

Comparing Settlement Patterns: New Spain, New France, and British North America

The Spanish, French, and English all established major colonial settlements in North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In each colony, settlement revolved around some sort of trade – plantations and mining in New Spain, the fur trade in New France, and tobacco and the family farm in British North America. There were many similarities among these countries' approaches to settlement, as the following reading will show, but also significant differences.

New Spain

The Spanish were the first European country to establish large settlements in the Americas. By the 1570s, the Spanish had established roughly 200 cities and towns in the New World. They had also built many cathedrals, as well as the first universities in the Americas, in Lima, Peru and Mexico City. *New Spain* refers to Spanish possessions in North and Central America and the Caribbean. Most of Spain's territories in South America were part of the Viceroyalty of Peru.

At its greatest extent in 1795, New Spain included Mexico, Panama, several Caribbean islands, and most of the United States west of the Mississippi River. In these territories, the Spanish established large projects to exploit available resources. Throughout the sixteenth century they established sugar plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean and gold mines in Mexico. The Spanish considered using Amerindians as their labor force, but eventually relied on African slaves. Though Amerindians were often used in the Mexican gold mines, European diseases had decimated the Amerindian population, and the Spanish considered Amerindians too savage to be good workers.

The Spanish set up a bureaucracy to govern the large population of Aztecs and Mayans, whom they had conquered. The new government regulated everything from transatlantic commerce to the makeup of individual settlements. The Law of the Indies, which was passed in 1573, decreed that all Spanish settlements be modeled on the plan of a Spanish village. It was required that the center of the town be about five-and-a-half acres, with a church at one end and either a military or government building on the other. This central plaza was to be surrounded by a grid of streets, along which the people lived.

Outside this grid was farmland and grazing land. Some of the land was available for common use, but officers and the nobility were given private land outside the city. Access to water for irrigation was also strictly regulated according to acreage. Amerindians also used irrigation to grow their crops (including corn, squash, and beans), and the Spanish incorporated this knowledge into their practice.

New France

The French colonized North America later than the Spanish; the first French colony, Acadia, was founded in 1604, and Quebec was founded in 1608. In the ensuing decades, the French slowly established more colonies along the St. Lawrence River and in other areas where they traded, but in general, French settlement occurred at a slower rate than Spanish. By 1660 there were about 3000 people living in New France. While by the eighteenth century the French claimed (in modern geographical terms) most of the U.S. Midwest, Louisiana, and Canada, its colonists were never as numerous as the English and Spanish.

At first, French settlement was based upon the fur trade and, to a lesser extent, fishing. Fur hats were immensely popular in Europe in the seventeenth century, and the Baltic fur market had dried up. Trade with the Native Americans gave the French a seemingly endless supply of furs. The trading relationship between the French and the Native Americans was an equitable one: the French needed the Native Americans to provide and cure the furs, while the Native Americans needed the French for European items like metal pots. The new land was also quite unforgiving, and different from the moderate European climate. The Native Americans were therefore very useful to the French settlers, as they taught them how to survive. In comparison with the British, who sought control over their Native American allies, the French remained on equal terms and were therefore a more attractive ally.

All French colonies were under the king's direct control, although in practice this was only nominal because of the distance involved. In practice, each French colony was under the jurisdiction of the governor-general, while the *intendant* was the chief administrator. The colonies operated under French law, called the Code Civil.

As in New Spain, the French colony's settlement patterns were meant to mimic conditions in the mother country. The crown leased large plots of land to local lords, or *seigneurs*, as well as to the Catholic Church, which played a large role in the colony. The majority of settlers rented land from these large landowners; this was called the *seigneurial* system. After the land was surveyed, it was parceled out to settlers in carefully measured and roughly equal linear pieces. In New France, the land was usually in the shape of a long, thin rectangle, and one side bordered the St. Lawrence River.

There were, however, some differences between life in France and life in the new colony. Class distinctions were not as sharp; there were fewer people, and everyone was to a certain extent reliant on others for survival, so rigid distinctions made little sense. It was easier, for instance, for commoners to access the legal system. Since the plots of land given out were relatively large, moreover, settlers had a good chance of becoming prosperous. Finally, the nobility never became established in New France.

New France also had a large gender imbalance – in the 1660s, the ratio of men to women was six to one. Since the first groups of colonists were overwhelmingly men, the colonists did not reproduce as quickly as the English colonists did, as we will see shortly. Some men had children with Native American women; their children, called Métis, often became outcasts from both communities. The gender imbalance was eventually corrected, at least to some extent, when Louis XIV sent boatloads of women

to the new colony. By the 1700s, the population of New France had increased to around 15,000.

French colonies in the Caribbean were established on a much different basis than New France – like the Dutch and Spanish, the French established plantation-based colonies there for sugar and food. The most important French colony was Saint-Domingue, modern-day Haiti. Other colonies included Martinique, which is still a French territory today. As in the Dutch and Spanish colonies, French sugar plantations relied heavily on the labor of African slaves.

British North America – Virginia and New England

English colonies in British North America – what would become the United States – followed two very different settlement models. In the southern colonies in Virginia and the Carolinas, the colonies used a plantation model. The settlements of New England and the Middle Colonies – Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, and Delaware – in contrast, operated on a family-farm model. Both drew large numbers of colonists in their first century; by 1700, the English colonies had a combined 100,000 inhabitants.

Like the French, the English hoped that they would find gold and silver in their American colonies, as the Spanish had. The Virginia Company was founded in 1606 on this premise, but the colonists found no precious metals when they arrived. Soon the colonists began growing tobacco, which they quickly produced in enormous quantities. By 1617 the settlers were already producing 70,000 pounds of tobacco a year; on the eve of the 1776 American Revolution, production had reached 100,000,000 pounds a year.

Tobacco was very labor intensive: it took nine months of work each year to cultivate. Plantation owners therefore relied on indentured servitude and African slave labor to do the work. To attract laborers to the new colony, the “headright” system was established. Anyone who paid the passage of a worker received 50 acres of land. Settlers who could afford to pay for their own passage received the land for themselves, but they were in the minority; 75–85 percent of migrants were sold into servitude to reimburse the costs of the voyage. In those cases, the people who paid each migrant’s passage to Virginia received the 50 acres. This created an opportunity for enterprising Englishmen to profit from the labor situation, if they could find men to send to North America. They often did so by making false promises of riches, by trickery, or even by abduction. Indentured servitude carried great risk. From 1607 to 1624, 80 percent of the colonists in Virginia died; Indian raids and the effects of the strange new ecosystem were among the many perils of life in the Americas. Nonetheless, the strong demand for tobacco in Europe kept the colony running, and the population grew quickly. In the 1650s three more colonies were established, and by 1660 there were 24,000 colonists – eight times the population of New France.

Settlement in New England differed from the Virginian model. Its focus on the family farm and, especially, on town life, resembled French and Spanish settlement patterns in many ways. The Puritans who settled in Massachusetts built their settlements around the center of the town. As in the early Spanish colonies, pastureland was located outside these clustered settlements. Each family received

100–150 acres to farm, though families often preserved much of the land to be divided among descendants. Daily life in the colony revolved around religion and family. The numbers of men and women were more balanced than in any of the other European colonies, as settlers were more likely to be whole families. Twenty thousand settlers arrived in New England in the 1630s and 1640s, and as towns grew they began to operate as trading hubs. Boston, the first settlement in the colony, quickly thrived as a seaport, and the settlers began to move westward and establish other colonies.

As in New France, Native American populations helped the English settlers stay alive; Native Americans gave supplies to the new arrivals and taught them to survive. Unlike the French, however, the English did not treat the Native Americans well in return. Settlers in Virginia would occasionally shoot at Native Americans without provocation, and as the colonies expanded, tensions grew. In 1622, an attack by the Powhatan, who had previously controlled the land under cultivation, killed 347 colonists. English reprisals to Powhatan attacks eventually resulted in the near-elimination of the tribe by 1650. In New England, the Native Americans and colonists were almost constantly at war.

Summary

- For the most part, economic opportunity was a common motive. Once the Spanish found gold and silver in the Americas, the other European powers wanted some too. On an individual level, each colony gave settlers the opportunity to have a better life.
- Most settlements revolved around town and church. Only the settlers in Virginia, who lived on large plantations, were widely dispersed.
- The populations in New Spain and British North America grew quickly; New France lagged well behind in population growth.
- Settlers generally dealt very harshly with the Native Americans. In New Spain, those who did not die of European diseases were put to work as slaves. English colonists in both New England and Virginia fought regularly with the tribes on their borders. Only the French managed an uneasy equality based on mutual dependence in trade and survival.