The New England Colonies

New England colonists’ lives centered around religion, family duties, and public work. Puritan religion strongly shaped everyday life in colonial New England. Weekly church meetings brought all members of the community together. New England colonists were skilled workers, experienced farmers, or had success with fishing enterprises or fur trading.

New England farmers grew food mainly for their own use rather than crops like tobacco for sale. Most New England farms were owned and run by a family. New England farmers had little need for indentured servants or slaves.

Most colonists in New England came in family groups. As the colony grew, couples had many children, who helped run the family farm. Parents helped choose their children’s marriage partners.

Women had three duties in New England. They had to obey their husbands, have children, and run the household. Husbands were expected to treat their wives with the greatest love, gentleness, kindness, and tenderness.

Education was an important part of New England society because parents wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. More colonists were literate in New England colonies than in the Middle or Southern colonies.

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The Middle Colonies

The majority of colonists in the Middle Colonies made their living by farming. Farmers found more favorable conditions in the Middle Colonies than in New England. The broad Hudson and Delaware River valleys were rich and fertile. Winters were milder than in New England and the growing season was longer.

On such promising land, farmers grew wheat, barley, and rye. These were cash crops and could be sold at market. They produced so much grain that they soon came to be called the Breadbasket Colonies.

Farmers of the Middle Colonies also raised herds of cattle and pigs. Every year they sent tons of beef, pork, and butter to the ports of New York and Philadelphia. From there, they went to New England, the South, the West Indies, and to Europe.

Farms in the Middle Colonies were generally larger than those in New England. Most farmers hired workers to help with the planting, harvesting and other tasks. Some farms used African slaves, but most workers were farmhands who worked alongside the farmer and his family.

Aside from farming, there were also skilled artisans in the Middle Colonies who specialized in hardware, clocks, watches, locks, guns, glass, stoneware, nails and paper. Other settlers profited from the rich deposits of iron ore in the region. They purified the iron ore and hammered it into nails, tools, and parts for guns.

In the Middle Colonies, everyone in the household had a job to do. Households were self-sufficient, which meant that everything needed for survival was made at home. The Middles Colonies were by far the most diverse and tolerant of the three areas. People from many backgrounds settled here. As a result, there were many religions practiced including Catholicism and Quakerism.

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The Southern Colonies

Today, we often think of the colonial South as a land where wealthy planters lived in elegant homes, with large numbers of enslaved African Americans toiling in the fields. In fact, this picture is only partially true. As the Southern Colonies grew, two distinct ways of life emerged – one along the Atlantic coast and another in the backcountry.

The Southern Colonies enjoyed warmer weather and a longer growing season than the colonies to the north. Virginia, Maryland, and parts of North Carolina became major tobacco-growing areas, while South Carolina and Georgia grew indigo and rice.

During the growing season, planters decided which fields to plant, what crops to grow and when to harvest the crops. Planters’ wives kept the household running smoothly. They directed house slaves and made sure daily tasks were done, such as milking cows. The main religion practiced was Anglican (Church of England).

Enslaved Africans played a crucial role on many plantations. They used farming skills they had brought from West Africa. They taught the English settlers how to grow rice and to use wild plants unfamiliar in England. They made water buckets out of gourds and fans, brooms, and baskets from palmetto leaves.

West of the Tidewater, life was very different. The backcountry was more democratic than the Tidewater and settlers lived as equals. They tended smaller fields of tobacco or garden crops such as beans, corn, or peas. They also hunted game. The families were self-sufficient. Women cooked meals and fashioned simple rugged clothing. Few enslaved Africans worked on the smaller farms in the backcountry.

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