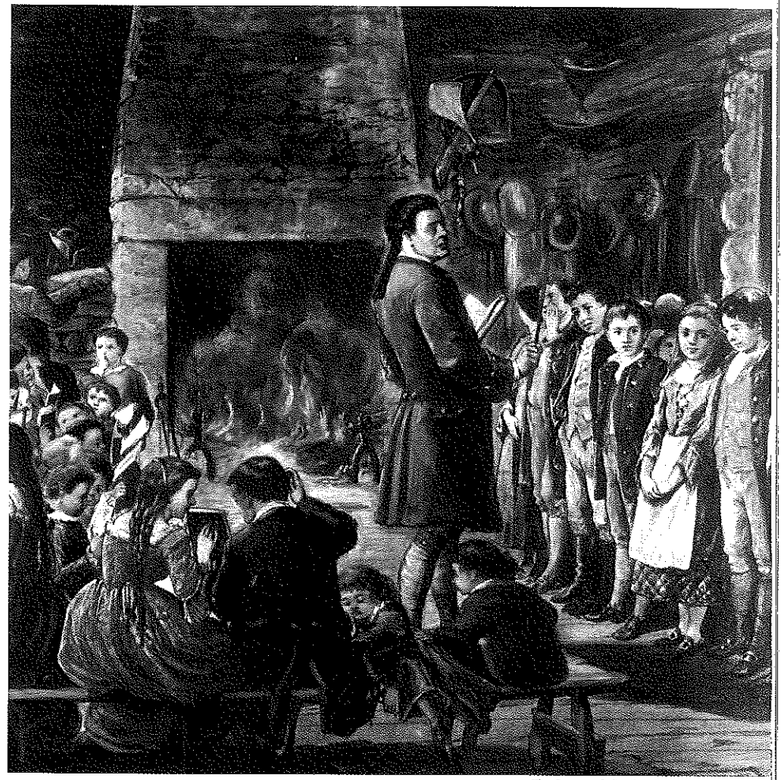
The Great Awakening had a powerful effect on the colonies. It helped spread the idea that all people are equal in the eyes of God. Ordinary people could understand God's will if they had an open heart and a desire to know God's truth. By encouraging ideas of liberty, equality, and resistance to authority, the Great Awakening helped pave the way for the American Revolution.

4.9 Education

Except in New England, most children in the colonies received little formal education. Neither the Middle nor the Southern Colonies had public schools.

In the Southern Colonies, most families were spread out along rivers. A few neighbors might get together to hire a teacher for their children. Often, wealthy planters hired tutors to educate younger children at home. Older children were sent to schools in distant cities, or even England, to complete their education.

In the Middle Colonies, religious differences among Quakers, Catholics, Jews, Baptists, and other religious groups slowed the growth of public education. Each religious group or family had to decide for itself how to educate its children. Some groups built church schools. Others were content to have parents teach their children at home.



The Granger Collection, New York

Children gather with their teacher in a colonial school. These children were among a minority of children who received formal education. Most children did not go to school beyond the elementary level.

Only in New England were towns required to provide public schools. The Puritans' support for education was inspired by their faith. They wanted their children to be able to read God's word in the Bible.

To encourage education, Massachusetts passed a law in 1647 that required every town with 50 families or more to hire an instructor to teach their children to read and write. Towns with more than 100 families were required to build a school. Similar laws were passed in other New England colonies.

Parents were asked to contribute whatever they could to the village school. This might mean money, vegetables, firewood, or anything else the school needed. Often, land was set aside as "school-meadows" or "school-fields." This land was then rented out to raise money for teachers' salaries.

Schools were one-room buildings with a chimney and fireplace in the center. There were no maps, or boards to write on. Pencils and paper were scarce. Students shouted out spelling words and wrote sums in ink on pieces of bark. There was usually one book, the *New England Primer,* which was used to teach the alphabet, syllables, and prayers.

Most colonists believed that boys needed more education than girls. "Female education, in the best families," wrote Abigail Adams, "went no further than writing and arithmetic; in some few and rare instances, music, and dancing."

Family life was at the center of colonial society. Here, a family is gathered around a fire on a cold, wintry evening. A mother and grandmother work while the father relaxes and the children play.

4.10 Colonial Families

The concept of family has changed many times throughout history. Today, most people think of a family as being made up of parents and their children. In colonial times, however, families might include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and stepchildren.

Marriage Colonial men and women generally married in their early to mid-20s. Those who arrived in America as indentured servants were not allowed to marry until they had gained their freedom.

Men outnumbered women throughout the colonies. As a result, almost every woman was assured of receiving a marriage proposal. "Maid servants of good honest stock [family]," wrote a colonist, could "choose their husbands out of the better sort of people." For a young woman, though, life as a wife and mother often proved to be even harder than life as an indentured servant.

Large Families Colonial families were generally large. Most families had between seven and ten children. (Benjamin Franklin had 17 brothers and sisters!) Farm families, in particular, needed all the hands they could get to help with the chores.

Religious and cultural backgrounds influenced colonists' ideas about raising children. But almost everywhere in the colonies, children were expected to be productive members of the family.

Married women gave birth many times, but nearly half of all children died before they reached adulthood. Childhood deaths were especially high in the Middle and Southern Colonies, where the deadly disease of malaria raged. Adults often died young as well. After the death of a wife or husband, men and women usually remarried quickly. Thus, households often swelled with stepchildren as well as adopted orphans (children whose parents had died).

Whether colonists lived in cities, in villages, or on isolated farms, their lives focused on their families. Family members took care of one another because there was no one else to do so. Young families often welcomed elderly grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins into their homes when they could no longer care for themselves. It didn't matter if there was barely enough room for everyone. No one would turn away a needy relative.

4.11 Leisure

While most colonists worked hard, they enjoyed their periods of leisure (time away from work). They also took advantage of gatherings, such as town meetings and Sunday services, to talk with neighbors and make friends.

Bees and Frolics When possible, colonists combined work and play by organizing "bees" and "frolics." New settlers might hold a "chopping bee" in which all the neighbors helped clear the trees off their land. Other frolics included corn-husking bees for men and quilting bees for women. Sharing the work made it faster and a lot more fun.

The Germans introduced house and barn raisings to the colonies. At these events, neighbors joined together to build the frame of a house or barn in one day. The men assembled the four walls flat on the ground and then raised them into place. Meanwhile, the women prepared a huge feast. At the end of the day, everyone danced on the barn's new floor.

Toys and Sports Colonial children had a few simple toys, such as dolls, marbles, and tops. They played games of tag, blindman's bluff, and stoolball, which was related to the English game of cricket (a game like baseball). Children in New England also enjoyed "coasting" downhill on sleds. Adults must have thought coasting was dangerous, because several communities forbade it.

Adults enjoyed several sports. Almost every village had a bowling green. Here men rolled egg-shaped balls down a lane of grass toward a white ball called a "jack." Colonists also played a game similar to backgammon called "tick-tack" and a form of billiards (pool) called "trock."

In the Southern Colonies, fox hunting with horses and hounds was a popular sport. Card playing was another favorite pastime, one that New England Puritans disapproved of strongly. Horse racing, cockfighting, and bull baiting were also popular.

Fairs were held throughout the colonies. At these events, colonists competed in contests of skill and artistry. There were footraces, wrestling matches, dance contests, and wild scrambles to see who could win a prize by catching a greased pig or climbing a greased pole.

Here, we see Dutch settlers in a spirited game of bowls in New Amsterdam. Below, colonists enjoy a form of billiards called "trock."

The Granger Collection, New York

The Granger Collection, New York

Food preparation occupied a great deal of time in the colonies. Here, we see one woman rolling corn meal while another cooks on the stove. The woman in the doorway is using a butter churn.

4.12 Food

The first colonists in North America traded with Indians for their food. The Indians taught them how to grow and cook corn, which became a major part of the colonists' diet. Colonial children knew that morning and evening meals would probably consist of something made from corn.

Most colonists ate ground cornmeal cooked into a mush or a cake every day. Women pounded corn for hours in wooden bowls called *mortars.* It is said that fishermen lost in a fog would know they were close to land when they heard the pounding sound.

Meat was a favorite food for many colonists. Colonists hunted wild deer, rabbits, and birds. They also raised pigs, cattle, and chickens. Their biggest problem with meat was how to keep it from going bad. Without refrigerators, meat had to be salted, smoked, or pickled to keep it from rotting. Colonists often used pepper and other spices to disguise the bad taste of old meat.

Fruit was another major food. Apple trees grew well in the New England and Middle Colonies. "Apple pie is used through the whole year," wrote a visitor to Delaware in 1758. "And when fresh apples are no longer to be had, dried ones are used. It is the evening meal of children." In spring and summer, children picked wild huckleberries, blackberries, blueberries, grapes, and strawberries. In the Southern Colonies, colonists had more peaches than they could eat.

Many colonists thought vegetables were unhealthy, particularly if eaten raw. Still, they learned to be thankful for native pumpkins, squash, beans, peas, and sweet potatoes. They also planted root vegetables, such as parsnips, turnips, carrots, and onions. In the English tradition, they cooked these vegetables into mushy stews seasoned with meat and herbs from their gardens.

Great iron pots of stew simmered 24 hours a day in colonial fireplaces. Keeping food hot reduced the chances that it would spoil. Each day, bowls of stew were served at the main meal, which was eaten between noon and three o'clock. For breakfast and dinner, colonists ate mostly some form of corn mush sweetened with milk, fruit, honey, molasses, or maple syrup.

4.13 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you read about life in the American colonies during the early 1700s. You used a journal to organize information about various aspects of colonial life.

The colonists developed an economy based on farming, commerce, and crafts. Farm families produced most of what they needed for themselves. In the villages and cities, many trades and crafts developed.

American colonists expected to enjoy all the rights of English citizens, especially the right to have a voice in their own government. Crimes and punishments were defined by colonial assemblies. Often, punishments were harsh.

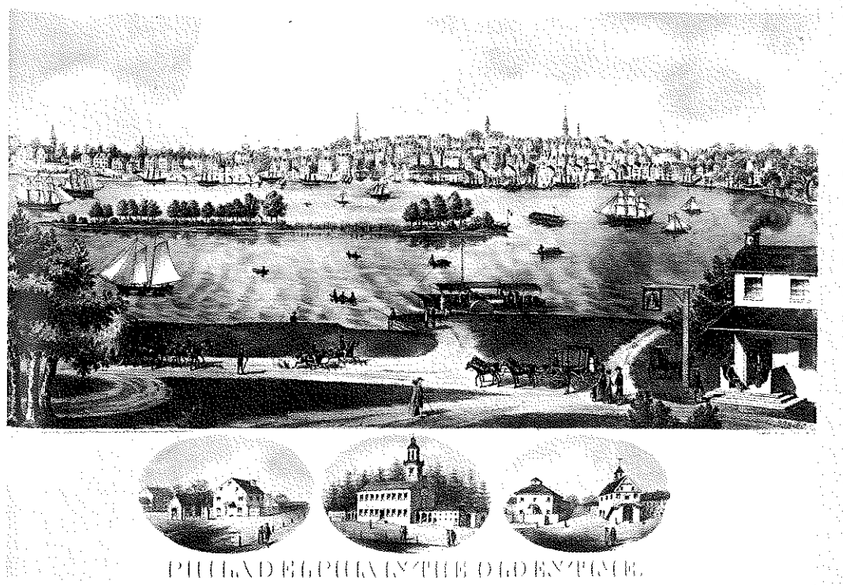
Class differences in the colonies were based mostly on wealth. Most people in lower classes could hope to move up through hard work. Enslaved African Americans had almost no such hope. After being brought to America in chains, they faced a life of forced obedience and toil.

Religion was very important to the colonists. The First Great Awakening revived religious feeling and helped spread the idea that all people are equal.

Except in New England, most colonial children received little education. Instead, they were expected to contribute to the work of the farm or home. Most colonial families were large. Often they included many relatives besides the parents and their children.

Much of colonial life was hard work, even preparing food. But colonists found ways to mix work with play. They also enjoyed sports and games.

For most of the 1700s, the colonists were content to be ruled by English laws. In the next chapter, however, you'll learn how tensions grew between the colonists and the government in far-off England.



The Granger Collection, New York

This panorama of Philadelphia in 1702 reveals a number of aspects of colonial life. Church steeples, government buildings, colonial homes, ships, and citizens on unpaved colonial roads are all evident in the painting.