

Growth of the Colonies

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The development of the colonial economy, facilitated by the Navigation Acts, enabled colonists to access more English goods than ever before. The consumption habits of both ordinary colonists and the colonial gentry, fueled by a consumer revolution in the colonies, created opportunities to establish stronger ties with England by means of tastes and cultural behaviors. The consumption of goods and ideas from the broader Atlantic World created opportunities for a distinct American identity to emerge within the colonies in the decades preceding the American Revolution, most notably in the area of religion.

This tutorial examines the growth of the American colonies through the consumption of goods and religious ideas. It focuses on some of the ways in which colonists considered themselves English. It also explores how a series of religious revivals, known as the Great Awakening, promoted individualism within the colonies.

1. Consuming England

The Navigation Acts, overseen by the Board of Trade, mandated the creation of a protected commercial zone within the Atlantic World, one in which English merchants, producers, and consumers interacted. In turn, these commercial networks facilitated a **consumer revolution** in America by 1750 as colonists began to purchase an array of goods that previous generations on either side of the Atlantic could hardly have imagined.



TERM TO KNOW

Consumer Revolution

An increased supply of consumer goods in the American colonies that facilitated closer ties between colonists and the British Empire.

In 1660, the households of even the wealthiest Virginians and New Englanders were without many material possessions. This was not a result of self-restraint among the colonists. Rather, it was because few of them could afford to live any other way.

Most colonial households in 1660 did not have tables, much less chairs to sit on. Meals were typically served on makeshift boards. Family members relaxed on chests, crude stools, or around the huge fireplace that also served as the kitchen. Eating equipment was comprised of a handful of bowls (typically wood or ceramic), a wooden platter, metal spoons, an all-purpose knife, and a shared mug. The main piece of furniture was the

bed where the husband and wife slept.



DID YOU KNOW

One third of the colonial population in 1660 lived in an 18 ft by 20 ft, one-room house.

Transformations in colonial purchases and consumption began shortly after the Restoration and the rise of Charles II in the late 17th century and first occurred among the elite in England and the colonies. They gradually trickled down to ordinary individuals and families during the 18th century.

Among the most notable new consumer goods that became available to colonists by the 18th century was **delftware**, first manufactured in the Netherlands. Delftware was blue and white ceramic china that came in a variety of forms. By the early 18th century, English craftspeople began producing dinnerware and accessories, and their products were soon available in the colonies.



18th-Century Delftware



TERM TO KNOW

Delftware

Blue and white ceramic china, first manufactured in the Netherlands.

By the 18th century, a new form of architecture began to emerge in England and the colonies: **Georgian-style architecture**. Georgian-style homes often featured four symmetrical rooms on each of at least two floors, paired on either side of a central hallway and grand staircase. Within these homes, all cooking was done in a separate kitchen building. Small fireplaces were located throughout the home to heat rooms more efficiently. Large windows illuminated the interior spaces.



Georgian-Style Architecture

A style of architecture that became popular in England and the American colonies by the early 18th century.



The Governor's Palace at Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia), which was originally constructed in the early 18th century, provides a visual example of Georgian-style architecture. The original palace burned down in 1781 and was reconstructed during the 1930s.

What was particularly notable about the adoption of Georgian-style architecture was the number of colonists who had accumulated enough wealth to build such homes. In the North American colonies, wealthy men who were connected with royal officials, merchants, or plantations built Georgian homes only a few years after the style was introduced in England. By the 1730s, Georgian-style homes were a familiar sight throughout the colonies.

Tea was the true vanguard of the consumer revolution for most ordinary British American households. Tea was the preferred drink throughout the British Empire.

In order to enjoy tea properly, colonists sought the paraphernalia necessary to prepare, sweeten, and serve it. Thus, in addition to tea, they purchased teapots, containers for tea, cream, sugar, strainers, spoons, cups, and saucers. If they could afford it, they also bought elegant tables on which to serve it. Most colonists managed to enjoy their tea without purchasing elaborate tea sets, but tea consumption was among the most significant forces that tied colonists to the British Empire.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1722, a luxury tea set cost 257 pounds, roughly 10 times the annual wage of an urban laborer. Thus, the goods that colonists consumed revealed their connections to the British Empire. The commercial networks of the empire enabled many colonists to purchase what was needed or desired. Perhaps no group in colonial society epitomized this trend more than the gentry of the Southern colonies.

Additional Resources

Take a virtual tour of [Colonial Williamsburg](#), one of the most populous cities of the British colonies in America and the seat of political power in colonial Virginia.

2. The Colonial Gentry and the Consumer Revolution

The reliance on racial slavery in the production of cash crops, such as tobacco, contributed to the rise of a wealthy class in the Southern colonies known as the gentry. Members of this class modeled themselves on the English aristocracy in every way, including the goods they consumed and the ways in which they spent their days.

William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, exemplified this phenomenon. A wealthy planter and enslaver, Byrd is known for founding Richmond, and for his diaries, which document the life of a gentleman planter during the consumer revolution.

Diary of William Byrd II

"August 27, 1709

I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Josephus. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance. I had like to have whipped my maid Anaka for her laziness but I forgave her. I read a little geometry. I denied my man...to go to a horse race because there was nothing but swearing and drinking there. I ate roast mutton for dinner. In the afternoon I played at piquet with my own wife and made her out of humor by cheating her. I read some Greek in Homer. Then I walked about the plantation. I lent John...£7 [7 English pounds] in his distress. I said my prayers and had good health, good thoughts, and good humor, thanks be to God Almighty....

September 21, 1710

I rose at 6 o'clock and read nothing but got ready to receive the company. About 8 o'clock the Governor came down. I offered him some of my [fine water]. Then we had milk tea and bread and butter for breakfast. The Governor was pleased with everything and very complaisant. About 10 o'clock Captain Stith came and soon after him Colonel Hill, Mr. Anderson, and several others of the militia officers . . . About 3 o'clock we returned to the house and as many of the officers as could sit at the table stayed to dine with the Governor, and the rest went to take part of the hogshead in the churchyard. We had a good dinner, well served, with which the Governor seemed to be well pleased."



THINK ABOUT IT

What does Byrd's diary show about the daily life of a gentleman planter during the consumer revolution?

Does the diary provide any evidence that suggests that one's participation in the consumer revolution depended upon the bondage of another?

Visitors to the homes of Byrd and other Southern planters would find them well-furnished and stocked with a variety of consumer goods. Planters' homes were designed to display their wealth and entertain guests. Byrd's diary also indicates that the gentry subscribed to certain rules about etiquette and manners.

Southern gentlewomen, in particular, maintained the status of their families through knowledge and enforcement of social norms. These women followed rules of etiquette, orchestrated rituals (such as tea service), and maintained appropriate social networks. They learned these rules and contributed to social conversations by reading the right books for the times and hiring English tutors.

Regardless of one's gender, being a member of the gentry required one to dress properly. This required knowledge of contemporary fashion, as well as the importation of silk taffeta and fine linen dresses and suits made in England.

3. American Religion

Colonists in British North America also made religious choices. The majority were Protestant, but there were a variety of sects to choose from within Protestantism. The continuous arrival of immigrants from across the Atlantic World further stimulated religious variance—and disputes. By the early 18th century, the combination of Protestant sectarianism and religious debates in the colonies contributed to a period of religious revivalism known as the **Great Awakening**.



TERM TO KNOW

Great Awakening

A period of religious revivalism that culminated in colonial America by the 1730s and 1740s. During the Great Awakening, evangelists came from the ranks of several Protestant denominations: Congregationalists (the heirs of Puritanism in America), Anglicans (members of the Church of England), and Presbyterians. They rejected what appeared to be sterile, formal modes of worship in favor of a vigorous religious fervor. Martin Luther and John Calvin had preached a doctrine of predestination and close reading of scripture, but evangelical ministers associated with the Great Awakening spread messages of personal and experiential faith. Most importantly, they emphasized that all individuals could bring about their own salvation by accepting Christ. This was an especially welcome message for those who had felt excluded by traditional Protestantism: women, the young, and people at the lower end of the social spectrum.

Outbursts of Protestant revivalism occurred throughout the colonies, but they were particularly pronounced in the Middle and Northern colonies. In the Middle colonies, Gilbert Tennent helped spark a Presbyterian revival by founding a seminary to train other evangelical clergymen. In the Northern colonies, Jonathan Edwards led another outburst of religious fervor. His best-known sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," drew audiences through powerful imagery that described the terrors of hell and the possibility of avoiding damnation through personal conversion. A selection from his sermon is provided below (Edwards, 2012):

Sermon of Jonathan Edwards

"O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: 'tis a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the damned in hell; you hang by a slender

thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it....

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; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the east, west, north and south; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are in now a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God...."



THINK ABOUT IT

How does Edwards' sermon reflect the emphasis on personal faith and personal conversion that was a feature of the Great Awakening?

The Great Awakening led to the rise of several new Protestant denominations in colonial America, most notably Methodists and Baptists. These new churches gained converts and competed with older Protestant groups like Anglicans, Congregationalists, and Quakers. Together, these and many other Protestant sects contributed to a dynamic religious environment, one that touched the lives of thousands of colonists.

Among the most significant features of this religious environment was the notion that individual people could become the instruments of their own salvation. By emphasizing that colonists had "an extraordinary opportunity" for salvation, Edwards and other revivalists drew large crowds. Revivalists often held their meetings in public spaces (such as the streets) rather than in sacred spaces (such as churches) where religious meetings traditionally took place. These meetings could be seen as a rejection of traditional social and religious authority, as the sermons of Edwards and others encouraged individuals to achieve their own salvation and, if necessary, question the clergy and other traditional forms of authority.



DID YOU KNOW

The minister George Whitefield drew crowds of 1,000 people or more on at least 60 occasions during the Great Awakening.

Most revivalists did not go so far as to argue for the need for a revolution against authority. However, participation in these revivals provided a shared experience for colonists that emphasized individualism and the opportunity for salvation.



SUMMARY

Consumption of goods (such as tea) and participation in movements (such as the Great Awakening) were shared experiences that influenced colonists' sense of unique identity. An increased supply of consumer goods from England in the 18th century contributed to a consumer revolution in the colonies. Remarkably, ordinary people as well as the gentry were able to consume goods from Great Britain. The Great Awakening, meanwhile, contributed to the rise of new Protestant denominations in the colonies. Evangelists challenged traditional forms of authority and argued that individuals could become the instruments of their own salvation.

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REFERENCES

Edwards, J. (2005). *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God and Other Puritan Sermons*. United States: Dover Publications.



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [Image of Governor's Palace, Colonial Williamsburg](#) | License: Creative Commons
- [Image of Delftware](#) | License: Creative Commons



TERMS TO KNOW

Consumer Revolution

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Delftware

Blue and white ceramic china; first manufactured in the Netherlands.

Georgian-Style Architecture

A style of architecture that became popular in England and the American colonies by the early 18th century.

Great Awakening

A period of religious revivalism that culminated in colonial America by the 1730s and 1740s.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Jonathan Edwards

Puritan theologian and preacher whose fiery sermons, such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," helped fuel religious revivalism in the colonies during the Great Awakening.



DATES TO KNOW

1730–1740

This period of religious revivalism in the colonies is known as the First Great Awakening.