

# Life in the Colonies

*What was life really like in the colonies?*

## Introduction

In 1723, a tired teenage boy stepped off a boat in Philadelphia. Not having luggage, he had stuffed his pockets with his belongings. He followed a group into a Quaker meetinghouse, where he soon fell asleep.

The slumbering teenager with the lumpy clothes was Benjamin Franklin, who had recently run away from his brother James's print shop in Boston. When he was 12, Franklin had signed a **contract** to work for his brother for nine years. But after enduring James's nasty temperament for five years, Franklin packed his pockets and left.

In Philadelphia, Franklin quickly found employment as a printer's assistant. Within a few years, he had saved enough money to open his own print shop, where he printed a newspaper called the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, which would become his first success.

In 1732, readers of the *Gazette* saw an advertisement for *Poor Richard's Almanac*. An almanac is a book, published annually, that contains information on a variety of useful subjects. According to the ad, *Poor Richard's Almanac* was written by "Richard Saunders" and printed by B. Franklin, but nobody knew then that the author and printer were the same person.

Franklin also printed proverbs, or wise sayings, in his almanacs. Some proverbs, like these, are still remembered today:

*A penny saved is a penny earned.  
Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy,  
and wise.  
Fish and visitors smell in three days.*

*Poor Richard's Almanac* sold so well that Franklin was able to retire at age 42. A man of many talents, he spent the rest of his long life as a scientist, inventor, political leader, and diplomat.

Franklin's rise from penniless runaway to wealthy printer was one of many colonial success stories. In this lesson, you will learn what life was like for people throughout the colonies in the 1700s.

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## **Social Studies Vocabulary**

English Bill of Rights

Great Awakening

Magna Carta

Parliament

right

## **1. Life on a Farm**

Land was the center of most economic activity in the colonies. Some colonists, like miners or plantation owners, worked the land to increase commerce (buying and selling of goods) between the colonies and Great Britain. Resources, like iron or cotton, were sold to companies in Great Britain, which would then use these materials to manufacture goods that could be sold back to the colonists. Others developed an economy based on agriculture. In fact, nine out of ten people lived on small family farms and strove to be self-sufficient by raising or making nearly everything they needed. One farmer wrote with pride about a typical year, "Nothing to wear, eat, or drink was purchased, as my farm provided all."

Most farming families faced the difficult task of clearing the land of thick vegetation, like trees, using only the rudimentary tools that they had, such as axes and saws. Then using the same simple tools, the farmers would cut square timbers and flat planks from this lumber to build houses, barns, and fences.

Imagine living on a colonial farm. Your home is a single large room with a fireplace at one end. In this room, your family cooks, eats, and sleeps. Your parents sleep in a large bed built into one corner, while your younger siblings sleep in a smaller trundle bed, a bed that can slide under the big bed during the day. At bedtime, you climb a ladder next to the chimney to sleep in an attic or a loft. As your family grows, you help to build another room on the other side of the chimney.

The fireplace is the only source of heat and is used for both warmth and cooking. It is important to store a supply of firewood to keep the fire burning all the time because, without matches, it is very difficult to light a new one.

Since food is cooked in heavy iron cauldrons hung over an open fire, cooking is one of the most dangerous jobs on your farm. While lifting or stirring these cauldrons, your mother might burn her hands, scorch her clothes, or strain her back.

Everyone wakes up before sunrise to share the labor on the farm. Chores include cutting wood, feeding animals, clearing land, tending crops, building fences, making furniture and tools, gathering eggs, spinning thread, weaving cloth, sewing clothes, making candles and soap, cooking, cleaning, and caring for babies.

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### 2. Life in Cities

In 1750, about one out of every 20 colonists lived in a city. Compared to the peaceful farm life, cities were exciting places.

The heart of the colonial city was the waterfront. There, ships brought news from England as well as eagerly awaited items, such as paint, carpets, furniture, and books.

Just beyond the docks, a marketplace bustled with fishers selling their catch and farmers peddling fresh eggs, milk, and cheese. Close by were taverns, where food and drink were served and people could gather to exchange gossip and news from other colonies.

The nearby streets were lined with shops. Sparks flew from the blacksmith's block as he hammered iron into tools, while shoemakers, clockmakers, silversmiths, tailors, and other craftspeople turned out goods based on the latest designs from England. There were also barbers to cut colonists' hair and wigmakers to make it look long again.

Cities were often noisy, smelly places. Church bells rang out several times a day, while carts clattered loudly over streets paved with round cobblestones where animals ran loose. During hot weather, clouds of flies and mosquitoes swarmed about, and the air was filled with the stench of rotting garbage and open sewers. But the colonists were used to these sights and smells.



City homes were close together on winding streets. Most were built of wood with thatched roofs, like the houses the colonists had left behind in Europe. Windows were small because glass was expensive.

For lighting, colonists used torches made of pine that burned brightly when they were wedged between hearthstones in the fireplace. Colonists also burned grease in metal containers called “betty lamps” and made candles scented with bayberries.

With torches and candles lighting homes, fire was a constant danger. To counter the threat of fires, colonists kept fire buckets hanging by their front doors so that when a fire broke out, the whole town would grab their buckets and form a double line from the fire to a river, pond, or well. They passed the buckets full of water from hand to hand up one line to the fire before being passed back down the opposite line to be refilled.



### 3. Rights of Colonists

Colonists in America considered themselves to be English citizens. They

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expected the same **rights** that citizens enjoyed in England, the most important of which was the right to have a voice in their government.

**Magna Carta** The English people had won the right to participate in their government only after a long struggle, the key victory to this struggle being the signing of **Magna Carta**, or “Great Charter,” by King John in 1215, which established the idea that the power of the monarch, or ruler, was limited. Not even the king was above the law.

The next major victory was the founding of **Parliament** in 1265. Parliament was made up of representatives from across England. Over time, it became a lawmaking body with the power to approve laws and taxes proposed by the king or queen.

In 1685, James, the Duke of York, became King James II and did not want to share power with an elected assembly in New York nor an elected Parliament in England. When he tried to rule without Parliament, James was forced off his throne. This change in power, which took place without bloodshed, is known as the Glorious Revolution.

**The English Bill of Rights** Following the Glorious Revolution, Parliament offered the crown to Prince William of Orange and his wife, Mary in 1689. In exchange, they had to agree to an act, or law, known as the **English Bill of Rights**. This act said that the power to make laws and impose taxes belonged to the people's elected representatives in Parliament and to no one else. It also contained a bill, or list, of rights that belonged to the people. Among these were the right to petition the king (request him to change something) and to have a trial by jury.

English colonists saw the Glorious Revolution as a victory not only for Parliament, but also for their colonial assemblies. They wanted to select those individuals who made their laws as well as those who set their taxes. After all, this was a cherished right of all English citizens.

**Crime and Punishment** Each colonial assembly passed its own laws defining crimes and punishments. However, most crimes were treated similarly in all the colonies.

Certain very serious crimes—including murder, treason (acts of disloyalty toward the government), and piracy (robbery at sea)—could be punished by death. Puritans in New England added other crimes to this list based on their understanding of God's law in the Bible. In New England, colonists could be put to death for “denying the true God” or

for striking or cursing their parents.

Crimes such as theft, forgery, and highway robbery also carried harsh punishments in every colony. For these crimes, people might be jailed, whipped, or branded with hot irons.

Lesser crimes, such as drunkenness and breaking the Sabbath (working or traveling on Sunday), were punished with fines, short jail terms, or public humiliation. A colonist caught breaking the Sabbath, for example, might be locked in the town stocks, which were a heavy wooden frame with holes for a person's neck, wrists, and ankles. Lawbreakers were locked for hours in this device in a public place where others could ridicule them.

No group had firmer ideas about right and wrong than New England's Puritans. The Puritans required everyone to attend church on Sundays and forbade anyone to work or play on that day. Some people believe that the Puritans wrote their Sunday laws in books with blue paper bindings. These rules came to be known as blue laws. Some blue laws still persist to this day.

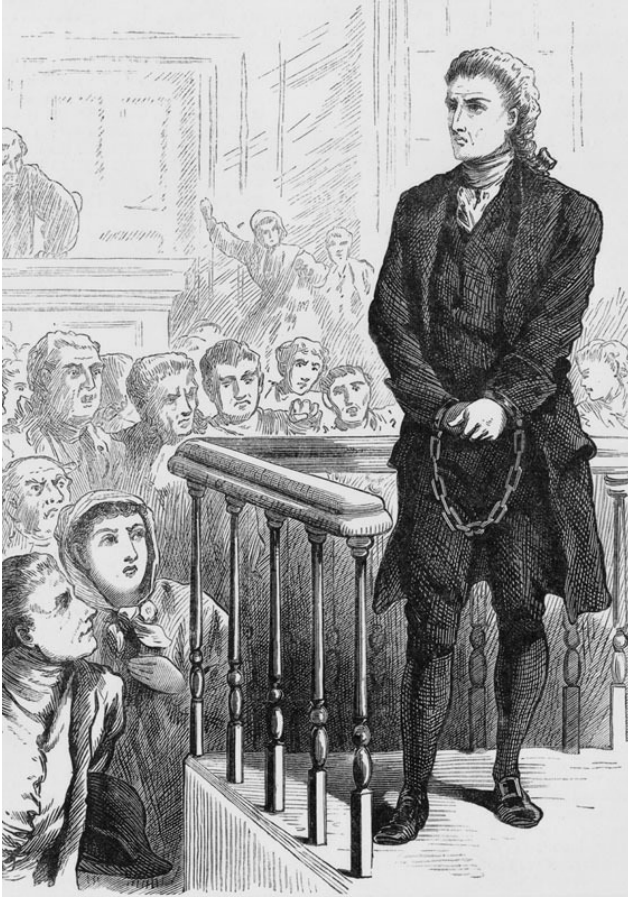
The Puritans were constantly on the watch for signs of Satan (believed to be an evil angel who rebelled against God) since he was thought to work through witches. In 1692, fear of witchcraft overtook residents of Salem, Massachusetts, when several girls were seen acting strangely in church. The girls accused their neighbors of being witches and putting spells on them. Nineteen accused witches were put to death during the Salem witch trials before calm was **restored** and the townspeople realized that the girls' accusations were untrue.

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#### 4. Life for African Americans

Slavery in the colonies began in Virginia, with tobacco planters. From there, it spread both north and south. By the early 1700s, enslaved Africans were living in every colony. Even Benjamin Franklin owned slaves for a time, but like most people in the New England and Middle Colonies, Franklin found that hiring workers when he needed them cost less than owning slaves.

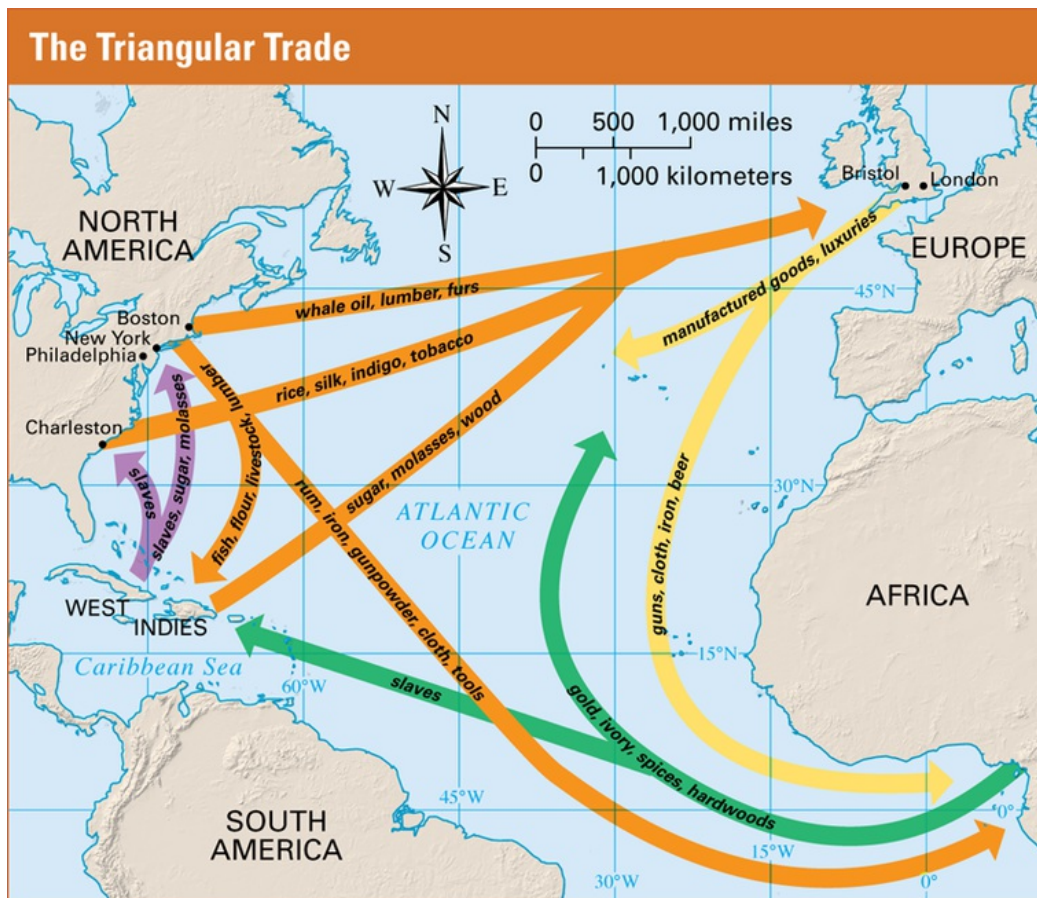
In the Southern Colonies slavery expanded rapidly. From Virginia to Georgia, slaves helped raise tobacco, rice, indigo, and other cash crops.

**The Atlantic Slave Trade** Most of the slaves who were brought to the colonies came from West Africa. Each year, ships from Europe filled with guns, cloth, and other goods sailed to West Africa, where they were traded for Africans. The ships then returned to the Americas carrying their human cargo, who would work to produce goods that would then be sent back to Europe. This exchange of goods and people between Europe, West Africa, and the Americas became known as the triangular trade.

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For the Africans packed onto slave ships, the ocean crossing—known as the Middle Passage—was a nightmare. According to his autobiography, Olaudah Equiano (oh-LAU-duh ek-wee-AH-noh) was just eleven years old when he was put onto a slave ship bound for the colonies. He never forgot “the closeness of the place . . . which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself.” Nor did he forget “the shrieks of the women, and groans of the dying.” The terrified boy refused to eat, hoping “for the last friend, Death, to relieve me.” Although Equiano survived the voyage, many Africans died of illness or despair.

**Work Without Hope** The slaves' masters in America demanded that the Africans work hard. Most enslaved Africans were put to work in the fields raising crops, though others worked as nurses, carpenters, blacksmiths, drivers, servants, gardeners, and midwives (people who assist women giving birth). Unlike other colonists, slaves had little hope of making a better life because their position was fixed at the bottom of colonial society. Some slaves **rebelled** by refusing to work or running away, but most adapted to their unhappy condition as best they could.



## 5. Religion

Religion was an important part of colonial life. Most colonists tried to lead virtuous lives based on their faith, and children were brought up reading the Bible from cover to cover several times over.

**Puritan Church Services** In New England, the sound of a drum or horn called Puritans to worship on Sunday morning. “Captains of the watch” made sure everyone was a “Sabbath-keeper.” Sometimes houses were searched to ensure that everyone was at the church service.

Church services were held in the town meetinghouse, the most important building in the community that was used for all public gatherings. Inside were rows of wooden benches, called pews, and a pulpit (a platform where the preacher stood). A “seating committee” carefully assigned seats, with the best ones going to older, wealthy people, while colonists with less influence sat farther away.

Services could last as long as five hours. At midday, villagers would go to “noon-houses” near the church to warm themselves by a fire, eat, and socialize before returning to church for the long afternoon sermon.

**The Great Awakening** Beginning in the 1730s, a religious movement known as the **Great Awakening** swept through the colonies. This movement was spurred by a feeling that people had lost their religious faith. “The forms of religion were kept up,” a Puritan observed, but there was “little of the power” of God in it.

To revive people's religious spirit, preachers traveled from town to town holding outdoor “revival” meetings where they would deliver fiery sermons to huge crowds. Their words touched the hearts and souls of many colonists. Benjamin Franklin wrote about the change he observed in Philadelphia: “It seemed as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk through the town in an evening without hearing psalms [Bible songs] sung in different families of every street.”

The Great Awakening had a powerful effect on the colonies because it helped spread the idea that all people are equal in the eyes of God. Ordinary people could understand God's will if they had an open heart and a desire to know God's truth. By encouraging ideas of liberty, equality, and self-reliance, the Great Awakening helped pave the way for the American Revolution.





### 6. Education

Except in New England, most children in the colonies received little or no formal education. Few places in the Middle and Southern Colonies had public schools.

In the Southern Colonies, most families were spread out along rivers. Neighbors might pool their resources to hire a teacher for their children, while wealthy planters often hired tutors to educate younger children at home. Older children were often sent to schools in distant cities, or even England, to complete their college education.

In the Middle Colonies, religious differences among Quakers, Catholics, Jews, Baptists, and other religious groups slowed the growth of public education. Each religious group or family had to decide for itself how to educate its children. Some groups built church schools, while others were content to have parents teach their children at home.

Only in New England were towns required to provide public schools. The Puritans' support for education was inspired by their religious faith because they wanted their children to be able to read and understand the teachings of the Bible.

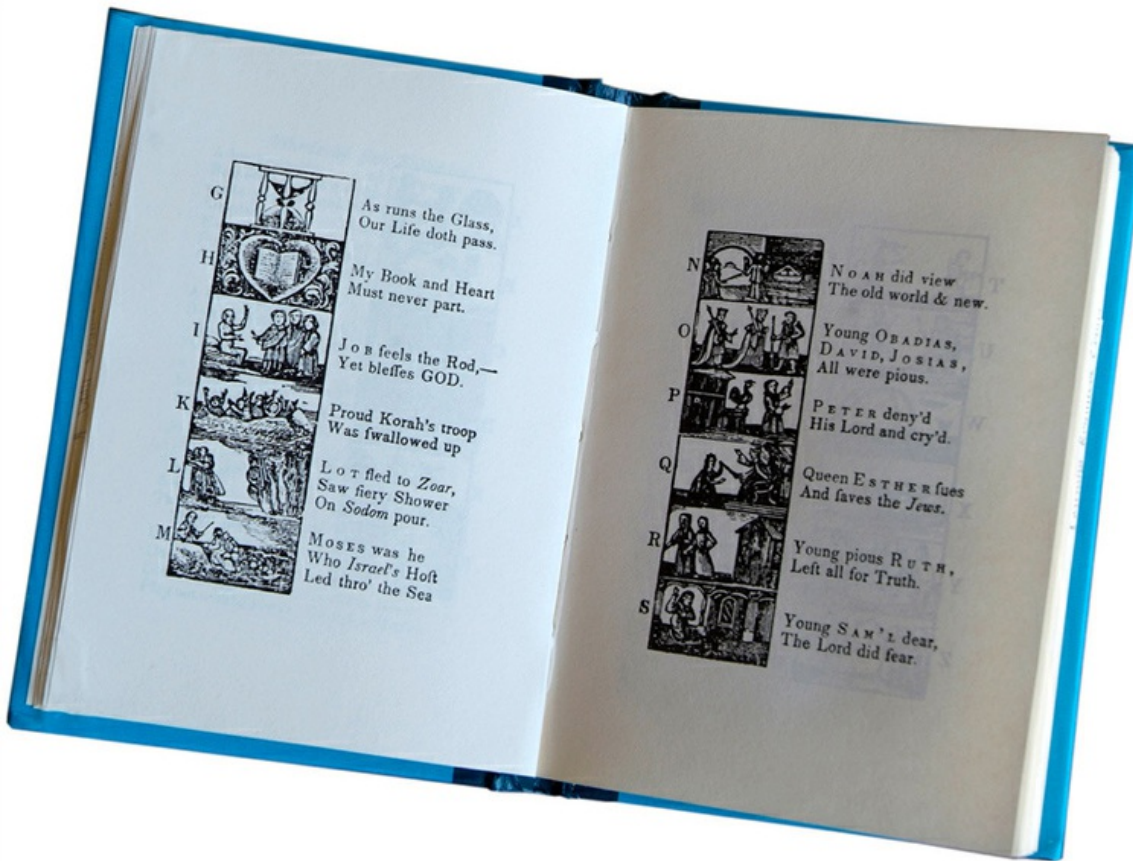


To encourage education, Massachusetts passed a law in 1647 that required every town with 50 families or more to hire an instructor to teach their children to read and write. Towns with more than 100 families were required to build a school. Following Massachusetts' example, similar laws were passed throughout other states in the New England colonies.

Parents were asked to contribute whatever they could to the village school. Contributions included money, vegetables, firewood, or anything else the school needed. Often, land was set aside as “school meadows” or “school fields” which could then be rented out to raise money for teachers' salaries.

Schools were one-room buildings with a chimney and fireplace. There were no boards to write on or maps of the Americas, and pencils and paper were scarce. Students shouted out spelling words and wrote sums in ink on pieces of bark. There was usually one book, the *New England Primer*, which was used to teach the alphabet, syllables, and prayers.

Most colonists believed that boys needed more education than girls. “Female education, in the best families,” wrote First Lady Abigail Adams, “went no further than writing and arithmetic; in some few and rare instances, music, and dancing.”



## 7. Colonial Families

The concept of family has changed often throughout history. Today, most people think of a family as being made up of parents and their children. In colonial times, however, families might include grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and stepchildren.

**Marriage** Colonial men and women generally married in their early to mid-20s. Those who arrived in America as indentured servants were not allowed to marry until they had gained their freedom.

Throughout the colonies, men outnumbered women, which meant that almost every woman was assured of receiving a marriage proposal. "Maid servants of good honest stock [family]," wrote a colonist, could "choose their husbands out of the better sort of people." For a young woman, though, life as a wife and mother often proved to be even harder than life as an indentured servant.

**Large Families** Colonial families were generally large and often had between seven and ten children. (Benjamin Franklin had 16 siblings.) Farm families, in particular, needed all the hands they could get to help

with chores and the impending harvest each year.

Religious and cultural backgrounds influenced colonists' ideas about their children's upbringing. However, almost everywhere in the colonies, children were expected to be productive members of the family.

Although married women in the colonies gave birth many times, nearly half of all children died before they reached adulthood. Childhood deaths were especially high in the Middle and Southern Colonies, where the deadly disease of malaria raged, and adults often died young as well. After the death of a wife or husband, men and women usually remarried quickly. Thus, households often swelled with stepchildren as well as adopted orphans (children whose parents had died).

Whether colonists lived in cities, in villages, or on isolated farms, their lives focused on their families. Family members took care of one another because there was no one else to do so. Young families often welcomed elderly grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins into their homes when they could no longer care for themselves. It didn't matter if there was barely enough room for everyone. No one would turn away a needy relative.



### 8. Leisure

While most colonists worked hard, they enjoyed their periods of **leisure** (time away from work). They also took advantage of gatherings, such as town meetings and Sunday services, to talk with neighbors and make friends.

**Bees and Frolics** When possible, colonists combined work and recreation by organizing “bees” and “frolics.” New settlers might hold a “chopping bee” in which all the neighbors helped clear the trees off their land. Other frolics included corn-husking bees for men and quilting bees for women. Sharing the work increased the production of goods while also making the work more enjoyable.

Other people participated in house and barn raisings throughout the colonies. At these events, neighbors joined together to build the frame of a house or barn in one day. The men assembled the four walls flat on the ground and then raised them into place. Meanwhile, the women prepared a huge feast. At the end of the day, everyone danced on the barn's new floor.



**Toys and Sports** Colonial children had a few basic toys, such as dolls, marbles, and tops. They played tag, blindman's bluff, and stoolball, which was related to the English game of cricket (a game like baseball). Children in New England also enjoyed coasting down snowy hills on sleds, although adults must have thought coasting was dangerous because several communities forbade it.

Adults enjoyed several sports. One popular sport was lawn bowling where men would roll egg-shaped balls down a lane of grass toward a white ball called a jack. Colonists also played a game similar to backgammon called tick-tack and a form of billiards (pool) called trock.

In the Southern Colonies, fox hunting with horses and hounds was a popular sport. Card playing was another favorite pastime, one that New England Puritans disapproved of strongly. Horse racing, cockfighting, and bull baiting were also popular in the South.

Fairs were held throughout the colonies where colonists could compete in contests of skill and artistry. There were footraces, wrestling matches, dance contests, and wild scrambles to see who could win a prize by catching a greased pig or climbing a greased pole.

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### Lesson Summary

**In this lesson, you read about various aspects of life in the American colonies during the early 1700s.**

**Farms and Cities** The colonists developed an economy based on farming, commerce, and crafts. Farm families produced most of what they needed for themselves. In the villages and cities, many trades and crafts developed.

**Rights of Colonists** American colonists expected to enjoy all the rights of English citizens, especially the right to have a voice in their own government. Colonial assemblies defined crimes and punishments. Punishments were often harsh, but for most of the 1700s, the colonists were content to be ruled by English laws.

**Life for African Americans** Enslaved African Americans had almost no rights or even hope for liberty. After being brought to America in chains, they faced a life of forced obedience and toil.

**Religion** Religion was very important to the colonists. The Great Awakening revived religious feeling and helped spread the idea that all people are equal.

**Education** Most colonial children received little education, except in New England. Instead, they were expected to contribute to the work of the farm or home.

**Family and Leisure** Most colonial families were large. They often included many relatives in addition to parents and their children. Much of colonial life was hard work, but colonists also found time to enjoy sports and games.



Reading Further

A Great Awakening

**In the 1730s and 1740s, the Great Awakening shook up the English colonies. This religious movement caused an outpouring of Christian faith and prompted new ways of thinking about the church and society. As a result, it helped lay the foundations for political changes to come.**

Nathan Cole was working on his farm on the morning of October 23, 1740, when he heard the news. The preacher George Whitefield was coming to Connecticut.

Famous for the powerful sermons that he delivered throughout the colonies, Whitefield drew huge crowds wherever he went. Now he was in Connecticut and preaching in nearby Middletown that very morning, and Cole knew if he didn't move fast, he would miss his opportunity to

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see Whitefield speak.

*I dropped my tool . . . and ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might fearing that I should be too late to hear him. I brought my horse home and soon mounted and took my wife up and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear . . .*

*And when we came within about half a mile [from the main road] . . . I saw before me a Cloud or fog rising. I first thought it came from the great river, but as I came nearer . . . I heard a noise something like a low, rumbling thunder and presently found it was the noise of horses' feet coming down the road and this Cloud was a Cloud of dust . . . As I drew nearer it seemed like a steady stream of horses and their riders . . . Every horse seemed to go with all his might to carry his rider to hear news from heaven for the saving of Souls.*

*—Nathan Cole, in George Leon Walker,  
Some Aspects of Religious Life in New England, 1897*

Thousands of people were rushing to Middletown to hear Whitefield speak. “I saw no man at work in his field,” Cole wrote, “but all seemed to be gone.” When Cole and his wife reached the town, they found a large crowd gathered there. The mood was electric in anticipation for Whitefield to appear.

What was behind all this excitement? Why would a preacher's arrival cause a commotion like that of a rock star or a Hollywood celebrity today?

In fact, Whitefield was a superstar of his time. He was the most famous figure in a religious revival that was sweeping the colonies. People who were seeking a deep spiritual experience and a direct connection to God found that connection in preachers like Whitefield.

### **Origins of the Awakening**

Since most people attended church regularly in the early 1700s, religion played a major role in the lives of colonists. There were a number of different churches, but most provided a similar experience. They emphasized traditional religious teachings. Their ministers were educated men who valued reason over emotion. The atmosphere in church was calm and orderly.



Some ministers, however, thought that the church had lost its way. They feared that religion had become a collection of formal, empty rituals, and they believed that they had to wake people up and renew their faith. In their sermons, they offered an emotional message of sin and salvation that was aimed at the heart, not the head.

By the 1730s, a split was developing between old-line ministers and those favoring a new way. These two groups became known as the Old Lights, who stressed tradition and respect for authority, and the New Lights, who called for a more individual, personal form of worship that focused on people feeling the spirit of God for themselves.



Whitefield and other New Light ministers often preached at open-air revivals, where they depicted the glories of heaven and the miseries of hell. Upon hearing these highly charged sermons, many people would weep, moan, and fall to the ground because they were overcome with feelings of great joy or despair. As news of the revivals spread, the movement gained strength.

### **Leading Lights: Whitefield and Edwards**

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A number of ministers played key roles in the Great Awakening. The leading figures, however, were George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards. If Whitefield was the star of the movement, Edwards was its most important thinker.

Whitefield was a young Anglican minister in England when he joined the revival movement. In 1739, he defied church authorities by holding revival meetings across the country.

That same year, he traveled to the colonies, where he caused a sensation. Because Whitefield was a magnificent speaker with a beautiful voice and the skills of an accomplished actor, his words and gestures could lift audiences into an emotional frenzy. He toured from Maine to Georgia, appearing in towns and cities along the way. In Boston, some 20,000 people gathered to hear him speak. He was the most celebrated man in America.

Although Whitefield was pleased with his success, he was also troubled by the wealth and vanity he saw in the colonies. Noting the fine clothing worn by wealthy citizens, he argued that Christians should dress simply and plainly. In Boston, he was disturbed to see young children dressed in fancy clothes:

*The little infants who were brought to baptism were wrapped up in such fine things . . . that one would think they were brought thither [there] to be initiated into, rather than to renounce, the pomps and vanities of this wicked world.*

While in Massachusetts, Whitefield visited Jonathan Edwards, who had helped start the revival movement and had been a great influence on Whitefield. Edwards, in turn, recognized that Whitefield had given new life to the movement and caused him to increase his own efforts to win converts. In this way, he said, he hoped to “make New England a kind of heaven upon earth.”

Edwards began to preach in neighboring towns. In 1741, he gave his most famous sermon in Enfield, Connecticut. Called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” this sermon was directed at a congregation that had resisted the revival message. Edwards told them that they had angered God with their sinful ways and that God held them in his hand and could cast them into hell at any moment.

*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider . . . is dreadfully provoked;*

*his wrath towards you burns like fire . . . 'Tis nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire . . . Oh sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in . . .*

*And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; . . . many that were very lately in the same miserable condition you are in, are in now a happy state, . . . rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God. How awful is it to be left behind at such a day!*

These words had a devastating effect on the congregation, which began to wail and beg for mercy. The “shrieks and cries were piercing,” wrote one witness, and the uproar was so great that Edwards could not even finish his sermon.

### **The Impact of the Awakening**

Over the next few years, such incidents became more common and quickly widened the split between Old Light and New Light ministers. Since churches were breaking apart, both sides agreed to make peace and heal their divisions for the sake of unity. Although the Great Awakening was over by the late 1740s, the impact of the movement was deep and ongoing.

New Light preachers had encouraged people to think for themselves and to make their own choices about their religious faith. As a result, the church no longer had absolute authority in religious matters, and preachers began to teach that everyone was equal in the eyes of God. As one preacher said, “The common people . . . claim as good a right to judge and act for themselves . . . as civil rulers or the learned clergy.” By encouraging people to act independently and defy authority, the Great Awakening helped lay the groundwork for rebellion against British rule.

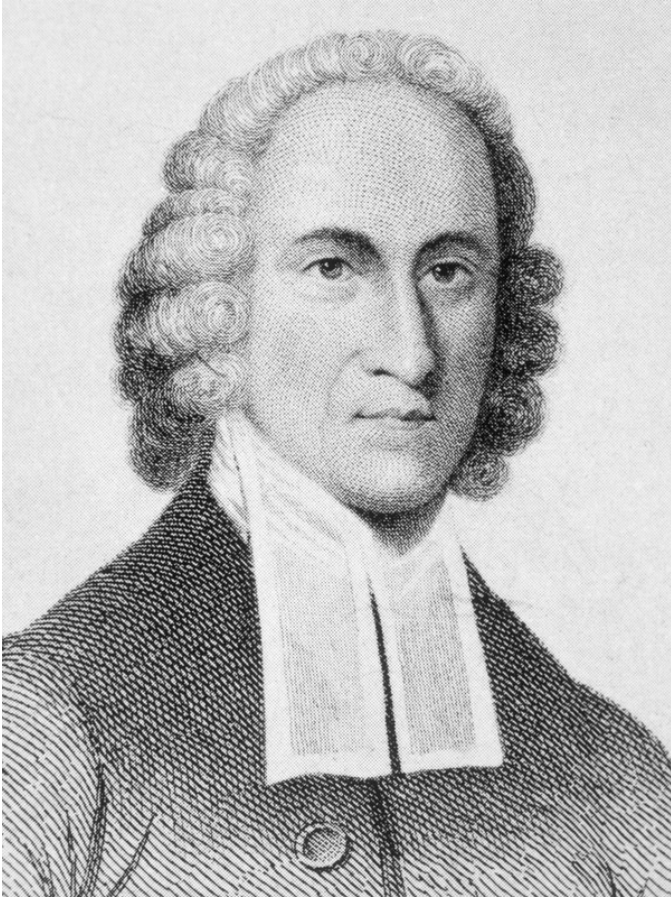


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S I N N E R S  
IN THE HANDS OF AN  
A N G R Y G O D.  
A  
S E R M O N

Preached at ENFIELD, July 8th, 1741.

At a Time of great Awakenings ; and attended with remarkable Impressions on many of the Hearers.

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By JONATHAN EDWARDS, A. M.  
Pastor of the Church of CHRIST, in NORTHAMPTON.

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*Amos ix. 2, 3. Though they dig into Hell, thence shall mine Hand take them ; though they climb up to Heaven, thence will I bring them down. And though they hide themselves in the Top of Carmel, I will search and take them out thence ; and though they be hid from my Sight in the Bottom of the Sea, thence I will command the Serpent, and he shall bite them.*

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Re-printed by particular Desire.

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