



CHAPTER 8

British Empire in America: Growth and Conflict (1650–1750)

IN THIS CHAPTER

Summary: The economic theory of mercantilism, which held that a state should be as economically self-sufficient as possible, helped to motivate England and other European powers to discover and develop colonies, as colonies could provide raw materials. The triangular trade system tied together the economies of Europe, the Americas, and Africa and brought slaves to the Americas. The Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts were a result of social unrest existing in the Massachusetts colony. Wars between the European powers spilled over into the Americas during this period, with Native American tribes cultivated as allies by either the English or the French.



Keywords

Mercantilism: economic system practiced by European powers in the late seventeenth century stating that economic self-sufficiency was crucial; as a result, colonial empires were important for raw materials.

Navigation Acts (1660): acts passed by the British Parliament increasing the dependence of the colonies on the English for trade; these acts caused great resentment in the American colonies but were not strictly enforced.

Triangular trade system: complex trading system that developed in this era between Europe, Africa, and the colonies; Europeans purchased slaves in Africa and sold them to the colonies, raw materials from the colonies went to Europe, while European finished products were sold in the colonies.

Middle Passage: voyage taken by African slaves on horribly overcrowded ships from Africa to the Americas.

Salem Witch Trials (1692): trials in Salem, Massachusetts, after which 19 people were executed as witches; historians note the class nature of these trials.

Salutary neglect: early eighteenth-century British policy relaxing the strict enforcement of trade policies in the American colonies.

Part of an Empire

European leaders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries expected colonies to generate wealth for the mother country. Most European statesmen subscribed to the economic theory of **mercantilism**. The proponents of mercantilism believed that a state's economic health depended upon a favorable balance of trade. Governments promoted this by regulating commerce, encouraging the export of goods while discouraging imports through high tariffs. Colonies served as the producers of cheap raw materials and staple products and as consumers of the mother country's finished goods. An operative assumption of mercantilists was that the wealth of the world was finite and that a state had to maximize its share of that wealth through governmental action. The American colonies played their part in this mercantilist scheme by supplying England with valuable commodities like tobacco, rice, fish, and lumber.

The first law regulating American trade was passed by Parliament in 1651. Under King Charles II, the **Navigation Acts** were passed in 1660 and 1663, with later revisions in the 1670s. These acts were designed to strengthen English trade, while hurting that of competitors like the Dutch. These acts required that English goods be transported only on English ships with majority-English crews. Colonial products such as tobacco, sugar, and rice intended for European markets had to be shipped to England first where they would be taxed. European goods intended for the American colonies also had to first be shipped to England and taxed.

The Navigation Acts increased the cost of living and the cost of doing business for the colonists. Many colonists colluded with the Dutch and other trading partners to evade these regulations. This led to some of the first conflicts between the colonies and the government in London. Disregard for English trade regulations was so extensive in New England that, in 1684, an English court convicted the Massachusetts Bay Colony of violating the Navigation Acts. This, along with Puritan resistance to the royal government, led to the revocation of the colony's charter. In 1686, King James II merged the New England colonies, New York, and New Jersey into the **Dominion of New England**. This new administrative structure increased royal authority under the King's hand-picked governor, Sir Edmund Andros.

Trouble also flared up in the south. When the price of tobacco began to fall in the 1660s, many planters blamed the unpopular Navigation Acts. This grievance was joined by others. Virginians living in the western part of the colony believed that the well-connected royal governor Sir William Berkeley was more concerned with the profits that he reaped from his office than protecting the colonists from raids by Native Americans. In 1676, a landowner named Nathaniel Bacon raised the standard of rebellion. He gathered an army of between 400 and 500 men to attack Native American settlements, some of which had been living at peace with the colonists, and to overawe the colonial government in what became known as Bacon's Rebellion. At one point, Bacon's men burned down Jamestown. Bacon died of dysentery shortly thereafter, and Governor Berkeley routed the remainder of the

rebels, hanging 23 of them. In later years, some historians chose to interpret this discreditable episode as a rising of the “little man” against the colonial elite. Royal reinforcements arrived after Berkeley had crushed the rebellion. The governor was recalled to England.

In subsequent years, the power of the larger landowners grew relative to that of the royal governors. Believing that white indentured servants were more politically fractious, the landowners increased the proportion of powerless slaves in their workforces.

Growth of Slavery

African slavery became increasingly widespread and institutionalized in the Chesapeake colonies during the 1670s and 1680s. In 1662, a law was passed in Virginia declaring that the child of a slave mother was also a slave. This nullified the English common law practice that one’s legal status came from that of the father and ensured that children born into slavery remained in that condition. The number of indentured servants decreased because of doubts of their political reliability after Bacon’s Rebellion and because fewer were willing to endure the hardship of agricultural labor in the south when more attractive working conditions could be found in the northern colonies. The Dutch had dominated the slave trade for many years. The end of their monopoly in 1682 led to lower prices for slaves in the English colonies. A labor force of enslaved Africans became increasingly attractive to prosperous planters. So as the number of indentured servants in the south dwindled, the number of African slaves greatly increased.

Europeans began to participate in the African slave trade when Portuguese explorers and merchants developed business contacts along the west coast of Africa in the 1440s. Once the Americas were opened up to European settlement in the sixteenth century and labor-intensive cash crops like sugar became enormously lucrative, African slaves became a valuable commodity. The burgeoning slave trade of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was an essential component of the **triangular trade system**. This was an Atlantic-wide system of trade and economic interdependence that knitted together Africa, the Caribbean islands, both South and North America, and Europe. Finished goods from Europe were traded for slaves in Africa, who were sold in the Western Hemisphere, where they helped produce staple products that were in turn shipped to Europe. The transportation of slaves from Africa to the Americas was known as the **Middle Passage**. Conditions for the people chained in the holds of the relatively primitive sailing ships of the day were horrifying. Disease in these confined quarters made the voyages deadly for both the slaves and the ships’ crews. The mortality rate among the imprisoned slaves often rose as high as 20 percent.

Only about 6 percent of the Africans shipped across the Atlantic arrived in the British colonies in North America. Most African slaves were sent to South America or the Caribbean. A healthier climate and a better balance between the sexes meant that slave populations in the British North American colonies grew through natural reproduction, unlike the situation in the Caribbean islands where high death rates demanded a continuous importation of new slaves. Until the rise of larger plantations in the south from the 1730s forward, most slaves worked on small farms in groups of two or three with their master. Over time, the slaves developed a unique culture that blended both African and European elements. Their religious beliefs also sometimes exhibited a syncretic merger of African traditions and Christianity.

Slaves sometimes rose up against their owners, and slave rebellions were a major fear for colonists in the south. The largest slave uprising in the British colonies was the **Stono**

Rebellion, which took place in South Carolina in 1739. A group of about 100 slaves rose up and began killing isolated planters. They lost a pitched battle against a force of militiamen, and eventually most of the rebels were killed in the fighting or were executed after being captured. In the aftermath of this rebellion, regulations concerning the control and treatment of slaves were tightened. Most slaves did not launch violent but futile revolts; instead they protested their treatment through work slow-downs, breaking tools, and other acts of minor sabotage. Although most slaves lived in the southern colonies, slavery existed in the north as well, where slaves worked as farmhands and servants.

Political Unrest in the Colonies

Massachusetts and the other New England colonies resented the loss of their authority to Sir Edmund Andros, the governor of the newly created Dominion of New England. King James II was overthrown during the **Glorious Revolution** of 1688 in England. The new English monarchs, William of Orange and Mary, the daughter of James II, gained power by agreeing to respect the prerogatives of Parliament. This was the beginning of constitutional monarchy in England. The Glorious Revolution inspired political upheaval in the colonies. In Massachusetts, Governor Andros was turned out of office and jailed. Protestant rebels overthrew the Catholic leaders of Maryland. In New York, a militia officer named Jacob Leisler took control of the colony.

The rebellious colonists declared their loyalty to William and Mary. The new monarchs abolished the Dominion of New England and restored most representative institutions in Massachusetts, though it became a royal colony with a royally appointed governor. Because William and Mary were Protestants, whereas James II had been a Catholic, the new English government supported the protestants in Maryland. Jacob Leisler ran afoul of the new regime and was hanged as a rebel. This was a sign that the royal government intended to continue to play an important role in colonial affairs.

Salem Witch Trials

Rapid political change was only one of the stresses the colony of Massachusetts underwent during the late seventeenth century. The dominance of traditional Puritanism began to break down. Economic tensions developed between small farmers and a flourishing class of merchants and business entrepreneurs. For many, John Winthrop's godly commonwealth seemed to be a thing of the past. Anxieties associated with this religious and social change probably played a key role in the still controversial **Salem Witch Trials** of 1692.

Accused witches had been prosecuted and executed before in the colonies, but never on the scale that exploded in Salem, Massachusetts. A group of girls began to experience inexplicable seizures and complained of attacks by invisible forces. The girls accused people of persecuting them through witchcraft, which began an expanding series of judicial investigations. Before the hysteria abated, over 100 people had been jailed and 20 executed. Nineteen men and women were hanged, and one man was pressed to death. Five other people, including an infant, died in prison. Eventually, the accusers began to lose their credibility, and people began to question the likelihood that so many people were engaged in witchcraft. A new governor put an official end to the proceedings. Historians have noted that social tensions may have fueled the accusations of witchcraft; the accusers came from

economically marginal farming families, whereas the accused were members of the better-off “commercial” class.

Imperial Wars

Louis XIV, the “Sun King” of France, attempted to establish his nation as the dominant power in Europe in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. England, a growing maritime power, resisted this. Beginning in 1689, the English and French fought a long series of wars that would culminate in the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. Early on, the American colonies of England and France became involved in these wars. The War of the League of Augsburg was known as King William’s War in America and lasted from 1689 to 1697. War parties of French and Native Americans raided the frontier and destroyed the town of Schenectady, New York. In turn, colonists assisted the Iroquois tribe in attacking Canada. A force largely recruited in Massachusetts captured the French base of Port Royal in Acadia. The war ended without any decisive results in America.

Just a few years later, England and France were at war again. The War of the Spanish Succession, called Queen Anne’s War in America, was waged from 1702 to 1713. Because Spain was allied with France, an English force from South Carolina attacked and burned St. Augustine in Florida. They armed local Native Americans, who then attacked Spanish missions. In the north, it was the English who suffered from Native American raids on the frontier. The most spectacular of these raids occurred in 1704, when a force of French and Native Americans devastated the town of Deerfield, Massachusetts, killing 48 people and taking 112 into captivity. As in King William’s War, no decisive battles took place in America. English victories in Europe, under the great general the Duke of Marlborough, compelled the French to surrender Newfoundland, Acadia, and other territories in America at the Treaty of Utrecht.

American Self-Government

England and Scotland were formally united with the Acts of Union of 1706 and 1707. From this point on, the united kingdoms were known as Great Britain. In the early eighteenth century, the British encountered some limits to their control of the North American colonies. Because of the various ways the colonies had been formed, there was no consistent method of governance across the colonies. While most colonies were royal colonies with governors appointed by the monarch, some, such as Connecticut and Rhode Island, elected their own governors; in **proprietorships**, such as the Carolinas, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, governors were appointed by the proprietors who held title to the colony.

Despite this, everywhere in British North America, the principle of self-government had taken hold. However governors were appointed, **colonial assemblies** were elected by the people. The “people” of this time were men who owned a certain amount of property. This electorate was broader than that back in Great Britain or in any other of the great European powers, however. Though the assemblies were usually composed of substantial landowners, to some degree they did reflect public opinion, especially in New England, with its vital institution of town meetings. The colonial assemblies, beginning with Massachusetts in the 1720s, resisted pressure from Great Britain to regularize the payment of salaries to royal governors. This gave the assemblies powerful financial leverage in disputes with their governors and familiarized the assemblies with “the power of the purse.”

Salutary Neglect

During the reigns of George I (1714–1727) and George II (1727–1760), the British government was preoccupied with international relations and the balance of power in Europe. Having come from the Electorate of Hanover, these kings were especially concerned with affairs in Germany and central Europe. The British government's chief goal in dealing with its colonies was furthering Great Britain's economic interests. Pursuant to their mercantilist worldview, British officials attempted to prevent Americans from manufacturing their own textiles (1699), hats (1732), and iron goods (1750). Because the Navigation Acts allowed the colonists as Englishmen to own ships and carry on trade, a vibrant merchant class emerged in America. These merchants followed their own interests, evading the Navigation Acts by doing business with the French West Indies and other non-British colonies. The British government became so concerned about the American sugar trade with the French in the Caribbean that Parliament passed the **Molasses Act** of 1733, raising duties on foreign sugar. Many American shippers continued to ignore British regulations. By 1750, a new generation of British colonial administrators was anxious to tighten the government's control over its insubordinate American subjects.

First Great American Religious Revival

The **First Great Awakening** was a religious revival that profoundly influenced spiritual and intellectual values in America. Beginning in the 1720s and lasting through the 1740s, the First Great Awakening challenged the established religious authorities and called for a personal and more emotional approach to divine worship. Exponents of the Great Awakening criticized traditional, overly intellectual sermonizing by ministers. Jonathan Edwards reduced his congregation to tears by preaching on “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” vividly describing the yawning pit of hell and the horrors awaiting sinners there. The dynamic Anglican preacher George Whitefield attracted crowds of thousands to his sermons as he travelled through the colonies in the 1740s.

By scorning the “establishment” and emphasizing fervor over traditional ministerial learning, the Great Awakening encouraged a greater sense of personal equality in the American colonies. A growing number of people became accustomed to thinking for themselves rather than deferring to authority. A people willing to question religious leaders soon proved ready to challenge political figures as well.

Chapter Review



Rapid Review

To achieve the perfect 5, you should be able to explain the following:

- The dominant economic theory of the era was mercantilism; British mercantilist measures such as the Navigation Acts created resentment in the American colonies.
- The importation of African slaves became increasingly important for the continued economic growth of several southern colonies.
- The Salem Witch Trials demonstrated the social conflict present in the American colonies.
- Eighteenth-century European wars between the British and the French spilled over into the Americas, with British and French colonies becoming involved.

- In the early eighteenth century, colonial assemblies became increasingly powerful and independent in several colonies, including Massachusetts.
- Even during the era of “salutary neglect,” the British attempted to increase their economic control over the colonies.
- The religious revival called the Great Awakening caused some colonists to question many of the religious, social, and political foundations on which colonial life was based.

Time Line

1651: First of several Navigation Acts approved by British parliament

1676: Bacon’s Rebellion takes place in Virginia

1682: Dutch monopoly on slave trade ends, greatly reducing the price of slaves coming to the Americas

1686: Creation of Dominion of New England

1688: Glorious Revolution in England; James II removed from the throne

1689: Beginning of the War of the League of Augsburg

1692: Witchcraft trials take place in Salem, Massachusetts

1702: Beginning of the War of the Spanish Succession

1733: Enactment of the Molasses Act

1739: Stono (slave) Rebellion in South Carolina

1740: George Whitefield tours the American colonies—the high point of the Great Awakening

› Review Questions

Multiple-Choice Questions

- The creation of the Dominion of New England
 - increased democracy in the colonies.
 - increased the power of the governor of the area.
 - allowed New England colonies to discuss common grievances.
 - guaranteed direct control of the king over affairs in the New England colonies.
- A major effect of the Stono Rebellion was
 - an increase in the number of slaves brought into the Southern colonies.
 - increased fortifications around several southern cities.
 - an attempt by slave owners to lessen the horrors of the Middle Passage.
 - harsher treatment of slaves in many parts of the South.
- The growth of colonial assemblies alarmed the British for all of the following reasons *except*
 - assemblies holding the “power of the purse” could ultimately undermine British control.
 - assemblies increased democratic tendencies in the colonies.
 - assemblies occasionally ignored or resisted instructions from Great Britain.
 - governors appointed in Britain had little control over these assemblies in most colonies.
- For the British, the major economic role of the American colonies was
 - to produce manufactured goods the English did not want to produce.
 - to produce crops such as tobacco.
 - to produce raw materials such as lumber.
 - B and C above