

## **European Westward Expansion and the Birth of British North America (Lecture no 2)**

This essay seeks to explain how the English came to settle North America and what it was, cultural speaking, that these settlers brought with them. It does so by first looking at what made possible - as well as what motivated - earlier attempts to explore and colonize the Western Hemisphere, before specifically considering the English experience.

### **Europe Looks Westward**

Christopher Columbus' accidental discovery of the "New World" of the Western Hemisphere while searching for a new trade route to Asia in many ways marked the beginning of a new era in European history: that of exploration, conquest and colonization. Yet Columbus's discovery would neither have been possible, nor would its historical significance been as great had certain technological, political, and economic developments not taken place in the Old World of Europe and Asia during the preceding two and a half centuries.

From a technological standpoint, an expedition like Columbus' would not have been possible - without certain navigational innovations that had occurred in the century or so prior to it. Innovations like the compass, the quadrant (a device for measuring angles on the earth's surface which allowed for the making of far more accurate maps), the astrolabe (which made possible much more accurate measurement of the position of the stars, and thus allowed sailors to much more accurately determine their latitude) all helped to keep sailors on course, while the development of lighter, swifter boats helped speed up the process of transoceanic voyage.

Even with these new innovations in place, there was still the question of who would finance such an expedition, and what their motivation to do so might be. Columbus would probably never have been able to raise the funds for his voyage had it not been for the beginnings of the consolidation of the nation-state during late medieval Europe, since he only received backing for his expedition after Ferdinand and Isabella had united their respective kingdoms and created Spain. The consolidation of relatively small and decentralized feudal kingdoms into larger nation-states - a process that was beginning to spread across much of Europe - thus made possible the accumulation of the sort of wealth required to finance navigational expeditions.

But given the ability of European monarchs to finance navigational expeditions, why would they choose to do so? Part of the reason lies in the fact that the newly centralized states looked to increased trade - and later, colonization - as a method for increasing the wealth, status, and power of their burgeoning nations. For these monarchs, the financing of enterprises such as navigational expeditions constituted the first step toward increasing trade and establishing colonies. Many of the same monarchs who sought to expand trade (this was especially true of the English, as we shall see) were also attempting to reduce their economic dependency on the landed aristocracy, and instead create a commercial class which itself was dependent on the state for economic protection.

The possibility for increased trade had arisen during the 13<sup>th</sup> century when explorers like Marco Polo helped reestablish trade routes between Europe and Asia that had remained dormant for centuries. But by the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Turks gained control of these land routes and

began charging exorbitant tolls to the Europeans attempting to pass through. Columbus's attempt to find a water route to Asia promised to give Europeans easier and cheaper access to , markets in the East.

Around the same time, new institutions of banking and credit were being created, institutions vital to the development and sustenance of more sophisticated and elaborate forms of trade.

For all these reasons, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europe had acquired both the capacity and the motivation for expanding westward to the New World. Yet while the conquering and colonization of much of the Western Hemisphere began soon after Christopher Columbus's voyages to the West Indies, the settling of most of the area that would later become the United States did not begin until almost one hundred years later. And unlike the land to the North (what is now Canada), which was settled by the French, and the land to the South (what is now Latin America) that was settled by the Spanish and Portuguese, the mid-eastern coast of North America was settled mostly by the English.

### The British and America

As was true for all of the European nations that created settlements in the Western Hemisphere, the English who settled there had their own particular reasons for doing so. When they embarked for America, they were responding at least as much to changes that were occurring in their own land as to any lure that the New World held. And when they arrived their efforts to create new societies were shaped by their English cultural heritage.

#### Motivations for Colonization

At the center of the British drive to colonize lay the social transformation that the nation had undergone between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. Probably more than any other European nation at the end of the sixteenth century, England had left the medieval world behind and was making its way toward becoming a modern society. At the level of political economy, the feudal system of lord and serf had collapsed and was replaced by that of landlord and tenant - with a substantial number of "middling freeholders" (small landowning farmers) between these two classes. Meanwhile, a rising merchant class was emerging in the cities, challenging the landed class for political, as well as economic, dominance.

### The Meaning of Capitalism and the State of England at the End of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

England in 1600, then, was a society in which capitalism had emerged, but mainly as a property system. In a capitalist society, the rights of property are more or less absolute: only the property owner has any claims to his or her property, while also enjoying the right to do more or less whatever he or she likes with it. Since one thing a property owner might wish to do with his

property is to sell it, capitalism as a system of exchange means free trade: the right of individuals to buy and sell according to the terms upon which the two parties can agree. There were still significant restrictions on trade in England during the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when **mercantilism** (see page 6 for a definition) dominated political and economic thought. Another key aspect of capitalism - a system of production in which people make a living primarily by producing goods to sell in the market (rather than to use them), and in which wage-labor has become a commodity, which exchanges in the market like any other commodity - was little present in early 17<sup>th</sup> century England; it would not become the dominant mode of organizing production relations until the late eighteenth century, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution. Capitalist societies also require a legal and political system which protects property rights, enforces contracts, standardizes and regulates the currency, and promotes economic growth; by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, British law and government were largely committed to all these processes. Finally, a capitalist society inevitably develops a culture, an ideology, and institutions which justify, support, and reinforce capitalist property, production, and trade relations and their expansion. The commercial and middle classes of England - the bourgeoisie - took the lead in creating a capitalist culture and articulating a capitalist ideology which celebrated the virtues of hard work, thrift, saving, self-discipline, and industriousness.

### Anatomy of Feudalism

The feudal system that preceded capitalism in England had emerged out of the chaos that characterized the collapse of the Roman Empire. Amidst the anarchy that accompanied the invasion of the “barbarian hordes,” groups of individuals, known as the “posse comitatus,” were formed which offered mutual protection to their members. Those who distinguished themselves with their ability as warriors achieved a higher status within these essentially tribal societies. Over time, the status and privileges of the warrior elite became much more graded and articulated, and as the members of this elite were able to transfer their status and privileges to their descendants a relatively simple model of social organization was transformed into a much more elaborate and hierarchical society.

At the top of feudal society, at least nominally, stood the king, whose job it was to regulate relations between the overlords, who, in turn, paid the king a tribute for this service. The overlords dominated an area called a demesne, which was about the size of what today would be an English county. Before the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the kings of England were generally weak, leaving the feudal system very politically decentralized, with the overlords more or less in charge of their demesne. The overlords commanded the allegiance of their vassals, or sub-lords, who pledged military service to their overlord in exchange for income from the land over which the overlord ruled. The ultimate source of the overlords’ income was the labor of the serfs, the group who occupied the bottom tier of the feudal system, who worked the land, and were obligated to pay a portion of their product as a “tax” to their overlord. (There were people who were largely outside this system of dependency, known as freemen, who will be discussed shortly.) In theory, the lords provided

protection for the serfs from outside invaders, a service which was supposedly repaid through the tax which the serf paid his lord. But since the feudal system was organized so as to allow the lords to exploit the labor of the peasants, it was really the lords, and not invading outsiders, from whom the serfs most needed to be protected.

The overlord's vassals constituted a private army of knights, who would bully recalcitrant serfs into paying their tax. Under feudalism, then, the lordly class used direct coercion to appropriate the peasants' surplus product (what the peasant produced beyond what it took to keep himself alive and working). The members of the lordly class had the Catholic Church as an ally in their efforts to exploit the serfs. The priests would instruct the serfs that they must pay their lords what was due to them in order to be able to go to heaven. But the Church also operated as a check on the ability of the lords to abuse the serfs, since the Christian ethos demanded that even serfs be treated as children of God. Ultimately, the protection that the Church offered the serfs may have served to stabilize the feudal system, by preventing the lords and vassals from abusing the serfs to the point where they would revolt or die off. In sum, then, while the relations between the lords constituted the material basis for the feudal social order, Christianity provided the ideological basis.

The lords used violence - and the threat thereof - not only to expropriate the peasants' surplus, but also against neighboring lords. An overlord in one demesne, with his retainers of vassals in tow, would sometimes wage war against a nearby overlord, hoping to force the other overlord to cede control over some of the serfs or land in his demesne. Whether used against serfs or against other lords, violence was thus the basis for maintaining and increasing one's wealth.

Related to the fact that violence underpinned the feudal system, was the additional fact that there existed in feudal England no modern conception of ownership of land in which a person had complete control over a piece of real estate. Feudal property relations are best understood in terms of a system of rights and obligations. People of different classes had different rights and obligations regarding the land; generally speaking, the lords (the ruling class) had the right to income from the land they lorded over, while the serfs (the working class) had a right to work the land from which they made their living. The lord could not "sell" the land over which he lorded, though, as we have seen, he could grant rights to the income of the land to a sub-lord or vassal; for his part, the serf could not be forced off the land he worked. But neither could the serf leave the land, since he owed his lord a "tax," a portion of his produce from the land. The feudal system was therefore, extremely static - it tended to reproduce the same set of relations across generations as descendants inherited the condition of their ancestors - whereas the emerging new capitalist system would be much more dynamic, with the incidence of both upward and downward mobility becoming much more common.

Not everyone under feudalism was a lord, vassal, or serf. There were also the so-called "free men," some of whom worked land without feudal obligations, but most of whom worked in the small towns of English feudal society as either artisans or merchants. The members of the latter group made their living primarily by servicing the needs of the lordly class, selling their products and services in a market that was highly regulated. This "middle class" is crucial for understanding the dynamics of feudal society, for unless the lords were able to employ these artisans and merchants, for the purpose of furnishing themselves with finery and luxury goods, they would not be able to benefit from having control over the serfs' surplus product. In essence, the lords traded the serfs' surplus in exchange for locally produced or imported craft goods.

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The English feudal social order entered a crisis around the end of the thirteenth century, a crisis that would only be resolved through a transition to capitalism. Economic, political, demographic, and pestilential factors all worked to bring about the transformation from feudalism to capitalism. The Black Plague which ravaged Europe beginning in the fourteenth century reduced the population of England by about a third, resulting in a decline in the amount of income which lords could obtain from their serfs. As a strategy for offsetting this drop, lords began to increase their attacks on neighboring lords, looting each other's estates and attempting to "steal" each other's serfs. Eventually, the situation became so anarchic and chaotic that lords lost the ability to even compel the serfs to remain on their demesnes. Desperate, lords then began to lure serfs away from other lords with the promise of accepting lower payment. But once the payment to a lord began to be the result of a negotiated agreement, rather than a duty, serfs had essentially won their freedom and were then paying what would more properly be termed a rent. At first emancipation constituted an economic boon for the newly liberated peasants, since they were initially obligated to give their lord - or more properly, at this point, their landlord - less than they had traditionally. But once the population began to increase, and there were now more peasants looking to rent land than land available to be rented, rents greatly increased, with many peasants having no access to land at all.

The transformation to capitalism wreaked havoc throughout English society, as landowners were then able to remove their tenants from their land at will. (The feudal system of rights and obligations had prevented them from doing so in the past.) Thus as the population of England increased from 3 million to 4 million over the course of the sixteenth century, peasants found themselves in increasing economic competition with each other as they attempted to rent land. This competition not only drove up the price of rents, it also left many peasants landless and struggling to survive, since with the increase in population, there was simply not enough land to go around.

Landlessness - and the suffering which attended this condition - was exacerbated by a number of factors. First, many large landowners were converting their estates to pasture - thus discarding their tenants in the process - prompted to do so by the greatly expanding market for wool, both at home and abroad. Meanwhile, other landowners were "enclosing" - putting up fences around - what had long been common pasture lands, thus eliminating an important source of subsistence for the peasants in the village who had traditionally grazed their animals upon this land. Still other landowners were converting to producing grain for export, for which they would hire on agricultural laborers as needed, leaving these landless farmers forced to eke out a living by combining agricultural work with laboring in the burgeoning woolens industry in the towns and cities, many of whose populations were composed increasingly of the poor, hungry, and unemployed (or underemployed). In some cases, tenant farmers' wives would work at home spinning and weaving thread for the market; this "putting-out," or "cottage" system was often all that stood between their families and starvation. The misery of the lowest ranks of the peasantry, however, was surpassed by the hundreds of thousands of Englishmen who were left to starve or roam the countryside, foraging and stealing to stay alive. The seeming overpopulation of England thus provided one of the motivations for colonizing the New World: to drain off excess population. During the seventeenth century, the majority of English settlers in North America would come

from this dispossessed group, forced to indenture - or pledge - their labor for a number of years to a master willing to pay their passage across the ocean; in effect, these indentured servants were selling themselves into a type of temporary slavery.

Adventurers, Merchants, and Monarchs

The English colonization of North America had its beginnings in Queen Elizabeth's decision to support English "adventurers," men like Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Martin Frobisher, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and Sir Francis Drake, whose activities in America consisted mainly of raiding Spanish gold and silver ships off the coasts of the Americas. Spain was England's premier antagonist during the late 16th century, and Elizabeth was happy to back any project which might weaken her nation's rival. In 1578, Elizabeth granted Gilbert - whose ambitions it was to establish himself as a manorial lord in the New World - a charter to all the land in North America between Florida and Labrador; Gilbert and his crew, however, were lost at sea before he could fulfill his dream. In 1584, Raleigh acquired a charter virtually identical to the one Elizabeth had granted Gilbert six years earlier. Raleigh was able to establish a settlement at Roanoke, North Carolina, in 1587 (although he, himself, stayed behind in England), where he planned to eventually build both a military garrison as a base for raiding Spanish ships as well as a mining camp (hoping to find gold and silver). The following year, England went to war with Spain, and the settlers at Roanoke were left to shift for themselves.

By the time, John White, the colony's governor, was able to return with supplies in 1590, the entire settlement had vanished without a trace. Although a failure, Roanoke ended up serving as the model for the successful settlement of Virginia, the first permanent British colony in America, in 1607.

Ultimately, those who played the most active role in the process of colonization were the merchants who lived in the port cities. The merchant class was recruited from among the younger sons of the English aristocracy, a group whose numbers greatly increased with the population boom of the sixteenth century. These merchants correctly perceived the economic opportunities which colonization would bring, since the more affluent settlers would surely need to import the products they were used to having. And, hopefully, settlers as a whole would be able to export natural resources in return, to pay for these imports. British merchants even hoped that settlers would discover gold in the new colonies (even though the Spanish, who had combed the North Atlantic coast during the 16th century, had not found any precious metals there). Merchants thus took the lead in organizing and raising the capital for expeditions of colonization.

But these merchants had the support of the British monarchs - first Elizabeth, and later James I and his son Charles I - who saw their own interest and that of the nation tied to colonization. These monarchs were adherents of the economic theory of *mercantilism*, which viewed the nation as a whole, rather than individuals, as the primary economic actor. Mercantilists also believed the wealth of the world to be finite and to inhere only in specie (gold and silver). According to the principles of mercantilism, the most economically successful nation was the one that exported as

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much as possible, and imported little or nothing, since then little or no specie would have to be sent out of the economically successful country to pay for imports, while other countries would have to send specie to the economically successful country to pay for their imports. For the mercantilists, maximizing one's export-import ratio was the most effective way to increase the amount of specie, and therefore the wealth, held collectively by the nation.

Throughout most of the 16th century, England was able to increase its supply of specie through its dominance of the world textile market, based in Antwerp, Belgium. But when the Spanish sacked Belgium in the 1570s, England was forced to look elsewhere for markets. At that point, Elizabeth began to envision that the mercantilist ideal could best be achieved by acquiring colonies which could provide needed raw materials, while serving as markets for English goods. By eliminating the need to import raw materials, England would thus be able to hold on to the specie that would otherwise end up leaving the country to pay for these goods. Monarchs were further motivated to support colonization by the fact that increased trade would translate into a tariff system, meaning increased customs revenue for the Crown.

British monarchs were attracted to mercantilism, in part, by their desire to enrich the nation. But these monarchs had perhaps an even more important motivation for supporting mercantilism: their desire to reduce their dependency on the class of great landowners through creating a mercantile class which itself would be dependent on the Crown, and which the Crown could then rely upon for support. With the transition to capitalism, private property had become a sacrosanct right, which, as we shall see, not even the king could violate. This right had enormous implications for the system of taxation which would develop in England. Since taxation involved a transference of property from the individual to the state, this transaction would only be "constitutional" if citizens, through their representative institutions, freely consented to paying it.\* The legislative body in England, Parliament, had the sole power to tax property: its members were elected by the property-owning class, who was thus able to control the extent to which it was taxed. For example, if the king wanted a tax to pay for a war he wished to fight (as was the case with Charles the I in the 1620s), he could only obtain it if the landed class agreed to pay it. But by supporting the growth of the mercantile class, the king would increase the amount of customs revenues coming into the Crown, since the only way the mercantile class could survive was if a well-developed tariff system was in place. And since the customs tax is ultimately paid by the consumer, the merchants in Parliament who would pass the tariff would not have to bear the burden of paying it the way that landowners would bear the burden of a property tax.

#### Publicizing Colonization

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\* In England, the term "constitution," refers not to a documentary blueprint for government as it does in the United States, but to the constitution of society - the ensemble of relations between society's members.

Elizabeth's decision to support the “adventurers” was prompted by the clergymen Richard Hakluyt, whose pamphlet *A Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, drew together various and disparate rationalizations for colonization, many of which took into account the motivations discussed above. Hakluyt noted that North America would operate as a base for harrying the Spanish, searching for a “Northwest Passage” that would allow water traffic across the North American continent, and extending the influence of Protestantism. Colonies would also provide a source for much-needed raw materials, a market for English goods, and a haven for the landless and unemployed. With Hakluyt, colonization had found its publicist, though Hakluyt himself was indebted to Johann Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press a century earlier, without which he would have been unable to circulate his views.

### The Religious Motivation

Economic motivation alone would probably have been sufficient to account for the British colonization of North America - and it was for the Southern colonies of Virginia and Carolina. But the settlement of New England was more immediately motivated by the desire of a group of radical English Protestants called *Puritans* to escape the persecution that King Charles I of England had begun directing at them in 1625. With the exception of Mary Tudor’s rule during the 1550s, England had been officially Protestant since 1534 when Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church over the Pope’s refusal to grant him an annulment from his wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had failed to bear him a male heir, so that he could marry the courtesan Anne Boleyn whom he hoped would be able to succeed where Catherine had failed “to deliver,” so to speak. Although Henry declared himself head of the Church of England, the Anglican Church retained much of the organizational structure and ritual forms of Catholicism. Unhappy with the mild character of the English Reformation, Puritans demanded that the Anglican Church rid itself of persisting Catholic forms of organization and ritual. Initially the Puritans attempted to reform or “purify” the Church from within. But by 1629, faced with increasing attacks from the Crown, a group of Puritans, armed with a charter for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, set out for the New World with the hope of creating a “city on a hill” that would serve as a beacon and model to their fellow Englishmen intent on fulfilling the Protestant Reformation.

### *The British Heritage - and American Innovations*

For all these reasons - overpopulation, trade, religious conflict, international rivalry - Englishmen settled in North America. Yet when they did, they brought with them the attitudes, beliefs, practices, and values that constituted their country’s heritage, which they then attempted to recreate in institutions that they believed paralleled the ones they left behind.



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### Monarchy and Self-Government

Perhaps the most important of these institutions and practices was self-government, which itself had increased significantly between 1400-1600 with the rise of capitalism. Interestingly, for the English, the commitment to self-government went hand-in-hand with a belief in the necessity of the monarchy. Today we are used to thinking of a monarchy as a contradiction to a republic, since how could people rule themselves if they are ruled by a king? But seventeenth century Englishmen, as well as colonial Americans, did not perceive this contradiction. For them the king was the guarantor of their rights more than he was a threat to them (although at times, unjust kings had posed a threat to citizens' rights), since it was the king who would arbitrate disputes and dispense justice through his courts.

The king's role as the guarantor of justice and freedom first emerged as the feudal system was entering its decline. Politically, the feudal system was based on the organized power of the overlord and his retainers (vassals, or knights, pledged to defend the overlord's interests, through military service). Each overlord, then, essentially possessed his own private army. While it was the English king's principal duty to settle disputes among the lords, more often than not, the monarch was generally too weak to prevent the lords from fighting among themselves. The king in fact was, in essence, simply another feudal lord. Although the strongest of the lords, he was often neither strong enough to force the other lords to submit to his authority, nor to keep them from fighting among themselves. With these inter-lordly wars, the aristocracy found itself in a double predicament: not only was their perpetual in-fighting ultimately destructive to their class as a whole, since lords were spending increasing amounts of treasure on attempting to obtain a larger portion of a "fixed pie." But in deploying their retainers (private armies) against one another, the lords found themselves without sufficient coercive force to compel their peasants to remain on the manor and pay the traditional tax.

So weakened were they by war and pestilence that by the time of Henry VII, who assumed the kingship in 1485, most of the lords were willing to surrender their right to retain private armies, if Henry (and succeeding kings) - who would now hold a monopoly on the use of coercive force - would promise to mediate disputes not only between the lords themselves, but also between the lords and the peasants who worked the lords' land - while simultaneously guaranteeing the traditional rights and freedoms of everyone. In other words, Englishmen would now go to the king to receive justice whenever a dispute arose between any of them. Lords went to the king to settle disputes over such issues as the boundaries of their estates, while peasants went to the king over such matters as an increase in their rent - at a time when the feudal system of fixed rents and servile obligations to remain on the land was breaking down. In most cases, when peasants were able to produce documentation showing not only that they had worked on an estate since before the feudal system had begun to break down, but also that the amount of tax due to the lord was never to be raised, the king would declare that the rent should remain the same as it had been back in the days when the peasant's ancestors were paying the obligatory and fixed tax. (After the inflation of the sixteenth century, peasants who had been able to obtain fixed rents, essentially owned their land, since the annual rent was now nominal, often amounting to less than a day's labor. By the late

seventeenth century, most of these more fortunate peasants found that their landlord did not even bother to collect the pittance which was his due, and thus these "freeholders" now owned their land outright.) On the other hand, peasants who could produce no evidence of what the traditional rent had been were at the mercy of the market forces that allowed the lord (now, in essence, a capitalist landlord, rather than a feudal lord) to charge a "rack-rent" of all that the market would bear.

With so many disputes in his kingdom, the king soon found himself too busy to hear all the petitions of his subjects. He thus began to create courts to which he appointed judges who would hear these petitions themselves, using the king's decisions in prior cases as precedents for their own decisions. From this process, the system of English constitutional law developed: justice was now less personal and more institutional: less dependent on the personality of the king, and more dependent on the impersonality of the law, and past precedent. (In fact, for the British, the term, "constitution," simply means the "way we've always done things.") By the beginning of the seventeenth century, Englishmen had learned to rely on the king's courts for settling disputes with their fellow countrymen, but they had also come to believe that the kingship was essential to prevent society from sliding back into the sort of anarchy that had characterized England during most of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. The kingship, thus, was seen as a prerequisite for self-government.

At the national level, self-government consisted of Parliament - the representative body of the English upper classes - which had initially functioned as an advisory board to the king. Over time, the "houses" of Parliament - the House of Lords which represented the great noble landowning families, and the House of Commons, which represented other men of means in England - grew in power, effectively gaining the power to legislate. (The transition to capitalism greatly strengthened the House of Commons by bringing to prominence a new class of merchants.) Parliament's growing power was rooted in the transition to capitalist property relations, for now the king was required to respect property rights, which meant that he could not tax without the consent - obtained through Parliament - of those being taxed. Not surprisingly, by the early seventeenth century, Parliament would use its control over the purse strings as the basis for challenging the monarchy as the principal governing institution of England. At the county and local level, participation in governmental affairs was even wider as the majority of adult men often participated in electing local officials like the sheriff, justice of the peace and constable. Far more than was the case in any of the other major nations of Europe at this time, Englishmen ruled themselves. This addition of self-government would become even more pronounced in the New World, as the colonies would find themselves separated from the mother country by 3000 miles of ocean, during a time when modern forms of transportation and communication did not exist. (It might take as long as three months simply for a letter to cross the Atlantic Ocean.) By the standards of the time, the British government was relatively weak; in any case, the Crown certainly did not possess the resources to create the sort of massive bureaucracy required to keep a tight rein on its colonies, as the Spanish monarchs had done in most of the region that would later become known as Latin America. As a result, British settlers in North America were thus left to pretty much rule themselves.

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### Freedom and Slavery

Along with - and related to - the practice of self-government, Englishmen possessed a strong attachment to the idea of freedom, or *liberty*, as it was more often called. This attachment had its roots deep in English history, going back to even before the Norman Conquest of 1066. The idea of liberty, however, was suffused with several not always compatible meanings, and the Englishmen who settled in the colonies brought these various notions of liberty with them, which would take deeper root in the New World. Although Englishmen, as a rule, did not believe in equality and the term democracy had a pejorative connotation for most English citizens, several competing notions of freedom had taken root by the early seventeenth century.

For some, liberty meant simply the freedom to do what one *ought*. This *ordered* conception of freedom (also known as Christian Freedom) figured most prominently among the devoutly religious Puritans who landed in Massachusetts. The aristocratic gentlemen who settled in Virginia with the intention of using indentured servants and slaves to work their plantations, on the other hand, were primarily concerned that they be free to exercise their own will, even if that meant the freedom to compel others - such as their slaves and indentured servants - to abide by their will; aristocrats' notion of liberty could be described then as *hegemonic*. The men of more limited means who would settle on small plots of land along the Western frontier of the colonies continually sought to escape the domination of the economic elite clustered in the coastal areas; these Western farmers subscribed to a *libertarian* notion of freedom, which meant to be free of the compulsion of others. (As we shall see in a later lecture, the libertarian and hegemonic definitions of freedom would ironically be joined together in the colony of Virginia, where forty per cent of the population consisted of black slaves.) Still another version of freedom was dominant among the Quakers, a group often persecuted by other religious sects who found its beliefs to be blasphemous; perhaps partly as a strategy of self-defense, Quakers developed the idea of *reciprocal* liberty, which meant that the same rights that individuals or groups claimed for themselves were to be extended to everyone else. As future lectures will demonstrate, much of American history has been marked by a contest between these various meanings of freedom.

What might seem paradoxical about early Americans' attachment to liberty was that during the first century of British settlement in North America, most of those who went there came as unfree laborers - either as indentured servants or slaves. This widespread use of forced labor in the colonies in retrospect might seem ironic given the fact that America would become known as "the land of the free." Yet as we will later see, it was precisely the presence of slavery in America that was so often at the root of free white Americans' attachment to liberty.

The existence of slavery in British North America is also remarkable given its absence in England (although some Africans were purchased and used as domestic servants there). A similar circumstance prevailed in regard to the institution of indentured servitude. While indentured servitude was common in England, it functioned there more as an apprentice system than the

system of forced labor it would become in North America. Institutions of unfree labor in America, thus, arose not from the English legacy, but as a part of the strategy of a landed class attempting to enhance its power through using whatever means were available.

## **Protestantism**

Like freedom, Puritanical Protestantism would flourish to a greater degree in America than it had in England. Although Puritanism was strong among much of the middle class in England, the Anglican establishment operated as a check upon radical Protestantism. Unencumbered by institutional authority, radical Protestantism would thrive in America, as would many of the virtues espoused by Calvinist Protestants such as the Puritans. These virtues, which included hard work, thriftiness, industriousness, and trustworthiness were seen as safeguards against sin, but they would take on a secular function as well by providing the soil in which a capitalist culture and work ethic would take root.

## **Conclusion**

The Englishmen who would settle in North America, no matter in what region - the South, mid-Atlantic, Appalachian frontier, or New England - would carry English attitudes with them as they settled, but they would find themselves often in far different circumstances than the ones they had left in England, circumstances that would significantly shape the development of British America. Perhaps the most important of these circumstances was the existence of people who had already been living there for several millennia. As we will soon see, English settlers' relations with the Indians would also have a profound effect on the ways these settlers related to one another.

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