

# Colonial Social Classes

## Enslaved Field Hands

Slavery existed in all the British American colonies. Africans were brought to America to work, mainly in agriculture. In Virginia, most slaves worked in tobacco fields. Men, women, and children worked from sunup to sundown, with only Sunday to rest.

## Enslaved House Servants

Some enslaved Africans worked as cooks, laundresses, manservants, blacksmiths, coopers, or in other skilled jobs. These men and women were generally considered "better off" than field slaves, but they were still enslaved.

## Free Blacks

The British American colonies had a small but important population of free men and women of African descent. Though they did not enjoy the same rights as white citizens, these free black men and women owned property, worked in a wide range of skilled jobs, and made significant contributions to their communities.

## Farmers

During the 18th century, most Americans lived and worked on small farms. They worked the farms with the labor of only their own families - father, mother and children - and perhaps one or two slaves or hired help.

## Middling

In the 18th century, a new group, the "middling sort" or middle class, gained a larger role in society and government. They worked in trades - blacksmithing, silversmithing, printing, and millinery, or as professionals, such as lawyers and doctors, or merchants who owned stores.

## Gentry

The gentry were the "upper crust" of colonial society. They were large landowners, very wealthy merchants, and financiers. They owned huge tracts of land and usually many slaves. Gentry men, or gentlemen, took it as their right and duty to govern others, serving in local governments. Gentry ladies, or gentlewomen, were at the top of social class and colonial fashion.

## Colonial Consumer Revolution

The consumer revolution that began in northern Europe soon spread to the New World. Americans in particular quickly earned a reputation for their enthusiasm for material things. "Pride of wealth is as ostentatious in this country as ever the pride of birth has been elsewhere," an English traveler declared. Other commentators despaired that consumer extravagance had reached new extremes in the colonies.

Why were Americans reputed to be so highly materialistic? Society in North America was exceptionally fluid. A never-ending stream of newcomers reinforced the colonials' need for inexpensive, movable, and fashionable objects.

The rapidly growing population with its increasingly expendable wealth increased the market for British imports, especially luxury imports. Britain continued shipping a steady stream of goods to the colonies, which were becoming the "sole and special proper customers of the mother country." **Colonists gradually developed a common identity based partly on the consumption of goods and displays of private wealth.**

(side note: often times, British merchants shipped damaged or second rate goods to the colonies, believing they would not know the difference).



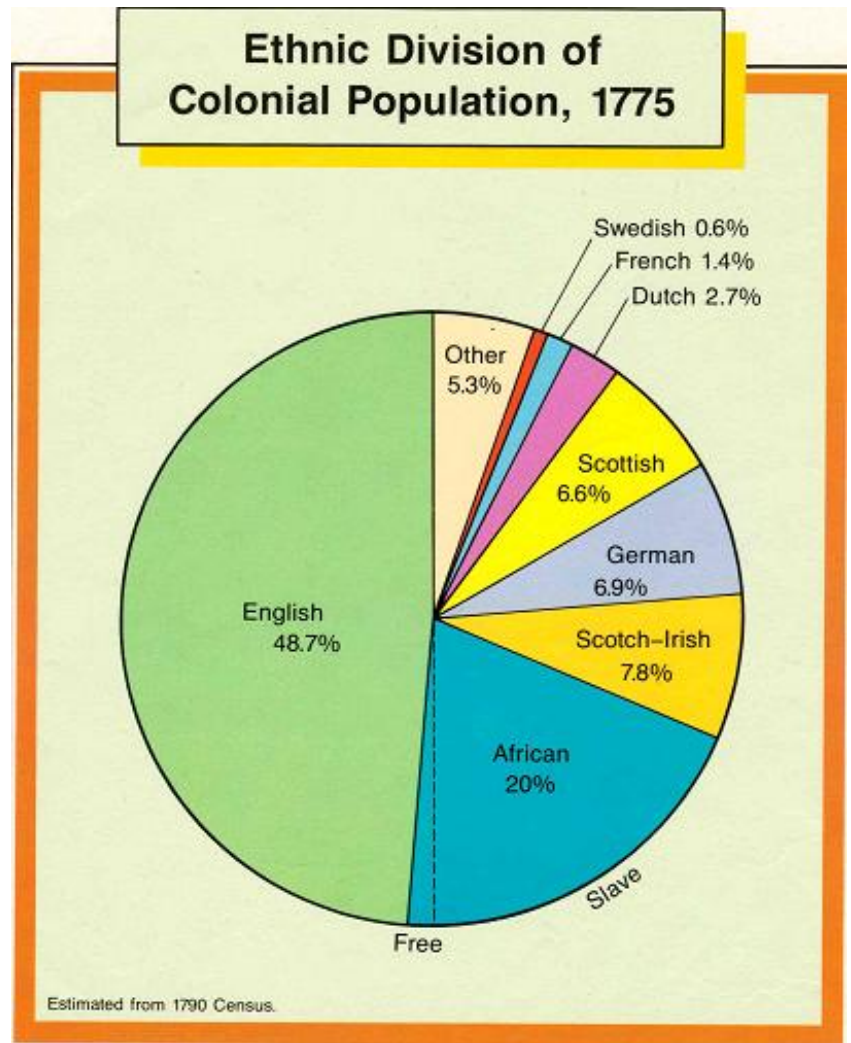
An 18th century bureau and teapot



## Colonial Ethnic Diversity

Estimated Population elements (ca 1785)

- English and Welsh: 66%
- Scottish: 6%
- German: 4.5%
- Dutch: 2%
- Irish: 1.5%
- French: .5%
- African: 20%



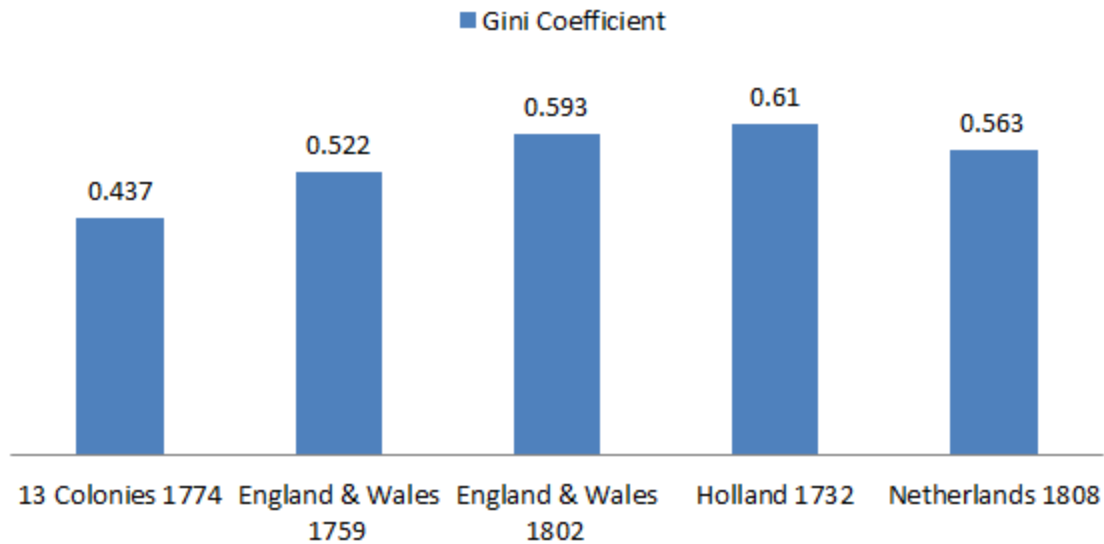


**Virginia House of Burgesses (80% of delegates came from the elite planter class)**

**Thomas Jefferson on the Differences between the Colonial Regions,  
Letter to a Frenchman, 1770s**

"In the North they are cool, sober, laborious, persevering, independent, jealous of their own liberties and just to those of others, interested, chicaning, (cheating) superstitious and hypocritical in their religion. In the South they are fiery, voluptuary, indolent, unsteady, independent, zealous for their own liberties but trampling on those of others, generous, candid, without attachment or pretensions to any religion but that of the heart. An observing traveler without the aid of a quadrant may always know his latitude by the character of the people among whom he finds himself...In Pennsylvania, they are free from the extremes both of vice and virtue."

## Income Distribution Colonial America vs. the World



The chart above compares the original 13 colonies to contemporary England and the Netherlands (including the former Kingdom of Holland) using a popular measure of inequality known as the Gini coefficient. The closer a Gini figure gets to 0, the more evenly a country's income is divided up. The closer they get to 1, the more of a country's wealth goes to its rich. Note: the colonies have the lowest number of the bunch by far. Not only was income more equally divided in the colonies, but Americans across the economic spectrum tended to be richer than their European counterparts. Even slaves, who were sometimes paid a tiny sum for their forced labor in addition to shelter and food, technically earned more than the poorest Europeans. (From a human rights perspective, they were obviously worse off).\* The single big exception to this rule was the top 1 percent: Europe's elite were still wealthier than ours.

## Wealth Distribution in Colonial America

Despite having less inequality than other countries at the same time, the colonies still experienced growing inequality. The chart below shows how commercial growth widened the gap between rich and poor, particularly in cities. Look at the difference between the cities and rural areas (Chester County). How to read this chart: On the first line that says Boston, 1684-1699: the richest 10% of Bostonians had 41.2% of the wealth in Boston. The poorest 30% of Bostonians had just 3.3% of the wealth.

Wealth Distribution in Colonial America		
Percentage of wealth held by the richest 10% and the poorest 30% of the population in two cities and one rural area.		
Year	Richest 10%	Poorest 30%
<b><u>Boston</u></b>		
1684-1699	41.2	3.3
1700-1715	54.5	2.8
1716-1725	61.7	2.0
1726-1735	65.6	1.9
1736-1745	58.6	1.8
1746-1755	55.2	1.8
1756-1765	67.5	1.4
1766-1775	61.1	2.0
<b><u>Philadelphia</u></b>		
1684-1699	36.4	4.5
1700-1715	41.3	4.9
1716-1725	46.8	3.9
1726-1735	53.6	3.7
1736-1745	51.3	2.6
1746-1755	70.1	1.5
1756-1765	60.3	1.1
1766-1775	69.9	1.0
<b><u>Chester County, Pennsylvania</u></b>		
1693	23.8	17.4
1715	25.9	13.1
1730	28.6	9.8
1748	28.7	13.1
1760	29.9	6.3
1782	33.6	4.7

Source: Gary B. Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, 1979.



## Social Class in Public Places

Tavern Keeper Henry Wetherburn catered to Virginia's elite. His tavern provided lodging, food, and entertainment that met the expectations of the most discriminating colonial clientele. With fashionable furniture, fine linens, Chinese porcelain dinnerware, sterling candlesticks, good food, and a cellar full of imported alcohol, Wetherburn offered the comforts of home to his well-heeled guests—and there were as well more modest accommodations for the middling sort. Below are comparisons of accommodations for various social classes at the tavern.



A gentry bed



A middling class bed



Slave "bed"



A Gentry Meal



A Middle Class Meal



A Slave Meal (on a broken plate)

Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744 Maryland physician traveling in Pennsylvania Friday, June 8th [1744; Pennsylvania]. . . .

“I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions. There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlightmen, Methodists, Seventhdaymen, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew...The prevailing topic was politics...They touched a little upon religion, and high words arose among some of the sectaries [members of different religious sects], but their blood was not hot enough to quarrel [fight]...”

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, 1760 English Anglican clergyman visiting the colonies

“The northern colonies . . . are composed of people of different nations, different manners, different religions, and different languages. They have a mutual jealousy of each other, caused by considerations of interest, power, and ascendancy. Religious enthusiasm too, like a smothered fire, is secretly burning in the hearts of the different sectaries [religious sects] that inhabit them, and were it not restrained by laws and superior authority, would soon burst out into a flame of universal persecution...The colonies, therefore, separately considered, are internally weak; but it may be supposed that by an union or coalition they would become strong and formidable [threatening]: but an union seems almost impossible . . .”



Christopher Schultz, Pennsylvania, 1769 German immigrant

“Here we mingled like fish at sea, but peaceably. He who would let it be noticed that he was inimical to another because of religion, would be regarded as a fool, although one frankly tells another his mind...”

## Runaway Wife Ads

*It was very difficult for women to obtain a divorce in the 18th century, and in some places, divorce was illegal. For the most part, a woman would have to prove that their husbands abandoned them. Even violence was not always enough of a reason. So, women fled their husbands, and the husbands took out ads, oftentimes warning other men and refusing to pay any debts their wives might have.*

**WHEREAS** my wife, *Margaret Overstay*, has eloped from my bed and board unlawfully, and without any just cause: I hereby forwarn all persons from harbouring, or trusting her upon my account, as I will pay no debts of her contracting after the date hereof. **CHRISTIAN OVERSTAY.**  
Bucks county, Falls township, July 25.

**W** any just cause of complaint hath eloped from my bed and board, all persons are therefore desired not to trust her on my account, as I am determined not to pay any debt she may contract after this date, unless she returns to her good behaviour. All persons are forwarned, at their peril, harbouring her.  
**MICHAEL M'KEEL.**

December 27th 1706

West Fallowfield Township, Chester County,

July 31, 1784.

**W**HEREAS Ann Liget, my wife, hath eloped from my bed and board, and threatened to do me other damages These are, therefore, to forwarn all persons not to trust her on my account, as I will not pay any debts of her contracting after the above date. And all persons who stand indebted to the said Ann Liget, by bonds, notes, or book accounts, are desired not to pay them to her, or they may expect to dealt with as the law directs.

\*2W.

JAMES LIGET.