

COLONIAL AMERICA (AN OVERVIEW ON THE PAST)

European nations came to the Americas to increase their wealth and broaden their influence over world affairs. The Spanish were among the first Europeans to explore the New World and the first to settle in what is now the United States.

By 1650, however, England had established a dominant presence on the Atlantic coast. The first colony was founded at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1607. Many of the people who settled in the New World came to escape religious persecution. The Pilgrims, founders of Plymouth, Massachusetts, arrived in 1620. In both Virginia and Massachusetts, the colonists flourished with some assistance from Native Americans. New World grains such as corn kept the colonists from starving while, in Virginia, tobacco provided a valuable cash crop. By the early 1700s enslaved Africans made up a growing percentage of the colonial population. By 1770, more than 2 million people lived and worked in Great Britain's 13 North American colonies

REVOLUTIONARY ERA

Defending the Colonies against attack by the French and others had cost the British a great deal of money. As a result, the British had very high taxes in their country. They thus decided to shift some of their financial burden to the colonists. The Stamp Act of 1765, which taxed all legal documents, newspapers and other documents, was met with a great uproar in the Colonies. In 1766, this tax was repealed, but it was just the beginning of the problems between the colonists and the British. The Boston Tea Party in 1773 was an act of revolt against the British and their tax on tea in the Colonies.

‘By the middle of the 18th century, differences in life, thought, and interests had developed between the mother country and the growing colonies. Local political institutions and practice diverged significantly from English ways, while social customs, religious beliefs, and economic interests added to the potential sources of conflict. The British government, like other imperial powers in the 18th century, favored a policy of mercantilism; the Navigation Acts were intended to regulate commerce in the British interest. These were only loosely enforced, however, and the colonies were by and large allowed to develop freely with little interference from England.’

THE NEW NATION

During this time, Americans established their government and two parties emerged--the Federalists and the Republicans. Americans had a lot to deal with during this period. They had to struggle with the need to increase taxes to pay for the American Revolution as well as deal with the French Revolution which divided American support between France and Britain. Under President Jefferson, the country expanded westward with the purchase of the Louisiana territory and the Lewis and Clark expedition. The War of 1812 against Britain, sometimes called the Second War of American Independence, lasted three years. After the war, a mood of nationalism existed as people focused on events and issues at home. However, troubles were brewing, particularly on the topic of slavery.

CIVIL WAR

Conflict over issues of how much control the federal government should have over the states, industrialization, trade, and especially slavery had increased tension between Northern and Southern states. After Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, 11 Southern states seceded (or withdrew) from the Union and set up an independent government--the Confederate States of America. These events led to the outbreak of the Civil War--a brutal, bloody, four-year conflict that left the South defeated and ended slavery at the cost of more than half a million lives.

PROGRESSIVE ERA

In the 1890s, the belief that Americans should avoid getting involved with other countries was slowly fading. Because of its rapid economic and social growth, the U.S. had become a major world power. So when Cuban rebels began a violent revolution against Spanish rule in 1895, and a mysterious explosion sunk the U.S.S. Maine in the Havana harbor, the U.S. entered into what diplomat John Hay called "a splendid little war" with Spain. Although the Spanish-American War ended relatively soon, issues over ownership of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the Hawaiian islands also had to be resolved.

'In this period of booming growth, the nation experienced a dramatic presidential election. The 1896 campaign was perhaps the most fiercely fought contest since Andrew Jackson's time. Republican McKinley represented Eastern conservative mercantile and industrial interests; Democrat William Jennings Bryan stood for Western radical agrarian interests. McKinley was a staunch supporter of high tariffs and the Gold Standard, while Bryan favored easier credit and "free silver." Thirty-six years old, Bryan was known as the "Boy Orator from the River Platte" and compared by some with the river itself -- "a mile wide and an inch deep." His "Cross of Gold" speech became famous: "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," he thundered.

This was a time of both confidence and ferment. In the cities and the states, political "Progressives" were coming to power, experimenting with reforms such as women's suffrage, direct election of United States senators, the initiative, recall, the Australian ballot, primary elections, and laws setting minimum wages, work standards, and regulated rates for common carriers and services. Followers of the Progressive movement believed in the perfectibility of man and his society. It was, said historian Samuel Eliot Morison, "an attempt through government action to curb the arrogance of organized wealth and the wretchedness of poverty amid plenty." Although McKinley certainly was no Progressive, the movement was on the rise; two of the three presidents who followed him were Progressives: Republican Theodore Roosevelt and Democrat Woodrow Wilson.'

The Spanish-American War of 1898

This war was immensely popular with the American people. For the first time since the Civil War, men from the north and the south closed ranks and marched to war, as the bands played the marches of John Philip Sousa. The conflict lasted less than 100 days, only 289 Americans lost their lives in battle, and the United States scored a triumphant victory over Spain. This "splendid little war," as Secretary of State John Hay called it, changed the course of American history.