

Demographics of Colonial America

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Free People Seeking Religious Freedom?

The image most hold of the colonial period is that the Eastern seaboard of what is now the United States was highly religious and that those coming to America were frequently religious dissidents seeking religious freedom for themselves and others. This image appeals to a sense of nostalgia and perhaps inflated concept of national heritage that authors Roger Finke and Rodney Stark describe in *The Churching of America*:

"Nostalgia is the enemy of history. No educated person any longer believes that the ancients were correct about a fall from a Golden Age. Yet we frequently accept equally inaccurate tales about more recent, "good old days" – tales that corrupt our understanding of the past and mislead us about the present."(1 p. 25)

Such is the case with the images we commonly retain about America's founding. The truth is that colonial America was not a very religious place and those who came here with strong religious positions generally had no concept of religious freedom but rather attempted to create societies based solely on their own beliefs. Historian George M. Marsden said of the colonies in *Religion and American Culture*;

"British colonial America was not an especially religious place. Rather, it had the rough and often violent features that we associate with the later American western frontier. Much of its development was driven by characteristic human ambition and greed along with some higher motives such as the wish to build healthy communities. Transplanting the church institutions that supported the ideals of Christendom had proven especially challenging. Outside of New England, the state churches were weak. Settlers came from a variety of nations and an even greater variety of religious or nominally religious backgrounds."(2 pp. 34-35)

The idea that most Europeans who came here were free men is also largely wrong. A great many were indentured servants, many others were convicts and a large number were even kidnap victims(3 p. 130), which is actually where the phrase "kidnap" came from. Authors Don Jordan and Michael Walsh in the book *"White Cargo"*, addressing the plight and general lack of awareness of these immigrants summarized the general inaccuracies of popular perception as follows:

"Throughout the colonial period, those who were sold into servitude or who sold themselves as servants formed the majority of immigrants, but they often have had short shift from historians. In the words of social historian Gary B. Nash, "Most depictions of early America as a garden of opportunity airbrush indentured servants out of the picture while focusing on the minority who arrived free."(4) A creation myth has flourished in which early American settlers are portrayed as free men and women who created a democratic and egalitarian model society more or less from scratch."(3 p. 16)

Unlike European society where churches had, from the time of the Reformation, come to be state supported, churches in America, apart from the Congregationalists and Anglicans, weren't. From this arose a sort of religious marketplace that has proven to be able to continually produce new ideas and adapt to its society. To what extent some of these ideas and forms of religious expression are either good or bad can be debated but Christianity in America is certainly unique and a large part of what formed the nation.

Perhaps the most important underlying question in analyzing the history of the development of America is whether we are in fact one people defined by an idea that "*all men are created equal*", as has been put forth by most modern politicians, or are we in fact multiple cultures loosely connected. In an even more basic sense, can any people be collectively defined by something as simple and as vague as a slogan? Is there really such a thing as a "*proposition nation*"? Interpreting Thomas Jefferson's iconic quotation, the phrase is generally taken to mean equal under the law as we are obviously not all created equal physically, socially, or intellectually, or in any other manner. Yet, at the time, there was really no commonly held idea in any geographical region that individual people were or should be equal under the law. Claiming this as a universal guiding belief simply has no historical basis.(5 p. 12) The story of how we over time came to see ourselves as we do is linked closely to the association of religion with society. As far as being "*one people*" is concerned, that is a question that ethno-religious politics can also definitively resolve as we trace the story forward from its early beginnings.

Politically there were two branches of American Christianity that would take shape with one being highly politically and the other being generally separated from politics more in line with the legacy of Christendom. In Massachusetts, the Puritans believed they were commissioned by God to play a major role in World history reasoning that's God's ordained principles should apply to the nations(2 p. 17) while in the South, religion was considered to be principally a personal commitment apart from the political realm. This would stem from the respective cultures and has strong links to political rivalries and cultural conflicts in England. While the predominant method of worship in all areas became American Evangelicalism, the way that was integrated with society would be quite different based on regional culture and history as would attitudes of religious tolerance.

Evangelicalism developed in the Northern colonies and spread across the land either in successive waves or one continual wave depending on how it's looked at(1 p. 88). The first "*Great Awakening*" is generally seen as impacting principally the Northeast although evangelicalism also appeared to be dominant in the Central and Southern colonies by the time of the revolution. What is remarkable is that from the very small populations that existed in colonial America all forms of American Protestant Christianity would develop and spread across the continent along with a principal cultural identity that, through demographics, economics, and military conquest came to dominate a country that nobody during the colonial period could have realistically imagined.

Small Population that Grew Very Rapidly

Because the developing colonial populations were so small in total, a small organized group, that otherwise would have been relatively insignificant in Europe, could come to have a great deal of

influence and control over society and policy relatively quickly. The following table shows colonial populations through 1780 along with the rapid growth rates. Note also that, apart from Virginia, the South was virtually unpopulated.

Colonial Populations by Decade (6)

Colony	1780	1770	1760	1750	1740	1720	1700	1680	1660	1640
Maine	49,133	31,257	20,000	----	----	----	----	----	----	900
New Hampshire	87,802	62,396	39,093	27,505	23,256	9,375	4,958	2,047	1,555	1,055
Vermont	47,620	10,000	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
Plymouth	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	6,400	1,980	1,020
Massachusetts	268,627	235,308	202,600	188,000	151,613	91,008	55,941	39,752	20,082	8,932
Rhode Island	52,946	58,196	45,471	33,226	25,255	11,680	5,894	3,017	1,539	300
Connecticut	206,701	183,881	142,470	111,280	89,580	58,830	25,970	17,246	7,980	1,472
New York	210,541	162,920	117,138	76,696	63,665	36,919	19,107	9,830	4,936	1,930
New Jersey	139,627	117,431	93,813	71,393	51,373	29,818	14,010	3,400	----	----
Pennsylvania	327,305	240,057	183,703	119,666	85,637	30,962	17,950	680	----	----
Delaware	45,385	35,496	33,250	28,704	19,870	5,385	2,470	1,005	540	----
Maryland	245,474	202,599	162,267	141,073	116,093	66,133	29,604	17,904	8,426	583
Virginia	538,004	447,016	339,726	231,033	180,440	57,757	58,560	43,596	27,020	10,442
North Carolina	270,133	197,200	110,442	72,984	51,760	21,270	10,720	5,430	1,000	----
South Carolina	180,000	124,244	94,074	64,000	45,000	17,048	5,704	1,200	----	----
Georgia	56,071	23,375	9,578	5,200	2,021	----	----	----	----	----
Kentucky	45,000	15,700	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
Tennessee	10,000	1,000	----	----	----	----	----	----	----	----
Total	2,780,369	2,148,076	1,593,625	1,170,760	905,563	436,185	250,888	151,507	75,058	26,634

In the early years of colonial development with an extremely low population density there was a labor shortage that necessitated that all founding groups had to accept people outside of that group. In some cases like Pennsylvania, they were generally welcomed and tolerated, while in others like Massachusetts they were largely outsiders. However, the nature of the land and the economy in New England in particular was not suitable for large farming operations intended to export back to the mother country. As opposed to becoming an agricultural colony for England the economy would develop around trade

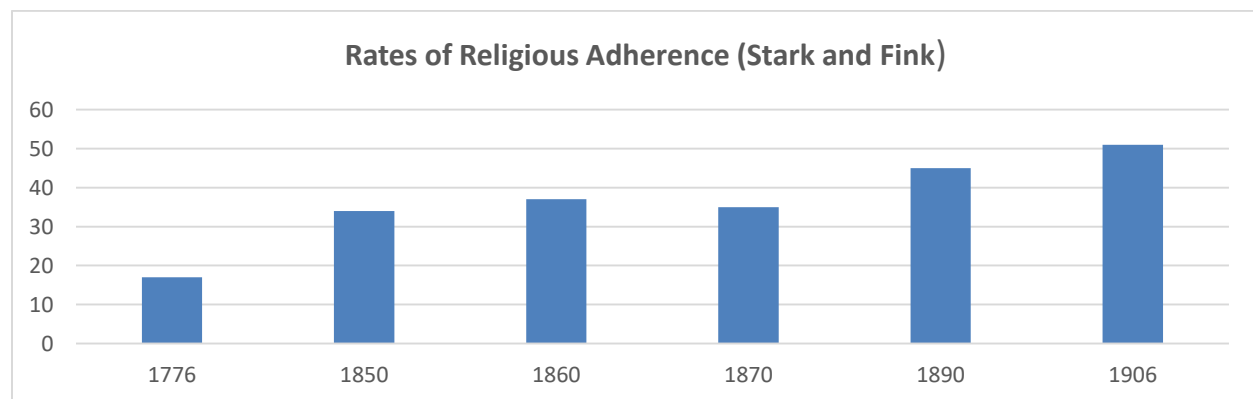
and eventually industry which limited the need for a large agricultural workforce. New England would develop as an economic competitor to England as opposed to being a source of raw materials and agricultural products(7 p. Ch.1). When the need for a large workforce was to develop in the north with the coming of the industrial revolution, it would be met by mass European immigration but with significantly different demographics.

European Immigration

Where did the people come from and what faiths did they bring with them? How many had no faith at all. The common perception that most people take away from their mandatory education is that immigrants to the Northern colonies and especially New England were deeply religious and some were. In fact it could be assumed that sects that immigrated as a group to the new world were largely devout but they were not a majority in any area beyond the first few decades.

As a general rule, the earlier an area is in the settlement process, the higher the percentage of males and the younger the overall population will be although there are some exceptions amongst the early English people groups who came to the Americas. Both of these characteristics are inversely correlated to religious affiliation or association(1 pp. 36-38). The reasons why someone migrates and whether they are doing this willingly also plays a role. For example, if someone was being deported as a criminal destined for servitude, which was very common, they would probably be less likely to be affiliated with a church.

Authors Finke and Starke, in their book *The Churching of America*, estimate that the overall adherence rate in 1776 was only around 17% as derived from churches and congregational sizes(1 p. 22). Other estimates generally range between 10% and 20% making the assumption of a highly religious population at odds with reality. Projecting this number back to the colonial beginnings, because many of those who were more religious immigrated first, the percentage total would have been significantly higher. The later immigrants around the time of the revolution were less religiously affiliated making the 1770's a probable low point. Over time this percentage would steadily grow. By looking at why and how people got here we can derive a bit more about our collective religious origins.



(1 p. p. 23)

In interpreting these numbers, it is important to note the not being church affiliated or a “practicing” adherent doesn’t necessarily mean that someone didn’t culturally associate themselves with some form of Christianity or hold to Christian beliefs, much as today.

In colonial America most of the migrants were not free and a large percentage of the English new comers did not come willingly. While there is some general awareness of indentured servitude in colonial America, few appreciate the scope or real nature of the institution. From 1620 to 1775 450,000 came to the colonies willingly (based on ships logs) and 2/3 of these were indentured servants who willingly sold some number of years of their lives for the hope of a better opportunity after that period had passed(3 p. 14). They were chattel or personal property in every respect. In the early years fewer than half of these survived to see freedom. Some were owned by benevolent masters but many were not. Terms varied by age and skills and were frequently extended to bring family members or for various offenses. Those who came willingly were referred to as “*free willers*”.(3 p. p. 14)

In addition to the free willers, there were a vast number of others who did not come willingly including 10’s of thousands of kidnap victims, criminals, vagrants and others who were unwanted within the British Isles. The kidnap victims were especially tragic in that they were predominantly adolescents and pre-teens taken from coastal towns in England and sold in America. This is from where the terms “*kidnap*” and “*spirited away*” came from (a spirit was a kidnapper) and this industry frequently involved prominent people on both sides of the Atlantic. Counting this second category is much harder and piecing the story together requires some dependence on antidotal evidence.

A summary of non-voluntary and indentured European migration to the new world, summarized from the book *White Cargo*, is shown as follows:

Street Urchins: Among the first to be sent were children. Some were sent by impoverished parents seeking a better life for them while others were forcibly taken. Starting in 1618, the authorities in London gathered hundreds of urchins from poor areas against the will of their families and shipped them to Virginia.(8) This was presented as an act of charity to give the ‘starving children’ a new start as apprentices in America. They were actually being sold to planters to work in the fields and half of them would be dead within the first year. Shipments of children, many of them little more than toddlers, continued from England and then from Ireland for decades. In 1661, the wife of a man who imported four ‘Irish boys’ into Maryland as servants noted that they should have come with ‘some cradles to have rocked them in’ as they were ‘so little’.(3 pp. 12-13)

Vagrants, Petty Criminals, and Convicts: These were people that England sought to be rid of and who put a strain on the English economy and social structure. The plan and legal justification was developed by a highwayman turned Lord Chief Justice who argued for England’s “*gaols*” to be shipped to America. 50,000 to 70,000 convicts (or more) were transported to Virginia, Maryland, Barbados and England’s other American possessions during the colonial period. Historian Bernard Bailyn estimated that between 1718 and 1775 at least 50,000 persons, most convicted of capital crimes were forcibly deported to America by order of British courts and another 16,000 were sent from Ireland.(1 p. p. 39) All types of people deemed to be undesirable were similarly deported and sold ranging from beggars to prostitutes,

Quakers to Cavaliers.(9) By 1776 roughly 1,000 convicts a year were being dumped in America, mostly in Maryland and Virginia. A convict dealer intimated that in the 1700s more than 30,000 convicts had been sold in Maryland alone.(3 pp. 13-14, 75-88) Note that referring back to the previous table, this was by percentage a very significant number.

The Irish: The Irish were outsiders in the British Empire who were seen as inferior and dehumanized making their murder and displacement relatively easy to justify. Their predominantly Catholic religion further secured their status. Following the British Civil War (more to follow on that) which culminated in Oliver Cromwell's ethnic-cleansing policy in Ireland, a large but difficult to quantify number of Catholic men, women and children were forcibly transported to the colonies. The challenge in defining a good count is that, while there is general historical agreement on roughly how many people lived in Ireland before and after Cromwell's invasion, it is hard to say how many were killed, died as an indirect result of the war, or were shipped abroad. The problems for the Irish did not end with Cromwell as forced transportation continued for at least another hundred years. (3 pp. 13-14, 137-154)

Kidnap Victims: Large numbers of people were taken from the city streets and countryside by gangs of kidnappers or '*spirits*' to feed the colonial labor market. Operating out of every significant port in the British Isles, spirits conned or coerced the unwary onto ships bound for America(3 pp. p. 13-14, 127-136). Quoting from White Cargo, "*London's most active kidnap gang discussed their targets at a daily meeting in St Paul's Cathedral. They were reportedly paid £2 by planters' agents for every athletic-looking young man they brought aboard. According to a contemporary who campaigned against the black slave trade, kidnappers were snatching an average of around 10,000 whites a year – doubtless an exaggeration but one that indicates a problem serious enough to create its own grip on the popular mind.*"(10)

The mass movement of people from England to the new world was very different from French and Spanish colonization and these differences were driven by economic and demographic differences. There was an underlying demographic problem that developed in England that is well described by the following passage by Don Jordan and Michael Walsh:

"One of the catalyst for the white slave trade was the fear that England was in danger of being overwhelmed by the poor and the lawless.." "In the course of a few generations the population had risen by a third. In 1509, Henry VIII came to the throne to inherit a kingdom of around three million souls. By the time his daughter Elizabeth faced the Spanish Armada eighty years later, she ruled over a population nearer to four million. "(3 p. 21)

This was caused by a number of factors including dramatically increased agricultural yields during the broader time period which enabled large scale population growth, English land ownership which concentrated ownership in the hands of a small percentage of the population, and confiscation of lands from the Catholic Church which had provided some form of "*economic safety net*" for the destitute. America became the dumping ground for England's unwanted and when that option was no longer available after the revolution(3), the destination shifted in a couple of years to Australia. This continued until the industrial revolution which provided employment for those who would have otherwise been

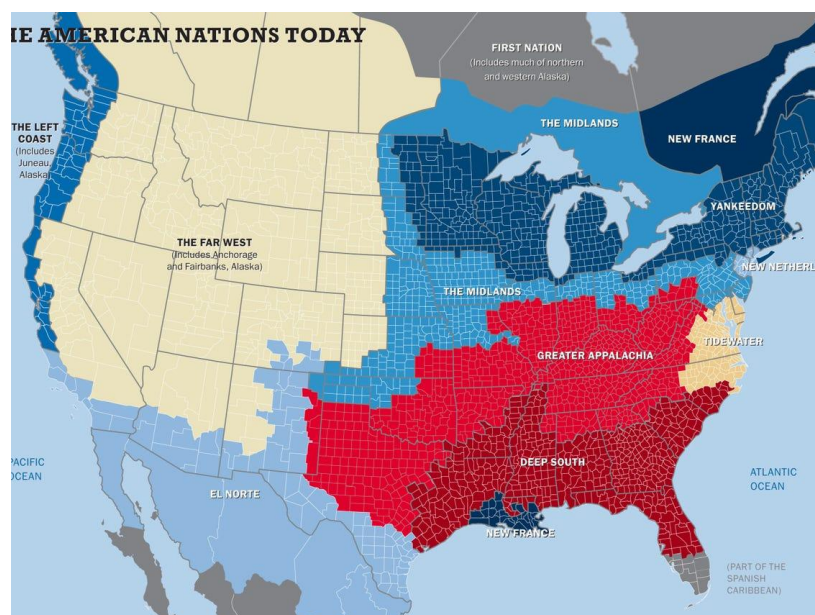
deported. Different levels of economic development can support different population densities and the industrialized economies could support a higher population density than could an agricultural society.

Understanding these points is extremely important to understanding American history and, for a great many, their own family history yet it is de-emphasized to the point of being hidden which should prompt an obvious question of why? In part it could be seen as taking away from the emphasis on Black slavery which would run contrary to post-modernist identity politics. It could also go against a sort of creation myth that America, especially in the north, was built by free Protestant Christian immigrants. This focuses entirely on a small minority while erasing everyone else from the picture.

Knowing where these people went is difficult. Virginia and Maryland are generally seen as being the centers of indentured servant trade (7 p. ch. 1) but the totals by location can only be notionally approximated based on total population, birth rate, and other factors. While these underclass immigrants were not religious generally, they did create an expanding religious market. Those who survived and eventually became free citizens would in time become at least somewhat more economically prosperous and, with age and maturity, would tend to become at least somewhat more religiously oriented. Yet their ability to economically support a top heavy church hierarchy would be limited and the low population density in geographically dispersed regions would also work against churches that had a relatively high fixed cost ratio. It could be seen as an obstacle or an opportunity. Those who treated it as an opportunity and were both agile and low cost providers would prosper.

One People or Competing Cultures?

When British immigration to the British colonies is looked at in detail, distinct cultures can be seen in the American colonies that are directly traceable to their English roots. The colonies were not “melting pots”. Author Colin Woodward in his book *American Nations* defines eleven dominant regional cultures and presents a case that these cultures have largely maintained themselves through time based in part people’s tendency to self-sort(11). The 11 nation map is provided for reference below:



(11)

While exact definitions and boundaries can be debated, and competing secondary cultures exist, this is generally considered to be a good representation of American sectional division that traces back to colonial times.

Author David Hackett Fischer, in his book *Albion's Seed*, defines four regional English cultures that moved largely intact to the English colonies in America taking with them a long list of characteristics that he analyzes in detail.(12) We will look at a few of them. To understand the ethnic, religious, and genetic differences in these English immigrants, maps are provided in the following images to help orient who these people were and where they came from.

Anglo Saxon has long been used as a descriptor for anyone who is white or Caucasian but in reality this can only be used to refer to a fairly specific area within England and, as shown in the map below, this is the area that contributed most of the puritan population. Modern genetic analysis has shown that the Britons did not migrate to the island in relatively recent times as did the Angles, Saxons, and Danes, and were concentrated in western England(13). When someone uses a the phrase "*White Anglo Saxon Protestant or WASP*" their intended meaning may be more general but the only group that came to America that generally fit this technical description would be the Puritans. One characteristic they all had in common though was varying levels of dislike for the mother country.(7 p. ch. 1)



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