

1.2 America's Foundation

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[Figure 1]

Landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth 1620

Sea travel expanded the horizons of many European nations and created prosperity and the conditions for the Enlightenment. In turn, the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and justice helped to create the conditions for the American Revolution and the subsequent Constitution.

The Colonial Era

In 1607 (more than a decade before the Pilgrims would land at Plymouth Rock), three wooden ships arrived on the shores of coastal Virginia. These ships carried just over 100 English men and boys--many of whom were jewelers and merchants by training and practice--and a charter from King James I of England.

When they arrived, they had little over a month's time to build a fort and to establish their presence in what would be known as Jamestown. This would be the first permanent English settlement in North America. Within six months, more than half of these colonists were dead (mostly from famine because they did not know how to farm). While many school

children today learn about the struggle and hardship these first colonists faced, we must also consider what they accomplished.

By 1619 in a small church on the grounds of the fort, these men established the first representative assembly in North America. Twenty-two elected representatives, known as burgesses, would establish the first rule of law in North America.

These men passed a number of laws concerning a new cash crop, tobacco, that they had learned to farm from the natives, and they established a system of taxation as well as rules meant to promote the general welfare of the people such as measures concerning drunkenness and gambling. This small elected body would go on to become the Virginia House of Burgesses, which was one of the most influential and effective bodies of self-government in the Colonial Era of America.



[Figure 2]

In this picture, a landing party makes its way to shore from the ships the Discovery, Godspeed, and the Susan Constant during a re-enactment ceremony on the 400th anniversary of the first landing of settlers to the "New World." Settlers from the ships the Godspeed, Discovery and the Susan Constant landed in Virginia Beach and stayed four days before transiting to Jamestown.

Early Historical Influences on American Government

Democracy was not created overnight. In a world where people were ruled by monarchs from above, the idea of self-government was entirely alien. Democracy requires practice and builds wisdom from experience. The American colonies began developing a democratic tradition during their earliest stages of growth.

Over 150 years later, the colonists believed their experience was substantial enough to refuse to recognize the British king. The first decade was rocky. The American Revolution and the domestic instability that followed prompted a call for a new type of government with a constitution to guarantee liberty. The constitution drafted in the early days of the independent American republic has endured longer than any in human history.

Where did this democratic tradition truly begin? The ideas and practices that led to the development of the American democratic republic owe a debt to the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, the Protestant Reformation, and Gutenberg's Printing Press (which greatly impacted the spread of revolutionary ideas in Colonial America). The Enlightenment of 17th-century Europe had the most immediate impact on the framers of the United States Constitution. Philosophes (the French term attributed to early Enlightenment Philosophers) had an important impact on modern democratic governments.

The Philosophes

One of the first philosophes (French for philosophers) was Thomas Hobbes, an Englishman who concluded in his famous book, *Levithan*, that people are incapable of ruling themselves primarily because humans are naturally self-centered and quarrelsome, so they need the iron fist of a strong leader.

Later philosophes, like Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Rousseau were more optimistic about democracy. Their ideas encouraged the questioning of absolute monarchs, like the Bourbon family that ruled France. Montesquieu suggested a separation of powers into branches of government, not unlike the system American would later adopt. They found eager students who later became the founders of the American government.



[Figure 3]

The Boston Tea party was a political and mercantile protest.

John Locke

The single most important influence that shaped the founding of the United States comes from John Locke, a 17th-century Englishman who redefined the nature of government.

Although he agreed with Hobbes regarding the self-interested nature of humans, he was much more optimistic about their ability to use reason to avoid tyranny.

In his *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke identified the basis of a legitimate government. According to Locke, a ruler gains authority through the consent of the governed. The duty of that government is to protect the natural rights of the people, which Locke believed to include life, liberty, and property.

If the government should fail to protect these rights, its citizens would have the right to overthrow that government. This idea deeply influenced Thomas Jefferson as he drafted the Declaration of Independence.

Important English Documents

Ironically, the English political system provided the grist for the revolt of its own American colonies. For many centuries, English monarchs had allowed restrictions to be placed on their ultimate power. The Magna Carta, written in 1215, established the core idea of limited government, or the belief that the monarch's rule was not absolute.

Although the document only forced King John to consult nobles before he made arbitrary decisions like passing taxes, the Magna Carta provided the basis for the later development of Parliament. Over the years, a representative government led by a prime minister came to control and eventually replace the king as the real source of power in Britain.



[Figure 4]

The ideas of the French Enlightenment philosophes strongly influenced the American revolutionaries. French intellectuals met in salons similar to this to exchange ideas and define their ideals such as liberty, equality, and justice.

The Petition of Right (1628) extended the rights of "commoners" to have a voice in the government. The English Bill of Rights (1688) guaranteed free elections and rights for

citizens accused of crimes. Although King George III still had some real power in 1776, Britain was already well along on the path of democracy by that time.

The foundations of American government lie squarely in the 17th and 18th century European Enlightenment. The American Founders were well versed in the writings of the philosophes whose ideas influenced the shaping of the new country.

Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, and others took the brave steps of creating a government based on the Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, and a new form of justice. That government is still intact more than 200 years later.

The Early Colonial Experience

One must remember that the majority of the original American Colonies were first established under the direct Charter of the British Government. The British King was considered a father to these new colonies, and the colonies were treated like the King's own children. Like children, the American colonies grew and flourished under British supervision. As with many adolescents, the colonies rebelled against their parent country by declaring independence.

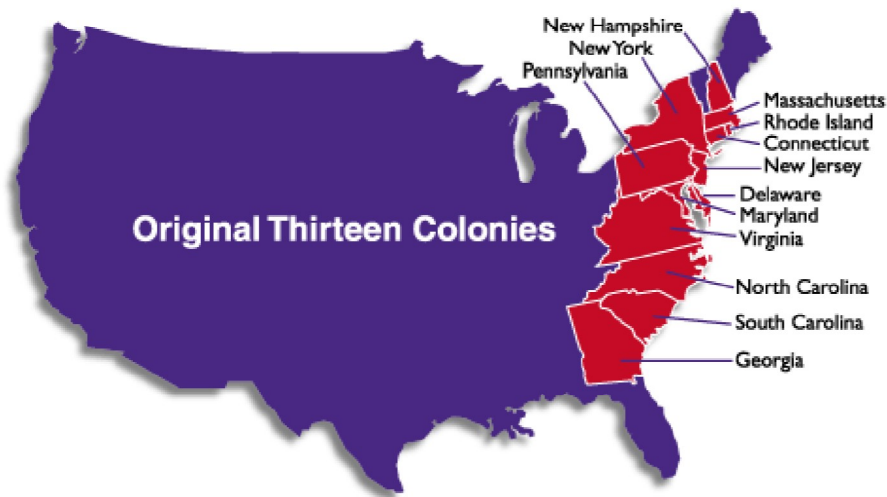
The American democratic experiment did not begin in 1776. The colonies had been practicing limited forms of self-government since the early 1600s. The great expanse of the Atlantic Ocean created a safe distance for American colonists to develop skills to govern themselves, and the British had very little power to enforce even the most basic of parliamentary policies governing trade or taxation during this period known as the period of salutary neglect.

Despite its efforts to control American trade, England could not possibly oversee the entire American coastline. Colonial merchants soon learned to operate outside British law. Finally, those who escaped religious persecution in England demanded the freedom to worship according to their faiths.

Colonial Governments

Each of the thirteen colonies had a charter, or written agreement between the colony and the king of England or Parliament. Charters of royal colonies provided for direct rule by the king. A colonial legislature was elected by property-holding males, but governors were appointed by the king and had almost complete authority—in theory.

The legislatures controlled the salary of the governor and often used this influence to keep the governors in line with colonial wishes. The first colonial legislature, the Virginia House of Burgesses, was established in 1619.



[Figure 5]

Map of the original 13 colonies

Colonies in North America

The colonies along the eastern coast of North America were formed under different types of charters, but most developed representative democratic governments to rule their territories.

When the first Pilgrims voyaged to the New World, a bizarre twist of fate created a spirit of self-government. These Pilgrims of the Mayflower were bound for Virginia in 1620, but they got lost and instead landed at Plymouth in present-day Massachusetts.

Since Plymouth did not lie within the boundaries of the Virginia colony, the Pilgrims had no official charter to govern them. They drafted the Mayflower Compact which, in essence, declared that they would rule themselves.

Although Massachusetts eventually became a royal colony, the Pilgrims at Plymouth set a powerful precedent of making their own rules that later reflected itself in the town meetings that were held across colonial New England.

[Figure 6]

The signing of the Mayflower Compact in 1620 led to the establishment of formal self-rule among the Pilgrims.

Video: When is Thanksgiving? Colonizing America

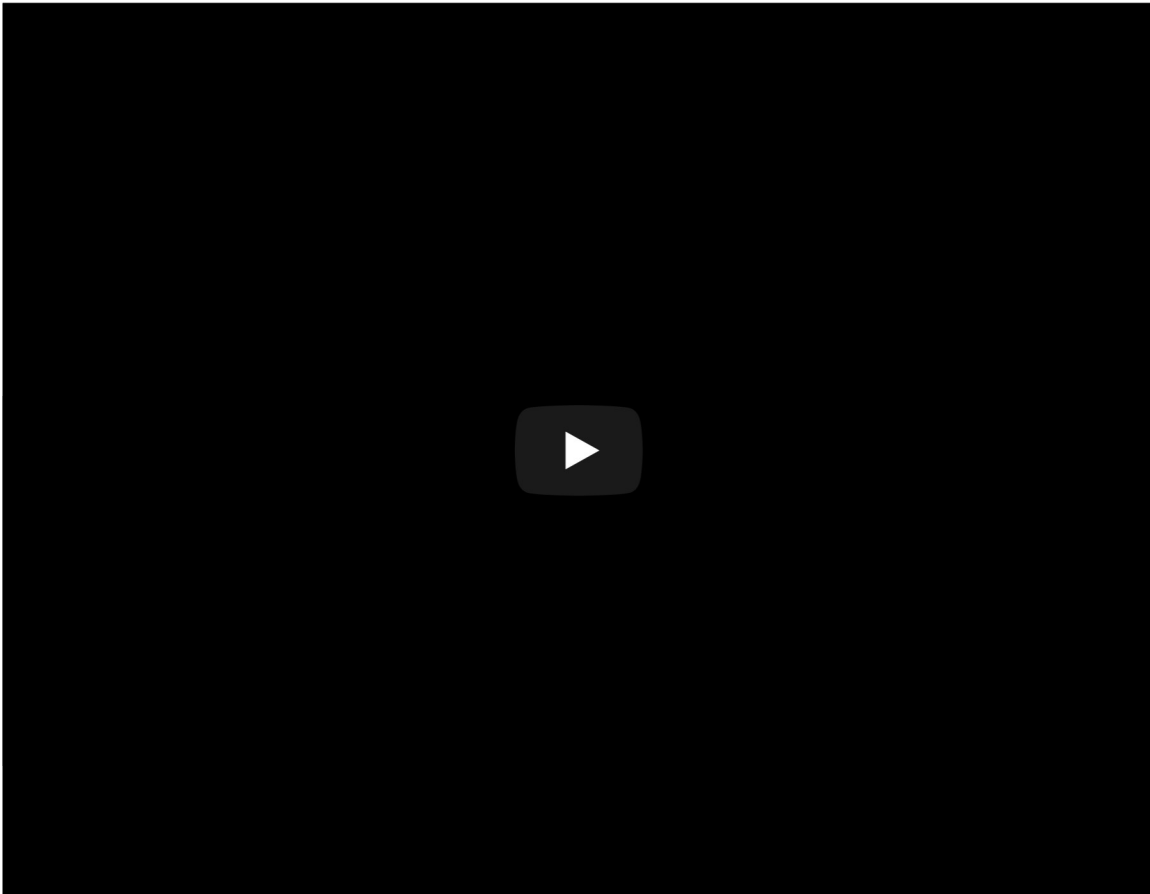


Trade and Taxation

Colonial economies operated under Mercantilism, a system based on the belief that colonies existed in order to increase the mother country's wealth. England tried to regulate colonial trade and forbid colonies from trading with other European countries.

England also maintained the right to tax the colonies. Both trade and taxation were difficult for England to control, so an informal agreement emerged. England regulated trade but allowed colonists the right to levy their own taxes. Smugglers soon exploited the English inability to guard every port by secretly trading against Parliament's wishes.

Video: Taxes and Smuggling: A Prelude to Revolution



[Figure 7]

The seal of the colonial charter granted to William Penn.

Colonial Charters

A charter is a document that gave colonies the legal rights to exist. Charters may also bestow certain rights on a town, city, university, or institution. Colonial charters were empowered when the king granted exclusive powers for the governance of land to proprietors or a settlement company. The charters defined the relationship of the colony to the mother country, free from involvement from the Crown. For the trading companies, charters vested the powers of government in the company in England. The officers would determine administration, laws, and ordinances.

Proprietary charters gave governing authority to the proprietor, who determined the form of government, chose the officers, and made laws--subject to the advice and consent of the freemen. All colonial charters guaranteed the vague rights and privileges of Englishmen to the Colonists. This would later cause trouble during the Revolutionary Era. In the second half of the 17th century, the Crown looked upon charters as obstacles to colonial control substituting the royal province for corporations and proprietary governments.

The Virginia and Massachusetts charters were given to business corporations. Regular meetings of company officers and stockholders were the only governmental institutions required. The Virginia Charter, issued in 1606 and revised in 1609 and 1612, was revoked in 1624 upon bankruptcy of the sponsoring and organizing Virginia Company of London. The second colonial charter was granted to Massachusetts Bay in 1629, settling at Boston and Salem, a decade after the first "New Englanders" inhabited Plymouth Colony further south toward Cape Cod.

In 1684, the Chancery Court in England voided the charter and changed it to a Royal Colony. Charles II placed Massachusetts under the authority of the unified Dominion of New England in 1685. After William III assumed the throne, he issued Massachusetts Bay a new liberal charter in 1691.

Charles II granted Connecticut its charter in 1662 with the right of self-government. When James II ascended the throne in 1685, he tried to revoke the Connecticut Charter and sent Sir Edmund Andros to receive it for the Crown. Captain Joseph Wadsworth spirited the precious document out a window, stole the charter, and hid it in a hollow oak tree. This became known as the "Charter Oak."

This lasted until James II was overthrown. Connecticut temporarily lost the right to self-government under the unification of the several colonies into the Dominion of New England in 1687, but it was reinstated in 1689. The last charter by Charles II was issued to Rhode Island in 1663. Connecticut and Rhode Island attained colonial charters as already established colonies that allowed them to elect their own governors.

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As a result of political upheavals, especially after the three English civil wars in the 1640s and the 1668 "Glorious Revolution," religious conflicts also transformed into struggles between the king and Parliament. Many historians believe the Glorious Revolution to be one of the main factors that led to defining the powers of Parliament and the Crown in England. As a result, the king's powers were limited while the governments were increased. It was specified that the king's power could not be absolute.

As these conflicts traveled across the Atlantic Ocean, most colonies eventually surrendered their charters to the Crown by 1763 and became royal colonies as the king and his ministers asserted more centralized control of their previously neglected and autonomous Thirteen Colonies.

By the late 1600s, colonial Maryland had its proprietary charter to the Lords Baltimore revoked and became a royal colony with the governor of Maryland appointed by the Monarch under the advice of his ministers, the colonial offices, and the Board of Trade of members from Parliament. By 1776, Pennsylvania and its lower Delaware Bay counties remained proprietary colonies under a charter originally granted to William Penn and his

heirs. The Province of Connecticut, the Province of Rhode Island, and Providence Plantations continued as corporation colonies under charters.

At this time, Massachusetts was governed as a royal province while operating under a charter after the unifying of the older "Massachusetts Bay" colony at Boston and the "first landing" colony, Plymouth Colony at Plymouth, Massachusetts, with its famous "Mayflower Compact" from 1620.

Further south, the Provinces of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and to the undefined border with Spanish Florida, all had their original charters dismissed with different opinions about the role, powers, and taxing authority between the Royal Governors and their increasingly restless and defiant colonial assemblies. The Royal Authority reasserted itself and began governing more directly from London with increasing friction as the 18th-Century progressed to its revolutionary climax.

[Figure 8]

Churches, such as this one, were the centerpiece of religious and social life in Colonial Era America.

Religious Freedom

While most early colonies in America were, at least in part, established for religious and economic reasons, it is clear that the majority of early colonists firmly rooted their daily life in what is today identified as Judeo-Christian values.

The Massachusetts Body of Liberties was created in 1641 with the intention of protecting an individual's rights. This document contained rights that would later be included in the Bill of Rights. Some of the liberties legislated are explicitly cited as originating from biblical sources.

These ideals, common to most colonists, include a belief in natural (God-given) rights, natural laws (those attributed to God and considered higher than those of men), a set of moral behavioral standards (based on the Ten Commandments), and a belief that hard work and right behavior will be rewarded. While these beliefs were commonly shared among the colonists, they certainly did not share a single religious belief system. Most believed in religious tolerance which meant people should be free to worship and practice the religious belief of their choice.

This was particularly true in the middle and southern colonies but was less true in the New England colonies (particularly Massachusetts where strict Calvinist beliefs were prominent). Other colonies such as Rhode Island, founded by Roger Williams, were established for the primary purpose of allowing religious diversity and tolerance.

In Thomas Jefferson's Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, he wrote:

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“Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishment or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was his Almighty power to do . . .

Be it enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, '' enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

This is just one example of many such documents that were drafted and adopted by colonial assemblies during the Pre-revolutionary period. Religious freedom served as a major motivation for Europeans to venture to the American colonies. Puritans and Pilgrims in Massachusetts, Quakers in Pennsylvania, and Catholics in Maryland represented the growing religious diversity in the colonies. Rhode Island was founded as a colony of religious freedom in reaction to zealous Puritans. As a result, many different faiths coexisted in the colonies. This variety required an insistence on freedom of religion since the earliest days of British settlement.

Colonial Comparison

The Pre-revolutionary colonial experience was one of absorbing British models of government, the economy, and religion. Over the course of about 150 years, American colonists practiced these rudimentary forms of self-government that eventually led to their decision to revolt against British rule.

The democratic experiment of American self-rule was therefore not a sudden change brought about by the Declaration of Independence. By 1776, Americans had plenty of practice.

REGIONAL COMPARISON OF THE 13 COLONIES

	Southern Colonies	Middle Colonies	New England Colonies
	Virginia, Maryland, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia	New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware	Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island
Settlement	Originally established under royal charter. Stockholders and settlers expected profits from gold and crops.	Dutch initially settled the region, followed by Swedes and finally the English. Quakers under William Penn were given a royal charter to develop the area as they saw fit.	Initially settled by Pilgrims and Puritans. Strict adherence to a godly community led to dissenters leaving and establishing new colonies.
Economy	Plantation economy based on single-crops, mainly tobacco and rice.	Small farmers, craftsmen, and merchants would form the basis of both agricultural (farming) and commercial (trade-based) economies.	Small farmers and merchants with the basis of subsistence small family-operated farms and trade in some areas (like Boston).
Labor and Servitude	Growth of large plantations led to heavy reliance on slavery.	Small businesses tended to rely on indentured servants.	Family-run businesses and farms meant little need for servants or slaves.
Demographic makeup	Biracial, socially-stratified society based on English tradition and wealth.	Diverse, heterogeneous society of many cultures, languages, and religions.	A homogeneous society based on the idea of a perfect, godly, religious community.
Government leadership	Lived on large and small plantations which led to the rule of wealthy elite at county level	Lived in small, dispersed settlements that encouraged the growth of county-level governments.	Lived in close-knit and clustered villages and towns that led to local rule and town-hall meetings.
Views on society, politics, and religion	English tradition formed the basis for traditionally English viewpoints about politics, religion and economy.	Many cultural traditions encouraged the growth of diverse cultural, economic, political and social traditions.	Separatist nature of colonies led to the creation of a distinctly "American" point of view far different than that of the British.
Religion	Religion was traditionally Church of England (Anglican) with the exception of Georgia which was intended as a Catholic colony. Played a minor role in politics and economy.	Religious tolerance was the rule and practiced by the Quakers. Religion played a minor role in politics and economy.	Religion was strictly Calvinist, while little uniformity existed among practitioners. Religion dictated political, economic and social lives of the colonists.

Political Life in Colonial Times

Under the Kingdom of Great Britain, the American colonies experienced a number of situations which would guide them in creating a constitution. The British Parliament believed that it had the right to impose taxes on the colonists.

While it did have *virtual* representation over the entire empire, the colonists believed Parliament had no such right as the colonists had no *direct* representation in Parliament. By the 1720s, all but two of the colonies had a locally elected legislature and a British appointed governor. These two branches of government would often clash, with the legislatures imposing "power of the purse" to control the British governor.

Thus, Americans viewed their legislative branch as a guardian of liberty, while the executive branch was deemed tyrannical. There were several occasions when royal actions upset the Americans. For example, taxes on the importation of products including lead, paint, tea, and spirits were imposed.