

**T**O WRITE A HISTORY of colonial America used to be easier, because the human cast and the geographic stage were both considered so much smaller. Until the 1960s, most American historians assumed that "the colonists" meant English-speaking men confined to the Atlantic seaboard. Women were there as passive and inconsequential helpmates. Indians were wild and primitive peoples beyond the pale: unchanging objects of colonists' fears and aggressions. African slaves appeared as unfortunate aberrations in a fundamentally upbeat story of Englishmen becoming freer and more prosperous by colonizing an open land. The other colonies of rival empires—Dutch, French, and Spanish—were a hazy backdrop of hostility: backward threats to the English America that alone spawned the American Revolution and the United States. And no colonial historian bothered with the eighteenth-century Russian colonization of Alaska or the English probes into Hawaii, although both places later became absorbed into the United States.

By long convention, "American history" began in the east in the English colonies and spread slowly westward, reaching only the Appalachian Mountains by the end of the colonial period. According to this view, the "seeds" of the United States first appeared with the English colonists in 1607 at Jamestown in Virginia, followed in 1620 by "the Pilgrims" at Plymouth in New England. Earlier Spanish and contemporary French settlements were fundamentally irrelevant except as enemies, as "foreign" challenges that brought out the best in the English as they made themselves into Americans. What we now call "the West" did not become part of American history until the United States invaded it during the early nineteenth century. Alaska and Hawaii made no appearance in national history until the end of that century.

That narrow colonial cast and stage made for the fundamentally happy story of "American exceptionalism": the making of a new people, in a new land. By emigrating to the colonies, white men escaped from the rigid customs, social hierarchies, and constrained resources of Europe into an abundant land of challenge and opportunity. That story persists in our national culture and popular history because it offers an appealing simplification that contains important (but partial) truths. Many English colonists did find more land, greater prosperity, and higher status than they could have achieved in the mother country. After about 1640, the great majority of free colonists were better fed, clothed, and housed than their common contemporaries in England, where half the people lived in destitution. And English colonial societies were truncated, lacking the gentry and aristocracy of the mother country, creating a political vacuum at the top to be filled by prosperous merchants and planters.

But the traditional story of American uplift excludes too many people. Many English colonists failed to prosper, finding only intense labor and early graves in a strange and stressful land of greater disease, new crops and preda-

tors, and intermittent Indian hostility. And those who succeeded bought their good fortune by taking lands from Indians and by exploiting the labor of others—at first indentured servants, later African slaves. The abundant land for free colonists kept wage labor scarce and expensive, which promoted the importation of unfree laborers by the thousands. Between 1492 and 1776, North America lost population, as diseases and wars killed Indians faster than colonists could replace them. And during the eighteenth century, most colonial arrivals were Africans forcibly carried to a land of slavery, rather than European volunteers seeking a domain of freedom. More than minor aberrations, Indian deaths and African slaves were fundamental to colonization. The historian John Murrin concludes that “losers far outnumbered winners” in “a tragedy of such huge proportions that no one’s imagination can easily encompass it all.”

Moreover, not all of colonial America was English. Many native peoples encountered colonizers not as westward-bound Englishmen, but as Spanish heading north from Mexico, as Russians coming eastward from Siberia, or as French probing the Great Lakes and Mississippi River. And each of their empires interacted in distinctive ways with particular settings and natives to construct varied Americas.

Historians have recently broadened their research to recover the enormous diversity and tragic dimensions of the colonial experience. Instead of lurking beyond the colonies in a “wilderness,” Indians have come back into the story as central and persistent protagonists. Instead of dismissing slavery as peripheral, recent historians have restored its centrality to the economy, culture, and political thought of the colonists. And new scholarship illuminates the essential role of women in building colonial societies. With the expanded cast has come a broader stage that includes attention to New France, New Spain, and New Netherland.

Colonial societies *did* diverge from their mother countries—but in a more complex and radical manner than imagined within the narrow field of vision once traditional to colonial history. The biggest difference was the unprecedented mixing of radically diverse peoples—African, European, and Indian—under circumstances stressful for all. The colonial intermingling of peoples—and of microbes, plants, and animals from different continents—was unparalleled in speed and volume in global history. Everyone had to adapt to a dramatic new world wrought by those combinations. In their adaptations to, and borrowings from, one another, they created truly exceptional societies (which is not to say that they were either better or worse than European societies, just new and different).

To divide the peoples in three, into the racial and cultural categories of European, African, and Indian, only begins to reveal the human diversity of the colonial encounter. For each embraced an enormous variety of cultures and languages. For example, the eighteenth-century “British” colonists included substantial numbers of Welsh, Scots, Irish, Scots-Irish, Germans,

Swedes, Finns, Dutch, and French Huguenots—as well as the usual English suspects. Moreover, during the eighteenth century those nationalities were still inchoate, still complicated by powerful local cultures within each kingdom. Both the Londoner and the rural peasant of Cornwall, in far western England, were English subjects of the same king, but they could barely understand one another. Thrown together as neighbors in a distant colony, they had to find a new commonality of identity, dialect, and customs. Until lumped together in colonial slavery, the African conscripts varied even more widely in their ethnic identities, languages, and cultures. A very partial list of West African peoples includes Ashanti, Fulani, Ibo, Malagasy, Mandingo, and Yoruba. In general, their languages differed from one another more than English did from French or Spanish. Most diverse of all were the so-called Indians. Divided into hundreds of linguistically distinct peoples, the natives did not know that they were a common category until named and treated so by the colonial invaders. All three clusters—European, African, and Indian—were in flux when they encountered one another in the colonies; in the process of those encounters they defined an array of new identities as Americans.

European ships served as the medium, and European profit-seeking and soul-seeking as the motives, for bringing Europeans, Africans, and Indians together on the natives' lands, breaking down the hundreds of localized identities and cultures that had formerly framed their lives. Thrown together in unexpected and kaleidoscopic combinations, the peoples struggled to make sense of one another as they tried to survive in a strange land of strange peoples. As James Merrell has shown, even Indians—no, *especially* Indians—lived in a new world transformed by the intrusion of diverse and powerful newcomers bearing alien diseases, livestock, trade goods, weapons, and proselytizing beliefs. By necessity, those in the encounter developed a composite culture borrowed in part from their new neighbors. African words and music infiltrated the popular culture of their enslavers, while the African-Americans adapted Christianity to their own needs. In such exchanges and composites, we find the true measure of American distinctiveness, the true foundation for the diverse America of our time.

In these cultural and environmental encounters, the various peoples were not equal in power. In most (but not all) circumstances, the European colonizers possessed tremendous ecological, technological, and organizational advantages, which demanded disproportionate adjustments by the Indians in their way and the Africans in their grasp. But the colonial elites never had complete power. Instead, they constantly had to adjust to the cultural resistance, however subtle, of those they meant to dominate.

Over time, race loomed larger—primarily in British America—as the fundamental prism for rearranging the identities and the relative power of the many peoples in the colonial encounters. A racialized sorting of peoples by skin color into white, red, and black was primarily a product, rather than a



## BOUNDARIES

*American Colonies* draws upon three especially productive lines of recent scholarship: an Atlantic perspective, environmental history, and the ethnohistory of colonial and native peoples. The Atlantic approach examines the complex and continuous interplay of Europe, Africa, and colonial America through the transatlantic flows of goods, people, plants, animals, capital, and ideas. Environmental history considers the transformative impact of those flows on the landscape and life of North America. And ethnohistory focuses on the cultural encounters between Africans, Europeans, and natives in colonial North America. Because all three inquiries are rich and complex, they ordinarily belong to distinct specialists, but their combination is indispensable in any effort to understand the bigger picture of North America in the colonial era.

By design the title speaks of plurality, *American Colonies*, rather than the singular, traditional *Colonial America*. The chapters present a series of regional explorations that gradually move forward in time. I favored a regional, rather than a topical, organization lest I confuse myself and my readers by leaping back and forth over broad regions and distinct centuries, comparing British apples to Spanish oranges without first creating a context for understanding both. By exploring regions in sequence and in some detail, I have tried to show how culture, economy, politics, and society *fit together* in each region, have tried to re-create human places coherent and cohesive to the reader. As that picture becomes clearer and more comprehensive, I increasingly compare the various colonial Americas: Spanish, French, Dutch, British, and Russian.

In recent years, the escalating integration of North America—by treaty, investment, trade, migration, travel, mass media, and environmental pollution—renders our national boundaries more porous. As a result, we may now be prepared to broaden our historical imagination beyond the national limits of the United States, to see more clearly a colonial past in which those boundaries did not yet exist. In attempting a more North American perspective on our history, this book is also a half step toward a more global (and less national) sensibility for our place in time.

That goal is somewhat at odds with the mandate for this volume, as the first in a series meant to cover the history of the United States down to the present. That nation-state defines the subject, setting boundaries for the authors of the subsequent volumes—a luxury not available to the colonial scholar, who writes about a period before the United States existed or was even conceivable. Reading the United States back in time and geography to frame the colonial story has the distorting effect known as “teleology”: making all events lead neatly to a determined outcome, in the colonial case to the American Revolution and its republic. Teleology costs us a sense of the true

drama of the past: the “contingency” of multiple and contested possibilities in a place where, and time when, no one knew what the future would bring. As late as 1775, few British colonists expected to frame an independent country. And very few Hispanics and fewer Indians wished for incorporation within such a nation.

Rejecting teleology, however, to wallow in pure contingency is an equal folly. Hindsight affords a pattern to change over time that readers reasonably seek from the historian. As their author, I cannot and should not treat the coming of the United States as utterly irrelevant to the colonial era—just as I cannot and should not allow that knowledge to overwhelm the other possibilities in that past. Instead, my job is to balance the creative tension between teleology and contingency.

Although British America does not warrant *exclusive* attention, it does deserve relatively *greater* coverage than that afforded the French, Spanish, Russian, and Dutch colonies. For British America became the most populous, prosperous, and powerful colonial presence on the continent—a development that made the American Revolution possible and successful. That revolution transformed the British colonists into the continent’s premier imperialists. British America left powerful legacies for the United States, which empowered its nineteenth-century conquest of most of the other peoples, both colonial and native, on the North American continent.

Striking a balance between the emerging power of British America and the enduring diversity of the colonial peoples requires bending (but not breaking) the geographic boundaries suggested by the United States today. Hispanic Mexico, the British West Indies, and French Canada receive more detailed coverage than is customary in a “colonial American history” (which has meant the history of a proto-United States). All three were powerful nodes of colonization that affected the colonists and Indians living between the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes. The internal cultures, societies, and economies of the Spanish, French, and Dutch colonies also warrant attention lest they again appear only in wars, reduced to bellicose foils to British protagonists. Such internal description also affords the comparative perspective needed to see the distinctive nature of British colonial society that made a colonial revolution for independence and republicanism possible first on the Atlantic seaboard.

As I wrote this book, several colleagues asked, “When does your book end?” Although it seemed to me that the end to my writing was nowhere in sight, I knew that they meant “At what year does your version of colonial America conclude?” The question implied the Anglocentric perspective that I hope, in some measure, to shift. So long as the subject was simply the English-speaking colonies on the Atlantic seaboard, the answer was relatively simple and finite: either 1763, when the British imperial crisis heated up, or 1776, when thirteen colonies declared their independence as the United States. But neither date marks an end point for the colonial experience west

of the Appalachians. In 1776, the colonial encounter with native peoples was just beginning on the Pacific rim. Consequently, my ending has a sliding scale: about 1775 in the east, where and when the imperial crisis broke into revolution, and approximately 1820 in the west, when colonialism had taken root in California, Alaska, and even Hawaii. By 1820 the United States had emerged from an anticolonial revolution to exercise its own imperial power on the Pacific coast. The former British colonists became the American colonizers of others in their path. In that transition, I end the book.

Ultimately, my geographic and temporal bounds for colonial America are open-ended because *process*, as much as *place*, defines the subject as I understand it. A cascade of interacting changes make up "colonization" as the Europeans introduced new diseases, plants, animals, ideas, and peoples—which compelled dramatic, and often traumatic, adjustments by native peoples seeking to restore order to their disrupted worlds. Those processes ranged throughout the continent, affecting peoples and their environments far from the centers of colonial settlement. In turn, resourceful responses by native peoples to those changes compelled the colonizers to adapt their ideas and methods.

Indian peoples were indispensable to colonizers as guides to local plants, landscapes, and animals; as converts for missionary institutions; as trading partners; and as allies in wars with other empires. By the late seventeenth century, when multiple empires competed for advantage in North America, each needed to build networks of influence over native peoples. Rather than imposing a pure colonial mastery, those alliances involved the mutual dependence of both colonists and natives. Although natives increasingly relied on European trade goods, they also compelled colonizers to accommodate to native protocols and alliances—often imposing costs and compromises on imperial visions.

Recovering native importance, however, has sometimes come at the cost of underestimating the importance of European empires to the colonial story. Historians once exaggerated the power of empires to enforce their will upon distant natives and their own colonists. But in recent years, historians have tended toward the other extreme to debunk empires as impotent and irrelevant on the colonial frontiers. The historian John Robert McNeill offers a more balanced perspective. Referring to Europe as the "metropolis" and colonies as its "periphery," he trenchantly defines a colonial empire as "the product of metropolitan logic and decisions imperfectly inflicted on people and places poorly understood by the metropolitans."

As McNeill so nicely put it, imperial visions were "imperfectly inflicted." Imperialists never achieved the full mastery they dreamed of; but the flawed pursuit of their illusions bore powerfully upon peoples in their way—just as those people inevitably deflected the blows of empire. Colonial empires unleashed powerful forces of disease, trade, missionaries, livestock, and war that, although often beyond imperial control, fundamentally disordered the



natives' world. Indians responded to the stresses with remarkable agility, but they did not have the option of ignoring the powerful changes imposed upon their continent by the newcomers. Over time, the natives lost land and freedom to the growing numbers of colonists, especially the proliferating British Americans of the Atlantic seaboard. As catalysts for unpredictable change, empires mattered, even if they were never quite what they claimed to be.