

The Transformation of European Society

GARY B. NASH

In all, Americans lived for 169 years under British rule. To place the colonial era in chronological perspective, this is the number of years that elapsed between John Quincy Adams's election to the presidency in 1824 and Bill Clinton's inauguration as president in 1993. In this selection, Gary Nash examines some of the momentous economic, social, and religious changes that occurred in North America during the last decades of British rule. In 1650, as Nash points out elsewhere, the population of the English colonies ran to about fifty thousand — "about the same as the daytime population of a large university campus today." But by 1750, thanks to a continuous stream of immigration from Europe and Africa, the colonial population had leaped to 1,125,000, including 240,000 blacks. As Nash says, this remarkable growth, unparalleled anywhere in the world at that time, encouraged Benjamin Franklin to speculate that one day the population of colonial America would surpass that of England itself.

By the eighteenth century, as Nash says, the colonists had transformed the European attitudes and social structures they had brought with them into something uniquely American. This "transformation of European society" had much to do with the abundance and availability of land in North America, which allowed quite ordinary people to acquire real estate and aspire to fortunes and higher stations in life. As Nash points out, two different forms of agricultural society emerged in eighteenth-century English America. There was the farming and artisan society of the North, where slaves were few and most free men — those who were not indentured servants — could boast of owning at least a fifty-acre farm. Here the Protestant work ethic, which celebrated hard work, thrift, and individual economic enterprise, took hold. In the South,

by contrast, a slave-based, planter-dominated society emerged. "But," Nash warns us, "the usual picture of a Southern plantation society made up of immensely wealthy men exploiting the labor of huge gangs of black slaves is badly overdrawn." He observes that perhaps 40 percent of southern white men were non-slaveholding farm workers or tenant farmers—those who rented or leased their land. And many more were independent small farmers, often called yeomen, who raised the same crops as the planters did. Only about 5 percent of southern white landowners were wealthy planters—those who owned twenty or more slaves and sizable plantations. Even so—and this is a crucial point—owning slaves was a potent status symbol, and the slave-holding planter was the role model in the South, the "ideal" to which other white men aspired. And planters and yeomen alike "were as avid in the pursuit of wealth and material comfort" as were their neighbors in the North.

The remarkable growth of the English colonies, as Nash says, had dramatic consequences. First, it destroyed "the utopian dream" of the seventeenth-century colonists that communities should consist of people who worked for the common good, not simply for individual success. Driven by the Protestant work ethic and apparently unlimited opportunity, eighteenth-century colonists celebrated the individual pursuit of wealth, the idea of every man for himself. As a result, Nash says, "the individual replaced the community as the conceptual unit of thought." Thus was born the "democratic personality, brash, assertive, individualistic, and competitive." And that personality would shape the entire course of American history and thought.

Second, Nash says, economic and population growth—and the emphasis on aggressive individualism—altered the very structure of colonial society. The traditional notion of a God-ordained "hierarchy in human affairs" gave way to a more fluid social structure and the ideal of egalitarianism, that is, of "the equality of all men." As Nash points out, most Americans "below the elite free whites" believed that they were creating a society free of class rule. But this, as Nash says, was the ideal, not the reality, of eighteenth-century colonial America. In reality, the abundance of opportunity allowed the rich to get richer at the expense of the poor and led to a concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. Such "aggrandizement of wealth" was to haunt America's capitalist system for generations to come.

In the last section of his essay, Nash analyzes the great religious and social upheaval in the 1730s and 1740s known as the Great Awakening, which he sees as a cultural crisis that resulted from decades of economic and social change and from the fear that American churches, as William McLoughlin put it, "no longer met the spiritual needs of the people." The Awakening was thus a rebellion against religious authority and dogma. As another historian said, it was "a search for new sources of authority, new principles of action, new foundations of hope." It unleashed "the greatest flow of religious energy since the Puritan movement" in Europe in the six-

teenth and seventeenth centuries and transformed the structure and attitudes of colonial religion into something uniquely American. Among the "middling sort," or middle class, the Awakening represented something more. It represented "a groundswell of individualism" and skepticism of authority that anticipated the American Revolution.

GLOSSARY

DAVENPORT, JAMES Itinerant preacher during the Great Awakening.

EDWARDS, JONATHAN Massachusetts Congregational minister who rejected the new religious ideas of "easy salvation for all" and preached traditional Calvinist doctrine — the sovereignty of God, the innate depravity of people, the notion of the elect, and predestination.

EGALITARIANISM The doctrine of "the equality of all men."

FREEHOLDER One who owned a landed estate for life.

GREAT AWAKENING Protestant revivals that swept the colonies from 1725 to 1770. The movement was more than just a religious one. It was "a profound cultural crisis that had been building for several generations," a crisis that demanded "a thorough reconsideration of the Christian ethic" as it had come to be known in 1730s America. The movement meant different things to different classes of people, but on the whole "it produced the greatest flow of religious energy since the Puritan movement a century before."

INNER LIGHT The Quaker belief that one can find spiritual understanding and guidance through the light within one's self, which the Holy Spirit provides.

ITINERANT PREACHER One who traveled from place to place, spreading the word of God.

PLANTER Wealthy southerner who owned a sizable plantation and twenty or more slaves.

WHITEFIELD, GEORGE English Methodist leader who helped ignite the Great Awakening in America.

YEOMAN FARMER Small farmer, or lesser freeholder.



LAND, GROWTH, AND CHANGING VALUES

Out of the combination of fertile land, a pool of bound laborers, white, black, and red, and the ambition of thousands of small farmers and artisans who labored independently, two variants of agricultural society emerged in eighteenth-century North America. In the North, small communities made up of farmers and artisans dotted the landscape. New Englanders engaged in mixed farming, which included farming the forests for timber used in barrels and ships, and farming the offshore waters for fish that provided one of the staples in the diet of the fast-growing slave population of the West Indies. The Middle Colonies specialized in producing corn, wheat, beef, and pork. By mid-eighteenth century they were provisioning not only the West Indies but also parts of Spain, Portugal, and England. Slaves were few in number in most of the Northern communities, rarely representing more than 5 percent of the population. A large percentage of free men owned land, and, though differences in ability and circumstances led gradually to greater social and economic stratification, the truly rich and abjectly poor were few in number and the gap between them was small in comparison to European society. Most men lived to acquire a farm of at least fifty acres. They extracted from the soil a modest income that allowed for security from want and provided a small inheritance for their children.

In the Southern colonies, where tobacco, rice, indigo, and timber products predominated, many yeomen farmers also struggled independently, al-

though they were more frequently dispersed across the land than clustered in villages. These men have been far less noticed by historians than the plantation owners with slaves and indentured servants who lived along the rivers and streams that flowed from the Piedmont through the coastal plain to the ocean. But the usual picture of a Southern plantation society made up of immensely wealthy men exploiting the labor of huge gangs of black slaves is badly overdrawn. Perhaps as many as 40 percent of the Southern white males worked as tenant farmers or agricultural laborers, and of the remaining men who owned land, about two out of every three in the Chesapeake region worked farms of two hundred acres or less. In North Carolina farms were even smaller and men of real wealth rarer. In South Carolina the opposite was true; slaveholding was more widespread, plantations tended to be larger, and planters of substantial wealth represented a larger proportion of the population. As early as 1726 in St. George's Parish, 87 of 108 families held slaves. . . .

On the whole, probably not more than 5 percent of the white landowners were wealthy enough by the mid-eighteenth century to possess a plantation worth £1,000 — not too different from the North. Similarly, those owning large numbers of slaves were not as numerous as we commonly think. The number of Southern slaves increased rapidly in the eighteenth century, rising from about 20,000 in 1700 to 240,000 in 1750. But a majority of white adult males held no slaves at all at mid-century, and those who operated plantations with more than twenty slaves probably did not exceed 10 percent of the white taxables. South Carolina excepted, the South throughout the pre-Revolutionary period was dominated numerically by small landowners whose holdings, if perhaps twice the size of the average New England farm, were not more than half again as large as the typical farm in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, or New York.

Nonetheless, the ideal in the South, if not the reality, was the large plantation where black slaves would make the earth yield up profits sufficient to

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support the leisured life. Statistically speaking, not many white colonists in the South achieved the dream. But that is what people worked for, and they came to identify the quest for material comfort with the exploitation of African slave labor in an era when the Northern colonists were beginning to phase out white bound labor and turning to a market economy where both goods and labor were freely exchanged.

The Protestant work ethic, which purportedly propelled people upward by inculcating a life of frugality, industriousness, and highly rationalized economic activity, perhaps operated less compellingly in the psyches of Southern colonists than in their Northern counterparts. But the abundant, fertile land of the South and the wider availability of slaves after 1690 provided all the incentive necessary for an aggressive, competitive society to develop. Much folklore about Southern cavaliers reposing under magnolia trees has been handed down in the history books, but in the eighteenth century European colonizers in the South were as avid in the pursuit of wealth and material comfort as European colonizers in the North. If the warm climate of the South bred languor, it was also true that farmers in the South had no long frozen winters when there was little to do but mend harnesses and chop wood. The typical New England farm produced just one crop each year, but a South Carolina rice or indigo plantation produced two. Moreover, the restraints of a New England community orientation and the Puritan bias against the accumulation of wealth which was not disposed of in socially useful ways never hindered entrepreneurial activity in the South. Organized religion was only shallowly rooted in most of the Southern colonies, and the community orientation never took hold because communities themselves were few and far between.

Paradoxically, one of the effects of the growth and success of the colonies in eighteenth-century British America was to shatter the utopian dream of the first generation that communities could be built where men and women worked for the commonweal, not

only for themselves. The Puritan work ethic and an atmosphere of seemingly limitless opportunity encouraged men to work arduously at their callings. That was to the good. And their labors had generally been rewarded with success. So was that. But living where the ratio of people to land was so favorable compared to the societies from which they came, many colonists developed an aggressive outlook that patterned their behavior. What was to hold a man back in these uncharted expanses of land and unclaimed river valleys, as soon as the Indians were gone? In Europe, the absence of uncultivated lands ripe for exploitation and the grinding poverty that enshrouded the lives of the great mass of people produced in the peasant consciousness a very low level of expectations. "The frontier zone between possibility and impossibility barely moved in any significant direction, from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century," writes Fernand Braudel. But it moved in North America. The new concept was of a society where anything was possible. A competitive, entrepreneurial spirit began to take hold.

Religion and commitment to community, which acted as brakes on competitive, individualistic behavior, were by no means dead in the eighteenth century. But in general, piety, in terms of defining one's life as a preparation for the afterlife, declined greatly. Even in the seventeenth century Roger Williams had deplored the "depraved appetite after the great vanities, dreams, and shadows of this vanishing life, great portions of land, land in this wilderness, as if men were in as great necessity and danger for want of great portions of land, as poor, hungry seamen have, after a sick and stormy, a long and starving passage." In the eighteenth century land became ever more regarded not simply as a source of livelihood but a commodity to be bought and sold speculatively as a means of building a fortune. It was Franklin's little how-to-do-it best-seller, *The Way to Wealth*, that caught the spirit of the aggressive entrepreneurial eighteenth century. The brakes on economic ambition had been suddenly removed, and

with the decline of fervid Puritanism in the eighteenth century, there was little left to restrain predatory instincts in those who were eager to pit themselves against their fellows in the pursuit of material gain. "Every man is for himself," lamented a prominent Philadelphian in 1706, only a generation after Penn had planted the seed of his "holy experiment." Two generations later the lieutenant-governor of New York, who had grown up in the colony, put it more explicitly: "The only principle of life propagated among the young people," wrote Cadwallader Colden, "is to get money and men are only esteemed according to what they are worth—that is the money they are possessed of." A contemporary in Rhode Island echoed the thought when he wrote "A Man who has Money here, no matter how he came by it, he is Everything, and wanting [lacking] that he's a meer Nothing, let his Conduct be ever so reproachable."

As these acquisitive values took hold, the individual replaced the community as the conceptual unit of thought. The advice of the ancestors, such as the Puritan minister John Cotton, to "goe forth, every man that goeth, with a public spirit, looking not on your owne things only," or Winthrop's maxim that "the care of the publick must oversway all private respects," carried less and less weight in eighteenth-century society. The conquest of the wilderness and its inhabitants had proceeded far enough, men had shown enough adaptability and endurance for a hundred years, and the future possibilities seemed so great that a mental set developed in which colonial Americans appeared bent upon proving wrong the Elizabethan poet, John Donne, who counseled that no man could survive as an island unto himself. Having gained something, the typical colonist wanted more. A French visitor, who took up residence in New York, described this psychological reorientation:

An European, when he first arrives, seems limited in his intentions, as well as in his views; but he very suddenly al-



In eighteenth-century British America, "the individual replaced the community as the conceptual unit of thought." When a European first arrived, wrote a New York resident, "he no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country." This portrait by John Singleton Copley captures the individualistic spirit of eighteenth-century colonial America. (Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

ters his scale. . . . He no sooner breathes our air than he forms schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country. . . . He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a man, because he is treated as such; . . . he begins to forget his former servitude and dependence. . . .

Paradoxically, this transformation of attitudes, while it helped promote phenomenal growth and unleashed economic energies, led toward material

success that contained within it the seeds of social strain. The demand for land east of the Appalachian Mountain barrier grew rapidly after 1740, as the population rose rapidly through immigration and natural increase. Especially in New England, ungranted land in the coastal region was a thing of the past, and the division and redivision of original land grants among sons and grandsons had progressed as far as it could go without splitting farms into unviably small economic units. New land — on the Maine frontier, in western Massachusetts and Connecticut, across the Appalachians in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas — was the obvious solution to the problem of overcrowding. With the saturation of the Eastern coastal plain making the lands of the interior more attractive, land companies were formed in the mid-eighteenth century. They laid claim, however flimsy, to the valuable Western lands, their investors understanding the enormous appreciation in value that would occur as the next generation came of age and sought *lebensraum* to the west.* But before a westward movement could begin, interior Indian peoples, as well as the French and Spanish, had to be overcome. . . .

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CHANGING SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Population growth and economic development, carried on for a century and a half by aggressive and opportunistic individuals, changed both the structure of colonial society and the attitudes of the people toward social structure — but changed them in opposite directions. Seventeenth-century Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic accepted the naturalness of hierarchy in human affairs, the inevitability of poverty, and the right of those in the upper stratum

of society to rule those below them. The belief was general that social gradations and internal subordination were not only sanctioned by God but were also essential to the maintenance of social stability and cohesion. Therefore care was taken to differentiate individuals by dress, by titles, in social etiquette, and even in penalties imposed in criminal proceedings. Puritans, for example, did not simply file into church on Sunday mornings and occupy the pews in random fashion. Instead, each seat was assigned according to the social rank of the person in the community. "Dooming the seats," as the assignment process was aptly called, was the responsibility of a church committee, which used every available yardstick of social respectability — age, parentage, social position, service to the community, and wealth — in drawing up a seating plan for the congregation. Puritans never entered their church without being reminded where they stood in the ranks of the community.

In spite of the philosophical commitment to hierarchy, the early European immigrants in North America were notably undifferentiated in their social makeup. Immigrant society was strongly lower-middle class in its composition, and the wide availability of land, combined with the lack of opportunities to amass great fortunes (when one had only his own labor and that of his wife, children, and a servant or two) kept the spectrum of wealth relatively narrow throughout most of the seventeenth century. Even in the cities, where the redistribution of wealth proceeded the fastest, the dawn of the eighteenth century witnessed a colonial society that was overwhelmingly middle class in character. In the Hudson River Valley and in the Southern colonies a handful of large plantation owners had made their mark, but the largest slave owners in Virginia at the beginning of the eighteenth century still owned fewer than one hundred slaves and not more than a handful of men had as much as £2,000 to leave to their heirs. As late as 1722 one of Philadelphia's richest merchants died with personal possessions worth just over £1,000 — a sizeable estate but unimpressive by European standards.

**Lebensraum* means territorial expansion to extend trade — Ed.

In the eighteenth century, and especially in the half-century before the Revolution, the customary commitment to hierarchy and deference waned at the same time that stratification in society was increasing. Social attitudes and social structure were moving in opposite directions. Below the elite free whites developed the ideal of egalitarianism. The middling sort of people, wrote a Philadelphian in 1756, "enjoy and are fond of freedom, and the meanest among them thinks he has a right to civility from the greatest." Such comments were common. The Frenchman, Crèvecoeur, was surprised to see hired workers who "must be at your table and feed . . . on the best you have," and the schoolteacher Philip Fithian wrote of "labourers at the tables and in the parlours of their betters enjoying the advantage, and honour of their society and conversation."

Europeans judged what they saw against what they had known at home and thus sometimes exaggerated the degree of egalitarianism that they thought they saw. But it was true that most American colonists believed they were creating a society where a wealthy aristocracy did not dominate and no masses of poor whites were ground into the dust. The ideal was a rough economic equality where each person would have enough and a social equality "in which invidious discriminations would be abolished." When Benjamin Franklin toured the English countryside in 1772 he was appalled at what he saw and raised thanks that America was different. He described "landlords, great noblemen, and gentlemen, extremely opulent, living in the highest affluence and magnificence" alongside "the bulk of the people, tenants, extremely poor, living in the most sordid wretchedness, in dirty hovels of mud and straw, and clothed only in rags." Franklin could only shake his head and take solace in the knowledge that North America was different. Ignoring Indians and Africans, he wrote: "I thought often of the happiness of New England, where every Man is a Freeholder, has a Vote in publick Affairs, lives in a tidy, warm House, has plenty of good Food and fewel, with

whole cloaths from Head to Foot, the Manufacture perhaps of his own Family." The German Mittelberger summed up the twin ideals of economic equality and democratic scorn for authorities and authoritarian institutions. Pennsylvania, he said, was "heaven for farmers, paradise for artisans, and hell for officials and preachers."

All these commentators occupied favorable positions in society, which may account for the fact that they were describing not the reality but the ideal of colonial life. The reality, in fact, was that eighteenth-century society, even for white colonists, was moving away from the ideal. As the old deferential attitudes gave way to brash, assertive, individualistic modes of thought and behavior — what would become known as "the democratic personality" — society became more stratified, wealth became less evenly distributed, and impressively rich and truly impoverished classes emerged. Population growth and economic development in the eighteenth century made rich men of those with capital to speculate in land, buy slaves and servants, or participate in trade. The aggrandizement of wealth became clearly apparent in all sections of the country — North and South, rural and urban. In Boston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston stately townhouses rose as testimony to the fortunes being acquired in trade, shipbuilding, and land speculation. Probably the last of these was the most profitable of all. "It is almost a proverb," wrote a Philadelphian in 1767, "that Every great fortune made here within these 50 years has been by land." By the late colonial period, it was not unusual to find merchant-land speculators with estates valued at £10,000–£20,000. Even in the rural areas of the North, wealthy farmers amassed estates worth £4,000–£5,000. In the South, plantation magnates built even larger fortunes, for the rapid importation of African slaves after 1720 accelerated the rate at which profits could be extracted from the cultivation of tobacco or rice. By the eve of the Revolution, the great planters of the Chesapeake region, men such as Charles Carroll,

Robert "King" Carter, and William Byrd, had achieved spectacular affluence. Their estates, valued at £100,000 or more, were equivalent in purchasing power to a fortune of about six million dollars in 1990. It was not unusual to see 300 to 400 slaves toiling on such plantations, whereas in the late seventeenth century the largest slaveholder on the continent had no more than 50 bound laborers.

While the rapid increase in population and large-scale capital investment in land and slaves enabled a small number of men to accumulate fortunes that would have been noteworthy even in English society, the development of colonial society also created conditions in which a growing number of persons were finding it difficult to keep bread on the table and wood in the fireplace. This was especially true in the cities, where the social stratification proceeded most rapidly. All the major cities built almshouses and workhouses in the second quarter of the century to provide for those who could not care for themselves—the aged, indigent, sick, insane, and orphaned. Between 1725 and 1760, however, the poor in the cities increased more rapidly than the urban population as a whole, and after about 1750 poverty was no longer confined to the old or physically depleted. . . .

Inexorably the expanding economy and the individualistic values incorporated in the society tended to favor the aggressive and able in their drive toward material success. The greater the opportunities—a primary characteristic of a democratic society—the greater the gulf became between the rich and the poor. The growth of cultural and political egalitarianism was accompanied by, and indirectly sanctioned, the decline of economic equality. An open society with ample opportunities in the eighteenth century for entrepreneurship, and with relatively few restraints imposed by government, led, paradoxically, to a concentration of economic power in the hands of a thin upper layer of society. Becoming a society in which the individual and not the common weal

was the central concern, the white population of colonial North America was transforming what they thought to be uniquely American into what resembled more and more the European conditions they had fled.

The differing abilities of men to manipulate their economic environment, capitalize on the freedom to exploit white and black labor, and obtain title to Indian land were eventually recorded on the tax lists of the community where each man's wealth was set alongside that of his neighbors. Colonial historians have scrutinized those tax lists that have survived and have found that population growth and economic development led toward a less even distribution of wealth and an increase in the proportion of those without property in virtually every community. The change occurred slowly in rural areas and proceeded more rapidly in the seaboard centers of commercial activity.

In the rural town of Northampton, Massachusetts, for example, the upper 10 percent of property owners controlled 25 percent of the taxable wealth in 1676 and slowly increased their control of the community's assets to 34 percent in 1759. At the same time the proportion of the community's taxable property owned by the bottom third of the society remained steady at about 10 percent. . . .

In the cities the rate of change was far greater. Boston's upper tenth in 1687 held 46 percent of the taxable property while the lowest 30 percent had a meager 2.6 percent of the wealth. Four generations later, in 1771, the top tenth had 63 percent of the wealth; the lowest three-tenths had virtually nothing—a mere tenth of one percent of the community's taxable resources. Economic polarization in Boston, where the population was static after 1735 and economic recession hit hard at many elements of the community, was duplicated in vigorously expanding Philadelphia. In 1693, little more than a decade after settlement, the wealthiest tenth laid claim to 46 percent of the city's wealth. Three quarters of a century

later, in 1772, they possessed 71 percent of the taxable wealth. As in Boston, these gains were not made at the expense of those in the bottom third of society, who possessed only a meager 2.2 percent of the wealth in 1693, but were accomplished at the expense of those in the middling elements of society.

If poverty touched the lives of a growing part of the urban laboring class, it was the usual condition on the frontier. Here the gap between rich and poor hardly existed because the rich were nowhere to be found. In its social order the frontier of the mid-eighteenth century was even cruder than rural society on the edge of the continent a century before. Whether in the towns of western Massachusetts and Connecticut, founded in the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century by the sons of Yankee farmers; or the lands along the Mohawk River in New York and the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania, which represented the hopes of the German and Scots-Irish immigrants; or the backcountry of Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas, which sponged up some 250,000 souls in the late colonial period, frontier society was composed of small farmers and rural artisans who all stood roughly on the same plane. They purchased land cheaply, often for as little as four shillings an acre, and struggled to carve farms from the wilderness. Many hoped to get enough land under cultivation within a few years to produce surplus crops for market. But with only the help of one's sons and a few farm animals this often took most of a man's life. Others struggled only to make enough improvements on a piece of land so that other settlers pushing westward on the next wave of settlement would find it attractive enough to pay a price that rewarded one's labor.

On the New England frontier, where people pushed westward in groups, they founded new towns and churches as they went, quickly reproducing the institutions of eastern society. While poor, these simple villagers and farmers lived a life where institutional ligaments had not been alto-

gether severed. But southward from New York on the east side of the Appalachian slopes frontier society existed in what many observers took to be a semibarbarous state. William Byrd described one of the largest plantations on the Virginia frontier in 1733 as "a poor dirty hovel, with hardly anything in it but children that wallowed about like so many pigs." Charles Woodmason, an itinerant Anglican minister who spent three years tramping from settlement to settlement in the Carolina backcountry in the 1760s, was appalled at what he found. "For thro' want of Ministers to marry and thro' the licentiousness of the People, many hundreds live in Concubinage — swopping their Wives as Cattel, and living in a State of Nature, more irregularly and unchastely than the Indians." As an English Anglican, Woodmason carried with him all the prejudices that were usually harbored against the Presbyterian Scots-Irish, the main inhabitants of the region. But there is little reason to doubt that the crudeness of life he described actually existed. After preaching at Flat Creek to "a vast Body of people . . . Such a Medley! such a mixed Multitude of all Classes and Complexions," he paled at their afterservice "Revelling Drinking Singing Dancing and Whoring" and threw up his hands that "most of the Company were drunk before I quitted the Spot — They were as rude in their Manners as the Common Savages, and hardly a degree removed from them." Some of what he saw made him close his eyes in horror, but he kept them open long enough to observe the young women who "have a most uncommon Practise. . . . They draw their Shift as tight as possible to the Body, and pin it close, to shew the roundness of their Breasts, and . . . their Petticoat close to their Hips to shew the fineness of their Limbs — so that they might as well be in Puri Naturalibus — Indeed Nakedness is not censurable or indecent here, and they expose themselves often quite Naked, without Ceremony — Rubbing themselves and their Hair with Bears Oil and tying it up behind in a Bunch

like the Indians — being hardly one degree removed from them.”



THE GREAT AWAKENING

Nowhere did the line between social and economic change on the one hand and religion on the other crumble more swiftly than in the experiential and ideological upheaval called the Great Awakening. More than a solely religious movement, this period of sustained religious enthusiasm must be seen as a profound cultural crisis that had been building for several generations.

At its core the Great Awakening was “a search for new sources of authority, new principles of action, new foundations of hope” among people who had come to believe that the colonial churches “no longer met the spiritual needs of the people.” The Awakeners preached that the old sources of authority were too effete to solve the problems of the day, too encrusted with tradition, hypocrisy, and intellectualism to bring hope and faith to a generation that was witnessing the rapid transformation of the world of their fathers. A new wellspring of authority was needed, and that source, the evangelists preached, was the individual himself. Like the Quaker “inner light,” which dwelled in every man and woman, the “new light” within the awakened would enable them to achieve grace through the conversion experience. When enough people were “born again,” as the evangelists of the Great Awakening phrased it, a new sense of community would be forged, a new brotherhood of man achieved, and the city on the hill restored. The Awakening, in its way, was a “revitalization movement,” similar to those that would occur periodically in Indian societies, as attempts were made to reject corrosive new ways and return to the traditions of the past.

The Awakening had its first stirrings in the colonies in the 1720s in New Jersey and Pennsylv-



The Great Awakening erupted in full force when the English evangelist George Whitefield barnstormed the coast of North America, evoking an unprecedented mass response. This painting shows his spellbinding effect on congregations. (By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London)

nia and then in the 1730s in Jonathan Edwards' church in Northampton, Massachusetts. But it was not until 1739, with the arrival of George Whitefield from England, that it struck with full force. Whitefield was a master of open-air preaching and had trekked across the English countryside for several years preaching the word of God. A diminutive man with a magnificent voice, he began a barnstorming trip along the coast of North America in 1739 that evoked a mass response of a sort never witnessed before in the colonies. Thousands turned out to see him, and with each success his fame grew. Especially in the cities, which were the crucibles of social

change, his effect was extraordinary, as people fought for places in the churches to hear him or congregated by the thousands in open fields to receive his message.

Some of Whitefield's appeal can be attributed to his genius for dramatic performances, his perfection of the art of advanced publicity, and his ability to simplify theological doctrine and focus the attention of masses of people on one facet of religious life — the conversion experience. In his electrifying performances, where written sermons were cast away, where spastic body movements and magnificent voice control replaced dry, logical, rigidly structured sermons, thousands experienced the desire to "fly to Christ." But it was the message as well as the medium that explains why people flocked to hear Whitefield. He frontally assaulted traditional sources of authority, called upon people to become the instruments of their own salvation, and implicitly attacked the upper-class notion that the simple folk had no minds of their own.

When Whitefield began his American tour in 1739, the social dynamite buried deep in his message was not yet clearly perceived by the elite. After all, his preaching produced thousands of conversions and filled the churches that had been languishing for more than a generation. Whitefield magnified the importance of religion in almost everyone who heard him, so it is no wonder that he was welcomed as "an angel of God, or as Elias, or John the Baptist risen from the dead." But Whitefield's popularity soon waned among the gentry because he was followed by itinerant Awakeners whose social radicalism was far less muted and because of the effects the evangelists' message had on the lower orders. Roaming preachers like Gilbert Tennant infused evangelical preaching with a radical egalitarianism that left many former supporters of Whitefield sputtering. Tennant attacked the established clergy as unregenerate and encouraged people to forsake their ministers. "The sapless Discourses of such dead Drones" were worthless, he proclaimed. James Davenport,

another itinerant preacher, told huge crowds that they should drink rat poison rather than listen to the corrupt clergy. Even more dangerous, Davenport indicted the rich and powerful, criticized the growing gap between rich and poor, and exhorted ordinary people to resist those who exploited and deceived them. Only then, he cried, would the Lamb Jesus return to earth.

Crowds followed Davenport through the towns, singing and clapping so that "they look'd more like a Company of *Bacchanalians* after a mad Frolick, than sober Christians who had been worshipping God," as one distressed Boston newspaper complained. Respectable people were convinced that revivalism had gotten out of hand and that social control of the lowest layers of society was crumbling. Revivalism had started out as a return to religion among backsliding Christians but now was turning into a social experience that profoundly threatened the established culture, which stressed order, discipline, and submissiveness from laboring people. The fear of the Awakeners' attacks on genteel literate culture, on wealth and ostentatious living, was epitomized in New London, Connecticut in 1743 when Davenport scandalized the gentry by inducing a huge crowd

to burn "sundry good and useful treatises, books of practical godliness, the works of able divines," as well as "hoop petticoats, silk gowns, short cloaks, cambrick caps, red heeled shoes, fans, necklaces, gloves, and other such apparel." While psalms and hymns were sung over the pile, the preacher added his own pants, "a pair of old, wore out, plush breaches." This, commented one critic, would have obliged him "to strutt about bare-arsed" had not the fire been extinguished.

By 1742 New England and the middle colonies were being criss-crossed by a procession of itinerant gospelers and haranguers, all of them labeled social incendiaries by the established clergy. Of all the signs of social leveling that conservatives saw springing

from evangelicalism, the one they feared the most was the practice of public lay exhorting. Within the established churches there was no place for lay persons to compete with the qualified ministry in preaching the word of God. Nor was there room for "self-initiated associations of the people meeting outside of regularly constituted religious or political meetings," for to do so was to relocate authority collectively in the mass of common people. Lay exhorting shattered the monopoly of the educated clergy on religious discourse, put all people on a plane in the area of religion, gave new importance to the oral culture of common people, whose spontaneous outpourings contrasted sharply with the literary culture of the gentry, established among them the notion that their destinies and their souls were in their own hands instead of the hands of the elite clergy, and turned the world upside down in allowing those who had traditionally been consigned to the bottom of society to assume roles customarily reserved for educated, adult men. In lay exhorting, class lines were crossed and sexual and racial roles were defied, as ordinary men, women, and even children, servants, and slaves rose before throngs to testify emotionally to their own conversion and exhort others to a state of religious ecstasy by preaching extemporaneously the Lord's truth.

The Great Awakening thus represented far more than a religious earthquake. Through it, ordinary people haltingly enunciated a distinctive popular ideology that challenged inherited cultural norms. To some extent, as many historians have noted, the Awakening represented a groundswell of individualism, a kind of protodemocratic spirit that anticipated the Revolution. This was true, especially among the middling people of colonial society for whom the revival years involved an expansion of political consciousness and a new feeling of self-importance, as they partook of spontaneous meetings, assumed new power in ecclesiastical affairs, and were encouraged by the evangelists to adopt a skeptical attitude toward dogma and authority. But among the lowliest

members of society, including impoverished city dwellers, servants, slaves, and those who struggled to gain a foothold on the treacherous slopes of economic security, the Awakening experience implied not a movement forward toward democratic bourgeois revolution but backwards to an earlier age when it was conceived that individuals acted not for themselves, always striving to get ahead at the expense of their neighbors, but pulled together as a community. Hence the dispossessed harked to the anti-entrepreneurial, communalistic tone permeating the exhortations of the radical evangelists such as Tennant, who preached that in any truly Christian community "mutual Love is the Band and Cement. . . . For men, by the Neglect of its Exercise, and much more by its Contrary, will be tempted, against the Law of Nature, to seek a single and independent State, in order to secure their Ease and Safety."

The radical Awakeners were not preaching class revolt or the end to wealth-producing commerce. What they urged was "a thorough reconsideration of the Christian ethic as it had come to be understood in the America of the 1730s." Nor were those who harked to the Awakeners inspired to foment social revolution, for in fact the seeds of overt political radicalism were still in the germinative stage. But the multitudes who were moved by the message of the revivalists, in the North in the 1740s and in the South during the next decade, began to believe that it was justifiable in some circumstances to take matters into their own hands. This is why Jonathan Edwards, a highly intellectual, latter-day Puritan minister, was seen by the commercial elite and their clerical allies as "the grand leveler of Christian history," even though sedition and leveling were not what he had in mind. The Great Awakening produced the greatest flow of religious energy since the Puritan movement a century before, but this outpouring was intimately connected with the tensions in colonial society that had grown from generations of social and economic change.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 To what conditions does Gary Nash ascribe the growth of individualism in eighteenth-century America? What emphasis does he place on land and its availability?
- 2 Gary Nash says that in the eighteenth century, American social structure and ideas about social structure changed in opposite directions. How did they change and why? How did seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American social and economic conditions compare with those of Europe and why?
- 3 How did social conditions vary from one region to another? What influences led to these variations?
- 4 According to Gary Nash, how did social and economic conditions and religion influence each other in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?
- 5 What does Gary Nash think the Great Awakening reveals about the tensions in eighteenth-century American society? Did the experience mean the same thing to all parts of society? What implications would the Great Awakening have for subsequent American history?