Introduction

We Americans like to think of our revolution as not being radical; indeed, most of the time we consider it downright conservative. It certainly does not appear to resemble the revolutions of other nations in which people were killed, property was destroyed, and everything was turned upside down. The American revolutionary leaders do not fit our conventional image of revolutionaries—angry, passionate, reckless, maybe even bloodthirsty for the sake of a cause. We can think of Robespierre, Lenin, and Mao Zedong as revolutionaries, but not George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. They seem too stuffy, too solemn, too cautious, too much the gentlemen. We cannot quite conceive of revolutionaries in powdered hair and knee breeches. The American revolutionaries seem to belong in drawing rooms or legislative halls, not in cellars or in the streets. They made speeches, not bombs; they wrote learned pamphlets, not manifestos. They were not abstract theorists and they were not social levelers. They did not kill one another; they did not devour themselves. There was no reign of terror in the American Revolution and no resultant dictator—no Cromwell, no Bonaparte. The American Revolution does not seem to have the same kinds of causes—the social wrongs, the class conflict, the impoverishment, the grossly inequitable distributions of wealth—that presumably lie behind other revolutions. There were no peasant uprisings, no jacobites, no burning of châteaux, no storming of prisons.

Of course, there have been many historians—Progressive or neo-Progressive historians, as they have been called—who have sought, as Hannah Arendt put it, "to interpret the American Revolution in the light of the French Revolution," and to look for the same kinds of internal violence, class conflict, and social deprivation that presumably lay behind the French Revolution and other modern revolutions. Since the beginning of the twentieth century these Progressive historians have formulated various social interpretations of the American Revolution essentially designed to show that the Revolution, in Carl Becker's famous words, was not only about "home rule" but also about "who was
to rule at home." They have tried to describe the Revolution essentially as a social struggle by deprived and underprivileged groups against entrenched elites. But, it has been correctly pointed out, despite an extraordinary amount of research and writing during a good part of this century, the purposes of these Progressive and neo-Progressive historians—to portray the origins and goals of the Revolution as in some significant measure expressions of a peculiar economic malaise of the social protests and aspirations of an impoverished or threatened mass population—have not been fulfilled. They have not been fulfilled because the social conditions that generically are supposed to lie behind all revolutions—poverty and economic deprivation—were not present in colonial America. There should no longer be any doubt about it: the white American colonists were not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial chains to throw off. In fact, the colonists knew they were freer, more equal, more prosperous, and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the eighteenth century. Such a situation, however, does not mean that colonial society was not susceptible to revolution.

Precisely because the impulses to revolution in eighteenth-century America bear little or no resemblance to the impulses that presumably account for modern social protests and revolutions, we have tended to think of the American Revolution as having no social character, as having virtually nothing to do with the society, as having no social causes and no social consequences. It has therefore often been considered to be essentially an intellectual event, a constitutional defense of American rights against British encroachments ("no taxation without representation"), undertaken not to change the existing structure of society but to preserve it. For some historians the Revolution seems to be little more than a colonial rebellion or a war for independence. Even when we have recognized the radicalism of the Revolution, we admit only a political, not a social radicalism. The revolutionary leaders, it is said, were peculiar "eighteenth-century radicals concerned, like the eighteenth-century British radicals, not with the need to recast the social order nor with the problems of the economic inequality and the injustices of stratified societies but with the need to purify a corrupt constitution and fight off the apparent growth of prerogative power." Consequently, we have generally described the Revolution as an unusually conservative affair, concerned almost exclusively with politics and constitutional rights, and, in comparison with the social radicalism of the other great revolutions of history, hardly a revolution at all.

If we measure the radicalism of revolutions by the degree of social misery or economic deprivation suffered, or by the number of people killed or manor houses burned, then this conventional emphasis on the conservatism of the American Revolution becomes true enough. But if we measure the radicalism by the amount of social change that actually took place—by transformations in the relationships that bound people to each other—then the American Revolution was not conservative at all; on the contrary: it was as radical and as revolutionary as any in history. Of course, the American Revolution was very different from other revolutions. But it was no less radical and no less social for being different. In fact, it was one of the greatest revolutions the world has known, a momentous upheaval that not only fundamentally altered the character of American society but decisively affected the course of subsequent history.

It was as radical and social as any revolution in history, but it was radical and social in a very special eighteenth-century sense. No doubt many of the concerns and much of the language of that premodern, pre-Marxian eighteenth century were almost entirely political. That was because most people in that very different distant world could not as yet conceive of society apart from government. The social distinctions and economic deprivations that we today think of as the consequence of class divisions, business exploitation, or various isms—capitalism, racism, etc.—were in the eighteenth century usually thought to be caused by the abuses of government. Social honors, social distinctions, perquisites of office, business contracts, privileges and monopolies, even excessive property and wealth of various sorts—all social evils and social deprivations—in fact seemed to flow from connections to government, in the end from connections to monarchical authority. So that when Anglo-American radicals talked in what seems to be only political terms—purifying a corrupt constitution, eliminating courtiers, fighting off crown power, and, most important, becoming republicans—they nevertheless had a decidedly social message. In our eyes the American revolutionaries appear to be absorbed in changing only their governments, not their society. But in destroying monarchy and establishing republics they were changing their society as well as their governments, and they knew it. Only they did not know—they could scarcely have imagined—how much of their society they would change. J. Franklin Jameson, who more than two generations ago described the Revolution as a social movement only to be roundly criticized by a succeeding generation of historians, was at least right about one thing: "the stream of revolution,
once started, could not be confined within narrow banks, but spread abroad upon the land.’’

By the time the Revolution had run its course in the early nineteenth century, American society had been radically and thoroughly transformed. One class did not overthrow another; the poor did not supplant the rich. But social relationships—the way people were connected one to another—were changed, and decisively so. By the early years of the nineteenth century the Revolution had created a society fundamentally different from the colonial society of the eighteenth century. It was in fact a new society unlike any that had ever existed anywhere in the world.

Of course, there were complexities and variations in early American society and culture—local, regional, sectional, ethnic, and class differences that historians are uncovering every day—that make difficult any generalizations about Americans as a whole. This study is written in spite of these complexities and variations, not in ignorance of them. There is a time for understanding the particular, and there is a time for understanding the whole. Not only is it important that we periodically attempt to bring the many monographic studies of eighteenth-century America together to see the patterns they compose, but it is essential that we do so—if we are to extend our still meager understanding of an event as significant as the American Revolution.

That revolution did more than legally create the United States; it transformed American society. Because the story of America has turned out the way it has, because the United States in the twentieth century has become the great power that it is, it is difficult, if not impossible, to appreciate and recover fully the insignificant and puny origins of the country. In 1760 America was only a collection of disparate colonies huddled along a narrow strip of the Atlantic coast—economically underdeveloped outposts existing on the very edges of the civilized world. The less than two million monarchical subjects who lived in these colonies still took for granted that society was and ought to be a hierarchy of ranks and degrees of dependency and that most people were bound together by personal ties of one sort or another. Yet scarcely fifty years later these insignificant borderland provinces had become a giant, almost continent-wide republic of nearly ten million egalitarian-minded bustling citizens who not only had thrust themselves into the vanguard of history but had fundamentally altered their society and their social relationships. Far from remaining monarchical, hierarchy-ridden subjects on the margin of civilization, Americans had become, almost over-

night, the most liberal, the most democratic, the most commercially minded, and the most modern people in the world.

And this astonishing transformation took place without industrialization, without urbanization, without railroads, without the aid of any of the great forces we usually invoke to explain ‘modernization.’ It was the Revolution that was crucial to this transformation. It was the Revolution, more than any other single event, that made America into the most liberal, democratic, and modern nation in the world.

Of course, some nations of Western Europe likewise experienced great social transformations and ‘democratic revolutions’ in these same years. The American Revolution was not unique; it was only different. Because of this shared Western-wide experience in democratization, it has been argued by more than one historian that the broader social transformation that carried Americans from one century and one kind of society to another was ‘inevitable’ and ‘would have been completed with or without the American Revolution.’ Therefore, this broader social revolution should not be confused with the American Revolution. America, it is said, would have emerged into the modern world as a liberal, democratic, and capitalistic society even without the Revolution. One could, of course, say the same thing about the relationship between the French Revolution and the emergence of France in the nineteenth century as a liberal, democratic, and capitalistic society; and indeed, much of the current revisionist historical writing on the French Revolution is based on just such a distinction. But in America, no more than in France, that was not the way it happened: the American Revolution and the social transformation of America between 1760 and the early years of the nineteenth century were inextricably bound together. Perhaps the social transformation would have happened ‘in any case,’’ but we will never know. It was in fact linked to the Revolution; they occurred together. The American Revolution was integral to the changes occurring in American society, politics, and culture at the end of the eighteenth century.

These changes were radical, and they were extensive. To focus, as we are today apt to do, on what the Revolution did not accomplish—highlighting and lamenting its failure to abolish slavery and change fundamentally the lot of women—is to miss the great significance of what it did accomplish; indeed, the Revolution made possible the anti-slavery and women’s rights movements of the nineteenth century and in fact all our current egalitarian thinking. The Revolution not only radically changed the personal and social relationships of people, including the
position of women, but also destroyed aristocracy as it had been understood in the Western world for at least two millennia. The Revolution brought respectability and even dominance to ordinary people long held in contempt and gave dignity to their menial labor in a manner unprecedented in history and to a degree not equaled elsewhere in the world. The Revolution did not just eliminate monarchy and create republics; it actually reconstituted what Americans meant by public or state power and brought about an entirely new kind of popular politics and a new kind of democratic officeholder. The Revolution not only changed the culture of Americans—making over their art, architecture, and iconography—but even altered their understanding of history, knowledge, and truth. Most important, it made the interests and prosperity of ordinary people—their pursuits of happiness—the goal of society and government. The Revolution did not merely create a political and legal environment conducive to economic expansion; it also released powerful popular entrepreneurial and commercial energies that few realized existed and transformed the economic landscape of the country.

In short, the Revolution was the most radical and most far-reaching event in American history.
1. Hierarchy

To appreciate the extent of change that took place in the Revolution, we have to re-create something of the old colonial society that was subsequently transformed. Despite all the momentous transformations that had taken place since the seventeenth-century settlements, mid-eighteenth-century colonial society was in many ways still traditional—traditional in its basic social relationships and in its cultural consciousness. All aspects of life were intertwined. The household, the society, and the state—private and public spheres—scarcely seemed separable. Authority and liberty flowed not as today from the political organization of the society but from the structure of its personal relationships. In important respects this premodern or early modern society still bore traces of the medieval world of personal fealties and loyalties out of which it arose.

To be sure, already by the middle of the century a thousand different aberrations and peculiarities, a thousand different anomalies and inconsistencies, cried out for resolution and explanation. Powerful social and economic developments were stretching, fraying, and forcing older personal bonds holding people together, and people everywhere were hard pressed to explain what was happening. New ideas, new values, were emerging in the English-speaking world, but the past was tenacious. Like all Englishmen, the colonists continued to embrace deeply rooted assumptions about the order and stability needed in a monarchical society.

Living in a monarchical society meant, first of all, being subjects of the king. This was no simple political status, but had all sorts of social, cultural, and even psychological implications. As clarified by Sir Edward Coke and other jurists in the seventeenth century, the allegiance the English subject owed his monarch was a personal and individual matter. Diverse persons related to each other only through their common tie to the king, much as children became brothers and sisters only through their common parentage. Since the king, said William Blackstone, was the "pater familias of the nation," to be a subject was to be a kind
of child, to be personally subordinated to a paternal dominion. In its starkest theoretical form, therefore, monarchy, as Americans later came to describe it, implied a society of dependent beings, weak and inferior, without autonomy or independence, easily cowed by the pageantry and trappings of a patriarchal king. The whole community, said Benjamin Franklin in 1703, is regulated by the example of the king.'

Because monarchy had these implications of humiliation and dependency, the Anglo-American colonists could never be good monarchical subjects. But of course neither could their fellow Englishmen "at home" three thousand miles across the Atlantic. All Englishmen in the eighteenth century were known throughout the Western world for their insubordination, their insolence, their stubborn unwillingness to be governed. Any reputation the North American colonists had for their unruinless and contempt for authority came principally from their Englishness.

In our enthusiasm to contrast the "traditional" society of the mother country with the "modernity" of the colonies, we have often overlooked how dominantly British and traditional the colonists' culture still was; indeed, in some respects colonial society was more traditional than that of the mother country. Most colonial leaders in the mid-eighteenth century thought of themselves not as Americans but as Britons. They read much the same literature, the same law books, the same history, as their brethren at home read, and they drew most of their conceptions of society and their values from their reading. Whatever sense of unity the disparate colonies of North America had came from their common tie to the British crown and from their membership in the British empire. Most colonists knew more about events in London than they did about occurrences in neighboring colonies. They were provincials living on the edges of a pan-British world, and all the more British for that. Their little colonial capitals resembled, as one touring British officer remarked of Williamsburg, nothing so much as "a good Country Town in England." Philadelphia seemed only a smaller version of Bristol. Most English visitors in fact tended to describe the colonists simply as country cousins—more boorish, more populist, more egalitarian perhaps, with too much Presbyterianism and religious nonconformity—but still Englishmen, not essentially different from the inhabitants of Yorkshire or Norwich or the rest of rural and small-town provincial England. Observer after observer thought that "the manners, morals and amusements" of America in the mid-eighteenth century were "in a humbler degree . . . much the same . . . as in the mother country."

In fact, it is very difficult to find contemporary descriptions of the colonists that were not applicable as well to the English at home. True, the colonists were thought to be a particularly unruly lot, crude if not barbarous, and especially defiant of social and political authority. But this reputation did not make them any less subjects of the English king; it only made them more English. Had not Montesquieu written that the English were too busy with their interests to have politeness and refinement? Englishmen everywhere simply made poor subjects for monarchy, and they were proud of it. The king had his birthright to the crown, but the people had theirs too: they were "free-born Englishmen," and they had rights and liberties that no other people in the world enjoyed. They had in fact more rights and liberties than any traditional hereditary monarchy could accommodate; and consequently the British monarchy was very different not only from any other but also from what it had been in the days of James I.

Since the early seventeenth century the English had radically transformed their monarchy: they had executed one king and deposed another, written charters and bills of rights, regularized the meetings of their parliaments, and even created a new line of hereditary succession. In the years following the Glorious Revolution of 1688 they had become increasingly aware of the marvelous peculiarity of their limited monarchy. "The constitution of our English government (the best in the World)," they told themselves, "is no arbitrary tyranny, like the Turkish Grand Seignior's, or the French King's, whose wills (or rather lusts) dispose of the lives and fortunes of their unhappy subjects." Representation in the House of Commons even allowed for the participation of His Majesty's subjects in the affairs of government. It was a constitution specially dedicated to liberty.

Liberty: Englishmen everywhere of every social rank and of every political persuasion could not celebrate it enough. Every cause, even repression itself, was wrapped in the language of English liberty. No people in the history of the world had ever made so much of it. Unlike the poor enslaved French, the English had no standing army, no lettres de cachet; they had their habeas corpus, their trials by jury, their freedom of speech and conscience, and their right to trade and travel; they were free from arbitrary arrest and punishment; their homes were their castles. Although few Englishmen and no Englishwomen could vote for representatives, they always had the sense of participating in political affairs, even if this meant only parading and huzzahing during the periodic elections of the House of Commons. It would be impossible to
overemphasize the degree to which eighteenth-century Englishmen revered in their worldwide reputation for freedom. Even the young Prince of Wales, soon to be George III, shared in this unmonarchical celebration of liberty. "The pride, the glory of Britain, and the direct end of its constitution," he said, "is political liberty." No unruly American provincial could have put it better.

Many of the characteristics for which the eighteenth-century colonists were noted were true in English characteristics or exaggerations of English characteristics. Continental critics accused the English of being rude and unpolished. But like the colonists, the English turned this lack of cultivation into an advantage: Frenchmen, they said over and over, were overrefined, foppish, and effeminate, sunk in luxury and misery, and overawed by superstitious priests in wooden shoes—no match for their own sturdy, brawling, beef-eating John Bull character. Just as the English commented on the uniformity of speech among the different social ranks of the colonists, so too did Europeans comment on the same characteristic among the English themselves. Americans may have had a multiplicity of religious groups and a consequent reputation for religious toleration. But so too did the mother country. "If there were only one religion in England," wrote Voltaire in his *Philosophical Letters*, "we should have to fear despotism; if there were two, they would cut each other's throats; but there are thirty, and they live in peace and happiness."  

Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic bragged of their independence. To be sure, most colonial farmers owned their own land and were thus different from the mass of tenant farmers who characterized English agricultural life. Yet too much can be made of this contrast, for dependent as English tenant farmers may have been, they were not seen to be dependent either by themselves or by foreigners. Although the farmers of New York held their lands "in Fee simple," said Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden in 1765, "they are as to condition of life in no manner superior to the common Farmers in England." English tenant-farmers were in fact celebrated for their independence, particularly in comparison with the cringing peasants of France, where, as Dr. Johnson's friend Mrs. Thrale observed, "everyone seems to belong to some other man and no man to himself." Independence and dependence were relative and not absolute statuses, and most colonists, like most Englishmen at home, were never as free as they made themselves out to be. 

America had a reputation for egalitarianism, but so too did England.

Unlike the Continent, England had no legal or customary barriers to set off its landed aristocracy from the rest of society, and the consequent uninterrupted circulation among the various ranks impressed European observers. When even a Manchester cobbler in 1756 could dream and celebrate the mobility of English society—"leaving the Coast open for new adventurers"—it is not surprising that foreigners thought the English were mad for equality. European visitors from across the Channel thought that ordinary Englishmen had no respect for authority; common people hooted at their social superiors in the streets and jeered at social pretensions everywhere. Foreigners were stunned to discover common workingpeople of England, even apprentices and streetwalkers, mingling with and emulating their betters on Sunday strolls in Greenwich Park. In France the peasants dressed like peasants, noted the Swedish visitor Peter Kalm, but in England laboring men and women wore knee breeches and perukes, bonnets and panneled dresses. In the eyes of Europeans everywhere, Englishmen appeared much too liberty-loving and egalitarian and indeed seemed infected with a "republican spirit."  

To be the subject of an English king who celebrated liberty as proudly as the humblest plebeian was to be a member of a very unusual state indeed. By continental standards the English monarchy was scarcely a real monarchy. Yet, however superficial and hollow, it was still a monarchical society the colonists lived in, and it was still a king to whom they paid allegiance. In fact, because the growth of royal authority and influence in America was such a recent and novel development, the colonists in the mid-eighteenth century could at times be more enthusiastic monarchists than the English themselves. South Carolinians, said Dr. David Ramsay, "were ford of British manners even to excess," and similar comments were made of other colonists up and down the seaboard. No metropolitan Englishman could have matched the awe felt by the Pennsylvanian Benjamin Rush when in 1768 he first saw the king's throne in London. It was as if he were "on sacred ground," and he "gazed for some time at the throne with emotions that I cannot describe." Rush importuned his reluctant guide to let him sit upon it "for a considerable time," even though the guide said that visitors rarely did so. The experience was unsettling, to say the least: "I was seized with a kind of horror," said Rush, and "a crowd of ideas poured in upon my mind." This was all a man could want in this world: "his passions conceive, his hopes aspire after nothing beyond this throne." No wonder Rush eventually came to rue the degree to which people's "affections" had been "absorbed by kings and nobles": too many col-
orists, including himself, had once spoken "only of George the 3rd" and ignored their fellow countrymen. Perhaps, as David Hume slyly noted, the colonists revered the king so much more than metropolitan Englishmen precisely because they were so far away and thus never knew what a king was really like. Certainly the colonists' excitement over the accession of George III in 1760 equaled that of Englishmen at home. William Henry Drayton of South Carolina thought that no people were ever "more wrapped up in a king" than were Americans in 1760.

Of course, most colonists knew little about monarchy firsthand. Unlike Rush, they never saw the throne, never witnessed royal progresses, and never saw much royal pomp and ceremony. But colonial newspapers reported royal occasions in detail, and colonial authorities did what they could to maintain respect for the crown. They displayed royal arms and emblems in public buildings and celebrated royal occasions like the king's birthday by firing cannons, setting off fireworks, and dispensing drinks. The royal governors were increasingly anxious to establish styles of living that would befit their rank as the crown's viceregents and do honor to the king—by building distinguished government houses, by dressing lavishly, by entertaining generously. They had the power to pardon condemned criminals, and sometimes they used it, like a new king succeeding to the throne, when they took up their gubernatorial offices. The governors' ability to set aside the law in this way was designed to induce awe among the people and to enhance royal authority: the condemned persons usually pleaded for their lives on their knees in open court. Royal authority being as thin as it was in the colonies, the governors resorted to this pardoning power quite freely, in some colonies sparing as many as one-quarter to one-half of those condemned to death.

In the mid-eighteenth century Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic made new efforts to embelish royal authority. Since the colonial courts were hardly awesome by English standards, every little effort was made to dignify the king's dispensing of justice, even if this only involved raising the justices' bench in a Virginia courtroom a foot or so above the floor. In 1754 the New York Supreme Court, in emulation of the mother country and several other colonies, ordered the judges and the counsel appearing before them to don robes or gowns and bands in order to advance the "Dignity Authority Solemnity and Decorum of the Court," and to promote "many useful consequences." John Adams recalled that in the early 1760s the Massachusetts authorities had likewise introduced a new "scenery" in the supreme court—"of scarlet and sable robes, of broad bands, and enormous tie wigs"—in order to create a more "theatrical" and "ecclesiastical" setting for the doing of justice. Full-length, gold-framed portraits of Charles II and James II, said Adams, were "hung up on the most conspicuous sides" of the courtroom "for the admiration and imitation of all men." The colors of the royal ermines and long flowing robes were the most glorious, the figures the most noble and graceful, the features the most distinct and characteristic—these portraits of these particular Stuart kings were designed to overawe. All this, thought Adams, made the council chamber in Boston's old town hall "as respectable an apartment as the House of Commons or the House of Lords in Great Britain, in proportion."

However recently contrived or artificially imposed, royal authority in the colonies was more deep-rooted and more effective by mid-century than ever before. Despite widespread smuggling of goods, especially in New England, most American trade was being carried on within the confines of the British navigation laws: British or colonial ships carried the goods, colonial staples such as sugar, tobacco, and rice were sent to Britain, the colonists imported increasing amounts of British manufactures, and most European imports came to America through England. Although the colonists grumbled about and evaded some of these imperial regulations, their compliance was remarkably high; legal commerce soared and all participants prospered as never before. With the resumption of Anglo-French warfare in the 1750s, British funds poured into the colonies, and the colonists responded to the empire's war needs in unprecedented fashion; by the end of the decade many of the colonies had mobilized huge proportions of their manpower and resources to fight on behalf of the British crown. At the same time there were more successful strong royal governors in the colonies than ever before—from William Gooch and Francis Fauquier in Virginia to William Shirley and Thomas Pownall in Massachusetts.

Religion tended to bolster monarchical authority and order, especially among ordinary people for whom Christian revelation (and magic) remained the major means for understanding and manipulating the world. The European tradition of centralized state-supported churches that had been only fitfully applied in the colonies during the seventeenth century was dramatically expanded in the first third of the eighteenth century. Although religious groups in most of the colonies lacked the kind of legally established dominance that the Church of England achieved in the mother country, all of their churches, including the
dissenting ones, extended their institutional and disciplinary hold over colonial society. Everywhere in the decades following 1690 governments helped the churches assert coercive Christian authority over increasing numbers of people who had hitherto been neglected or ignored. In all the colonies clerical power was reinvigorated, new parishes were laid out, larger and more elegant churches were built, new and more elaborate ceremonies were established, and more and more unchurched were brought under the control of formal religion; in these different ways monarchical authority and obedience were subtly fortified. Even the Puritan churches of New England reversed their original exclusivism and localism by attempting to strengthen the central authority of the clergy and by reaching out to embrace larger and larger proportions of the society. By offering religious rituals and services to everyone, however, the revived Anglican church during the first half of the century did the most to extend the crown’s Christian authority into the remotest areas and the lowest ranks of American society. Although the leaders of all religious groups tended to support hierarchical authority to one degree or another—for example, by preaching from Romans 13 that all were “subject unto the higher powers . . . for conscience sake” and by exalting personal and emotional loyalties over calculating and conditional ones—none of them supported and spread the ethic of monarchy more forcefully than did the Anglicans. By the time of the Revolution there were some four hundred Anglican congregations in the North American colonies. Even moderate Anglican preachers continually stressed the sacredness of authority and the need for subjects to honor and revere those set over them and thereby lent a more monarchical tone to the culture than it otherwise would have had. Although the Anglican church often appealed to the poorest and the most powerless of the colonists, as the king’s church it was also especially attractive to the top of the social scale—to royal officials and other elites. Indeed, by mid-century Anglicans held public office in numbers out of proportion to their numbers in the society, which further contributed to a strengthening of monarchy in the colonies.15

Royal authority never seemed more impressive and acceptable to the colonists than at mid-century, not simply because wars naturally favored a growth in the influence of the crown and the Anglican church was growing in strength, but also because the theoretical underpinnings of their social thought still remained largely monarchical. They may not have known much of real kings and courts, but they knew very well the social hierarchy that the subjection and subordination of monarchy necessarily implied. Monarchy presumed what Hume called “a long train of dependence,” a gradation of degrees of freedom and servility that linked everyone from the king at the top down to the bonded laborers and black slaves at the bottom. The inequalities of such a hierarchy were acceptable to people because they were offset by the great emotional satisfactions of living in a society in which everyone, even the lowliest servant, counted for something. In this traditional world “every Person has his proper Sphere and is of Importance to the whole.”16 Ideally, in such a hierarchy no one was really independent, no one was ever alone and unattached. Hence followed the fascination of the eighteenth century with the fate of isolated individuals, like Robinson Crusoe, strangers without relatives or connections cast alone in the world.17

In the eighteenth century, as in the time of John Winthrop, it was nearly impossible to imagine a civilized society being anything but a hierarchy of some kind, in which, in the words of the famous Calvinist preacher Jonathan Edwards, all have “their appointed office, place and station, according to their several capacities and talents, and everyone keeps his place, and continues in his proper business.” In such a society it was inconceivable, unnatural, for inequality not to exist.

Order is Heav’n’s first law: and this confest,  
Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,  
More rich, more wise . . .

The hierarchy of a monarchical society was part of the natural order of things, part of that great chain of existence that ordered the entire universe, part of what John Adams called that “regular and uniform Subordination of one Tribe to another down to the apparently insignificant animalcules in pepper Water.”18

A proper society was like the plenitude of nature: nothing was ever lost, nothing was ever wasted. This traditional society contained a limited number of places and goods, with the implication that no one could really advance and prosper except at someone else’s expense. Movement from one rank to another was not only possible, of course, but necessary if people were to find their allotted positions; but such mobile persons had to possess and demonstrate the qualifications of the rank or position into which they moved. It was unnatural to pretend to be something that one was not equipped to be. “A man of low stature may add something to his height, but nothing to his comeliness by strutting upon stilts.” Ideally, people were expected to find and attend to “the proper
Business’ of their particular place within the social order and to “consider their mutual Relations and Dependencies, and duly perform the Duties of their respective Stations” and thus promote the moral consensus and harmony essential for a healthy society. “God hath in great wisdom,” said the Reverend Thomas Cradock of Maryland at mid-century, “given variety of abilities to men, suitable to the several stations in life, for which he hath design’d them, that everyone keeping his station, and employing his respective abilities in doing his own work, all might receive advantage.”

Both the New England towns with their ancient “warning out” regulations and the southern colonies with their vagabond legislation expected everyone to belong somewhere, and they used the force of law to maintain their inherited sense of community. Under the warning-out laws, for example, towns could legally eject “strangers” and have constables convey them from town to town until they were returned to the town where they legally belonged. Society had to be an organic whole. The colonists repeatedly invoked those powerful lines from Corinthians—“that there should be no Schism in the Body but the Members should have the Same Care for one another”—and widely condemned all selfish persons and parties, indeed “anything that dissolved in a moment the soliciest friendship.”

The colonies were simple, underdeveloped provincial societies, and they lacked the great inequalities and the intricate calibrations of the more complicated society of the mother country. Yet they had their own degrees and subordinations. Although eighteenth-century Americans were “without nobility, or orders of gentry,” recalled Arthur Browne, an Anglican clergyman who lived in several New England cities, there was evidence everywhere in the colonies of “how necessarily some differences of rank, some inequality must and ought to grow up in every society.”

The colonists’ sense of hierarchy was reinforced in a multitude of ways. The military seemed to reproduce the society, and thus it was natural for land grants to veterans of the French and Indian wars to be made according to rank, with field-grade officers receiving 5,000 acres each, captains 3,000 acres, and so on, down to privates, who received 50 acres each. College students learned, sometimes through harsh punishments, the importance of hierarchy. They were required, in the words of Yale president Thomas Clap, to “show due Respect and Distance to those who are in Senior and Superior Classes” and were taught through a variety of means the intricacies of rank and precedence within the college. Students, for example, had to remove their hats at varying distances from the person they approached, depending on the status of that person: ten rods for the president, eight rods for a professor, and five rods for a tutor. All had some sense of where they stood and how they ought to behave toward others in this social hierarchy. And if they did not, there were guidebooks, like that copied by a young George Washington, telling them when to pull off their hats “‘to Persons of Distinction,” how to bow “according to the Custom of the Better Bred and Quality of the Person” —what to do, in short, in order to “give to every Person his due title According to his Degree.”

Social ranks carried designations, and such designations, whether “Mr.,” “Esq.,” “Yeoman,” or whatever, were virtually part of a person’s name. Pleadings in courts of law often depended on plaintiffs or defendants getting their social rank correct. “If it is of any Consequence to society that Ranks and subordination should be established in it,” argued the young attorney John Adams in 1761, “it is of Consequence that the Titles denoting those Ranks should not be confounded.” Every title from the local militia was carried over into private life: there was hardly a justice of the peace who was not a colonel. When William Brattle went on a mission to New Hampshire on behalf of the Massachusetts governor, he took care to let all “the Country People” know that “he was General Brattle, that he might make them Stare,” and that his words “might have more weight.” New England farmers prized the subtle shade of difference between husbandman and yeoman. Church pews were assigned on the basis of family heads’ age and social position; and entering students at Harvard and Yale were ranked according to the social respectability of their families. On the eve of the Revolution the colonists squabbled over the proper seating order at the governors’ tables to the point where Joseph Edmundson, the Mowbray herald extraordinary of the English College of Arms, had to be called in to prepare “Rules of Precedency” to lay down the precise social position of the various colonial officials.

These differences of title and quality did not resemble our modern conception of “class.” Although the colonists talked of “gentlemen of the first rank,” people of “middling circumstances,” and the “meager sort,” they did not as yet think clearly in terms of those large-scale horizontal solidarities of occupation and wealth with which we are familiar today. Distinctions in colonial society were measured by far more subtle, far more emotionally powerful criteria. Money and property were of course critically important, but by themselves they could not create
and sustain the inequalities of this social hierarchy. Indeed, the distribution of wealth in eighteenth-century colonial society was far more equal than it would become in the nineteenth century. But a more equitable distribution of wealth did not make this traditional society more equal than the one that would emerge in the decades following the Revolution. It was just differently organized.

There were, of course, a number of occupational categories. Men were in fact considered to be bred to their occupations and were usually labeled by occupation as coopers, tradesmen, laborers, and so on. Usually occupational designations were for common people only—for all those who were defined by what they did rather than by who they were. The learned professions—medicine, law, and divinity—were not yet regarded as occupations in any modern sense of the term. Indeed, "profession" still bore traces of its ancient meaning as something publicly and voluntarily professed, like a religious avowal; and therefore members of the learned professions were generally not defined by how they occupied themselves but by who they were—by their "quality" or gentlemanly status. Although designations of quality were becoming harder to make in the increasingly complex eighteenth-century pan-British society, nonetheless efforts were continually made. Some positions—government officeholders and the liberal professions—usually carried with them a presumption of high social status and the title of "Mr." or "Esq." It was thought, for example, that clergymen were "often by birth, and always by education and profession gentlemen."

Most people in the society were planters or farmers; a few of them possessed a high degree of quality, most did not. Calling oneself a planter or farmer could be confusing, however, for gentlemen who applied such titles to themselves never meant to say that they were cultivators by trade. Those involved in overseas commerce, and hence creating wealth for the country, were designated as merchants—a very respectable but not genteel title. There were, moreover, many different sorts of merchants. In large port cities there were great ones, like Able James of Philadelphia, deeply involved in the lucrative and prestigious dry-goods trade with Great Britain. But for every such great merchant in Philadelphia, New York, or Boston, there were scores of smaller traders and shopkeepers, not only in the large ports but in lesser places such as Hartford or Norfolk, sometimes dealing in coastwise or West Indian routes but often just scrambling every which way in an endless search for goods and places with which to trade. Various sorts of artisans and mechanics existed everywhere—on southern plantations, in small towns, and in the port cities. Indeed, one-third to one-half of the male population of the large cities was composed of artisans or mechanics, and they ran the gamut from very rich to very poor. Some were beginning teenaged apprentices, others were journeymen working for wages, and many were masters, ranging from those who hired themselves out to those few who ran huge manufacturing establishments employing dozens of workers. No matter how wealthy an artisan became, however, his social status or quality remained at best only middling—along with most other laboring people in this society. Below these were the "meager sort," distinguished from everyone above them by their lack of property—their lack, that is, of either land, goods for trading, or a skill of some sort.

Out of these occupational categories and differing levels of wealth a class consciousness of a sort would begin to rise by the early nineteenth century. But in the mid-eighteenth century most Americans still conceived of their society in a traditional manner, composed not of broad and politically hostile layers or classes but of "various individuals, connected together and related and subservient to each other." They thought of themselves as connected vertically rather than horizontally, and were more apt to be conscious of those immediately above and below them than they were of those alongside them. Probably nothing captures more succinctly the peculiar vertical nature of this social hierarchy than a passage from Henry Fielding's great comic novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742). Fielding saw the degrees of dependence in the society as "a kind of ladder":

as, for instance: early in the morning arises the position, or some other boy, which great families, no more than great ships, are without, and falls to brushing the clothes and cleaning the shoes of John the footman; who, being drest himself, applies his hands to the same labours for Mr. Second-hand, the squire's gentleman; the gentleman in the like manner, a little later in the day, attends the squire; the squire is no sooner equipped than he attends the levee of my lord; which is no sooner over than my lord himself is seen at the levee of the favourite, who, after the hour of homage is at an end, appears himself to pay homage to the levee of his sovereign. Nor is there, perhaps, in this whole ladder of dependence, any one step at a greater distance from the other than the first from the second; so that to a philosopher the question might only seem, whether you would choose to be a great man at six in the morning, or at two in the afternoon. And yet there are scarce two of these who do not think the least familiarity with the
persons below them a condescension, and, if they were to go one step farther, a degradation.\(^3\)

Although individuals in this graded society might on occasion erupt in passion against the rich and the moneyed, few groups or occupations could as yet sustain any strong corporate or class consciousness, any sense of existing as a particular social stratum with long-term common interests that were antagonistic to the interests of another stratum. In fact, most people could locate themselves only in superiority or in subordination to someone else. Their behavior and courtesies were always relative, for it was "absurd to act the same with a Clown and a Prince." Thus the colonists' literature on how to behave in society always had to advise for both directions at once, above and below: "with Superiors, courteous and fair-spoken; not over familiar nor surly, with inferiors." Individuals were simultaneously free and subservient, independent and dependent, superior and inferior—depending on the person with whom they were dealing. Thus they did not have class positions or occupations as much as they had relationships; and the degrees of these relationships could sometimes be calculated with startling precision. When a new tutor to a household of children was even advised to "let the same distance be observed in every article of behaviour between you and the eldest Son, as there ought to be, by the latest and most approved precepts of Moral-Philosophy, between the eldest Son, and his next young-est Brother," then we know we are dealing with a society that took its degrees of subordination seriously.\(^3\)

2. Patricians and Plebeians

Despite the fact that most of colonial society was vertically organized, there was one great horizontal division that cut through it with a significance we can today scarcely comprehend—that between extraordinary and ordinary people, gentlemen and commoners. Although the eighteenth century was becoming increasingly confused over who precisely ought to make up each of these basic groups, there was little question that in all societies some were patricians and most were plebeians, that some were officers and most were common soldiers, that some were polished and literate and most were rude and unlettered, that some were gentlemen and most were not. There were the few who were sometimes called "the reverend" or "right reverend," "the hon-ourable," or "excellent," or "noble," or "puissant," or "royal," and there were the many who were often called "the Mob," "the Vulgar," or "the Herd." This social cleavage, this "most ancient and universal of all Divisions of People," overwhelmed all others in the culture, even the one between free and enslaved that we find so horrifying conspicuous. The awareness of the "difference between gentle and simple," recalled the Anglican minister Devereaux Jarrett of his humble youth in colonial Virginia, was "universal among all of my rank and age." Since this distinction has lost almost all of its older meaning (Jarrett himself lived to see "a vast alteration, in this respect"), it takes an act of imagination to recapture its immense importance in the eighteenth century. Southern squires entered their churches as a body and took their pews only after their families and the ordinary people had been seated. Massachusetts courts debated endlessly over whether or not particular plaintiffs and defendants were properly identified as gentlemen. More than any other distinction, this difference between aristocrats and commoners, between gentlemen and ordinary people, made manifest the unequal and hierarchical nature of the society.\(^1\)

In the English-speaking world the aristocracy composed a small but immensely powerful proportion of the society, constituting perhaps only 4 or 5 percent of the population, though in the northern colonies of North America that proportion approached 10 percent. Originally the term "aristocracy" referred to a form of government, government by the most distinguished in birth and fortune; but by the eighteenth century "aristocracy" had been popularly extended to embrace the entire patrician order to which such a governing body belonged. Although this aristocracy was a group distinct from the main body of the social hierarchy, it was itself marked by severe degrees of rank. At its top was the king. Below him were the peers of the realm, rarely numbering more than two hundred at any one moment in the eighteenth century. These dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons had huge estates and hereditary titles and, in the case of the English peers at least, automatically sat in the House of Lords (Scottish peers elected a proportion of their number to the House of Lords). Baronetcies, too, were inheritable but gave the holder no right to a seat in the House of Lords. Below these were several titled ranks of knights and esquires. The entire aristocracy was bottomed on the large body of gentry, the lowest social rank entitled to bear a coat of arms.\(^2\)

"Gentleman" originally meant noble by birth and applied to all of the aristocracy, including even the king. But from the sixteenth century
that the profession of law would at least allow Bradford to use the knowledge both of them had acquired at Princeton. A liberal education, he said, "is a sort of General Lover that woos all the Muses and Graces." 39

Eighteenth-century Englishmen were preoccupied with the moral character of their leaders precisely because leaders were the source of despotism. The very abilities that made patricians and gentry likely leaders also made them potential tyrants. "Men of great talents by nature and polish by Art" were no doubt necessary for all government. But, said Nathanael Greene in a common reckoning, such accomplished men, especially if they had "a general Acquaintance with mankind," were as well "the most dangerous persons to be connected with unless" — and this qualification identified the crux of the whole republican tradition — "unless they steadily persevere in the practice of Virtue." Such men knew "the secret avenues to the human Heart and, having the power to make the worse appear the better," they had the capacity for ensnaring ordinary people in chains. "Ninety-nine parts out of one hundred of mankind, are ever inclined to live at peace, and cultivate a good understanding with each other." Only members of "the remaining small part" — those whose "considerable abilities" were "joined to an intriguing disposition" — were "the real authors, advisers, and perpetuators of wars, treasons, and those other violations, which have, in all ages, more or less disgraced the annals of man." 39

Controlling and channeling the overweening passions of these extraordinary men — the aristocratic passions of avarice and ambition: "the Love of Power and the Love of Money," as Benjamin Franklin called them — seemed to many to be the central political problem of the age. Some thought that "ambition and avarice are springs of action so utterly opposite, that they never did or ever will unite in the same person." Others, however, were convinced not only that these two great passions "may subsist together in the same breast," but that when "united in View of the same object, they have in many minds the most violent Effects. Place before the Eyes of such Men a Post of Honour, that at the same time be a Place of Profit, and they will move Heaven and Earth to obtain it." 39

For all those who claimed to speak for the interests and the good of the people, the crown and all other rulers with soaring passions were dangerous, and the people were always justified in their suspicion and jealousy of power. Precisely because rulers in government were thought to be men of extraordinary and frightening capacities — "like elephants in war," said one colonial minister — they had to be watched constantly.

Radical whigs turned "political jealousy" into a "necessary and laudable Passion." The people had to be suspicious of their rulers, for, as Henry Laurens said in 1765, a "malicious Villain acting behind the Curtain . . . could be reached only by suspicion." Assuming as they did that patterns of events were always the intended consequence of particular human designs, the enlightened men of the age were ready to see plots and conspiracies everywhere. 33

But suspicion and jealousy, essential as they might be in protecting liberty in a monarchy, were not noble or praiseworthy emotions in themselves. They were in fact necessary evils to offset the soaring passions of ambition and desires for power expressed by rulers or great men. And therefore to the degree that the rulers became virtuous and republicanized, the people could relax their jealousy and suspicion and become open and trustful. Barriers could be erected, bills of rights established, contracts negotiated, charters written, institutions arranged and balanced, and the people allowed a share of participation in government; but ultimately the most enlightened of that enlightened age believed that the secret of good government and the protection of popular liberty lay in ensuring that good men — men of character and disinterestedness — wielded power. In the end there was no substitute for classical republican virtue in the society's rulers; and everyone on the political spectrum paid at least lip service to the need for it. But no one paid more attention to this need for virtue than did members of that generation of North American colonial leaders who came of age in the middle decades of the eighteenth century.

7. A Truncated Society

Classical republican values existed everywhere among educated people in the English-speaking world, but nowhere did they have deeper resonance than in the North American colonies. Nowhere had the republicanizing of monarchy gone further. The Americans did not have to invent republicanism in 1776; they only had to bring it to the surface. It was there all along. The revolutionaries shed monarchy and took up republicanism, as Jefferson put it, "with as much ease as would have attended their throwing off an old and putting on a new suit of clothes."

Because English culture was so republicanized, it was often difficult for the colonists to appreciate how radical their thinking was. When the colonists in the 1760s and 1770s were accused of fomenting rebellion and
promoting republican principles, they were surprised and indignant. The spirit of republicanism, they said, the spirit of Milton, Needham, and Sidney, was "so far from being incompatible with the English constitution, that it is the greatest glory of it." In resisting tyranny the colonists saw themselves acting only as good Englishmen should. "We boast of our freedom," Samuel Adams told his fellow Englishmen across the Atlantic in 1767, "and we have your example for it. We talk the language we have always heard you speak." It was true. Americans read the same literature, the same law books, the same histories as those read by the English in the mother country. Even stories admitted that whig and republican principles of government were so ingrained in British culture, "so often transcribed by one from another," that there was no longer any need of having those principles "retained in this enlightened age."

Despite the colonists' sense that they were only thinking as any good Englishmen would, they did draw from that British culture its most republican and whiggish strains. For they were in fact the most republican of people in the English-speaking world. Every visitor to the New World sensed it. All the republican peculiarities for which Englishmen were noted were magnified in the colonies and carried to excess. If Englishmen were known to be liberty-loving and unruly, then the colonists seemed absolutely licentious. The colonists lived in a monarchy and were monarchical subjects, but, as General Guy Carleton noted in 1768, the conditions of their society gave them "a strong bias to Republican Principles."  

First, many colonists had little reason to feel part of His Majesty's realm or to respect royalty. Many white foreign immigrants had no natural allegiance to a British king, and they often settled far from established authority in the colonies. Even many of the eighteenth-century migrants from the British Isles—Scotch-Irish and Irish—came with bitter grievances against the English government. They had been pushed about and persecuted by the English government and Anglo-Irish landlords for so long that they could not feel much loyalty to the English crown.

But even those English colonists who were proud of being Englishmen were not very good monarchists. Many New Englanders ritualistically recalled their seventeenth-century Puritan heritage of defiance to king and church; and many of them remained a stern, sober people, not much given to the hierarchies and displays of monarchy. Massachusetts was accused in 1740 of being still "a kind of commonwealth where

the king is hardly a stadtholder." Everywhere in America, even in the southern colonies where attempts to emulate English ways were strongest, most colonists had little sense of royal majesty: the crown was too far away to make its presence felt. The colonists were apt to think of King George, as one wealthy colonial merchant reputedly did, as simply a good honest fellow with whom they might like to smoke a pipe. The crown's viceroy in the colonies—the royal governors—did little to enhance royal dignity. They were often without titles, wealth, or the accoutrements of power, and they complained constantly that their meager incomes allowed them to live no better than "a private gentleman."

In the 1750s the North Carolina governor did not even have a permanent residence; he was reduced, as he grumbled, to renting "a small House" in New Bern "without either garden or field to keep either horse or cow."  

Royal authority operated much of the time on the surface of American life, masking the confused reality of decentralized institutions and localized authorities that made up the central governance of the colonies. The harmonious compromise between central and local authorities that had developed in Britain since 1688 was not duplicated in America. The crown always seemed to the colonists to be an extraneous overlaid power antagonistic to their local institutions, especially the provincial assemblies. In England, Parliament provided an arena for reconciling crown and local interests, but in the colonies it had no such function. In this respect colonial society resembled more the hodgepodge of local privileges and liberties that confronted the French monarchy in the eighteenth century than it did the relatively agreeable and integrated relationship between the crown and local authorities worked out in Great Britain. Consequently, the colonists had little understanding of state authority, of a united autonomous political entity that was completely sovereign and reached deep into the localities. And thus they were not prepared to accept that authority when after 1763 it tried to intrude into their lives.

Not only did royal authority have trouble making itself felt in the colonies, but it lacked the religious backbone that an established church offered royalty at home. In England the Anglican church was firmly in the hands of the crown and operated essentially as a bureaucratic arm of the crown. But not in America. "No Bishop, no King," James I had once warned—a "stupid saying," declared radical English whigs, that had "formerly filled our Prisons with Dissenters, and chased many of them to America." The colonies had many dissenters and no bishop—
and had never had one—and consequently the presence of the Church of England was fundamentally flawed; and royal officials saw a latent (and sometimes not so latent) rebellious presbyterianism everywhere.5

If England had thirty different religions, then America had hundreds, and none of them was traditionally organized. “There was no hierarchy or degrees of Eminence among the Clergy,” complained William Knox, an imperial bureaucrat with a half dozen years of firsthand experience in the colonies, “no distinctions of Bishops, Priests or Deacons, no Rule or Order, no Deans Chapters or Archdeacons. All were Priests and nothing more.” Control of religious life never flowed from the top down, and personal patronage within any of the numerous religious groups was never strong. Even where the Church of England was most solidly established—in Virginia—it was dominated by the local vestries. Regardless of the circumstances of their ordination, clergymen everywhere tended to be appointed by their congregations and thus dependent on them. The disorders and confusions of American religious life by themselves made difficult the maintenance of a traditional monarchical society in the colonies.6

But the meager royal authority and the disordered religious life only expressed a deeper social confusion—the weakness and incompleteness of America’s social hierarchy. Despite increased social stratification during the eighteenth century, American society remained remarkably shallow and stunted by contemporary English standards. All the topmost tiers of English society were missing in America. There were no dukes, no marquesses, no court, and nothing like the fabulous wealth of the English nobility. The scale of everything was different in the colonies. While Charles Carroll of Maryland, one of the wealthiest planters in the South, was earning what the colonists regarded as the huge sum of £1,800 a year, the Earl of Derby’s vast estates were bringing in an annual income of over £40,000. George Washington’s estate was thought to be earning in the 1770s only £500 per an. Virginia currency,” which put Washington, according to a visiting Englishman, “in point of rank only equal to the better sort of yeoman in England.”7 Major merchants in American cities were worth between £25,000 and £50,000; in contrast, their counterparts in England were worth between £200,000 and £800,000. Thomas Hancock of Boston, one of the richest merchants in America, left an estate of nearly £500,000; yet this enormous colonial fortune was scarcely a third of the sum bequeathed in 1739 by a London merchant, Henry Lascalles. Hancock’s house in Boston and William Byrd’s Virginia mansion of Westover may have been expensive and elaborate structures for the colonies, but they were dwarfed by the magnificent palaces the English nobility built for themselves. Hancock’s two-storied house, like most gentry homes in America, had only eight rooms; the Sackville family’s palace, Knole in Kent, had 365. Very few of the colonists’ great houses even had secondary staircases for the servants. Byrd’s Westover was sixty-five feet in length, but this was scarcely a tenth of the size of the Marquess of Rockingham’s house, Wentworth Woodhouse, which was longer than two football fields.8

Everywhere even the wealthiest of colonial gentry strained to imitate the best of English taste. The practice of plastering and painting the wood, brick, and fieldstones of their homes in order to resemble classically precise-cut masonry was symptomatic of their plight. By English standards the colonial aristocracy was a minor thing—at best composed of middling and lesser gentry only. Charles Chauncy of Massachusetts was not exaggerating by much when he said in 1766 that “there is scarce a man in any of the colonies, certainly there is not in the New England ones, that would be deemed worthy of the name of a rich man in Great Britain.”9

Although real and substantial distinctions existed in colonial America, the colonial aristocracy was never as well established, never as wealthy, never as dominant as it would have liked. As strong as the colonial gentry may have been in some places and at some times, they never were able to duplicate the mutual protection and allegiance between superiors and inferiors that made the eighteenth-century English squires a relatively secure. As pervasive as personal and kinship influence was in the colonies, gentry use of this influence in the economy, in religion, or in politics was never as powerful as it was in England. Militia officers were often selected by their companies, ministers were hired by their parishioners, and a remarkably large proportion of political leaders were popularly elected, sometimes by an extremely broad electorate.

The American aristocracy, such as it was, was not only weaker than its English counterpart; it also had a great deal of trouble maintaining both the desired classical independence and its freedom from the marketplace. Few members of the American gentry were able to live idly off the rents of tenants as the English landed aristocracy did. Some landowners in New York and in the South leased out their lands to tenants, but their position was never quite comparable to the English landed gentry. Landlords were not able to preempt the produce of their tenants, and their rental income was often unreliable. Usually they acted
more as land speculators than as landlords, offering tenants very advantageous terms simply to open up and clear land that otherwise would remain as useless wilderness. New royal governors, thinking of the English experience, tried to build up large rent rolls, but none of them realized his expectations.9

America could not sustain the stable pattern of tenantry that lay at the heart of a traditional landed society, and thus that dependency that lay at the heart of monarchical society was undermined. The tenants often lived on land far removed from their landlords and were very poorly supervised. Many landlords had trouble not only in collecting rents but in preventing their tenants from selling their leases and moving on without paying their debts. Since tenantry was often regarded as simply a first step toward an independent freehold, mobility was high. The New York manor leases, which were usually for life, turned over on the average every ninth year. In a society where land was so widely available, most men preferred to secure their own land. In fact, said Cadwallader Colden, "the hopes of having land of their own & becoming independent of Landlords is what chiefly induces people into America." In 1747 a North Carolinian advised a gentleman who was about to purchase from afar a plantation in the Cape Fear region to come and see it before he bought it; "for if you should not like to live there, you cannot rent it," even at the low rate of 1 percent interest. "The poorest people here if they have been any time in the country, makes shift to get Land of their own either by taking up or Buying." The truth was, as the English bureaucrat Knox put it, that "the relation between Landlord and Tenant could have no existence where every Man held by the same tenure." Even though some gentlemen had vastly greater wealth and land than others, they could not be aristocrats in the English manner: "their riches brought them little influence for if they parcellled out their Lands it was upon the same tenure as they held it."10

Consequently, it is not surprising, particularly in the years after mid-century, that New York landlords expected less and less filial affection from their tenants and more and more monetary payments. Fewer of the landlords were able or willing to ignore or burn their tenants' overdue debts, as Colonel Frederick Philipse and Sir William Johnson continued to do. More and more landlords wanted their rents, and those like Beverly Robinson who raised them at every opportunity were willing to evict tenants who could not pay. Yet every act of exploitation, every suggestion that only profit mattered, eroded further the paternalistic bonds tying superiors and inferiors together."

Most colonial aristocrats were never able to dominate their localities to the extent that English aristocrats did. In England local aristocrats were the primary patrons and consumers of local merchandise and skills. Their country houses were the centers of consumption and employment in their communities. They spent fortunes on building and maintaining their estates, and their patronage kept dozens and sometimes hundreds of artisans, shopkeepers, and laborers in work. Walpole employed twenty-nine men and fifty women just to lay out and plant his gardens at Houghton in 1721. Landowners with mines on their estates could employ entire communities. In the colonies a few aristocrats did spend huge amounts of money in their localities and developed dependencies among the local artisans and laborers. John Hancock went through a fortune in his aristocratic attempts to patronize local labor. But Hancock's example was conspicuously unusual in a way it would not have been in England; most American gentry had neither the funds nor the ability to do what he did. The southern planters built and maintained country houses, but, they relied on their slaves to supply them with most of their needs, from making hogsheads to caring for their gardens. Thus not only did the great planters' reliance on the labor of their own slaves prevent the growth of large middling groups of white artisans in the South, but their patronage and hence dominance of the communities beyond their plantations was correspondingly reduced. Everywhere in America aristocrats tended to import from abroad many of their accouterments—from carriages to furniture; and to the extent that they did, they weakened their influence among artisans and workmen where they lived."

Of course, the great planters of the South did enjoy a considerable amount of leisure based on the labor of their slaves; and consequently they came closest in America to fitting the classical ideal of the free and independent gentleman. By the middle of the eighteenth century the ruling southern planters in the Chesapeake and in South Carolina had thoroughly absorbed the classical republican ideology of leadership and saw themselves fulfilling it, and to a remarkable extent they did. In Virginia about forty or so interrelated wealthy families dominated the society and practiced a republican stewardship that rivaled that of the English squirearchy—laboring tirelessly in the county courts, the parish vestries, the House of Burgesses, and other offices out of a deep sense of public responsibility. In South Carolina planters and planter merchants likewise saw themselves as independent English country gentlemen. They built country houses in the swamps, traced their ge-
nalogies, attempted to found families, and worked hard to make their General Assembly live up to the republican image of being a repository of virtue. Perhaps nowhere else on the continent did so many wealthy individual leaders take so much pride in their scorn of party and connections and their promotion of classical republican values. Yet despite the impressive ways these southern planters controlled and stabilized their societies and lived up to the classical republican image they had of themselves, they were not as free and independent as they would have liked. Some planters kept taverns on the side, and many others were intimately concerned in the day-to-day management of their estates. Even with overseers and agents and dozens of slaves, few of the great planters could treat their estates as self-perpetuating patrimonies. Their overseers were not comparable to the stewards and estate managers of the English gentry; thus the planters, despite their aristocratic poses, were often very busy, commercially involved men. Their livelihoods were tied directly to the vicissitudes of international trade, and they had always had an uneasy sense of being dependent on the market to an extent that the English landed aristocracy, despite its commitment to enterprising projects and improvements, never really felt. Even the wealthiest and most established of planters were incapable of being absentee owners; and those like William Byrd and the younger Charles Carroll, who might have liked to spend their days in Europe, had to return home or lose the source of their wealth. "Our affairs," Carroll told his father in 1764, "absolutely require my residence in Maryland."16

The legal devices of entail and primogeniture that in England worked to perpetuate family estates intact through a prescribed line of heirs had a contrary effect in America: by limiting a father's discretion in disposing of the estate, such devices tended to risk the family property on the particular talents—or shortcomings—of an eldest son. By the eve of the Revolution the great planters of the Chesapeake realized with growing concern that their painstakingly built fortunes could be suddenly wiped out by the mistakes of their heirs. Robert Carter gave his son Robert Bladen the management and profits of his Billingsgate plantation—1,200 acres and forty slaves—and then in dismay watched him squander it all away in only three years. The Nelsons were not the only great family in Virginia to disappear through the indebtedness and waywardness of a single generation. William Byrd III had no head for business: he mortgaged his silver plate and 159 slaves and went through a fortune before committing suicide on New Year's Day 1777. Some of the planters saw with mounting fear the accumulated gains of their lives being dissipated by the reckless gambling and drinking of their heirs, who, as Landon Carter moaned, "play away and play it all away." "In a commercial nation," noted the sober young Carroll, "the glory of illustrious progenitors will not screen their needy posterity from obscurity and want." The aristocrats of America had a much keener consciousness of mobility, both up and down, than their English counterparts. The huge debts of the Virginia planters, warned Thomas Nelson on the eve of the Revolution, were "but Preludes to Vast Changes of property among us, that must soon take place."15

In the years after mid-century the Virginia planters became more and more concerned about the state of their society. Pressure from their British creditors forced them to hound each other for repayment of debts. Circumstances were compelling them to cut through the appearance of independent country gentry they had sought to maintain and to expose the raw commercial character of their lives. They discovered, as James Mercer did, that they were not as free from the day-to-day business world as they made out. When Mercer gave up his law practice in 1765, he found that his plantation could not support him. Many of the planters were living on the edge of bankruptcy, seriously overextended and spending beyond their means in an almost frantic effort to live up to the aristocratic image they had created of themselves. Lieutenant Governor Francis Fauquier thought that the rising indebtedness of the planters was due to their unwillingness to "quit any one Article of Luxury." By the eve of the Revolution many planters were voicing a growing sense of impending ruin. Nonimportation of British luxuries was welcomed in the 1760s and 1770s precisely because, as Washington pointed out, it gave the planters a pretext to cut back on their ostentation and display without injuring either their aristocratic honor or their credit. By 1776 many Chesapeake planters were ready to believe that republicanism and republican values would save their society. Still, despite all their difficulties the great southern planters at least approached the classical image of disinterested gentlemanly leadership; they knew it and made the most of it throughout their history.16

Elsewhere, even in other parts of the South, elites never even came close to the English model. Perhaps no ruling group in the eighteenth-century colonies was weaker and more vulnerable to challenge than that of North Carolina. The majority of the colonial assembly in 1730 who were distinguished enough to leave any personal records were only middling planters even by Virginia standards—owning less than ten slaves
and five hundred acres each. Even the council was composed of men whose claim to gentility was very doubtful. Of the twenty members of the council in 1730 only two are known to have been university-educated. One Virginian called them a "company of pirates, vagabonds and footmen." Put together, their estates, it was said, "won't amount to £1500." The royal governors continually complained that North Carolina lacked men of wealth and standing. The "characters" of the high officials, said Governor Gabriel Johnston, "alone were sufficient to bring all Magistracy and Government into contempt and ridicule." Of course, many of the governors were no better. Johnston himself was criticized for being "a Schoolmaster and of mean and low descent."  

No place was as confused as North Carolina; but in the northern colonies gentry elites also had trouble living up to the classical republican model of leadership, and challenges to their authority were common. Although eighteenth-century society was much tighter and less porous than American mythology would have it, the topmost ranks of the social hierarchy certainly remained more permeable and open to entry from below than in the mother country. Claiming the rank of gentleman in America was easier. Men who prescribed a few potions or displayed a knowledge of law might pretend to be doctors or lawyers and thus assert their membership in one of the gentlemanly liberal professions. Even in a settled area of Pennsylvania, noted the Maryland doctor Alexander Hamilton, a "very rough spun, forward clownsish blade, much addicted to swearing," could attempt "to pass for a gentleman." In New England, to the chagrin of young John Adams, farmers called themselves both yeomen and gentlemen at the same time. More than half of the company officers of the Massachusetts militia mobilized for the Seven Years' War identified themselves with manual occupations.  

Because, as Benjamin Franklin said, "common Tradesmen and Farmers" in America were "as intelligent as most Gentlemen from other Countries," these common men often expected to pass as gentlemen more easily than elsewhere. David Harry, who had once been a fellow apprentice with Franklin, set himself up as a master printer in Philadelphia. But, said Franklin, "he was very proud, dress'd like a Gentleman, liv'd expensively, . . . ran in debt, and neglected his Business, upon which all Business left him"; eventually Harry fled the country. Franklin himself discovered early in his life how easy it was for a commoner with the right sponsorship to mingle comfortably with gentlemen. When he and James Ralph boarded the ship to sail to England in 1724, they "were forc'd to take up with a Berth in the Steerage," since, "none on board knowing us, [we] were considered as ordinary Persons." But when Colonel John French, justice of the Delaware Supreme Court, came on board, recognized the nineteen-year-old Franklin, and paid him "great Respect," he and Ralph were immediately invited "by the other Gentlemen to come into the Cabin." Franklin, however, did not let the incident go to his head; he realized, as we have seen, that it was wiser to keep to his allotted rank and wait until he had acquired sufficient wealth to retire permanently from business before formally becoming a gentleman.  

Other colonists were not so punctilious as Franklin. Everywhere wealthy-commoners, even those who still worked with their hands, sought to buy their way into gentlemanly status. Building a second home in the country, for example, was very much a sign of being a gentleman. By the 1770s eighty-two Philadelphians owned places clearly defined as "country seats" in Philadelphia County alone. Yet these "seats" were by no means comparable to the great country seats of the English aristocracy. They were not even suburban villas: they had assessed values ranging from £4 to £200, and only ten of them were worth more than £50. And this distinction of having a "seat" was spread very widely: the list of eighty-two owners included thirteen esquires, nine gentlemen, five doctors, twenty-two merchants, four widows, three shopkeepers, two innkeepers, and twenty-six artisans of one sort or another.

In the northern port cities there were only a few "merchant princes"—such as the Drinkers and Whartons of Philadelphia or the Amorys and Boylston's of Boston—whose wealth and standing were sufficient to allow them to imitate comfortably the lesser gentry of England. But even these few merchant princes, rich and genteel as they might be, knew that they were not real aristocrats exempt from the interests and worries of trade. Certainly they were not as patrician in manner or as free from failure as their counterparts in the mother country. Even the wealthiest American merchants realized that they could not ignore their businesses and take grand tours and live as nobly as rich English merchants did. Most ordinary colonial merchants—perhaps 85 percent or more of the two or three hundred merchants in Philadelphia—were ensnared in such a "hardhearted Iron-Fisted & inhospitable world," unable "to lay up such a Stock, as would maintain me without dayly labour," and thus could not even pretend to gentility. Most were in fact very new to wholesale trade, often having begun their careers as artisans, shopkeepers, or smugglers. As Lieutenant Governor Colden of New
York pointed out, most of them “suddenly rose from the lowest rank of the People to considerable fortunes.” Whereas in England it took £3,000 to become a merchant, in colonial Philadelphia it took only £400; which is why many young Englishmen who lacked the resources to become wholesalers at home migrated to the colonies. But business in America was always chancy, and being a colonial merchant was always precarious; and one could as readily slide into bankruptcy as rise into merchant status. Perhaps as many as one in three colonial merchants failed. Becoming a merchant in the colonies was far easier but also far riskier than it was in the more developed ports of Great Britain.

The relative primitiveness of colonial economic conditions aggravated the uncertainty of many of the merchants and reduced their influence. Whatever authority they claimed in their port, it rarely extended very far into the countryside. Rather than dictating to the farmers of the region, merchants often found themselves dependent on them. They needed supplies to trade, and farmers, many of whom were not regularly producing for the market, often lacked “surpluses” to sell. Not only were the merchants’ sources of supply insecure; their markets were too. Consequently, even the most wealthy merchants usually ended up being only middlemen in extraordinarily complicated networks of exchanges. As such, they rarely could specialize; most merchants were forced to engage in a wide variety of tasks, being exporters, importers, wholesalers, retailers, manufacturers, insurance underwriters, shipbuilders, or privateersmen at one time or another. Such different roles blurred their special reputation as “merchants”—a term supposedly confined to those involved in overseas wholesale trade—and further weakened their status and thus their authority in their communities. Being merchants under such adverse circumstances no doubt bred peculiarly flexible and risk-taking personalities, but such aggressive and hustling arrivistes rarely possessed a patrician interest in public service. Many were apt to share Charles Pettit’s view that politics was not worth the time and trouble it demanded, “unless it should eventually throw business in my hands by which I may obtain a profit.” Consequently, most active merchants did not serve in government.

Of course, in the northern colonies there were numbers of educated well-connected professional men or gentlemen of independent fortune who were capable of living up to the classical ideals of political leadership that dominated eighteenth-century culture. But there were, it seemed, never enough of these to go around. As a result, more than one established gentleman complained of the extent to which the colonial assem-

blies contained too many members who were not gentlemen in any sense; much less gentlemen educated in a liberal classical mode. The legislatures contained too many retailers of “Rum and Small Beer” from “poor obscure” country towns “remote from all Business”; or too many “plain, illiterate husbandmen, whose views seldom extended farther than the regulation of highways, the destruction of wolves, wildcats and foxes, and the advancement of the other little interests of the particular counties they were chosen to represent.” Even members of the councils—the colonial counterparts to the English House of Lords—were sometimes criticized by the governors for being men in “necessitous circumstances” or of “no estate in the country and much in debt.” Or when they did have sufficient wealth, too often the councillors abstained themselves from attendance because, as one New Jersey councilor put it, “it would too much interfere with my Interests & Business.”

The long and short of it was, as Governor Lewis Morris of New Jersey complained to the Board of Trade in 1745, that many wealthy individuals regarded service on the council as “a sort of tax on them to serve the publick at their owne Expense besides neglect of their business.”

More than anything else, it was this weakness of the colonial aristocracy—its relative lack of gentility, its openness to entry, its inability to live up to the classical image of political leadership, and its susceptibility to challenge—that accounts for the instability and competitive factionalism of colonial politics. Wherever the ruling families of a colony were entrenched—readily identifiable and beyond the resentment and rivalry of others—as in eighteenth-century Virginia and New Hampshire, then the politics were stable and factionalism was at a minimum. The strength or weakness of royal authority in any particular colony had almost nothing to do with determining this stability. In New Hampshire royal authority was extraordinarily strong, stronger than in any other colony. But this authority was only a consequence of the power exercised by a small and well-defined elite dominated by the royal governor, Benning Wentworth. By controlling the timber and naval stores trade, which was practically the sole source of great wealth in the colony, Wentworth was able for twenty-five years to manipulate the mercantile leaders of Portsmouth, virtually the only aristocracy the colony possessed, and to maintain peace within the colony. Yet in Virginia, whose politics were likewise remarkably stable, royal authority was very weak—so weak, in fact, that the royal governors virtually abandoned responsibility for ruling the colony to the forty or so aristocratic families that kept Virginia politics relatively calm for nearly a half century.
They were able to do so because they were a remarkably homogeneous and uncontested ruling group—perhaps the only colonial aristocracy whose wealth and influence approached that of the eighteenth-century English aristocracy.14

Elsewhere in the colonies—wherever the aristocracies or would-be aristocracies were weak and divided—politics were contentious and factional, filled with bitter clashes among the prominent individuals and families of each colony for the rewards and privileges of government. Although most colonists naturally came to believe that the intrusive presence of British royal authority and the imperial relationship in general were the source of America’s political instability and factionalism, they were wrong. The problems of American politics were at bottom neither imperial nor constitutional but social; the crown was virtually irrelevant to the society’s basic contentiousness. In the tiny corporate colony of Rhode Island royal authority was weaker than anywhere else; yet Rhode Island was the most faction-ridden colony of all. Only after the Revolution would some Americans come to appreciate the true nature of their social reality.

But it was not just the top of the English hierarchy that was missing or confused in America; the bottom layer—the great mass of destitute people that still burdened most European societies—was also lacking. Severe famine remained a threat to parts of Europe well into the eighteenth century, and although England itself had been free of famine since the seventeenth century, it still had plenty of poor. Nowhere in America was there anything comparable to the vile and violent slums of London—that wretched gin-soaked world immortalized by Hogarth. Although by the mid-eighteenth century the numbers of poor were increasing in the urban ports of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, there was not, Americans realized, “the least danger of starving amongst us.” Many of the American poor, especially those in an entrepôt like Philadelphia, were transients, people on their way to someplace else. Economic downturns could occasionally allow the proportion of poor in the colonies to range as high as 10 percent; but this still did not begin to compare with the poor of Hanoverian England, where as much as half the population was regularly or at least occasionally dependent on charity for subsistence. England, of course, had nothing like the nearly half million blacks held by the colonists in hereditary bondage. But it had huge proportions of marginal tenants and rural wage laborers; indeed, the bulk of its population was landless. The independent English yeoman landowner was a dream of the past in the mother country. By the eve of the Revolution three-quarters of English farmland was owned by noble and gentry landlords who leased their estates to tenants of one sort or another. Indeed, four hundred great families owned a fifth of all the land in England.15

By contrast, most American farmers owned their own land (“We are Lords of our own little but sufficient Estates”). The radical importance of this landownership in an English-speaking world dominated by rent-paying tenants and leaseholders cannot be exaggerated: even before the Revolution it gave Americans a sense of their egalitarian exceptionalism. The “Level” in New Jersey society that Philip Fithian thought so admirable arose “from the very great division of the lands in that Province, and consequently from the near approach to an equality of Wealth amongst the Inhabitants.” Connecticut was no different, as even a spiteful Anglican victim of the Revolution, Samuel Peters, admitted. “In no part of the world,” Peters wrote in his General History of Connecticut, “are les petits and les grands so much upon a par as here, where none of the people are destitute of the conveniences of life and the spirit of independence.”16 Two-thirds of the white colonial population owned land, compared with only one-fifth of the English population. There were propertyless in America (maybe in some places as many as 30 percent of the adult males), but they tended to be either recent immigrants or young men awaiting their inheritance or an opportunity to move and acquire land. In no case was the overall situation of property-owning in America comparable to that of England, where more than 60 percent of the population owned no property of any kind. Freehold tenure in America was especially widespread, and freehold tenure, said William Knox bluntly, “excluded all ideas of subordination and dependence.”17

This description of the truncated nature of American society is familiar. Both eighteenth-century observers and historians ever since have repeatedly commented on the egalitarian character of colonial society. America, it seemed, was primed for republicanism. It had no oppressive established church, no titled nobility, no great distinctions of wealth, and no generality of people sunk in indigence and poverty. A society that boasted that “almost every man is a freeholder” was presumably a society ideally suited for republicanism.18

Yet paradoxically this latently republican society was at the same time manifestly monarchical. American society was riddled with contradictions. It was still remarkably underdeveloped commercially compared with the mother country, it was still largely agricultural and rural, and it possessed as yet few modern alternatives to traditional personal and
kinship relations to tie itself together—fewer certainly than the economically advanced society of England. Not only were the legal dependencies of white servitude and black slavery harsher and more conspicuous in the colonies than in England, but the relative backwardness of the colonists’ society and economy meant that Americans had fewer opportunities than Englishmen to substitute impersonal market exchanges and a cash nexus for older personal and patriarchal connections; and thus they were more apt than Englishmen to continue to think of social relationships in familial and personal terms—as expressions of the household rather than of a market society. Colonial society was therefore a society in tension, torn between contradictory monarchical and republican tendencies. It had many exaggerated expectations of subjection and dependency but at the same time lacked sufficient personal influence and patronage power to fulfill these expectations. Consequently, the connectedness of colonial society—its capacity to bind one person to another—was exceedingly fragile and vulnerable to challenge.

8. Loosening the Bands of Society

Perhaps in time this truncated republicanized monarchical society might have matured and become more hierarchical. Already by mid-century colonial society in some areas was more stratified than it had been, and social distinctions seemed to be hardening. The rich were getting richer and the poor were growing in number. Despite pockets of instability in some areas and the spread of republican values, the ruling gentry in most colonies were more visible, interconnected, and conscious of their identity than ever before.

Yet any resemblance between colonial society and that of the mother country remained superficial and partial; the hierarchies and patronage connections of American society were brittle; and little in the society had much chance to solidify. For just at the moment when some parts of American society seemed to be becoming more like England’s, powerful forces were accelerating and changing everything.

These basic forces were the most important sources of the late-eighteenth-century democratic revolution. Of course, they were not unique to America; they were Western-wide. But because society in the New World was already more republican, more shallow, and more fragile, there the effects of these forces seemed magnified and overdrawn. All Europe experienced a democratic revolution in the late eighteenth century, but in America this democratic revolution was carried further than elsewhere. Extraordinary demographic and economic developments, moving as never before, reshaped the contours of the society—challenging and further eroding the older monarchical world of dependent paternal and personal relations.

Most Americans, like most Europeans, scarcely grasped the immensity of the fundamental forces at work in the Western world. They were, of course, conscious of changes and disruptions in the customs of their lives. Yet, habituated as they were to monarchical hierarchy and desirous of stability and continuity, most were not disposed to perceive, much less to understand, the structural shifts taking place in their society. In the subsequent decades, they, like the Europeans, struggled to comprehend what was happening to them, and they sought through a variety of ways to resolve the problems and anxieties created by their newly detached and independent situations. The history of America in the decades between the 1740s and the 1820s is the story of these various resolutions. The imperial crisis with Great Britain and the American Revolution itself were simply clarifying incidents in this larger story of America’s democratic revolution.

The basic fact of early American history was the growth and movement of people. From the beginning of the eighteenth century, if not earlier, the colonial population had been virtually exploding; in fact, through their high birthrates and low mortality rates the North American colonists were multiplying more rapidly than any other people in the Western world. Between 1750 and 1770 they grew from one million to over two million and between 1770 and 1790 from two to four million, doubling every twenty years as they had for several generations.

Moreover, this growth was not entirely natural. During these same middle decades of the eighteenth century immigrants poured into the New World by the tens of thousands—Englishmen, Scots, and Protestant Irish from the British Isles and Germans from the Rhine Valley. Between 1764 and 1776 alone, 125,000 entered the American colonies from the home islands. From the colonial ports, particularly Philadelphia, these new migrants from the British Isles and Europe now combined with the swelling numbers of uprooted colonists to spread themselves in all directions over the eastern half of the continent.

For nearly a century and a half the colonists had been confined to a several-hundred-mile-wide strip along the Atlantic coast. Now in the middle decades of the eighteenth century they began to feel pressed by the growing numbers of people. Overcultivated soil in the East was