

# The New England Colonies

## SETTING THE SCENE

### Read to Learn . . .

- ★ what ways New England colonists made a living.
- ★ how much New Englanders valued education.
- ★ how community life was organized in New England.

### Places to Locate

- ★ West Indies
- ★ Nantucket
- ★ Martha's Vineyard
- ★ Boston
- ★ Newport

### Terms to Know

- ★ subsistence farming
- ★ export
- ★ import
- ★ artisan
- ★ triangular trade routes

► CHILDREN'S DOLLS



The newcomers' wagon rolled along the dusty New England road and stopped at the grassy common in the center of town. After weeks of rocking in a ship across the Atlantic, the travelers were happy to be on land. This place did not look much different than their home in England. Would life in America be as they imagined?

In the late 1600s the New England Colonies welcomed many settlers. What they found was a way of life based on the Puritan ethic of work and strict rules. Many qualities that people think of as typically American began with these thrifty, hardworking New Englanders.

## ★ Making a Living

With a harsh climate and poorer land than other parts of the colonies, New England developed an economy based on more than farming. The region did have valuable natural resources and drew more and more settlers, mainly from England. These people made their living from the environment around them—the land and the sea.

## Farming

Farming in New England was not an easy life. Much of the land was hilly or too rocky and hard to plow. Before they could plant, farmers had to spend days picking



rocks out of the soil. They piled up stones to make fences between the fields or to build house foundations and fireplaces. Many of these stone fences are still standing in New England today.

The growing season in these northern colonies was short. Farmers could plant and harvest only one crop—such as corn—before the ground froze and winter set in. Most farms were small and all family members worked together. They produced just enough for the family's own needs. This type of farming is called **subsistence farming**. Sometimes farm families produced extra food—apples from the orchard, honey from their beehives—that they could sell.

## Harvesting the Sea

The cold waters of the Atlantic were a richer source of food than the thin New England soil. New England harbors were within easy sailing distance of the great fishing grounds in the Atlantic Ocean. Fishing fleets sailed regularly from the ports of Gloucester and Portsmouth.

Fishing was a backbreaking, dangerous way to make a living. The most important catch was codfish, which New Englanders dried or salted to store, cooked in chowders, and pressed to make cod-liver oil. Fishing boats also brought back halibut, herring, and mackerel.

Fishing became an important part of the New England economy. Fishers caught enough fish to **export** it, or sell it elsewhere. They sent some to other colonies. They packed large quantities of salted or dried fish in barrels to ship to markets in Europe and the islands of the **West Indies**. With the profits from exports, New Englanders could **import**, or buy goods brought in from Europe.

The more adventurous sailors took up whaling, which held the promise of better pay. They hunted whales for their valuable oil, which was used in oil lamps. Other parts of the whale such as the bones

and spermaceti—a waxy substance used in candle making—were also valued.

The islands of **Nantucket** and **Martha's Vineyard**, along with New Bedford on the mainland, were important whaling centers. Many whalers' crews included Native Americans. This is how St. John de Crevecoeur, a French writer who settled in America, described the crew of a whaling ship and the dangers they faced:

“... [T]hey always man them with thirteen hands [sailors] in order that they may row two whale-boats, the crews of which must necessarily consist of six, four at the oars, one standing on the bows with the harpoon, and the other at the helm. It is also necessary that there should be two of these boats, that if one should be destroyed in attacking the whale, the other ... may be ready to save the hands.”

## Living From the Forest

When Europeans arrived, thick forests covered most of eastern North America. Colonists cut down trees to clear land, supply firewood, and build houses and furniture. Like the Native Americans, settlers hunted in the forests for deer, squirrel, or wild turkeys to feed their families.

Timber from the forests also proved valuable for shipbuilding. Cedar, oak, and white pine all made excellent ship timber. Starting with fishing boats, New England shipbuilders went on to make ocean-going ships for the transatlantic and Caribbean trade. While there were shipyards in most American port cities, more than half the ships built in the colonies came from Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. England encouraged colonial shipbuilding because its own forests had been cut years earlier.



## Business and Trade

Shipbuilders provided jobs for many **artisans**, or craft workers, and other laborers. Carpenters and coopers—barrel makers—found steady work in shipyards. Other artisans made sails, rope, and nails. Small factories produced naval stores from the white pines of New Hampshire. Naval stores were products such as turpentine or rosin used to maintain wooden ships. Some colonists found jobs on ships while others worked on the docks, loading and unloading goods.

## Women in the Economy

Women played an important role in the development of the economy of New England. On family farms, most wives worked side by side with their husbands. Many New Englanders became merchants. Women whose husbands were away at sea often opened shops. Others produced goods for sale such as cloth, garments, candles, soap, or furniture.

Colonial merchant ships followed regular trading routes. Some ships went

directly from the colonies to England and back. Others followed what came to be called the **triangular trade routes** because the routes formed a triangle. On one leg of such a route, ships took fish, grain, meat, and lumber to the West Indies. There the ship's captain traded for sugar, molasses—a syrup made from sugarcane—and fruit, which he then took back to New England. Colonists used the molasses and sugar to make rum.

The rum, along with manufactured goods, was then shipped on the next leg of the route—to West Africa. It was traded for Africans who had been captured by slave traders. On the final leg of the route, the ships carried the Africans back to the West Indies, where planters were always in need of workers. With the profits, the captain bought more molasses and sugar to sell in the colonies. A later route brought enslaved West Africans directly to the American colonies.

## Triangular Trade Routes

Trading ships were constantly sailing in and out of the harbors of **Boston** and **Newport**. They brought in luxuries such as tea, English-made cloth, and furniture, as well as books and news from Europe. By 1740 New England's trading center was Boston, the largest city in the colonies with 17,000 people.

## ★ A Belief in Education

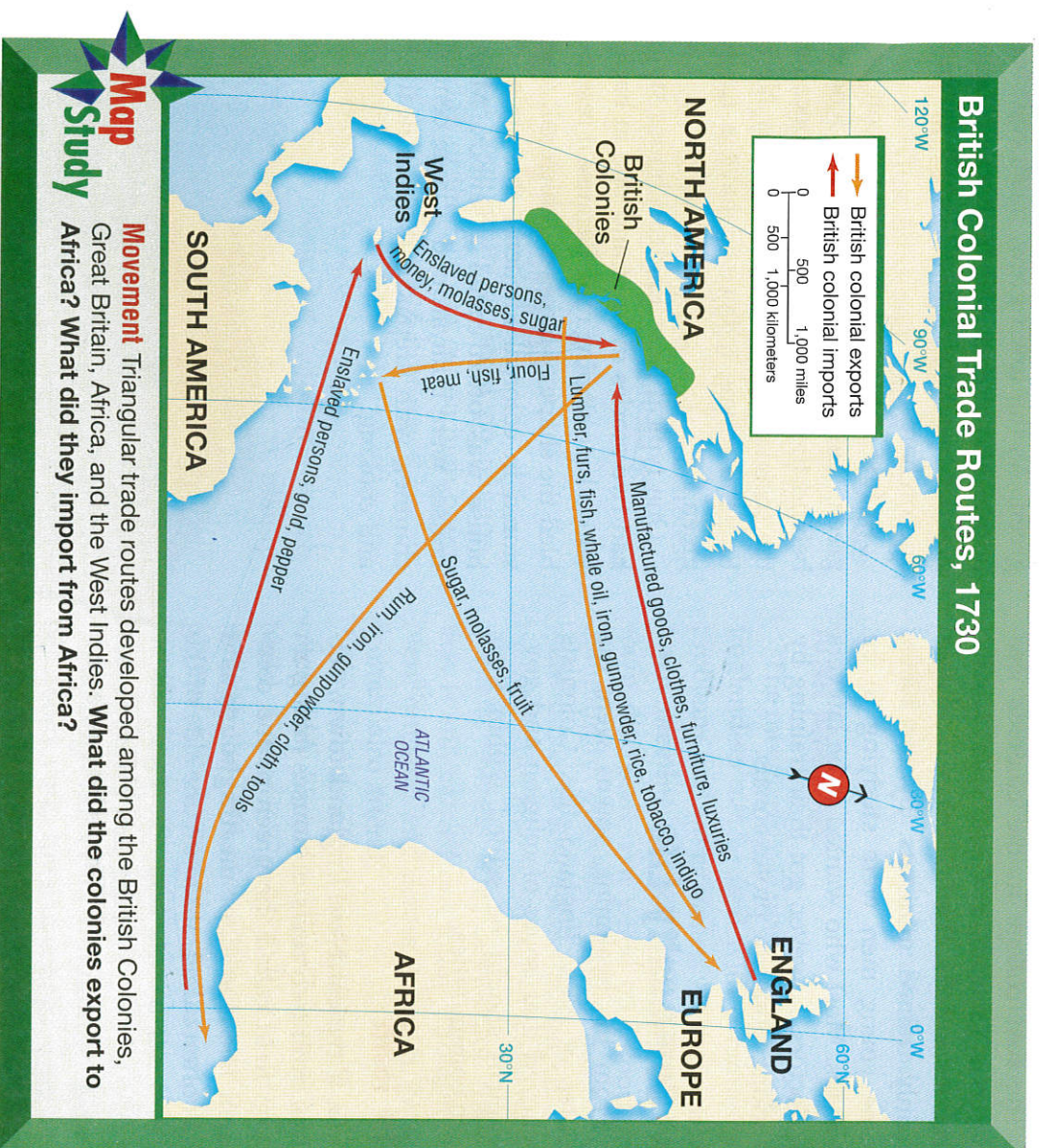
In the 1600s, many people could not read. The Puritans believed that people needed enough education to read the Bible and understand laws. Those parents who could read taught their children at home, along with instructing them about religious beliefs and practical skills. A common scene in New England was a group of

## Footnotes to History

**Female Attorney in Maryland** The first female barrister, or lawyer, in America was Margaret Brent. She was the colonial attorney for the Lord Proprietor of Maryland, Cecilius Calvert. Brent was also the first American woman to be denied the right to vote. Brent attempted to vote in the Maryland General Assembly in 1648. At that time, Maryland's law limited the vote to landowners. Despite the fact that Brent was a wealthy landowner, she was denied the right to vote based on her gender. Women were denied the right to vote until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed.



## British Colonial Trade Routes, 1730



children sitting around a fireplace reading aloud from a shared book. This took place at private **dame schools**. Here women taught the alphabet, reading, verses from the Bible, and perhaps simple arithmetic. For colonial girls, this was probably their only chance at formal schooling.

Books were scarce in the colonies. Instead of textbooks, dame schools usually had a hornbook, a flat wooden board shaped like a paddle. It held a sheet of paper printed with the alphabet and the Lord's Prayer, covered by a thin sheet of transparent horn.

By about 1690, Boston printers began to publish the *New England Primer*. Soon this

book of illustrated alphabet verses and simple religious texts appeared in most New England homes and schools.

## The First Public Schools

Because of the Puritans' concern for education, Massachusetts laws required all towns to teach their children to read. In 1647, the colony set up the first public school system under the **Massachusetts School Law**. The law provided that every township with more than 50 households must hire someone to teach its children to read and write. This law marked a step toward universal education.



The first college in the colonies was Harvard, founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1636. The first colonial colleges mainly trained ministers. By the 1700s, some young men were studying to be lawyers. Most who wanted to be lawyers or doctors, however, got their training by working alongside professionals.

## ★ Community Life

From the beginning, towns were the center of New England life. Colonists believed that issues of religion and government should be settled within their own communities.

### The Town

In a typical New England town, settlers built two rows of houses facing an open field called the green or the common. The church, or **meetinghouse** as it was often called, stood on one side of the

green. As the town grew, more rows of houses and streets were built around the green. Most houses had a small garden and orchard.

At first, cattle and sheep grazed on the green. Later on, pastures were fenced behind the village. The common became the social center of the town. Many New England towns today still have a town green.

One typical New England house style had two stories in front and one in back, with a long sloping roof. Because it resembled the shape of boxes in which salt was stored in colonial kitchens, this style of house was often called a saltbox. Most houses were built around a large central chimney, with fireplaces for both heating and cooking.

► WILLIAM BRADFORD'S BIBLE



▲ **PILGRIMS GOING TO CHURCH** by George H. Boughton, 1867 Religion was an important part of Pilgrim life. What evidence shown in this picture suggests that the settlers did not yet feel safe?



## Family Life

The family was important in New England. Puritan children, like their parents, had to work hard and follow the strict ideas of discipline. Still, many families were close and devoted to each other.

Even with chores and religious duties, children had time to play, and parents found time to tell stories and make toys. Puritan children played jacks, marbles, hide-and-seek, and other familiar games.

## Observing the Sabbath

In a community centered on religion, Sunday, or the Sabbath, was a high point of the week. Farm and household chores were set aside because Puritan laws forbade most kinds of work on Sunday. People put on their best clothes—which might be of rich fabric even if plainly cut—to go to the meetinghouse.

Inside, men sat on one side of the center aisle, women on the other. Servants or African slaves stayed in the back or in the balcony. In winter churchgoers shivered through long services in unheated buildings. A Sunday morning service included several hours of intense preaching by the minister. There was another service in the afternoon. To make sure that people stayed awake, a “tithingman” walked up

and down the aisle carrying a long pole with a feather at one end and a knob on the other. Drowsy churchgoers were either tickled gently or rapped on the head.

## Town Meetings

The meetinghouse was also where New Englanders met to deal with community problems and other issues. At the yearly **town meeting**, all the free men of the town discussed and voted on important community questions. Town meetings were limited at first to landowning church members but later included all white male property owners. This democratic tradition is still carried out today throughout New England and across America. Now women also attend.

Town meetings were never dull and often noisy. Should a citizen be allowed to build a fence? Could a new road cut through the field of another citizen? People brought up every detail of community life for discussion and elected the town leaders, called selectmen.

Although not every community member could vote, town meetings were an important step toward democracy. Thomas Jefferson called them “the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government and for its preservation.”

## ★ SECTION 1 REVIEW ★

### Checking for Understanding

1. Identify West Indies, Nantucket, Martha's

### Critical Thinking

5. Analyzing Information Why were the town