

History  
UNFOLDING

# DAILY LIFE IN COLONIAL AMERICA



MindSparks  
CHALLENGING STUDENTS TO THINK HISTORICALLY

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# Introduction

## Daily Life in the 13 Colonies

In the 1600s and 1700s, thousands of people arrived in North America from Europe. Except for African slaves, most came willingly in search of a better life. A few came hoping to get rich and return home quickly. Far more came to start life over in the colonies. However, few settlers planned to create an entirely new society. Religious sects such as the Puritans did hope to establish more godly communities. Yet even they brought with them their past knowledge and assumptions, and they set about building villages and colonial societies based on what was already familiar to them.

Nevertheless, they did create something new. In adapting to conditions along the Atlantic coast of North America, they developed new ways of life and new ideas about religion, society, family, work and citizenship. In so doing, they began to lay the foundations of a new nation. That new nation evolved slowly at first. Its form and its values emerged out of the way in which the colonists adjusted day by day to their new circumstances. It is that daily life that this booklet seeks to help students better understand and appreciate.

The twelve illustrations in this booklet focus on several key areas of daily life in the 13 American colonies. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three of the illustrations to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **Settlements**

The illustrations in this section call attention to two things—the initial contacts between Europeans and Native Americans, and the early villages and towns the colonists established.

### **Religion**

The focus here is primarily on the Puritan beliefs and practices of most New Englanders. Nevertheless, themes touched on—the importance of theological concerns, or missionary work among the Indians—were central matters to nearly all the colonists.

### **Family Life**

The family was the central institution in colonial life. It was the basic unit of economic production, the key social “safety net” for most people, and the main educator, as well as a household and a home.

### **Work**

Work was primarily small in scale and based on the household. Except for large-scale plantations in the southern colonies, farms tended to be small, primitive and geared mainly to produce what the household itself needed. Even in the towns, much of the crafts work took place in small shops connected to the workers’ own homes. Colonial society was largely a society of small farmers, traders, shopkeepers, and craftsmen, along with a small class of wealthier professionals, merchants and planters.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

## Daily Life in Colonial America

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### OBJECTIVES

1. Students will better understand the nature of the earliest communities established by colonists in North America.
  2. Students will discuss the first contacts between colonists and Native Americans.
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# Settlements

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*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### Illustration 1

This 1635 scene shows a first meeting between English colonists and a group of Native Americans. The illustration is of Roger Williams landing at what would come to be the colony of Rhode Island. Williams had just been banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony in part for his support for religious toleration. Williams also called on settlers to accept and live in peace with all of the Native American tribes. This illustration shows him greeting some Indians as he gets off the boat. The scene is a hopeful one. Each side seems to be making gestures of peace and friendship toward the other. Some might see this drawing as misleading, given the harsh way Indians and settlers often dealt with one another. Yet many of the first contacts between the newcomers and the original inhabitants in America actually were quite friendly. Trade and cooperation were as common as mistrust and warfare in these first contacts.

#### Illustration 2

These images give an idea of the simple life colonists lived in the earliest villages they built. The images also illustrate the communal and religious values of those settlers. Notice the stark simplicity of the Pennsylvania church in the upper right. Notice also the sense of a close-knit Pilgrim community conveyed by the 1893 painting on the left. The centrally located church (and meetinghouse) was a key part of the ideal the New England Puritans and many other colonial groups hoped to realize in the New World. Of course, not all colonial settlements were like this—especially the large plantations and small farms in the Southern colonies.

#### Illustration 3

Even the largest “cities” in the American colonies were small by our standards today—as this street scene of Philadelphia in 1800 makes clear. Yet these colonial towns were very important. They were centers of trade and of other kinds of contact with the outside world. They were places where merchants and other wealthy leaders of colonial society gathered. And they were places where different groups could mingle, where people could learn about the world beyond the colonies, and where they could exchange views and hear new ideas.

## Lesson 1—Settlements

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### **Discussing the Illustration**

1. This drawing drawing shows Roger Williams greeting some Native Americans as he lands in what would come to be Rhode Island. Briefly, explain who Roger Williams was and why he moved to Rhode Island.
2. This scene is one of several we have showing a first meeting between English colonists and a group of Native Americans. Notice the gestures Roger Williams is making as he gets off the boat. Look also at the pipe the Indian hands him and the expressions on the faces of the other people in this scene. From all of these details, what view does this picture give of what this first meeting was like? What do the two groups seem to be feeling about one another? What do they seem to want to have happen?
3. What point about Roger Williams does the drawing help to make? From what you know about Williams, is this point true? Why or why not? In what ways is drawing accurate in the idea it presents of a first meetings between Europeans and Indians? In what ways is it inaccurate?

### **Follow-up Activities**

1. In 1635, the Massachusetts Bay colony banished Roger Williams. Read a biography of Williams. Pay particular attention to the arguments he had with the Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Also pay attention to the key ideas he followed as the leader of Rhode Island. Based on what you learn, write a brief essay about this illustration. In the essay, explain why you think the illustration does or does not present an accurate view of what Roger Williams was like.
2. Do some research in the library by looking through books with photos, drawings and other illustrations of past times in U.S. history. Find as many illustrations as you can showing Europeans and American settlers meeting with Native Americans. Make copies of these illustrations and use them in a bulletin board display called "First Contacts: How We Have Pictured Them." Write your own ideas about the illustrations and include these in your bulletin board display.

## Settlements

# Illustration 3



Courtesy of the Library of Congress