

# unit **One**

What were the Founders' basic ideas about government?

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## KEY CONCEPTS

checks and balances

civic virtue

common good

consent of the governed

constitution

constitutional government

natural rights

purpose of government

republican government

separation of powers

social contract

In the spring and summer of 1787, fifty-five men met in Philadelphia. These men knew a great deal about government. They wrote our Constitution. They and many other Americans gained their knowledge by reading and discussing books about history and political philosophy. Political philosophy is the study of basic ideas of government.

Americans also knew about government from their own experience. Many of the men who met in Philadelphia had been leaders in the American colonies when they were ruled by Great Britain. Many were leaders in the new state governments formed after the American Revolution.

The men who wrote the Constitution used their knowledge and experience to create the best kind of government they could. An understanding of their knowledge and experience will give you some insight into why they created the kind of government we have today. It will also help you discover and appreciate the most important ideas in our Constitution.

# What were the British colonies in America like in the 1770s?

# 1

## LESSON PURPOSE

People living in the American colonies in the 1770s were in many ways quite different from the people living in Europe. The colonists brought British laws and customs to America—but they were developing their own way of life as well.

When you finish this lesson, you should be able to explain how the average person in the American colonies lived in the 1770s. You should also be able to explain how life in the colonies influenced people's ideas about good government.



## TERMS TO UNDERSTAND



Founders  
government  
indentured servants  
self-sufficient  
subject

## Why study the British colonies in North America?

We begin our study of the U.S. Constitution by looking back in history. The period is the 1770s. By that time, there had been European colonies established in North America for more than 150 years. Nations that had set up colonies in America included France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Spain.

Our study will focus on the British colonies. It was these thirteen colonies that became the United States of America.

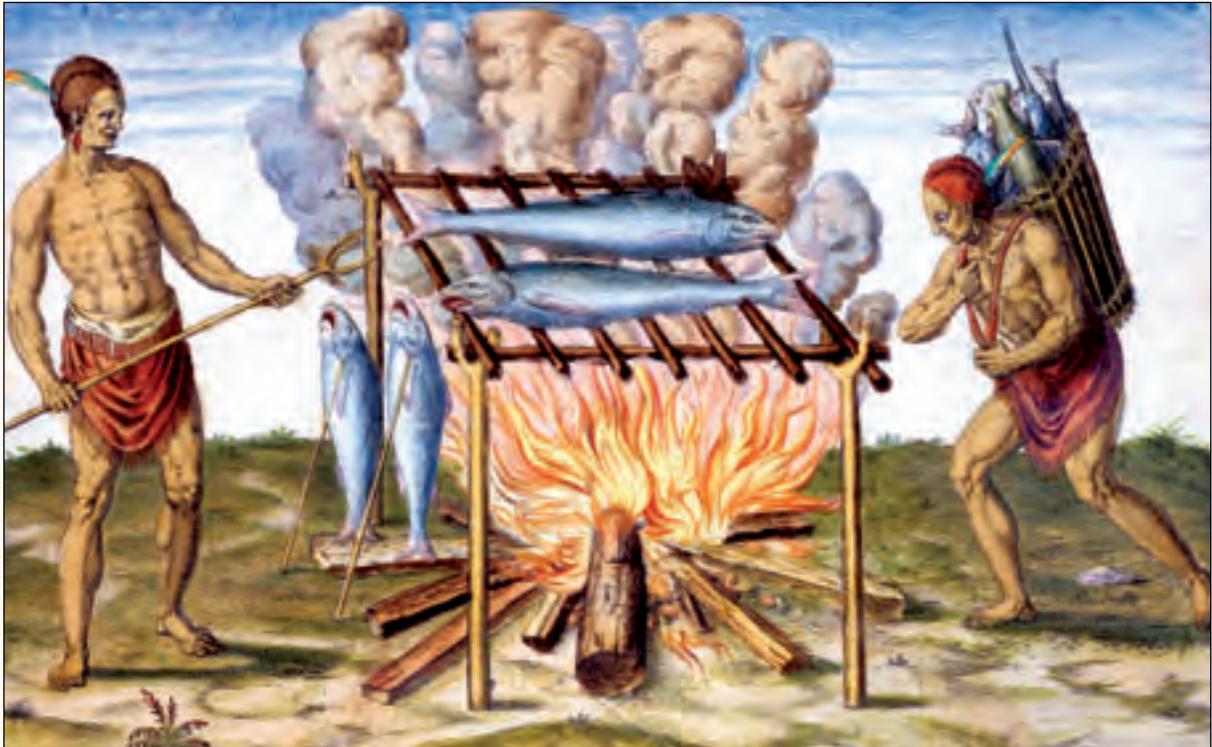
By the 1770s, the British colonies along the eastern coast of North America were well established. The British colonists were subjects of Great Britain. Being a **subject** in this case means being under the rule of a monarch. In 1770, King George III was the ruler of Great Britain. Our nation did not yet exist.

Learning about how the people lived in the British colonies can help us to understand why they developed their ideas about government. When we talk about **government** we mean the people and institutions with authority to make and enforce the laws and manage



*What did it mean to the colonists to be subjects of King George III?*

disputes about laws. People living in the 1770s in the British colonies held certain beliefs about good government that still affect our lives today.



*What was life like for American Indians along the eastern coast of North America?*

## How did American Indians live before the Europeans came?

The Europeans were newcomers to North America. Hundreds of different groups of Native American people had inhabited the continent for thousands of years. Along the eastern seacoast, where the British colonists settled, the native Indian people lived in well-organized tribes. They are known as the Eastern Woodland tribes. They lived by fishing, hunting, gathering wild plants, and tending small crops of corn.

The eastern tribes maintained loose political ties among themselves. In some cases, entire tribes formed leagues so that they could come together to discuss common problems. The best known league was the Iroquois League.

The Iroquois League was made up of five tribes that lived in what today is the state of New York.

## Where did the British colonists settle?

The British colonies in America occupied a large area of land. The colonies stretched twelve hundred miles along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean and ran two hundred miles inland. Between the settled area and the Mississippi River lay a vast, forested country. Few Europeans had explored beyond the area of settlement. The nations of Europe were small in area compared to America. Great Britain was only slightly larger than the colony of New York.

Although the land was expansive, there were few people living on it. In 1790, the population of the colonies was almost 4 million, compared with more than 300 million people living in the United States today.

## How did people in the colonies earn a living?

Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were the largest cities in the colonies. Each had a population of more than 25,000 people. Most people in cities or towns earned their living by working in professions, trades, crafts, or small factories.

Most colonists did not live in cities. They lived in small communities or villages or on farms. Ninety percent of

the colonists were farmers. A typical farm was between 90 and 160 acres. Farm size varied from the small 30-acre plot of the poorest New England farmers to giant Southern plantations with thousands of acres. Not all colonists were independent farmers. Some were hired laborers or craftspeople working on the larger farms.

Outside the cities and small communities, people in the colonies might live as far as ten miles from their nearest neighbor. As a result, they had to develop the knowledge and skills to provide for themselves in order to survive.

The people became self-sufficient. **Self-sufficient** means that people had to provide for their own needs. Not only did the colonists grow their own food,



*How was life on a small, Northern farm different from life on a large, Southern plantation?*

they also wove cloth to make their own clothing. They made their own medicines, built their own homes and barns, and made their furniture and tools. Colonists took the surplus produce from their farms and traded it for goods they could not make.

Although families worked independently, they traded among their neighbors and helped each other. Neighbors got together to build houses and barns. People rarely traveled more than fifty miles from their homes.

A farm family frequently included a hired laborer or an indentured servant. **Indentured servants** were men and women who sold their labor in exchange for the cost of the trip from Europe to the colonies. Farm families often relied on the labor of slaves, especially in the South.

The typical colonial family in the 1770s worked hard and had the highest standard of living in the world. The land was fertile and crops grew well. As a result, the colonists had diets rich in protein and tended to be healthier than people in Europe.

The colonists were also better educated than most Europeans. In fact, a greater percentage of people in the colonies were able to read and write than in any European nation. The most popular publications, other than the Bible, were newspapers. Four times as many newspapers were published in the colonies than in France.

While most colonists lived fairly well, this was not true of everyone. One-fifth of the population was held in slavery. The slaves were people who were brought as laborers to the colonies from different

regions of Africa. Slavery was permitted in all the colonies, North and South. Slavery continued to be practiced until 1865.

## How were the people living in the colonies different from one another?

Most colonists were descended from British or Irish settlers. Therefore, most people in the colonies spoke English. Some colonists did not come from English-speaking countries, however. Settlers came from France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and other countries. All brought with them their own customs and ideas about government and rights.

The colonists also held different religious beliefs. There were many different groups of Protestants; there also were Catholics and Jews. Compared to most European nations of the time, the population of the colonies was diverse.



*What contributions have people from other nations brought to the United States?*

## How did this colonial farmer compare life in America with life in Great Britain?

In the 1700s a French colonist who settled in New York wrote a book that contained a series of letters from a fictional Pennsylvania farmer to his friend in Great Britain. J. Hector St. John was the pen name that Jean de Crèvecoeur used for his book. The letters describe Crèvecoeur's views about life in America. Some sections of these letters follow. Read them and discuss the questions at the end.

*Behold, Sir, a humble American Planter... addressing you from the farther side of the Atlantic....*

*[The English traveler to America] is arrived on a new continent; a modern society... different from what he had hitherto seen. It is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings.... The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe. Some few towns excepted, we are all tillers of the earth.... [Here we are] united by the silken bands of mild government, all respecting the laws, without dreading their power, because they are equitable [fair].*

*[Here the traveler] views not the hostile castle, and the haughty mansion, contrasted with the clay-built hut and miserable cabin, where cattle and men*



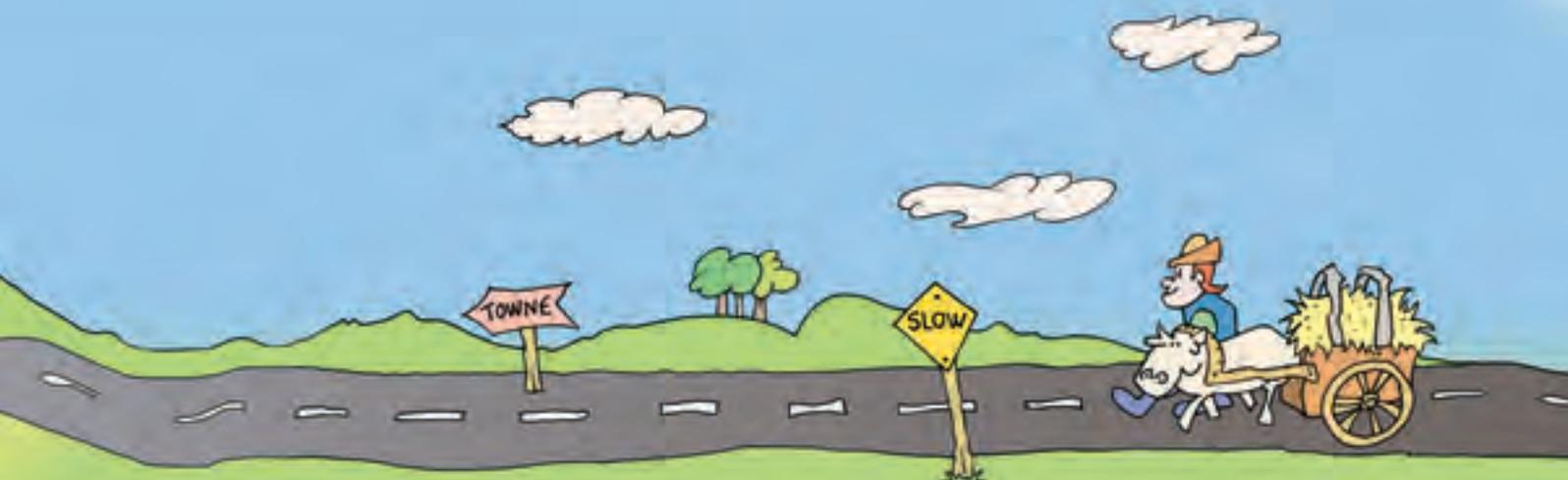
*help to keep each other warm, and dwell in meanness [humility], smoke, and indigence [poverty].... The meanest [most humble] of our log-houses is a dry and comfortable habitation.*

*Lawyer or merchant are the fairest titles our towns afford.... We have no princes, for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free; as he ought to be....*

*Can a wretch...call England or any other kingdom his country? A country that had no bread for him, whose fields procured him no harvest, who met with nothing but the frowns of the rich, the severity of the laws, with jails and punishments; who owned not a single foot of the extensive surface of the planet? No! urged by a variety of motives here they came. Everything has tended to regenerate them; new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system....*

*Formerly they were not numbered in any civil lists of their country, except in those of the poor; here they rank as citizens.*

- 1 What was it that Crèvecoeur liked about life in the colonies?
- 2 What rights did he enjoy?
- 3 Given what you know of Crèvecoeur's experiences, explain why he would or would not favor laws that
  - guarantee each individual the right to own property
  - limit an individual's right to buy and sell goods to anyone he or she chooses
  - give people certain rights because they are wealthy or from a certain family background or group
- 4 How might people in Great Britain react to Crèvecoeur's comparisons of life in America and life in Europe? Explain.



## Why were class differences not important in the colonies?

The colonies were not divided into a few rich people and a large mass of poor people as in most of Europe. In the colonies, there was no royalty and no titled nobility.

The difference between wealthy and poor people was less important in colonial society. A poor person could become wealthy by using knowledge, skills, and opportunities. In many cases, a man who was not part of the wealthy class could be elected to a government position.

## Whose opportunities were limited?

Not all people shared the same opportunities to gain wealth or to become leaders. Usually, only adult white males who owned property could vote. In most colonies, a person had to own fifty acres of land to be qualified to vote. But land was easily available. Therefore, more people in the colonies had the right to vote than in any other country of that time.

Native Americans, blacks, white men without property, and women were typically not allowed to vote or hold office. Women usually were not allowed to own property. Under the law, married couples were considered one person and the husband controlled the property.



*What does this picture tell you about the right to vote in colonial America?*

## What rights did the colonists value?

Since most colonists were self-sufficient, they valued their freedom highly. The people in the colonies thought that their society was superior to the corrupt societies of Europe. Colonists considered themselves to be virtuous, hardworking, simple people.

As subjects of Great Britain, the colonists enjoyed the rights included in the British constitution. You will learn about these rights in Lesson 6. Many



*John Adams, one of our nation's Founders, once said that "revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people before Lexington and Concord." What does this statement mean?*

colonial governments also protected the rights of the colonists. For example, the Massachusetts Body of Liberties of 1641 included the right to trial by jury, free elections, and the right of free men to own property. The state of Pennsylvania guaranteed freedom of belief or conscience.

In the years before the American Revolution, the colonists were very sensitive to any attempts by the British government to limit their rights. After the Revolution, Americans were concerned with protecting the rights they had just fought for.

## Who were the Founders?

Throughout this text, we refer to a group of people as the Founders. The **Founders** were the political leaders of the colonies. They had developed their own ideas about what might be the best kind of government. These ideas were formed from their own experiences and their studies of governments of the past. The Founders led the fight to free the American colonies from British rule. The Founders helped to create the state governments, and their ideas influenced the writing of the Constitution. Some of the Founders' names that you might recognize include John and Abigail Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, Mercy Otis Warren, and George Washington.

## LESSON REVIEW

- 1 In what ways were people's lives in the British colonies of the 1770s different from those of people living in Europe?
- 2 What diversity of people and ideas existed in the British colonies in the 1770s?
- 3 What difference did gender, race, and wealth make to people in colonial society?
- 4 What rights did the colonists value?
- 5 Who were the Founders?

## ACTIVITIES

- 1 Go to your library or search the Internet. Find information about what life in the colonies was like for one of the following groups:
  - children and adolescents
  - indentured servants
  - Native Americans
  - people held in slavery
  - women
- 2 The British colonies in America are generally divided into three regions: the New England Colonies, the Middle Colonies, and the Southern Colonies. Learn more about what life was like in each region. Write a brief summary for your class.
- 3 On an outline map of the United States, mark the British, French, and Spanish colonies with different colors. What states are these colonies now?