Early Settlements

by James Horn

Nieuw Amsterdam, from a 1682 map of America by Nicholas Visscher. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

“I marvel not a little,” Richard Hakluyt the younger wrote in 1582, “that since the first discovery of America (which is now full fourscore and ten years) after so great conquest and plantings of the Spaniards and Portuguese there, that we of England could never have the grace to set fast footing in such fertile and temperate places, as are left as yet unpossessed by them.”[1] Hakluyt was among the foremost experts of colonization of his age and a glance at a map of the Americas in the early 1580s would have confirmed his gloomy assessment: the entire Western Hemisphere was claimed by Spain. Despite repeated explorations throughout the sixteenth century and sporadic efforts to establish colonies, not a single non-Hispanic nation had established a settlement in the New World. At the time Hakluyt wrote, the Spanish Catholic monarch Philip II was the undisputed master of the New World.

Hakluyt hoped that the English would soon stake a claim to New World lands, but even at his most optimistic he could not have foreseen the dramatic changes that were about to take place. Within fifty years, England had established successful colonies in Virginia, Bermuda, New England, and the Caribbean. Within a century, English settlements stretched some 1,200 miles along the North American coast from Maine to the Carolinas, and in the West Indies in a great arc from Jamaica to Barbados. By 1763, following a series of imperial wars fought among Great Britain, France, and Spain for global preeminence, the British emerged with a vast North American empire.

THE PEARL AND THE GOLD

The first phase of English settlement from 1585 to 1603 was dominated by one man—Sir Walter Raleigh—and by one ambition—to emulate Spanish success in the New World. Tens of thousands of Spanish settlers crossed the Atlantic in the ninety years following the European discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. By 1580, the Spanish Indies boasted 225 towns and cities with a total white population of approximately 150,000 scattered throughout the Caribbean, Mexico, and South American mainland. Each year, treasure fleets from Panama and Mexico sailed to Spain carrying gold and silver bullion, pearls, cochineal, hides, cacao, and other valuable commodities. The

massive flow of wealth from the New World filling Philip's royal coffers made possible his ambition to expand Spain's dominions throughout Europe and enlarge his overseas empire.[2]

The English were well aware of the threat posed by Philip's aim to reunite Christendom under a universal Catholic monarch. Raleigh borrowed freely from plans developed earlier by his half brother, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, which called for the English to attack Spain in the New World in order to weaken its power in the Old. A colony located somewhere along the eastern seaboard of North America would be an ideal site, Raleigh believed, for a privateering base from to prey on Spanish galleons. But a broader ambition stemmed from the exploits of famed conquistadors such as Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro, who had plundered the wealth of the Aztecs and Incas and had carved out empires for themselves and their king. If the Spanish had done so, then why couldn't the English?

Raleigh chose Roanoke Island, off the coast of modern-day North Carolina, as the site of his colony. Three principal objectives guided his thinking: to claim the region for the English crown and establish a beachhead for further territorial expansion; to establish a convenient American harbor for privateers; and to search for precious minerals as well as a river passage through the landmass of North America to the Pacific Ocean. After a successful reconnaissance expedition to the coast of North Carolina in 1584, he launched a large fleet carrying about 600 men the following spring. A garrison of approximately 108 soldiers on Roanoke Island lasted for a year before the English were forced to abandon their fort when supplies ran out and hostilities with local Indian peoples made it impossible to remain any longer. The island had also proved to be unsuitable as a privateering base owing to its shallow waters.

Despite the setback, Raleigh pressed on with plans to dispatch another expedition in 1587. He had been encouraged by reports of great quantities of a soft pale metal, perhaps gold, in a wealthy province deep in the interior called "Chaunis Temoatan," and by the possibility of a passage through the mountains to the South Sea (Pacific). The new settlement, made up of civilians under the command of John White, was to be established on the Chesapeake Bay to the north, where the English had discovered fertile lands and deep rivers capable of accommodating ocean-going ships.

In April 1587, White led a group of 118 men, women, and children to the Chesapeake Bay to establish a colony to be called the City of Raleigh. They never reached the Chesapeake, however. The mariners instead put them off at Roanoke Island and refused to take them any farther. After remaining on the island for six weeks, White returned to England at the end of August to raise funds and pick up more supplies but was unable to get back to Roanoke Island for three years, by which time the colonists had disappeared. Although he found clues that indicated they had moved to Croatoan Island fifty miles to the south, he was unable to reach them and returned to England a broken man. Raleigh's plans had come to nothing, and the first sustained English attempt to establish an American colony had failed.[3]

ENGLISH AMERICA

The turn of the century witnessed a new direction in English colonizing activities. Peace with Spain in 1604 brought an end to privateering, plunder, and the need for a North American base from which to attack Spanish shipping. What remained was the certainty that the New World offered

England potentially vast profits from valuable American commodities. The new era heralded the age of commercial trading companies.

Two companies were established by royal charter in April 1606. The Plymouth Company, made up of merchants and financiers from Plymouth, Bristol, Exeter, and lesser West Country ports, was granted the right to settle lands between the Chesapeake Bay and Maine. The Virginia Company, supported by important statesmen, merchants, and gentry from London and surrounding counties, was permitted to establish settlements in a region stretching from North Carolina to the Hudson River.

The Plymouth Company's venture did not prosper. A small settlement established at Sagadahoc near the mouth of the Kennebec River, Maine, in the summer of 1607 was abandoned the following spring after a series of disastrous setbacks. Its failure gave the region an unenviable reputation for harsh winters and unfriendly Indians. England did not attempt to plant another colony in the northern region for more than a decade, although plenty of English mariners plied the rich fishing waters off the coast and dabbled in the fur trade with local peoples.

To the south, picking up where Sir Walter Raleigh had left off twenty years earlier, the Virginia Company of London focused their efforts on the Chesapeake Bay. The Company's aims were to assert England's claim to North America, search for gold or silver and a passage to the South Sea (Pacific Ocean) in the interior, harvest the natural resources of the region, and trade with the American Indians.

Jamestown, founded on May 14, 1607, barely survived its first five years. A combination of disease, Indian attacks, faction, and the failure to make any significant discoveries or profit brought the colony to the edge of collapse on several occasions and discouraged continuing investment. The discovery of a lucrative cash crop, tobacco, which could be cultivated extensively in Virginia and brought a handsome return in England, saved the colony but not the Virginia Company, whose exclusive charter was revoked in 1624.

By the mid-1620s the new royal colony was thriving; some 1,200 to 1,300 men, women, and children lived along the James River valley, and new immigrants arrived regularly to work on the growing number of tobacco plantations lining the rivers. Tobacco, the first major American staple to emerge, formed the basis of the Chesapeake's transatlantic economy for the next century and a half. As a consequence, Virginia rapidly took on the characteristics of a plantation society in which large numbers of poor white laborers (indentured servants) toiled in the fields alongside initially small numbers of enslaved Africans. The first Africans on English soil on the North American mainland came to Virginia in a Dutch ship in 1619.[4]

In New England colonial development took a different course, influenced by the immigrants' religious convictions and the natural resources of the region. The first significant group to arrive was made up of religious separatists who established themselves at Plymouth in 1620. The Pilgrims wished to erect a pure church free of the corruptions of the Old World where they could worship and govern themselves without interference from state authorities. Plymouth did not develop into an important colony; its population and economy remained marginal throughout the century, dwarfed by its much larger neighbor, Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts Bay Company, founded in 1629, conceived colonization of New England on a much grander scale. Attracting London merchants and investors to finance their venture as well as Puritan settlers who wished to live under a reformed church rather than a separate one, the colony welcomed thousands of emigrants from England during the 1630s and early 1640s. Based on fishing, farming, and maritime trade, settlement quickly spread throughout the region along the coast and fertile river valleys spawning new colonies in Connecticut, New Haven, and Rhode Island (of differing theological temperatures), as well as offshoots farther north in New Hampshire and Maine. By 1640, New England's population approached 14,000 and the region was the most populous in English North America.[5]

Puritan migration to New England, however, was only a small component of a much broader flow of settlers to English America in this period. More than 200,000 settlers arrived in the colonies between 1630 and 1670. Most ended up in the West Indies and the Chesapeake working on sugar and tobacco plantations. In the tobacco colonies of Virginia and Maryland, white indentured servants were the main source of labor throughout the century; enslaved Africans did not become numerically significant until the 1680s and 1690s. In contrast, the numbers of enslaved African laborers in the English West Indies (St. Christopher, Barbados, Nevis, Montserrat, Antigua, and Jamaica) equaled the white population as early as the 1660s.

The great influx of white settlers, together with large numbers of enslaved Africans transported to the islands, transformed English North America and the Caribbean during the mid-seventeenth century. In 1660 there were three major clusters of settlement: New England with a population of approximately 33,000; the Chesapeake with 25,000; and the English West Indies with 66,000, half of whom were enslaved Africans.[6]

With the rapid spread of white settlement many American Indian populations experienced demographic collapse. In the Caribbean, Spanish Florida, and English mainland colonies, Old World diseases such as smallpox, measles, typhus, and influenza ravaged Native peoples. In some regions, virulent epidemics carried off up to 90 percent of the population, destroying entire communities and leaving once densely populated lands deserted. Periodic wars and the steady encroachment of white settlers into Indian territories further hastened population decline. Of the approximately 15,000 Algonquians who lived along the coastal plain of Virginia when the English first arrived, only about 1,000 remained by 1700. In New England the decline was equally dramatic, from about 70,000 in 1620 to 12,000 half a century later.[7]

Another pulse of expansion began after 1660 with the capture of New Netherland (New York) from the Dutch in 1664 and the establishment of New Jersey in the same year and Pennsylvania in 1681. All three colonies grew quickly, rising from a combined population of 15,000 in 1680 to more than 53,000 twenty years later, forming a fourth population center in the Middle Colonies.

At the same time, settlers from overcrowded Barbados established Charles Town, Carolina, in 1670, initially supplying livestock and naval products (tar) to the West Indies but then turning to rice cultivation in the 1690s. Rice became the third great staple of Britain's transatlantic commerce, alongside West Indian sugar and Chesapeake tobacco, and with the expansion of rice-growing areas in the low country of the coastal plain, the numbers of enslaved African laborers increased steadily. By 1710, nearly 40 percent of the colony's 11,000 inhabitants were of African descent, and South Carolina soon emerged as the first mainland colony with an African majority.[8]

The establishment of half a dozen new colonies in the second half of the seventeenth century brought about important changes to the character of English America. The Middle Colonies introduced greater ethnic and religious diversity with the absorption of Dutch, German, French, and Scandinavian peoples. In addition, the arrival of West Indian planters in Carolina and growing numbers of enslaved laborers forcibly transported from West Africa and Angola created a new cultural mosaic as English colonies of the seventeenth century gave way to the expansive, polyglot British American world of the eighteenth.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH AMERICA

Three major trends characterize the expansion of British America through 1763: rapid white and black population growth, increasing diversity among immigrant populations, and the surge of movement into the backcountry. These far-reaching social, economic, and cultural developments took place in the context of intense imperial rivalry between the major European powers in America—Britain, France, and Spain—expressed in a series of major colonial wars between 1689 and 1763 that redrew national boundaries several times during the period.

In 1700, the white population of British mainland colonies was approximately a quarter of a million. Sixty years later in the midst of the French and Indian War (1756–1763), the population had risen fivefold to 1,284,000, representing a doubling of the population every twenty-five years. The areas of fastest growth were the Middle Colonies and Lower South, which grew more than six times over the period. Black populations grew even more rapidly from about 20,000 in 1700 to 326,000 by 1760, reflecting the massive importation of enslaved Africans into the Chesapeake and Lower South after 1720. Sectional divisions were much in evidence by 1760. Whereas in New England and the Middle Colonies Africans and African Americans made up 3 percent and 7 percent respectively of the population, in the Chesapeake and Lower South the corresponding figures were 38 percent and 44 percent. Together, Virginia, Maryland, and the Lower South accounted for fully 87 percent of all Africans and African Americans living in the mainland colonies in 1760.[9]

Continuing large-scale immigration and high rates of natural increase fueled European population growth and expansion. Commercial disruption caused by Queen Anne's War (1702–1713), initially slowed the pace of immigration during the first two decades of the eighteenth century. But from the 1720s huge numbers of white settlers moved to America: well over 100,000 up to 1750 and another 200,000 by 1776. English indentured servants, Ulster Irish, Catholic Irish, Scots, French Huguenots, and tens of thousands of Germans from the Rhineland and Swiss cantons moved into the coastal plain; flocked to the burgeoning port cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia; trekked along fertile river valleys into the interior; and pressed on toward the Appalachian Mountains. Tens of thousands of settlers headed westward into the rich lands of the Virginia piedmont and across the mountains to the enormous expanse of the Ohio River basin. Others went south along the Great Wagon Road to the Shenandoah Valley, the Carolinas, and Georgia. All along the expanding backcountry frontier, Irish, Scots, English, Welsh, German, and French colonists, together with enslaved Africans and American Indians, evolved locally distinctive societies where ethnic diversity and the continual arrival of new settlers were taken for granted.[10]

Territorial adjustments in the wake of major imperial wars encourage ethnic diversity and the expansion of settlement. As a result of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), which ended Queen Anne's War, Britain acquired Hudson Bay, Acadia (Nova Scotia), and Newfoundland from France, greatly

strengthening British presence in the north. Far to the south, Georgia was created by royal charter in 1732 to provide a buffer between the Carolinas and Spanish Florida. King George's War (1743–1748) heightened British interest in the vast lands claimed by the French in Ohio territory. The French and Indian War (1756–1763) was the culmination of British, French, and Spanish rivalry in North America and resulted in complete British dominance. Britain took control of Canada and lands east of the Mississippi River from France as well as Florida from the Spanish. The Spanish still claimed lands west from the Mississippi to California (Spanish Louisiana), but by the Treaty of Paris in 1763 Britain emerged as the acknowledged master of North America.[11]

In little more than a century and a half, British America had grown from a fragile outpost on a distant Atlantic shore to an empire that stretched from the great forests and lakes of Canada to the lush tropical lands of East Florida. Population continued to surge and reached approximately two and half million by the Revolutionary War, embracing a remarkable diversity of peoples, regions, and settlements. The political convulsion ignited by the American Revolution split Britain's American empire in two and accelerated the expansion of settler populations. Taking advantage of the end of British restrictions on westward movement, migrants flooded into the American interior, foreshadowing the greater movements to come in the nineteenth century.

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[1] E. G. R. Taylor, ed., *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1935), 1:175; 2:242.

[2] J. H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 41, 52.

[3] James Horn, *A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

[4] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975); James Horn, *A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). Tobacco was initially an important cash crop on the Atlantic island of Bermuda, governed from 1615 by the Somers Islands Company, and in the early English Caribbean, notably Barbados, down to the sugar revolution of the 1640s.

[5] Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "New England in the Seventeenth Century," in Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 193–216; Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 164–185.

[6] Russell R. Menard, "British Migration to the Chesapeake Colonies in the Seventeenth Century," in Lois Green Carr, Philip D. Morgan, and Jean B. Russo, eds., *Colonial Chesapeake Society* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 105; John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 154; Hilary McD. Beckles, "The 'Hub of Empire': The Caribbean and Britain in the Seventeenth Century," in Canny, ed., *Origins of Empire*, 224; Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 178.

[7] Helen C. Rountree, *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,1990), 104–105; Steven Sarson, *British America, 1500–1800: Creating Colonies, Imagining an Empire* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 136.

[8] Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 178; Ned C. Landsman, "The Middle Colonies: New Opportunities for Settlement, 1660–1700," in Canny, ed., *Origins of Empire*, 351–373; Taylor, *American Colonies*, 223–226, 236–239.

[9] Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 179.

[10] James Horn and Philip D. Morgan, "Settlers and Slaves: European and African Migrations to Early Modern British America," in Elizabeth Mancke and Carole Shammas, eds., *The Creation of the British Atlantic World* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 24, 33–34; Richard R. Johnson, "Growth and Mastery: British North America, 1690–1748," in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 276–298; Sarson, *British America*, 166, 182.

[11] Taylor, *American Colonies*, 421–433; Anthony McFarlane, *The British in the Americas, 1480–1815* (London: Longman, 1992), 220–225.

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