

# The Challenges to the English Empire

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

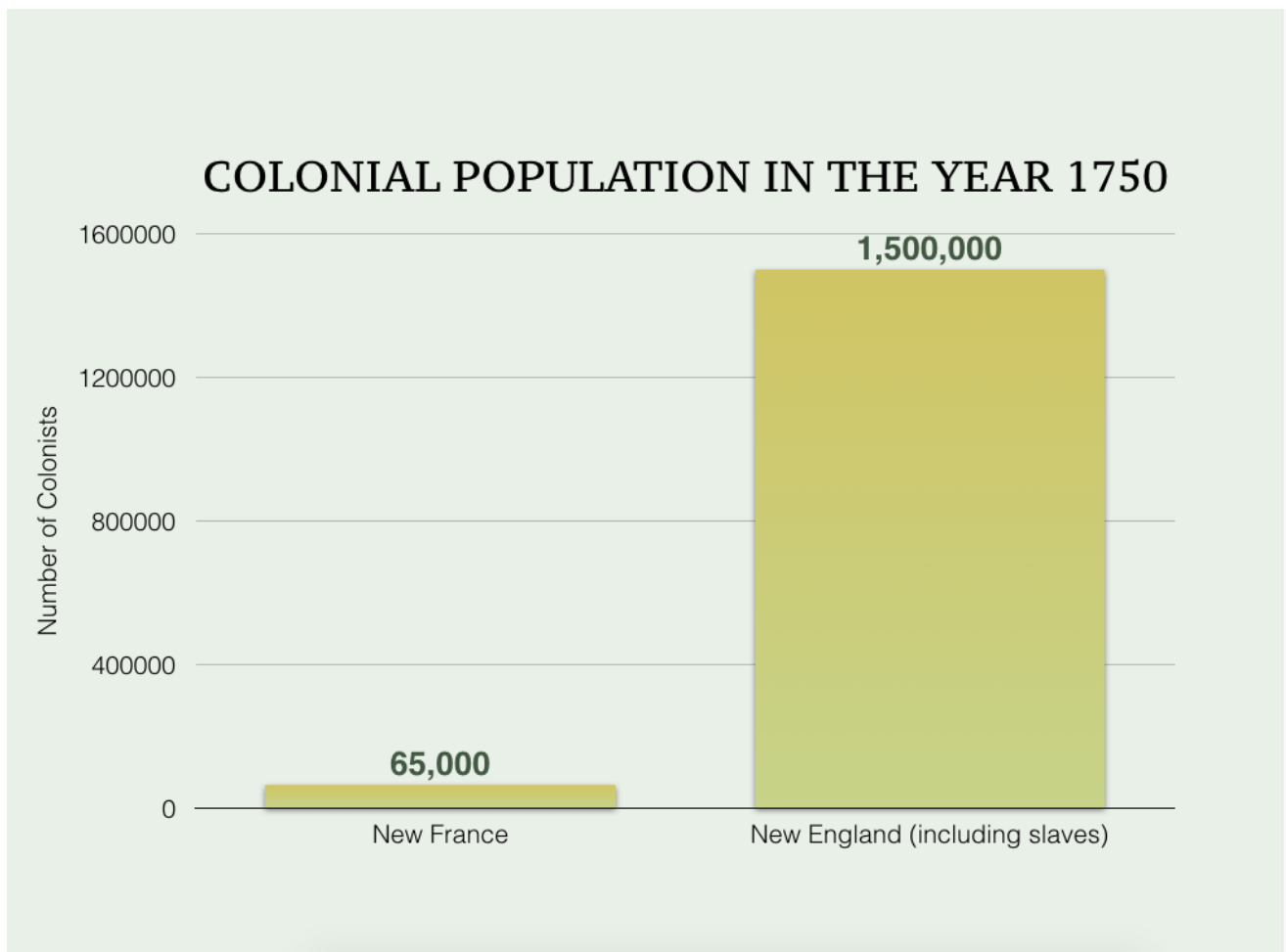
In the mid-17th century, the geopolitical map of Eastern North America was a patchwork of imperial designs and ambitions. Colonies established by the Spanish (Florida), Dutch (New Netherland), French (New France), and English (New England and the Chesapeake region) reinforced imperial claims to North America. Uneasiness, punctuated by violent clashes, prevailed in the border zones between the Europeans' territorial claims. In addition, powerful native tribes (such as the Iroquois) waged war or engaged in diplomacy to establish favorable relations with Europeans, while enslaved people resisted their increasing subjugation.

This tutorial examines some of the foreign and domestic challenges that faced England's North American empire by the mid-18th century in three parts:

## 1. The Imperial Context

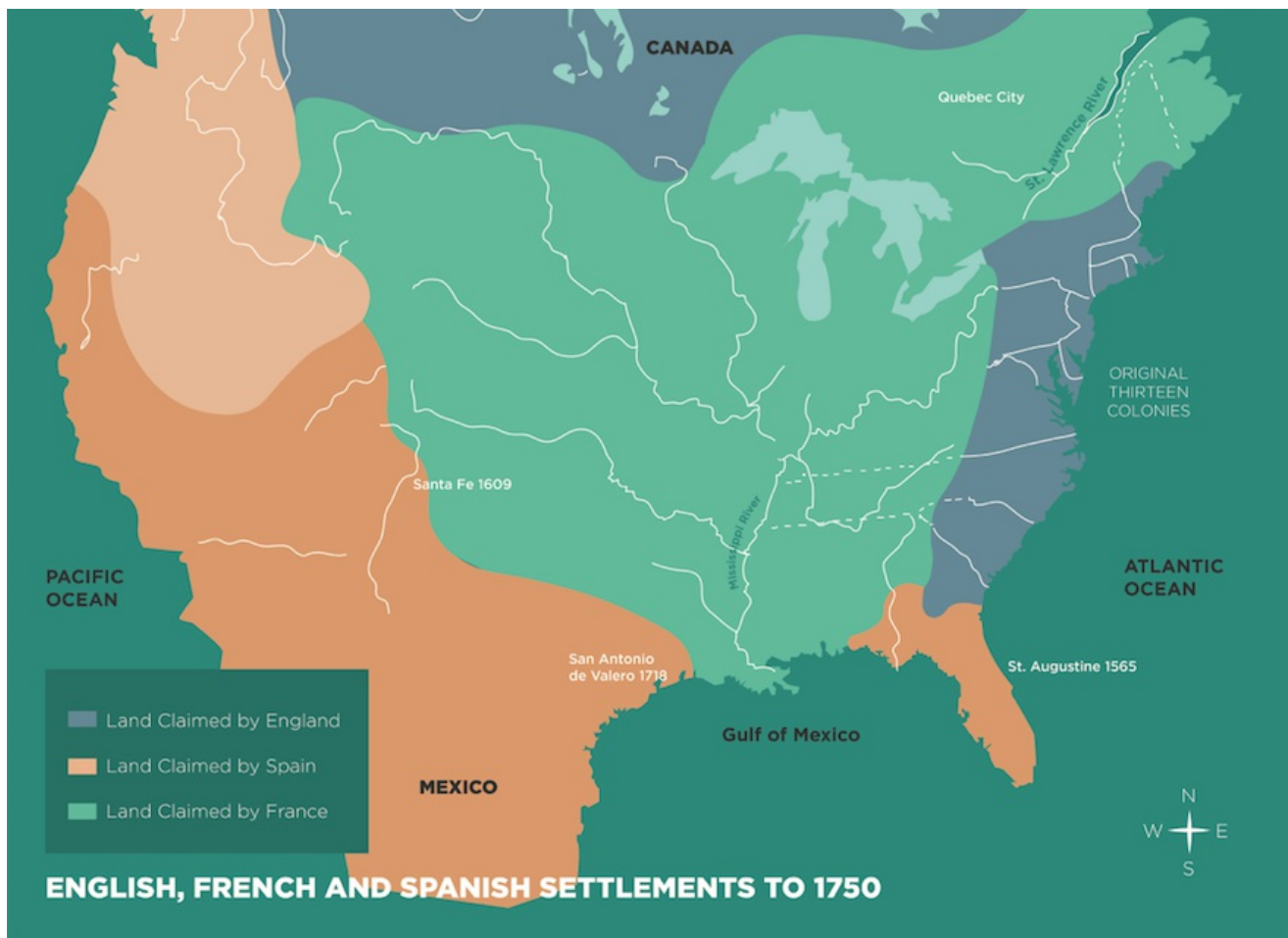
England's North American colonies were not immune to the imperial rivalries of the Atlantic World. In fact, these rivalries led them to distinguish themselves from Spanish and French colonists (and their Native American allies). English colonists in North America felt that they were not only subjects of the empire but also English. Occasional fights against the Spanish, French, and their native allies reinforced this feeling.

France's North American empire was immense and surrounded England's North American colonies. However, it remained underpopulated compared to the English colonies. See the image below, which depicts the colonial populations of France and England in North America by the year 1750.



The colonial population of New France was overwhelmingly male (almost 80% by some estimates) and widely dispersed. The only major population centers within the empire were Quebec and New Orleans. Quebec was situated along the St. Lawrence River. New Orleans was established in 1718 at the mouth of the Mississippi River. By the middle of the 18th century, a handful of large French sugar plantations had emerged along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in what is now Louisiana.

Almost no one from France came to the Great Lakes and Canada except Jesuit missionaries, who lived among the native tribes to convert them to Catholicism, and fur traders. French colonists maintained strong relations with native tribes, including many who shared borders with England's North American colonies.



Spain also remained a significant presence on the periphery of English North America. Similar to New France, Spain's New World empire was vast—larger than England's in terms of territory. Spain remained a major power in the Caribbean and extracted immense wealth from Central and South America on the backs of Indigenous laborers.

Spain claimed a significant portion of North America as well: from California on the Pacific coast, through New Mexico and Texas, to Florida on the shores of the Atlantic. Yet, in another key similarity to New France, relatively few European colonists populated this portion of Spain's empire, compared to English North America. The majority of the inhabitants of Spain's North American empire were Native Americans, including the Comanches and Apaches, and **mestizos**—individuals of mixed Spanish and Indigenous American descent.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Mestizo**

An individual of mixed Spanish and Indigenous American descent.

The Spanish population in North America consolidated in a handful of urban centers, including St. Augustine in Florida, San Antonio in Texas, and Santa Fe in New Mexico. The Spanish created a number of missions to convert native populations, with assistance from Franciscan missionaries. They also built military outposts to protect the empire from encroachment by other European powers, including England.

On paper, the colonial empires of France and Spain covered much of North America and posed a significant challenge to England's North American empire. Native Americans, who sometimes allied themselves with the Spanish or the French, were also a serious threat to the English.

## 2. Native North America

England's imperial rivalries with France and Spain in North America were intricately tied to relations with Native Americans. In many cases, European conflicts exacerbated violence between colonists and Native Americans in North America. Key alliances with Native Americans could potentially tip the balance of power in North America in favor of one European nation—and against the others.

For example, during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–1713), which pitted England against a French–Spanish alliance to determine who would become the next king of Spain, colonists in South Carolina formed an alliance with nearby Creek and Yamasee tribes. The Creeks and Yamasees raided Spanish Florida, killing or enslaving thousands of other Native Americans in the process. These attacks struck a blow against Spain, which was what the English colonists wanted. Some colonists profited from the raids by trading enslaved Native Americans that the Creeks and Yamasees brought from Florida and elsewhere. By 1715, more than 50,000 native men, women, and children had been shipped out of Charles Town to sugar plantations in Barbados, or to homes and farms in the Northern and Middle Colonies.

Fighting in Florida and trading with the English significantly disrupted Yamasee and Creek life. Both tribes built up a trade deficit with the English by trading deerskins and enslaved captives for English guns. English colonists exacerbated these tensions with the native tribes, especially the Yamasee tribe, by expanding their rice and tobacco fields into native lands. Worse still, English traders took native women captive if the Yamasee and other tribes were unable to pay their debts.

The outrages committed by traders, combined with the seemingly unstoppable expansion of English settlement onto native land, led to the outbreak of the **Yamasee War** (1715–1718), in which a tribal coalition nearly annihilated England's Carolina colonies. Only when another native tribe, the Cherokee, allied themselves with the colonists did the Yamasee tribe's goal of eliminating the English from the region falter. The English ultimately won, and the Yamasee people who remained were either sold into slavery or forced to live in Spanish Florida.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Yamasee War (1715–1718)**

Conflict between a coalition of Native American tribes (led by the Yamasee people) against English colonists in the Carolinas.

Meanwhile, to the North, the Iroquois people played a key role in diplomatic exchanges between the English and the French. Following the conclusion of the Beaver Wars in 1701, representatives of the Iroquois met with the French at Montreal and pledged their neutrality in future wars between France and England. In exchange, the French guaranteed the Iroquois people the right to hunt for furs in the Great Lakes region, rights that the Iroquois people had gained after years of fighting against the Algonquians.

About a month before meeting with the French, however, another Iroquois delegation attended a conference in Albany to reaffirm their alliance with the English. At this conference, the Iroquois people presented the English with a deed to the same region in which the French would promise to protect Iroquois hunting rights.

Thus, in two meetings, the Iroquois people effectively played two empires against each other. The English never realized that the Iroquois had an agreement with the French, nor did the French know that the Iroquois had reached an agreement with the English. Through simultaneous negotiations with both powers, the Iroquois promised neutrality to the French while maintaining their alliance with the English. In the process, they secured access to a significant area in the Great Lakes region to maintain their supremacy in the fur trade.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

### 3. An Empire of Slavery

Racial slavery formed a cornerstone of England's North American empire by the 18th century. Every colony had enslaved people, from the Southern rice plantations in Charles Town, South Carolina, to the Northern wharves of Boston. Slavery was more than a labor system; it influenced every aspect of colonial thought and culture. The uneven relationships that slavery engendered gave White colonists an exaggerated sense of their status. When enslaved Black people attempted to assert their liberty, English colonists responded swiftly and harshly.

Enslaved people strove to adapt to their situation by forming communities among themselves, often adhering to traditional African customs and healing techniques. The development of strong families and communities formed their most important response to the trauma of being enslaved. Other enslaved people dealt with their situation by actively resisting it, often by defying their masters or running away.

Enslaved people understood that rebellion would bring massive retaliation from White colonists and, therefore, had little chance of success. Even so, uprisings occurred within English North America.

One notable uprising was known as the **Stono Rebellion**, which occurred in South Carolina in September 1739. It showed how foreign rivalries and race could become entwined in colonial North America. During another war between England and Spain (the War of Jenkins's Ear), the Spanish governor in Florida offered freedom to enslaved people who fled the English colonies. A literate enslaved man named Jemmy led a large group of enslaved people toward Florida. This group killed several White colonists before the militia stopped them and suppressed the rebellion, in a battle in which both enslaved individuals and militiamen were killed. The remaining group members were executed or sold to the West Indies.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Stono Rebellion**

An insurrection of enslaved people that took place in South Carolina in September 1739 that was led by a literate enslaved man named Jemmy.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Despite the suppression of the Stono Rebellion, some escapees from slavery reached Florida. In 1740, the Spanish armed them to help repel an English colonial force that attacked St. Augustine.

Historians believe that Jemmy was taken from the Kingdom of Kongo in Africa, an area where the Portuguese had introduced Catholicism. Other enslaved people in South Carolina may have had a similar background, meaning that they were born in Africa but were familiar with European cultures. If so, this common background may have made it easier for Jemmy to communicate with the others and enabled them to work together, even though enslavers tried to keep the people they enslaved from forming communities.

In the wake of the Stono Rebellion, South Carolina reacted swiftly to prevent such communities from forming. In 1740, the colony passed a new law called An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in the Province, also known as the Negro Act of 1740. This law imposed new limits on the behavior of enslaved individuals. It prohibited them from assembling, growing their own food, learning to write, and traveling freely.

Racial tensions existed elsewhere in the colonies as well, including such notably diverse areas as New York City. The city was a center for the Atlantic slave trade, and a number of elite New Yorkers owned at least one enslaved person. Enslaved Black people constituted at least one-fifth of the city's population by the 1740s.

In 1741, 13 fires broke out in New York City. Ever fearful of an uprising, the city's White inhabitants spread rumors that the fires were part of a massive revolt in which enslaved people would murder White people, burn the city, and take over the colony. Nervous English authorities interrogated almost 200 enslaved people and accused them of conspiracy. Rumors that Roman Catholics had joined the suspected conspiracy to murder Protestants added to the general hysteria. 200 people were quickly arrested, including a significant portion of the city's enslaved population.

After a series of trials at City Hall, known as the **New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741**, the government executed 17 New Yorkers. 13 Black men were publicly burned at the stake, four White men were hanged, and 70 other enslaved people were sold to the West Indies. Historians have found little evidence that an elaborate conspiracy, like the one White New Yorkers imagined, existed.



In the wake of a series of fires throughout New York City, rumors of a revolt of enslaved people led authorities to convict and execute 30 people, including 13 Black men who were publicly burned at the stake.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741**

The trial, execution, and enslavement of a number of New Yorkers in the wake of a series of fires and amidst fears of a conspiracy in New York City in 1741.



#### BIG IDEA

The Stono Rebellion of 1739 and events of 1741 in New York City illustrate the racial divide that existed in English North America by the mid-18th century. The creation of enslaved communities and open resistance in the form of rebellion constituted significant challenges to the English colonial order. In most cases, panic among White people spurred great violence against and repression of the feared enslaved population. English colonists went to greater and greater lengths to define freedom and bondage in the colonies along the lines of race.



#### BRAINSTORM

Of the three categories examined in this tutorial—relations with France and Spain, relations with Native Americans, and racial slavery—which do you think constituted the most significant challenge to English North America? Why?



#### SUMMARY

The rise of the English empire in North America brought Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans together. In the process of establishing colonies, the interactions between these groups highlighted important social and cultural differences as the Spanish, French, and English vied for control of the continent. The interactions between these nations manifested themselves at the colonial level in a number of ways. English settlement and trade transformed relations with Native Americans, which at

times led to violence (in the case of the Yamasee people) or continued negotiation (in the case of the Iroquois people). Perhaps the most significant challenge confronted by the English empire was that of the Atlantic trade of enslaved people and racial slavery in the colonies. Fears of rebellion and conspiracies solidified racial divisions in English North America.

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## ATTRIBUTIONS

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Mestizo**

An individual of mixed Spanish and Indigenous American descent.

### **New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741**

The trial, execution, and enslavement of a number of New Yorkers in the wake of a series of fires and amidst fears of a conspiracy by enslaved people in New York City in 1741.

### **Stono Rebellion**

An insurrection of enslaved people that took place in South Carolina in September 1739 that was led by a literate enslaved man named Jemmy.

### **Yamasee War (1715–1718)**

Conflict between a coalition of Native American tribes (led by the Yamasee people) against English colonists in the Carolinas.



## DATES TO KNOW

### **1701**

The Iroquois people make conflicting deals with the French and the English at the conclusion of the Beaver Wars.

### **1702–1713**

The War of Spanish Succession in Europe arises after the death of Charles II of Spain.

### **1715–1718**

The Yamasee War breaks out in the Carolina region.

### **1739**

The Stono Rebellion begins in the colony of South Carolina.

**1739**

The War of Jenkins's Ear starts between England and Spain and spreads to the colonies.

**1740**

South Carolina passes "An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in the Province" (Negro Act).

**1741**

The New York Conspiracy Trials of 1741 includes the execution of 17 New Yorkers.