

Era 2: Colonization and Settlement (1585-1763)

Overview

The study of the colonial era in American history is essential because the foundations for many of the most critical developments in our subsequent national history were established in those years. The long duration of the nation's colonial period--nearly two centuries--requires that teachers establish clear themes. A continental and Caribbean approach best serves a full understanding of this era because North America and the closely linked West Indies were an international theater of colonial development.

- One theme involves the intermingling of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans.
- A second theme is the development of political and religious institutions and values.
- A third theme is the economic development of the colonies through agriculture and commerce.

One theme involves the intermingling of Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans. Students first need to understand what induced hundreds of thousands of free and indentured immigrants to leave their homelands in many parts of Europe. Why did they risk the hardships of resettlement overseas, and how well did they succeed?

Students must also address two of the most tragic aspects of American history: first, the violent conflicts between Europeans and indigenous peoples, the devastating spread of European diseases among Native Americans, and the gradual dispossession of Indian land; second, the traffic in the African slave trade and the development of a slave labor system in many of the colonies. While coming to grips with these tragic events, students should also recognize that Africans and Native Americans were not simply victims but were intricately involved in the creation of colonial society and a new, hybrid American culture.

A second theme is the development of political and religious institutions and values. The roots of representative government are best studied regionally, so that students can appreciate how European colonizers in New England, the mid-Atlantic, and the South differed in the ways they groped their way toward mature political institutions. In studying the role of religion--especially noteworthy are the foundations of religious freedom, denominationalism, and the many-faceted impact of the Great Awakening--a comparative geographic approach can also be fruitful. Comparison with the role of religion in Dutch, French, and Spanish colonies can be valuable as well.

A third theme is the economic development of the colonies through agriculture and commerce. A comparative approach to French, Spanish, Dutch, and English colonies, and a regional approach to the English mainland and West Indian colonies, as part of a developing Atlantic economy, will also be instructive. As in studying politics and religion, students should ponder how economic institutions developed--in ways that were typically European or were distinctively American--and how geographical variations--climate, soil conditions, and other natural resources--helped shape regional economic development.