

History
UNFOLDING

COLONIAL AMERICA IN THE 18TH CENTURY



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MindSparks
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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Introduction

Images of Life in Colonial America

The 1600s in colonial American history were a time of exploration, chaotic conflict and a heroic struggle just to survive. As the British colonies of North America established themselves, it took some time for regular patterns of social life to appear. In addition, political conditions in England for much of the century meant that the colonists were often largely on their own.

By the early 1700s, however, the thirteen colonies of British North America had taken shape as rather distinct and different societies. Clearly, they were still British in many important ways. Yet subtle differences had developed, differences setting each colony apart from the mother country and apart from the other colonies. The full implications of these differences would not become clear until after the French and Indian War. But they were there, and they were slowly laying the ground for the emergence of a new nation on the world's stage.

This booklet looks at some of the basic features of life in colonial America in the 1700s. It does this through just 12 visual displays. These are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Farmers and Planters

Colonial America was, above all, a society of farms, villages and small towns. The illustrations here focus on the nature of agriculture and rural life in the various regions of British North America.

Towns and Merchants

Though still quite small, a few key seaports were vital to the growth of colonial America. The illustrations in this lesson attempt to highlight some of the reasons for the importance of these commercial centers.

Family and Church

The family played an enormously important role in the lives of colonial Americans. And in some key respects, the family differed in form and function from the family life most students know today. As for religion, its role was also central, though it was changing as the upheaval known as the Great Awakening made clear.

Social Conflict and Political Life

Colonial society was anything but placid. Conflict between settlers and Native Americans was a constant. So also was social conflict between regions and classes. Finally, the colonies as a whole were always in a state of some degree of tension with British authorities across the sea. The illustrations here focus on all of these types of conflict.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Colonial America in the 18th Century***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand the crucial role of agriculture in the life of colonial America.
2. Students will better understand how geographical conditions shaped rural colonial life in the various British colonies.

Farmers and Planters

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

By the year 1700, colonial society in Britain's North American colonies was well established. Several important seaports dotted the Atlantic coast. But like this family, most colonists were still self-sufficient in nearly every way, growing their own food and making their own household goods. This was especially true in New England and in the mid-Atlantic colonies, or middle colonies. Fathers and sons were able to handle most of the farming chores. And women took time off from domestic production to help in the fields at harvest time.

Illustration 2

Subsistence agriculture was common in all the colonies. But larger-scale and more commercial farms, such as the one on the left here, were also appearing, especially in the middle colonies. Wheat was a key crop in the mid-Atlantic region, thanks in part to a high demand in Europe. In the South, the mild climate permitted the cultivation of many kinds of crops. But two in particular—tobacco and rice—led to the rise of large-scale plantations. As the illustration on the right suggests, tobacco production was highly labor intensive. But it was also very profitable and in great demand in Europe. Southerners were willing to invest in the complex plantation farms it required—if they could get a dependable labor force. At first, indentured servants from England provided most of the labor. But by 1700, the owners were relying more and more on African slaves.

Illustration 3

Not all planters in the southern colonies were wealthy or large-scale. But especially in Virginia and South Carolina, a rich and powerful plantation elite emerged. Uncooperative Indians and indentured servants could not meet its enormous need for cheap farm labor. And so, increasingly, the plantation owners turned to African slave labor. Of the 650,000 inhabitants of the southern colonies in 1750, about 250,000 (or nearly 40 percent) were slaves. Along with tobacco, rice and indigo were two other crops raised mainly with slaves labor. A slave society sharply divided by race and class arose, as this illustration suggests. It had enormous effects on the social values and on the nature of family life and personality in the regions where it was the dominant form of labor.

Lesson 1—Farmers and Planters

Illustration 1



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Discussing the Illustration

1. By 1700, the British colonies of North America were firmly settled and starting to grow rapidly. Towns, plantations and villages existed. But a large majority of American colonists lived as the people you see here. Can you explain?
2. Most colonial farmers spent most of their time in “subsistence” agriculture, as this family appears to be doing. Can you explain what this means?
3. What crop does the family appear to be harvesting? Can you guess in which part of the British colonies this farm was located? How can you tell?
4. From this illustration alone, what differences can you see between this farm and the typical farm in America today? What do these differences help you to understand about life in colonial America in the 1700s?

Follow-up Activities

1. American colonists were famous for their “spirit of independence.” Some say this is due in good part to the fact that many were self-sufficient farmers like this family? Write an imaginative short story about this family. Make sure your story contains dialogue, not just between the husband and wife, but also between one or both of them and their young boy. What would they have discussed? What do you think would have been their common daily concerns? Focus your story why on a strong sense of independence would have been necessary to such a family.
2. Learn more about farm life in colonial New England. Then, pretend you are one of the individuals in this scene. It is later in the evening. Write a complete diary entry listing all the chores you performed on this day and other typical activities you took part in. Be sure to include such things as how early you got up, when you ate your meals (what did you have to eat?) and what the weather was like. Now also add some details about the other family members.

Social Conflict and Political Life

Illustration 3



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