Colonial Life…

…In 18th century Charleston, Boston, and Philadelphia, the upper classes could occasionally hear Bach and Mozart performed by professional orchestras. Most musical endeavor, however, was applied to religion, as church hymns from the Bay Psalm Book (1640) and Psalms of David (1719) were sung acapella and, occasionally, to the accompaniment of church organ. Americans had customized and syncopated hymns, greatly aggravating pious English churchmen, indicating the true course that American music would follow. Reflecting the most predominant musical influence in colonial America, the folk idiom of Anglo, Celtic, and African emigrants, American music already had coalesced into a base upon which new genres of church and secular music—gospel, field songs, and white folk ballads—would emerge in the 19th century.

Like much of the early arts, colonial literature focused on religion and answered other needs of the common folk. This pattern was set in the 17th century when William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* related the exciting story of the Pilgrims with an eye to the all-powerful role of God in shaping their destiny. Anne Bradstreet, an accomplished 1600s Colonial poet who was read throughout eighteenth century New England, also conveyed religious themes and the divine inspiration that surrounded her Puritan lifestyle. Although in "The Prologue" (1650) she apologizes for her "obscure lines" and "foolish, broken, blemished Muse," Bradstreet's work in fact shows a keen intellect and lively, religious imagination. For example, in "The Flesh and the Spirit" she wrote,

> *My garments are not silk nor gold*
> *Nor such like trash which earth doth hold*
> *But royal robes I still have on*
> *More glorious than the glist'ning sun*
> *. . .*
> *If I of heaven may have my fill*
> *Take thou the world, and all that will.*

The most popular eighteenth century colonial literature also addressed worldly concerns like religion, politics, and making money. Such habits revealed that Americans had a pragmatic, down-to-earth nature when it came to their reading. Although literacy was widespread, Americans read mainly the Bible, political tracts, and "how-to" books on farming, mechanics, etiquette, and moral improvement, not Greek philosophers or the campaigns of Caesar.

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PROVINCIAL MATERIAL CULTURE can be seen in colonial American architecture, furniture, hygiene, transportation, and communication. With the exception of a few government buildings, colleges, and wealthy abodes, 18th century architecture was humble. Most Americans lived in one-room homes made of logs and rough-cut lumber. Families cooked, ate, worked, relaxed, and slept in a main room called the "keeping room." Colonial homes were hot in summer and cold in winter—so cold that sometimes the ink on a quill pin would freeze! Folks burned giant logs in fireplaces to stay warm (not until five decades later would Ben Franklin invent the heat-efficient "Franklin Stove"). After a time, a growing family might add an additional room or dormers to their home.

Families made their own furniture, but their small houses did not require much. One good chair was usually "father's chair"; everyone else sat on the floor, on wooden benches, or on a long, high-backed bench called a settle (like a wooden "love-seat" in houses today). Adults slept curled-up on short jack-beds with trundle beds for young children underneath. Older children might sleep in the attic, on mattresses stuffed with straw, feathers, or wool. There were no closets; folks hung their clothes on wall pegs. Since colonial homes had no bathrooms, family members relieved themselves in trenches or rough-built out-houses. As in Europe, bathing was viewed as unnecessary on a regular basis—and in some English colonies, especially in the West Indies, swimming in the clear blue Carribean was viewed as unhealthy. When weddings or special occasions made a bath necessary, however, colonials stood in wooden tubs of water in front of the fireplace.

And travel? After crossing a three thousand-mile ocean to America, most colonials traveled little further than their villages or farms. Roads were rough—they were not much more than improved game and Indian trails, capable of hobbling a valuable horse or throwing a wheel on a carriage. Narrow, muddy, and rutted roads ambled through thick forests. Rivers and streams proved formidable barriers to travel, and if and entrepreneur had provided a ferry or constructed a bridge, it required a toll to cross. Colonial folk crossed rivers initially on horseback or by wagon—which had to be caulked and sealed against leaks—or via crude log bridges. In winter, some traveled by pod and pung, sleighs drawn, respectively, by one or two horses. Trips from home often lasted so long that folks brought bedding, and hot coals to cook their food. No one, ever, just "ran into town."

Not until the French and Indian War ended did colonials began to trek beyond the Appalachian mountains in great numbers. In the first half of the eighteenth century, travel was too difficult and the wilderness too dangerous a place to venture. Besides, there was too much opportunity (and work) at home.

Obviously, the lifestyle of colonial America was as coarse as the physical environment in which it flourished, so much so that English visitors expressed shock at the extent to which emigrants had transformed in the new world.

Black folk culture shows the way in which slaves combined African culture with Anglo- and Celtic-American culture to create a unique African-American folk culture. For example, blacks borrowed the "Jack Tales" (like "Jack and the Beanstalk") of Anglo traditions and told stories about a new slave folk hero, also named Jack. In these stories, Jack made fools out of the whites, pretended to be more ignorant than he was, defied his master, and expressed a desire for revenge. Combining African beliefs in magic with Anglo superstitions, Jack sometimes became a "Conjuror" who cast "spells" on the master and rode him around the pasture "like a bull-yearlin'."

Music also provided sustenance, in both secular and religious form. Working in the tobacco and rice fields, slaves customized Anglo and Celtic folk melodies, incorporating "call and response" style and syncopated rhythm. The resulting work songs made field labor less arduous, providing a rhythm to the work and helping the long hours pass more easily. To the extent that slaves were permitted Christian religious services, their songs combined Euro-American Protestant forms with a new frontier enthusiasm for religion and their own spirituality, resulting in a profoundly felt folk religion that stressed personal salvation and a hope for "a better day a comin'"–what the Old Testament called the "Day of Jubilee." Together, black family life, folklore, medicine, conjuring, music and religion, made life worth living, with slaves always looking towards freedom and the "Jubilee." As historian John Blassingame has written, slaves created a culture that "lightened their burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided a way for verbalizing aggression, maintaining hope, and building self-esteem."

SIDEBAR: FAMOUS TRIALS – The Trial of John Peter Zenger

Although Colonial legislatures and governors still held some judicial prerogatives (hence the Massachusetts legislature's title, the "General Court"), a full-fledged judiciary branch of government had emerged and so too had a unique American bar. American lawyers were often self-trained and tended to learn on the job. Both the bar and judicial branch fostered an "Americanization" of English law, as evidenced in the case of John Peter Zenger, whose victory, some argue, set a precedent for what would later be termed "freedom of the press." Zenger turned British libel law on its head while simultaneously attacking the power of an arbitrary Royal governor.

Born in Germany in 1697, John Peter Zenger emigrated to New York in 1710. Fervently religious—the Dutch Reformed Zenger played the organ each week in church— he learned the printing trade and in 1733 set up his own newspaper, the New York Weekly Journal. Zenger's paper formed a political counterweight to the supporters of Governor William Cosby, whom Zenger viewed as an enemy of legislative power and the forces of democracy. Biblical principles undergirded Zenger's material. He diligently committed himself to "speaking and writing Truth," and viewed governors who abused their power as "not Gods but dead Idols." Soon, a newspaper war began between Zenger's Journal and a pro-Cosby paper, the New York Gazette. The debate heated up as Zenger and his fellow editors severely lampooned the Governor and the royal administration. Outraged at attacks by a lowly newspaperman, Cosby ordered Zenger arrested and charged with seditious libel.

Authorities held Zenger incommunicado for ten months before bringing him to trial in 1735. In this landmark libel case Zenger was represented by a brilliant jurist, Andrew Hamilton (no relation to the Revolutionary hero). In order to win, Hamilton had to pursue a radical course of overturning centuries of precedent in English libel law. According to English law, a person could seek judgment for libel so long as he could prove that his reputation had been harmed. Note, this "harm" did not necessarily hinge on "truth"—thus a person could be libeled even if someone was telling the truth about him! In other words, all that was necessary to win in a seditious libel case in England was to prove harm, not the falseness of the libelous comments.

When the judge thereby refused to admit evidence regarding the truth of Zenger's newspaper's writings, Hamilton challenged English law. He "placed Zenger in the line of Martin Luther, John Foxe, and John Stubbes," all of whom were persecuted religious leaders. Hamilton argued that the truth of his client's statements should be the criteria on determining whether they were libelous:
May it please your Honor; I agree with Mr. Attorney, that government is a sacred thing, but I differ very widely from him when he would insinuate that the just complaints of a number of men who suffer under a bad administration is libeling that administration…if he can prove the facts charged upon us to be false, I'll own them to be scandalous, seditious, and a libel. So the work seems now to be shortened and Mr. Attorney has now only to prove the words false in order to make us guilty. In the end, the jury broke with English law and acquitted Zenger. Governor Cosby and his supporters were outraged. The verdict had the practical effect of overturning English legal precedent of reshaping libel law. Christian editors started to see their role as challenging corruption and injustice: within a year of the Zenger decision, William Parks of the Virginia Gazette assailed the Virginia House of Burgesses for corruption, and when threatened with prosecution, he invoked the Zenger defense. Charges were dropped. Thus, the Zenger case paved the way for what Americans would come to embrace as "freedom of the press," but, ironically for many modern Americans, only on the grounds that what was printed was true. The important immediate result of the Zenger case was to rebuke an authoritarian royal governor and provide further evidence of the democratization of American politics and government.

Sources: Rutherfurd Livingston, John Peter Zenger: His Press, His Trial, and a Bibliography of Zenger Imprints (Glouchester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1963 [1904]); William Lowell Putnam, John Peter Zenger and the Fundamental Freedom (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 1997); Ed Knappman, ed., Great American Trials (Detroit: Visible Ink Press, 1994); Melvin I. Urofsky, ed., Documents in American Constitutional and Legal History (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 21-28; Frank B. Latham, The Trial of John Peter Zenger, August 1735; an Early Fight for America's Freedom of the Press (New York: Watts, 1970). Quotations by Zenger appear in Marvin Olasky, Telling the Truth: How to Revitalize Christian Journalism (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books: 1996), 110, and his Prodigal Press (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1988), Zenger's quotation on 107.

Everyday Life in America

BY THE MID-1700s, across the American colonies, it was clear that the settlers had become increasingly less English. Travelers described Americans as coarse-looking country folk. Most colonial folk wore their hair very long. Women and girls kept their hair covered with hats, hoods, and kerchiefs. Men and boys tied their hair into "qeues" (ponytails) until wigs came into vogue in the port cities. Colonials made their own clothes from linen (flax) and wool; every home had a spinning wheel and a loom, and women sewed and knitted constantly, as cotton cloth would not be readily available until the nineteenth century. Plentiful dyes like indigo, birch bark, and pokeberries made colorful shirts, pants, dresses, socks and caps.

Americans grew their own food and ate a great deal of corn—roasted, boiled, and cooked into cornmeal bread and pancakes. Hearty vegetables like squash and beans joined apples, jam, and syrup on the dinner table. Men and boys hunted and fished; rabbit, squirrel, bear, and deer (venison) were common entrees. Pig-raising grew important, but beef cows (and milk) were scarce until the eighteenth century and beyond. Given the poor quality of water, many colonials drank cider, beer, and corn whiskey—even the children! As cities sprang up, cattle drank beer, yielding a disgusting variant of milk known as "swill milk" that propagated childhood illnesses.

Infant mortality was high, and any sickness usually meant suffering, and often, death. Colonials relied on folk medicine and Indian cures, including herbs, teas, honey, bark, and roots, supplemented with store-bought medicines. Doctors were few and far between. The American colonies had no medical school until the eve of the American Revolution, and veterinarians usually doubled as the town doctor, or vice versa. Going to a physician usually constituted the absolute last resort, as without anesthesia, any serious procedures would involve excruciating pain and extensive recovery. Into the vacuum of this absence of professional healers stepped folk healers and midwives. "Bleeding" (drawing blood from the sick person), a common medical technique, stemmed from the so-called "humoral" theory of medicine still in vogue, wherein all body malfunctions originated in an imbalance of one of four body "humors" or liquids (black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm). Conveniently, doctors usually sought to adjust the blood level, as that was the humor they had most rapid access to. Needless to say, more than a few "quacks" practiced medicine. Yet folk healers, including early chiropractors called "bone crackers," provided valuable services to a grateful constituency.

While most New England children went to school for a short time, southern schooling was less frequent, and, well into the 19th century, for fewer months of the year. Boys studied longer (girls, it was believed, needed only to learn to cook and raise children). Laws prohibited schooling African-Americans (especially insofar as they might learn to read the Bible), though some whites ignored such regulations. Schools were uncomfortable; students sat on wooden benches in damp rooms heated by a single fireplace, with all grades "K-8" and even high school lumped together in one room. Students wrote on bark with lumps of lead or quill pens dipped in homemade ink. Their main text was The New England Primer; Aesop's Fables and Robinson Crusoe sufficed in absence of children's literature, and Bible reading was always acceptable. Teachers punished ill-behaved boys with whips, dunce caps, and cards hung around their necks reading "Idle Boy" and "Bitefinger Baby." Although some boys as young as 12 went on to college at Harvard or William and Mary, joined the work force as soon as they learned to read, write, and "cipher."

Children worked hard because all Americans worked hard, all their lives. But kids always found time to play games like "tag," "blindman's bluff," "Here we go round the mulberry bush," and "London Bridge." Boys played ball and girls played with dolls made of rags and corn husks. In the winter they sledded, and in the summer they swam. Most boys and girls, certainly in frontier areas, learned how to plow, mend fences, skin animals, dress meat, fish, shoot, hunt, and ride. Their lives, like their parents' lives, were tied to the seasons as they worked and played and civilized the raw land, and their survival to a deadly aim trained on an attacker, man or beast. It was nothing for a father to go away for days or even weeks, leaving a young teenager in charge of the farm, the livestock, the house, and the other family members. At 12 or 13, most boys sought work in the form of an apprenticeship, where they learned a craft or trade from a cobbler, barrel-maker, tanner, fisherman, or other skilled artisan.

Women, expected to bear between five and 10 live children, could anticipate a dozen pregnancies. Bodies wore out fast, and women aged rapidly. With infant mortality high, families typically did not name a child until he or she had reached the age of two: prior to that time, parents would call the baby "it," "the little angel," or "the little visitor." Overall life expectancy hardly tells the tale of the everyday life, where work was hard, the most minor sicknesses potentially life-threatening, and pleasures few. Despite the reality of this coarse life for common folk, it is worth noting that by 1774 American colonists already had attained a standard of living that far surpassed that found in even most of the civilized parts of the modern world.

Larry Schweikart

The Radical Whig Synthesis

CERTAINLY RELIGION, AND specifically Christianity, informed the attitudes of the Founders. Equally as certain, European political ideas shaped their thinking as well. American political philosophers, such as Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, had, of course, read Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and others. Yet is it far-fetched to think that semi-literate American farmers and tradesmen could read and articulate the ideas of such great and learned political theorists? The answer lies in the American love of newspapers, pamphlets, oral debate, and informal, down-to-earth political discussion. Over previous decades, all of the ideas of Locke, Hobbes, other European thinkers had been distilled and served up in plain English by a group of writers that historian Bernard Bailyn describes as the English "radical Whig" theorists.

The Whigs, who had overthrown James II in the Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 spawned a second generation of propagandists in 1707. Considered extremists and coffee house radicals" in post-Glorious Revolution England, the Whig propagandists nevertheless continued to question and assault royal authority. Writers like John Trenchard, Lord Bolingbroke, Thomas Gordon, and Algernon Sidney, did not accept the conventional wisdom that the toppling of the Stuarts had forever removed all threats to English liberty. In the first third of the 18th century, radical Whigs relentlessly warned of the tyrannical potential of the Hanoverian Kings—George I and George II. Bailyn and others have shown that influential Americans read and circulated the writings of Trenchard, Gordon, Sidney, Lord Bolingbroke, and their fellow Whigs. A quantified study of colonial libraries, for example, shows that a high number of Whig pamphlets and newspaper essays had made their way onto American bookshelves. Moreover, the Whig ideas proliferated beyond their original form, in hundreds of colonial pamphlets, editorials, essays, letters, and oral traditions and informal political discussions.

What made the Whig ideas so popular? Part of the answer lies in the provincial nature of American society. Americans were an isolated, agricultural people, living hundreds of miles from those more urbane leaders who ostensibly governed them. This rural, provincial status led quite naturally to a state of mind suspicious of outside controls and centralized authority exercised by "strangers." That physical isolation, despite the demands of farming or trade, also meant that whatever free time a man had usually went to reading the Bible (which was by far the most common book in American society), as opposed to printed matter involving politics and Whig views. Yet the success, and further radicalization, of Whiggery in America was also tied to the simplicity and compelling nature of the Whig ideas themselves. Whiggery was, in a very important way, a philosophy for non-philosophers. It was a philosophy that semi-literate and anti-intellectual Americans easily understood and enthusiastically embraced. It was simple because it was consistently libertarian—more so than any set of ideas before or since. To be an American Whig, one needed only to distrust and fear the authority and taxes of outsiders and be willing to use violence to resist that authority. Whig anti-authoritarianism spared no form of power. Whigs were suspicious of all power: religious, economic, military, and governmental. They feared a state church, a standing army, a mercantile economy, and a centralized government. What did they favor? They favored freedom of religion, a militia of citizen soldiers, a free market, and as little government as possible. If there must be government (and most Whigs considered it a "necessary evil"), then it should be small, close to home, and (most Whigs thought) democratically elected.

This was the American Whig creed, and those who advocated Whiggery did so everywhere, not just in books and published essays. Whig ideas circulated by word of mouth among rustic American farmers, tradesmen, professionals and governmental leaders; they percolated through common discussion in taverns and at militia musters; they were preached from the pulpit and discussed around the dinner table each evening. In short, Whig ideas were everywhere. It is significant that Americans as different as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson shared essential Whig ideas. Franklin, 39 when Jefferson was born, nevertheless had much in common with the Virginian. Both proposed or sponsored the main university in their colony; both traveled in Europe, where they received welcome receptions in France; both were scientists—Renaissance men who enjoyed music, literature, architecture, and invention. Although Franklin eventually honed an image in France as the "frontier" American, even to the point of wearing a coonskin cap, the two men in different ways chiseled the marble of what Europeans saw as representative (if not "typical") Americans.

Franklin and Jefferson, like other rebellious colonial leaders, had a well-considered and thoroughly developed political philosophy for supporting their rights as Englishmen, or, if necessary, their break with the mother country. Franklin, who served as an intermediary and correspondent between the colonies and Parliament, lost influence in England in 1774 after publication of the "Hutchinson letters," in which Franklin shared with Boston leaders letters he intercepted from Governor Thomas Hutchinson requesting more troops to crush opposition. By then, the public at large, even if not fully in tune with revolutionary Whig ideologies, chafed under the heavy-handed application of the Navigation Acts, while concern deepened over the willingness of the British government to alter policies or inflict new burdens at will. Sometimes one policy acted in diametric opposition to another. For example, the British anti-slavery movement started to receive official support at the time as a means for the Empire to increase its control over the colonies as a means to "civilize" and "Christianize" natives in Africa. Yet at the same time, subsidies protected certain plantation products in the American South, thus increasing the demand for slaves, intensifying the pro-slave forces in the southern colonies, and making abolition less likely. But whether slavery, taxes, or stamps on paper, the economic impact of the Navigation Acts was not nearly as important as the political threat they presented. England had given the colonies a reason to organize and unify through the Intolerable Acts, bringing war one step closer. Another incident with bloodshed, such as the Boston Massacre, might rend the final, fragile bond that still joined the colonists to England.

1. Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism in the History and Historiography of the United States," American Quarterly, 37 (1985), and the entire issue, 461-598; Jack P. Greene, Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Policies of the British Empire and the United States, 1607-1788 (New York: Norton, 1990 [1986]); Gordon S. Wood, The Radicalism of the American Revolution (New York: Knopf, 1992).
2. Christopher L. Brown, "Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, 56, April 1999, 273-306.
3. The question of whether or not the Navigation Acts even could have imposed enough of a burden on the colonists to provoke a rebellion has been substantially answered. Several economic historians, as detailed in Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell, (A New Economic View of American History, 2d ed., [Boston: W.W. Norton, 1994), conclude that the heaviest burden the Acts could have place on Americans was about 1% of GNP. In other words, the Navigation Acts, as an economic issue, were not significant enough to have caused one-third of all Americans to take up arms against the British.