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COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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As British America became more ethnically and racially diverse, the free colonists became more closely tied to the economy and culture of the mother country. Although colonists often protested some feature of the Navigation Acts, none wanted an abolition of the whole system. Indeed, the colonists benefited from the mother country as a protected market for the produce of their farms and plantations, while the British manufacturers increasingly relied on colonial consumers.

Far from dividing the colonists from the mother country, the Atlantic Ocean drew them closer together during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Thanks to a tripling in the number of transatlantic voyages, colonists became significantly better informed about events in, and ideas from, Britain and especially London. The swelling volume of shipping also boosted the colonial economy, which grew faster than did that of the mother country. From just 4 percent of England's gross domestic product in 1700, the colonial economy blossomed to 40 percent by 1770, assuming a much greater importance to the empire. Thanks to substantial farms and booming trade, most of the free colonists enjoyed a higher standard of living than did the common people in Europe. The rising incomes enabled colonists to purchase more British manufactured goods—which reinforced the economic ties between the mother country and the colonies.

During the eighteenth century, the expanding transatlantic commerce produced a “consumer revolution,” which meant cheaper and more diverse goods in greater abundance. At the same time, demand swelled as colonial consumers sought a wider array of new things, especially Asian tea and spices, and British manufactured goods. Women played a leading role in the consumer revolution, for the imported goods reduced their long and hard labor to spin thread and to weave cloth. By acquiring

fashionable clothing, middle-class women also obtained a new means for self-expression and self-assertion. In vain, old-fashioned newspaper writers denounced an erosion of patriarchal power that allegedly left husbands ruined by their newly aggressive wives.

Romantic mythology miscasts the common colonists as self-sufficient yeomen, who produced all that they needed or wanted. In fact, every colonial farm produced crops for both household needs and the external market. By raising surplus crops for export, the colonists could pay for their imported consumer goods. Between 1720 and 1770 per capita colonial imports increased by 50 percent, and the aggregate value more than tripled from about £450,000 in 1700 to over £1,500,000 in 1750. In sum, the growing American market became critical to the profits and growth of British manufacturing.