

KEY TERMS

Paxton Boys (90)
 Regulator movement (90)
 triangular trade (94)
 Molasses Act (96)
 Arminianism (98)
 Great Awakening (98)
 old lights (100)

new lights (100)
Poor Richard's Almanack (102)
 Zenger trial (103)
 royal colonies (104)
 proprietary colonies (104)

PEOPLE TO KNOW

Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur
 Jacobus Arminius
 Jonathan Edwards
 George Whitefield

John Trumbull
 John Singleton Copley
 Phillis Wheatley
 John Peter Zenger

VARYING VIEWPOINTS**Colonial America: Communities of Conflict or Consensus?**

The earliest historians of colonial society portrayed close-knit, homogeneous, and hierarchical communities. Richard Bushman's *From Puritan to Yankee* (1967) challenged that traditional view when he described colonial New England as an expanding, opening society. In this view the colonists gradually lost the religious discipline and social structure of the founding generations as they poured out onto the frontier or sailed the seas in search of fortune and adventure. Rhys Isaac viewed the Great Awakening in the South as similar evidence of the erosion of the social constraints and deference that once held colonial society together. Unbridled religious enthusiasm, directed by itinerant preachers both North and South, encouraged the sort of quest for personal autonomy that eventually led Americans to demand national independence.

Other scholars have focused on the negative aspects of this alleged breakdown in the traditional order, particularly on the rise of new social inequalities. Social historians like Kenneth Lockridge have argued that the decline of cohesive communities, population pressure on the land, and continued dominance of church and parental authority gave rise to a landless class, forced to till tenant plots in the countryside or find work as manual laborers in the cities. Gary Nash, in *The Urban Crucible* (1979), likewise traced the rise of a competitive, individualistic social order in colonial cities, marking the end of the patronage and paternalism that had once bound communities together. Increasingly, Nash contended, class antagonisms split

communities. The wealthy abandoned their traditional obligations toward the poor for more selfish capitalistic social relations that favored their class peers. The consequent politicization of the laboring classes helped motivate their participation in the American Revolution.

Some scholars have disputed that "declension" undermined colonial communities. Christine Heyrman, in particular, has argued in *Commerce and Culture* (1984) that the decline of traditional mores has been overstated; religious beliefs and commercial activities coexisted throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Similarly, Jack Greene has suggested that the obsession with the decline of deference has obscured the fact that colonies outside of New England, like Virginia and Maryland, actually experienced a consolidation of religious and social authority throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, becoming more hierarchical and paternalistic.

Like Greene, many historians have focused on sectional differences between the colonies, and the peculiar nature of social equality and inequality in each. Much of the impetus for this inquiry stems from an issue that has long perplexed students of early America: the simultaneous evolution of a rigid racial caste system alongside democratic political institutions. Decades ago, when most historians came from Yankee stock, they resolved the apparent paradox by locating the seeds of democracy in New England. The aggressive independence of the people, best expressed by the boisterous town meetings, spawned

the American obsession with freedom. On the other hand, this view holds, the slave societies of the South were hierarchical, aristocratic communities under the sway of a few powerful planters.

More recently some historians have attacked this simple dichotomy, noting many undemocratic features in colonial New England and arguing that while the South may have been the site of tremendous inequality, it also produced most of the Founding Fathers. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison—the architects of American government with its foundation in liberty—all hailed from slaveholding Virginia. In fact, nowhere were republican principles stronger than in Virginia. Some scholars, notably Edmund S. Morgan in *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975), consider the willingness of wealthy planters to concede the equality and freedom of all white males a device to ensure racial solidarity and to mute class conflict. In this view the concurrent emergence of slavery and democracy was no paradox. White racial solidarity muffled animosity between rich and poor and fostered the devotion to equality among whites that became a hallmark of American democracy. Histori-

ans of Latin America point out that other New World societies, like Brazil and Mexico, had far sharper class divisions than the British colonies, with lasting consequences for their social integrity and political stability.

Few historians still argue that the colonies offered boundless opportunities for inhabitants, white or black. But scholars disagree vigorously over what kinds of inequalities and social tensions most shaped eighteenth-century society and contributed to the revolutionary agitation that eventually consumed—and transformed—colonial America. Even so, whether one accepts Morgan's argument that "Americans bought their independence with slave labor" or those interpretations that point to rising social conflict between whites as the salient characteristic of colonial society on the eve of the Revolution, the once-common assumption that America was a world of equality and consensus no longer reigns undisputed. Yet because one's life chances were still unquestionably better in America than in Europe, immigrants continued to pour in, imbued with high expectations about America as a land of opportunity.

To Learn More

Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America* (1986)

Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (1967)

———, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (1985)

John Butler, *Becoming America: The Revolution Before 1776* (2000)

Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (1868)

James Henretta, *The Evolution of American Society, 1700–1815* (1973)

Rhys Isaac, *Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation* (2004)

Jill Lepore, *New York Burning* (2005)

William Moraley, *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley*, edited by Susan Klepp (1992)

Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (1987)

Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (2004)

A complete, annotated bibliography for this chapter—along with brief descriptions of the **People to Know** and additional review materials—may be found at

 www.cengage.com/history/kennedy/ampageant14e