

Life on the Farm

What was life really like in the colonies?

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 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.”

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 fireplace 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 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. 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.

Your day begins at sunrise. Everyone wakes up early to share the work. Chores include cutting wood, feeding animals, 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.



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

Life in the 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 fishers 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 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 several times a day. Carts clattered loudly over streets paced 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 streets. 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 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.

Which torches and candles lighting homes, fires were in 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 back down the opposite line to be refilled.



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

Rights of Colonists



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.

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.

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 **Magna Carta**, or “Great Charter.” This agreement established the idea that the power of the monarch, or ruler, was limited. Not even the King was above the law.

Rights – powers or privileges that belong to citizens and that cannot or should not be taken away by the government.

Magna Carta – an agreement made in 1215 listing the rights granted by King John to all free men of the kingdom.

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

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.

In 1685, James, the Duke of York, became King James II. The king 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 change in power, 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 (request him to change something) and the right to trial by jury.

English colonists saw the Glorious Revolution as a victory not only for Parliament, but 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.

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.

English Bill of Rights – an act passed by Parliament in 1689 that limited the monarch’s power by giving certain powers to Parliament and listing specific rights of the citizens

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 Sabbath (working or traveling on Sunday), were punished with fines, short jail terms and public humiliation. A colonist caught breaking the Sabbath, for example, might be locked in the town stocks. The 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 could ridicule them.

No group had firmer ideas about right or 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 Connecticut for example, it is still illegal for stores to sell alcohol on Sundays.

The Puritans were constantly on the watch for signs of Satan (believed to be an evil angel who rebelled against God). Satan was thought to work through witches. In 1692, fear of witchcraft overtook residents of Salem, Massachusetts, when several girls were acting strangely in church. The girls accused their neighbors of being witches and putting spells on them. Nineteen accused witches put to death during the Salem witch trials before calm was **restored** and the townspeople realized that the girls' accusations were untrue.

Restored – to make something as it was before



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

Life for African Americans

Slavery in the colonies began in Virginia, with tobacco planters. 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 was growing 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 cargo.

For the Africans packed onto slave ships, the ocean crossing – known as the Middle Passage – was a nightmare. According to his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano (oh – LAU- duh ek- wee-AH-noh) 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 that the Africans work hard. Most enslaved Africans were put to work 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.

<p>Rebelled – to fight against a government or another authority</p>

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 “Sabbathkeeper.” 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.

The Great Awakening Beginning in the 1730s, a religious movement known as the 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 there was “little of the power” of God in it.

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 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 affect 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 hear and a desire to know God’s truth. By encouraging ideas of liberty, equality, and self-reliance, the Great Awakening helped pave the way for the American Revolution.



Colonial society had a strong religious flavor. Here colonial citizens gather around a church on Sunday.

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

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. Wealthy planters often 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.

Only in New England were towns required to provide public schools. The Puritans' support for education was inspired by their religious faith. They wanted their children to be able to read 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. Contributions might be 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 boards to write on or maps. 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 the boys needed more education than girls. "Female education, in the best families" wrote First Lady Abigail Adams, "went no further than writing and arithmetic; in some few and rare instances, music and dancing."



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

Colonial Families

The concept of family has changed 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 16 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.

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 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.



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

Toys and Sports Colonial children had a few simple toys, such as dolls, marbles, and tops. They played 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 down snowy hills 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 land 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 were a particular sport. Card playing was another favorite pastime, one that New England Puritans disapproved of strongly. Horse-racing, cockfighting, and bull baiting were also popular in the South.

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 can win a prize by catching a greased pig or climbing a greased pole.