

HISTORY AS STORY

Every history contains a story. This is true in the literal spelling of the word but also on a deeper, more important level. In writing history, we choose a relatively few data from the nearly infinite supply out there in the past. We use these data to give an account of what happened back then and how that helps us make better sense of our lives today. To change the image, we select particular beads out of a big tub and put them on a string for people to appreciate and try on. The beads draw the eye, but the string is what keeps them together. Likewise, a story-line gives unity and thrust to the various facts of history. It helps us answer: what do these facts add up to? What is our history all about?

This book tries to answer these questions for early America. Most Americans remember the colonial period in bits and pieces from a high school history class. Often the pieces are connected to particular stories. There's Pocahontas rescuing Captain John Smith from execution at the hands of her father. There are the Pilgrims hosting the first Thanksgiving feast at Plymouth Rock. There's the Salem witch craze, the battle of Bunker Hill, the Constitutional Convention, and so on. A couple of problems immediately arise out of these stories. Take the one about

Pocahontas for instance. Her father, the paramount chief of the native Powhatan Confederacy, probably did not want to execute John Smith but claim him as a subject or at least an ally for political purposes. Maybe the fake-death and redemption ritual was meant to seal that deal. Or maybe the event did not happen at all. Smith sometimes talked about the episode but sometimes ignored it, making it hard to decide this question for sure. Part of the historian's challenge, then, is to determine which stories are authentic. The other part, and the one we are concerned with right here, is to determine how the data that have been authenticated come together. What is the keyword we should use to string all the particular bits and pieces together to make a narrative that is true and relevant and helpful? More briefly, what's the main theme of early American history?

TWO STORY-LINES

Many Americans would probably answer that question with "America" itself. In this telling, the story of the colonial period is the story of thousands of Europeans crossing the Atlantic Ocean in search of a new way of life. Soon they came to feel that their new land needed political independence, too. They begin and win the American Revolution. End of story, beginning of a new nation. But there are problems with this account. First, there were many non-Europeans on the scene, of whom more in a

minute. Second, many of those Europeans were not interested in a new way of life. Instead, they wanted a new chance at an old, familiar life that had become impossible back home. Third, in thinking about their new land, they did not have in mind the whole stretch of thirteen colonies that we are familiar with from maps in school. They thought of the particular colony in which they lived, or just the part of the colony that they were familiar with: this stretch of the Hudson River, a cluster of towns in backcountry Massachusetts. Since it might well have been easier to get from their nearest seaport to England than to another port along the American coast, they more likely had a “British” as well as a local identity than an “American” one. In fact, “American,” used as a term for people rather than the name of a territory, only came into use after 1740. It was first uttered by British officers in response to the provincials on this shore who greeted them as fellow “Englishmen.” “You aren’t English; you’re American,” they sneered. Even then, it took the colonists a long time to think about changing their political allegiance. Not until 1770 at the earliest, or even after the battle of Lexington and Concord (1775) had shed American blood, did many of them begin to think in terms of political independence.

Another keyword for our story might be “liberty,” or perhaps a couplet, “liberty” and “equality.” But here again we run into problems. By the time the new United States was founded in 1776, fully twenty percent of its inhabitants shared in neither liberty nor equality. They were

enslaved, and this slavery was not a fluke or a bad old habit on the way out. It was essential to the fabric of the new nation. The number of slaves and their importance to the economy had steadily increased from 1675 to 1775. If white settlers and their descendants felt that America was indeed a land of liberty—and many did, with good cause—the economy built on slavery was in no small part responsible for that freedom. At the same time, more and more white people felt they were falling short of equality too, even if they were free. If slavery had grown over the last century, so too had land tenancy. On the eve of Independence, more wealth was under the command of fewer people than ever before. True, the situation was better than in most of Europe, but our subjects did not live in Europe. They lived in New Jersey or Connecticut or Virginia. There they saw property-less men flocking to the cities, looking for jobs. Or working on land that they could never hope to own. Or stopped from getting married by the lack of economic prospects.

The golden age of equality turned out to have come at the very start of the colonial period, when everybody was more or less in the same plain boat. We usually take the story of liberty and equality to mean that the passage of time brings “progress.” That is, time is supposed to be a tide that will lift most boats. As it turned out, “progress” in colonial America had lifted some boats much more than others. Yet another idea tied to the theme of liberty and equality is “freedom of religion.” But freedom

of religion figured in the founding of only a few of the thirteen colonies. And only two of them, Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, regarded the term the same way as we do—freedom to worship as you please. In the rest of New England it meant freedom to worship God not as you pleased but as God pleased. Ministers, supported by the tax dollars of all the citizens, were there to tell you exactly how.

AND YET ONE MORE

If these familiar story-lines are not true—or are only partly so—then what story should we tell ourselves about our American roots instead?

Perhaps we should return to the original motto of the United States: *e pluribus unum*; “out of many, one.” By “many” the Founders probably had in mind the thirteen states that were being joined into one nation. But for understanding the roots of the United States, it makes more sense to talk not about thirteen states but about five regions. Each of these regions was defined by a particular geography, and each attracted a particular set of people from across the Atlantic. These immigrants brought with them their own stories, their own pictures of a proper society, along with a particular set of governing values and religious loyalties. They established different kinds of economies. Although they had much in common, and although time brought the regions closer together on some

counts, the differences remained—and sometimes even grew stronger. The *unum* of the new nation was more of a goal than a reality.

And so it remains today. One purpose of this book is to push past nostalgia for a golden age of peace and harmony that never was. The United States from the start has been an argument, although ideally it has been an argument conducted without violence within the bounds of the Constitution. Some of our current quarrels started only recently, but others go back to differences established already in colonial times. This book hopes to show where, why, and with what consequences those differences emerged so that we can better understand early Americans—and ourselves today.

FIVE REGIONS, THREE RACES

Because colonial America can be understood as five distinct regions, we will look at each of these in turn. We will visit each region asking the same sorts of questions that anthropologists ask when they travel to a new country: What are the hopes, values, and ideas that different people brought along with them when they arrived in the Americas? How did their new environment change them? What other changes came with time? What persisted from their old life? Many newcomers may have hoped less for a new way of life than a new chance at an old one. Yet time, place, and chance happened to them all so that a new sort of life

did emerge in British North America. At the same time, the different hopes, dreams, and values of their original plans still showed through.

And there was more. In their new environment, European colonists encountered not just a new landscape but also native peoples they had not previously known. This native population would soon fall in numbers due to foreign diseases, harsh treatment, and eviction from their lands, but Indians still outnumbered Euro-Americans east of the Mississippi River well into the eighteenth century. Then their territory came into the cross-hairs of rival European empires. In the resulting wars, the native peoples were of key strategic importance. Local leaders knew this when they advised British General Edward Braddock to cultivate Indian allies, at least as scouts, in invading western Pennsylvania in 1755. Braddock ignored them. He paid with his life when a French and Indian force surprised and slaughtered his army short of its target of Fort Duquesne. The native peoples had a cultural influence, too. When young Bostonians disguised themselves as Mohawk warriors to conduct the “tea party” in 1773, they showed how deeply the Indian presence had sifted into white Americans’ identity. To be a Mohawk was to be an American. Yet because most Indians lived outside of white settlements, they were still considered outsiders. For most of early American history and beyond, Indian concerns seemed more like “foreign policy” than “internal affairs.”

It was just the opposite with the other major race

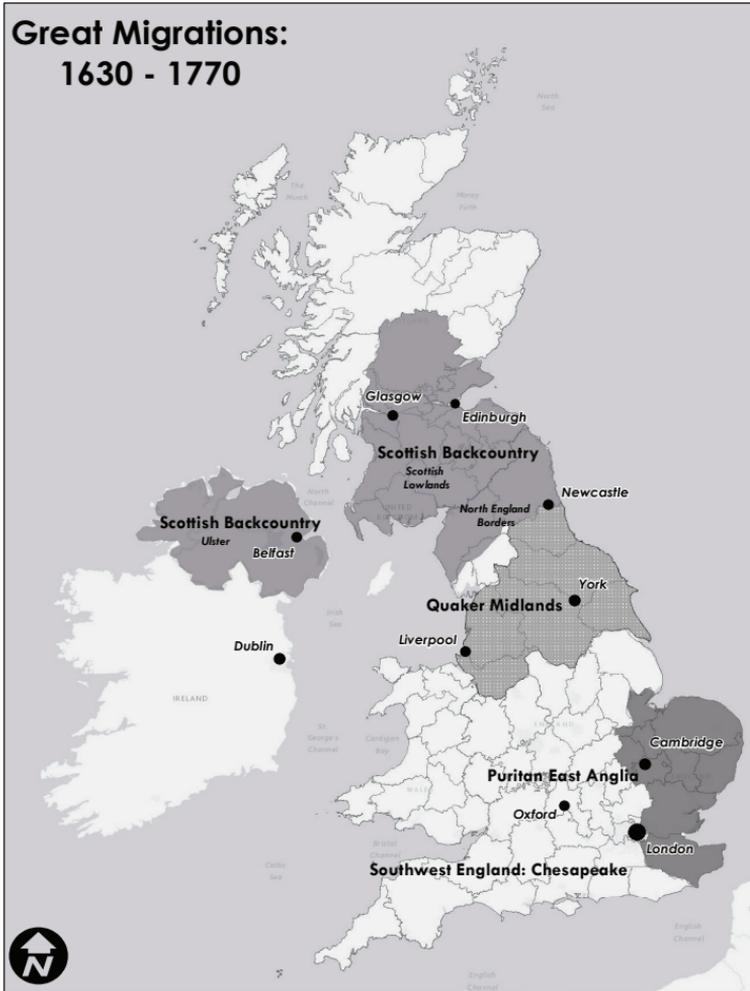
that appeared on the scene, people from Africa. Within a century of contact with Europeans, nearly eighty percent of the native Indian population died off. Africans were forced into the breach. From 1492 until 1815, an equal eighty percent of all people who crossed the Atlantic were Africans bound in chains. They became deeply integrated into the white-run economies, even as they were thoroughly subordinated in white society. They suffered horrendous mortality rates, principally because the vast majority of them were bound to grueling plantation labor under the tropical sun in Brazil and the Caribbean, and secondly because the enslavers' strong preference for males over females limited the birth rate.

In the eighteenth century, the only exception to these high mortality rates occurred among the Africans enslaved in the southern regions and northern seaports of what would become the United States. By mid-century, they constituted a majority in South Carolina, the majority of the work force in Virginia, and twenty percent of the population of New York City. Although these future Americans represented only five percent of all the people brought over from Africa, by 1950 they proved to be the ancestors of one-third of all people of African descent in the Western Hemisphere. In sum, while Indians were kept to the fringe, Africans entered into the center of white life in three of colonial America's five regions. Black and white life were shaped accordingly.

OUR TRAVEL PLANNER

And so we begin our tour of colonial America's five regions. We start with the oldest persisting British settlement in the New World, the Chesapeake region of Virginia and Maryland, begun at Jamestown in 1607. We then move down to the Lower South of the Carolinas and Georgia, which looked toward the intensive slave-labor sugar colony of Barbados. Carolina's founders were sons of Barbadian elites who carried the island's model over to the mainland. We then move up to New England, where the tale of colonial American history has traditionally begun. We don't begin in New England because, being religiously driven and the first free-labor set of settlements, New England was the exception to the slave-labor rule for colonizing the Western Hemisphere. The fourth region, the Middle Colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, was also mostly built on free labor. Unlike New England, however, the Middle Colonies attracted a motley array of European immigrants. This region came to be defined above all by ethnic and religious diversity as well as high levels of trade through their large ports of New York and Philadelphia. Through those ports flowed an increasingly large tide of immigrants from Scotland and the north of Ireland over the course of the eighteenth century. These newcomers settled in the colonial backcountry which became the fifth distinctive, and perhaps most turbulent, region of colonial America.

Great Migrations: 1630 - 1770



The chapters that follow analyze each region, one by one. For each we will first survey the land and the people who settled there and how they were shaped by its particular geography. Second, we'll look at a defining crisis in its history, an episode that reveals in sharp relief the dominant values of its system and the contradictions it harbored. Third, we'll note some of the leading legacies that each region gave to the independent nation. It was the mix of these varied ingredients, however unlikely the odds, that went into the building of the new nation. This nation would have a raucous infancy, a near-fatal adolescence, and an adulthood that still bears the marks and spirit of its origins. Americans continue to draw off these roots. Non-Americans can look at these roots to understand the massive tree that still looms large, for better or worse, on the world scene today.