

Life in the Thirteen British Colonies: Climate, Commerce, and Culture

NEW ENGLAND COLONIES

Massachusetts (1628)

Climate/Geography

- Long, cold winters, moderate summers, plentiful forests, and rocky soil

Commerce/Production

- Mostly family subsistence farms
- Fishing, whaling, logging, shipbuilding, and rum-distilling (“Triangular Trade” with Africa and the West Indies)
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Puritan religious beliefs with little toleration of religious dissent
- Town meetings: an example of direct democracy

New Hampshire (1629)

Climate/Geography

- Long, very cold winters, moderate summers, rocky soil, steep hills and mountains, and dense forests

Commerce/Production

- Mostly family subsistence farms
- Fishing, whaling, logging, shipbuilding, and rum-distilling (“Triangular Trade” with Africa and the West Indies)
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Puritan religious beliefs with little toleration of religious dissent
- Town meetings: an example of direct democracy

Rhode Island (1636)

Climate/Geography

- Long, cold winters, moderate summers, plentiful forests, and rocky soil

Commerce/Production

- Mostly family subsistence farms
- Fishing, whaling, logging, shipbuilding, and rum-distilling (“Triangular Trade” with Africa and the West Indies)
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Charter colony: major government officials selected by the people
- Founded by Roger Williams with religious freedom for all residents
- Town meetings: an example of direct democracy

Connecticut (1636)

Climate/Geography

- Long, cold winters, moderate summers, plentiful forests, and rocky soil

Commerce/Production

- Mostly family subsistence farms
- Fishing, whaling, logging, shipbuilding, and rum-distilling (“Triangular Trade” with Africa and the West Indies)
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Charter colony: major government officials selected by the people
- Founded by Thomas Hooker with religious freedom for all residents
- The “Fundamental Orders of Connecticut” (1639): often considered the first written constitution in America

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MIDDLE COLONIES

New York (1626)

Climate/Geography

- Moderate, temperate climate with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil
- Many lakes, rivers, and good harbors

Commerce/Production

- “Breadbasket” of colonial America: surplus corn and wheat grown on large farms sent to Europe and the West Indies
- Small manufacturing businesses in textiles and iron, raising livestock, fur trading with Indian tribes
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Religion: primarily the Anglican Church once England took over, with some Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian, and smaller congregations of other religions, including Methodists, Baptists, and Jews
- Class distinctions developed between government officials, large landowners, and prosperous merchants vs. small farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and shopkeepers

New Jersey (1664)

Climate/Geography

- Moderate, temperate climate with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil
- Many lakes, rivers, and good harbors

Commerce/Production

- “Breadbasket” of colonial America: surplus corn and wheat grown on large farms exported to Europe and the West Indies
- Small manufacturing businesses in textiles and iron, raising livestock, fur trading with Indian tribes
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Religious freedom for all residents
- Simple living in self-built wooden homes and homemade furnishings, tools, and utensil

Delaware (1664)

Climate/Geography

- Moderate, temperate climate with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil
- Many lakes, rivers, plains, and good harbors

Commerce/Production

- “Breadbasket” of colonial America: surplus corn and wheat grown on large farms exported to Europe and the West Indies
- Small manufacturing businesses, raising livestock, and fur trading with Indian tribes
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Proprietary colony: major government officials selected by the proprietor
- Settlers of all religious faiths welcomed, no “established” church
- Many diverse European immigrants (Dutch, Swedes, Finns, French, Scots, and British) settled in the colony as farmers, craftsmen, laborers, merchants, and shopkeepers.

Pennsylvania (1682)

Climate/Geography

- Moderate, temperate climate with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil
- Many lakes (Lake Erie), rivers, and good harbors

Commerce/Production

- “Breadbasket” of colonial America: surplus corn and wheat grown on large farms exported to Europe and the West Indies
- Small manufacturing businesses, raising livestock, and fur-trading with Indian tribes.
- Family labor supplemented by paid labor, indentured servants, and some African and Indian slaves

Culture

- Proprietary colony: major government officials selected by the proprietor
- Founding proprietor William Penn sought religious haven for Quakers
- Religious freedom for all residents

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SOUTHERN COLONIES

Virginia (1607)

Climate/Geography

- Warm climate with sufficient rainfall, long growing season, and fertile soil
- The Appalachian Mountains: a natural barrier between the English and French colonies in North America

Commerce/Production

- Rivers, lakes, and good harbors for commerce and transportation
- Tobacco as a cash crop and a farming economy based on large plantations
- Labor: indentured servants from Europe and forced migration and enslavement of Africans

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Anglican Church became the “established” church of the colony, supported by taxes
- Class distinctions developed between government officials, large landowners, and prosperous merchants vs. small farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and shopkeepers.

Maryland (1632)

Climate/Geography

- Warm climate with sufficient rainfall and fertile soil
- Longer growing seasons and extensive river systems

Commerce/Production

- Shipbuilding, iron works, and local textile manufacturing
- Good harbors for fishing and commerce
- Tobacco as a cash crop and a farming economy based on large plantations
- Labor: indentured servants from Europe and forced migration and enslavement of Africans

Culture

- Proprietary colony: major government officials selected by the Proprietor
- Founding proprietor: Lord Baltimore (George Calvert) sought religious haven for Catholics
- Religious freedom for all residents

North Carolina (1653)

Climate/Geography

- Warm climate with a long growing season
- Coastal plains, mountain ranges, and plateaus

Commerce/Production

- Surplus food crops sold to other colonies
- Cash crops of tobacco, cotton, indigo, rice, sugar, etc., sent to Europe
- Good harbors for fishing and commerce
- Labor: indentured servants from Europe and forced migration and enslavement of Africans

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Settlers of all religious faiths were welcomed; no “established” church.
- Class distinctions developed between government officials, large landowners, and prosperous merchants vs. small farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and shopkeepers
- High incidence of mosquito-related diseases and mortality rates

South Carolina (1663)

Climate/Geography

- Warm climate and a long growing season

Commerce/Production

- Good harbors for fishing and commerce
- Cash crops included tobacco, cotton, indigo, rice, and sugar; a farming economy based on large plantations
- Labor: primarily forced migration and enslavement of Africans, some indentured servants from Europe

Culture

- Royal colony: major government officials selected by the king
- Settlers of all religious faiths welcomed; no “established” church
- Class distinctions between government officials, large landowners, and prosperous merchants vs. small farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and shopkeepers

Georgia (1732)

Climate/Geography

- Warm climate provided a long growing season
- Hilly coastal plains, plentiful forests

Commerce/Production

- Good harbors for fishing and commerce

- Cash crops included tobacco, cotton, indigo, rice, and sugar; a farming economy based on large plantations
- Labor: indentured servants from Europe and forced migration and enslavement of Africans

Culture

- Founded to create a buffer of protection between South Carolina and the Spaniards in Florida and the French in Louisiana; refuge for persecuted English Protestants and impoverished and indebted people
- Royal charter: governed by twenty trustees, who enacted all laws, taxes, and land grants (a five hundred acre limit)
- “Melting pot” of Protestant sects, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Puritans, Quakers, etc.; no “established” church in the colony