The first enduring settlement of Englishmen in New England was the result of the discontent of a congregation of Puritan Separatists from the little town of Scrooby in England.

I need to take a minute here to define a few terms. There were three kinds of Protestants in the early 17th century that were given the derisive name, Puritan. All of these groups were Calvinists, and all agreed that only a few people had been chosen for salvation. They differed most in terms of how the church should be governed, and in what the relationship should be between the church and the political state.

The first were Presbyterians. Presbyterians wanted to reform the Church of England by getting rid of bishops, and replacing them with a sort of “congress” of church leaders called a synod. The synod would then make rules governing the churches. Presbyterians generally felt that there should be no separation between church and state, but that there should be no bishops.

The second group, and in 1630, the largest are called Non-Separating Congregationalists. They believed that the Church of England required reform, they believed that each church should have the right to interpret scripture for itself, and to hire its own minister, and make decisions about who should and should not be a full church member (decide who was chosen and who not). But they had not given up on the Church of England completely. From the late 1500s until the 1620, most of this group, accepted the Anglican Church so long as they could consider its priests and bishops godly. But in the late 1620s, under Charles I, several new bishops made decisions about church services and theology that Congregationalists felt moved the church back in the direction of Catholicism. Many non-separating Congregationalists chose to immigrate to America rather than stay in England, which they considered damned. In the 1640s these Puritans led the English revolution that unseated (and unheaded) Charles I. But no matter what they did, they still considered that their practices and churches were the legitimate Church of England.

The third group were called Separating Congregationalists. This group had given up on the Church of England and considered themselves a separate entity. To be separate, however, they knew that they would have to leave England, because, in the 1600s, to dissent from the established church was heretical, and to a heretic was also to be a traitor.
The Pilgrims

In 1608 a congregation of separatists from Scrooby, England, began quietly to leave England for Holland. Once settled in Leyden, they began to worship in their fashion. But there were problems. First, they watched their children grow up in a Dutch community, and feared that their children would gradually become Dutch rather than English. Second, they were not happy with the religious worship and habits of their Dutch neighbors. Dutch Protestants celebrated Christmas and Easter (pagan holidays to the minds of English Calvinists), they sang and played music in services (another banned practice among Puritans). The “pilgrims” as they came to be called were, as you may have already figured out, not the most tolerant people when it came to religion, and they began to feel that their Dutch Protestant neighbors were no better than the Anglicans.

Less than enchanted with their Dutch Protestant neighbors, leaders of the Scrooby group obtained permission from the Virginia Company to settle as an independent community in Virginia. They arranged financing by getting several English merchants to agree to finance the trip in return for a share of the profits of the new colony. In September, 1620, the Mayflower with 35 “Saints” and 67 “Strangers” set sail for America. They were supposed to set up a colony in northern Virginia, but they found themselves in the Cape Cod area, instead.

After some exploration, they settled at Plymouth in what would become Massachusetts. Since Plymouth lay outside of any chartered colony, the Pilgrims realized that they would have no government or law unless they created it themselves. Some of the “Strangers” began to argue that since their indentures had been set to send them to Virginia, where they weren’t, they were then free. One of the “Saints” drew up an agreement, called the Mayflower Compact, which 41 passengers signed (some possibly under duress). The compact was a church covenant of sorts, creating a Congregationalist religious community, but also establishing a colonial government and professing allegiance to the king of England. Then, on December 21, 1620, the Pilgrims stepped ashore.

December is not a good time to start a colony. The first winter pilgrims froze and starved, in that order. 50% died that winter. Of 18 wives only 5 survived. That any survived at all is attributable to a lonely Indian named Squanto. Squanto had lived in England for 9 years, and had returned to America with John Smith, only to be taken into slavery to Spain by the Spanish. Squanto escaped and had, himself, only recently returned to New England, where he discovered that his entire tribe was dead. So Squanto adopted the Pilgrims. Before his arrival, things had gotten so bad that Pilgrims had even resorted to digging up Indian graves to get the corn offerings buried there. Squanto helped the Pilgrims find food, plant corn, and make friends with the local tribes. Pilgrims planted English vegetables next to Indian corn, only to find that the corn grew, but not the English veggies. The first thanksgiving was a celebration that there were any crops at all. They invited the local Indian chief who showed up with the entire tribe. Once the chief saw the sorry condition of their strange neighbors, he sent a few of his men to hunt, and got a couple of deer, a few ducks, an eel or two, (no turkeys) and shared some of the tribe’s corn, and made a three-day meal of it. The affair became annual.

Puritans & Massachusetts Bay

Massachusetts Bay was settled by Non-Separating Congregationalists. Their purpose was to create an example of a godly Congregationalist state. Or as one Puritan called it, “a city on a hill.” It was to be a Bible Commonwealth, a state on a mission from God – an example for mankind in general, and for England in particular. They proposed to take the “true English religion” out of England to save it when God might decide to punish England for its sins. So they would survive, pure and true in the American wilderness while England received God’s punishment. Then they would return to introduce the true faith to England. They believed that God held the entire community responsible for individual sin.

The Massachusetts Bay leader, John Winthrop and the government of Massachusetts felt that they had to enforce their religion. They closed political participation to “visible saints” (those elected to Grace.” Winthrop was afraid that if “Strangers” were permitted to participate in government, the Bible Commonwealth would surely vanish. The Massachusetts government could not pass a law that said that only Saints could vote or hold office, but they could say that only church members could vote and hold office. Since there was only one church (the Congregationalist) in the colony, and since only Saints could be members of the Congregationalist churches, that did the same thing. So, in effect Massachusetts civil rights were tied to Congregationalist Church membership and, thus the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was ruled exclusively by Puritan Saints.

The Massachusetts leadership also had no intention of letting England interfere with the colony. When the Puritans left England they took their charter with them. The company existed where the charter was, so the headquarters of the Massachusetts Bay company was Massachusetts. By transferring the company 3,000 miles from London, English interference was, for a while, eliminated.
Winthrop and company would go through any required form, so long as the real power resided in Massachusetts. So, when necessary the English flag was hoisted above the state house just long enough for a navy ship to see it, and then taken down and put in the closet. The leaders of Massachusetts sent letters of loyalty to whomever they needed to in England, then did as they pleased (or, as God pleased; same thing to them).

In terms of religion, their plan succeeded so well that it failed. In order to explain that remark I need to talk a little about the basic ideas Protestantism in general, and of Congregationalists in particular. An important idea of Protestantism is that each Christian should read the scriptures and interpret them for themselves. Another important idea is that the Bible is the revealed word of God. These two ideas create a dilemma for organized religion. If the Bible is the revealed truth, then there isn’t really much room for interpretation. So if I interpret the Bible in a specific way, since it is from the Bible, and thus absolute truth, I must be right and anyone who disagrees with me must be wrong. So long as an established church hierarchy interprets and requires belief of its members, there is no dilemma. This was the case with the Church of England, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics.

But the central idea of Congregationalism was congregational independence. Each congregation is expected to interpret theology for themselves. In England where the Congregationalists were a persecuted minority there was no real problem, but once independent churches became free in the Massachusetts wilderness, some began to develop new ideas. Some Congregations began to shift their theology and ideas. If all the churches began to find their own way, then the solidarity of the Massachusetts Bay community would be broken, the Puritan experiment fails, and the city on a hill becomes, figuratively, a series of unconnected villages, a collection of strangers in a strange land. But for Massachusetts to force the churches of the colony to conform violated the idea of separate congregations. If Winthrop and company did so, they would be no better than the Anglican bishops they sought to escape. The Massachusetts government developed a different way to deal with dissent – the “New England Way.”

The “New England Way”

The New England way of dealing with dissent included:

1. Informal meetings among ministers to try to iron out differences and bring the erring minister or individual of a particular church back to the fold.
2. A formal meeting of senior ministers who pointed out the errors of the dissenter and demanded that the offending person, church or minister conform.
3. If the above failed the civil authorities took the appropriate measures to either force conformity or expel the nonconformists.

Now, let’s examine the cases of two of the nonconformists who were the most troublesome to Winthrop and the early colony, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson.

Roger Williams was a dissenting Puritan minister who had been chased out of England by the Anglicans and was initially welcomed to Massachusetts in 1631 with open arms. But Williams quickly became rather disturbing in Massachusetts as well. He began to announce that New England Puritans were living in sin and practicing false doctrine. He argued that the Bible didn’t really offer a blueprint for government, and thus, church and state should be separate. And worse, Williams stated that magistrates may not punish any sort of "breach of the first table [of the Ten Commandments]," such as idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, false worship, and blasphemy and that every individual should be free to follow his or her own convictions in religious matters.
He stated, to Winthrop's horror, that “forced worship stinks in God's nostrils!” he also began to argue that the Indians had been cheated two ways. First he questioned whether the Indians weren’t better off with their own traditional religion; second, he questioned whether the Crown of England had the right to give land to the Massachusetts colony that belonged, not to the king of England, but to the native Indians who had lived upon it when the English arrived. How could anyone give what was not theirs?

The Boston leaders were worried about Williams, but decided that his ideas were so whacky that no congregation would possibly want to hire him. Invitations for Williams to take guest preaching gigs dried up, especially in and around Boston. It looked like Williams would be silenced, but then in August of 1634, the congregation of the church at Salem Massachusetts hired Williams to become their pastor. Williams preached his controversial ideas relentlessly from the Salem pulpit. Boston leaders were annoyed at Williams' brashness, but they were unable to take any decisive action against this popular and famous Puritan minister without violating the rule of Congregational independence. If they let Williams keep preaching, they risked the destruction of their Utopian project as people began to agree with the renegade Separatist pastor. If they were too heavy handed in their removal of Williams, they would be accused by many ministers of meddling in independent church affairs.

Then Boston got the opportunity to act in the matter. In a dispute between the Massachusetts Bay court and the Salem colony regarding the possession of a piece of land (Marblehead) claimed by the Salem, the Court, probably under the advice of John Winthrop, offered to grant the land to Salem on condition that the Salem church fire its pastor, Roger Williams. The fact is that this act should have made John Winthrop's blood run cold. The offer he made was either stand by your chosen minister (adhere to the ideal of congregationalism) or go for the gold. What will you have, independence and righteousness or pure greed? Politics or religious principle? Salem opted for the land and dismissed Williams. Once Williams was cut loose from his church the colonial government could deal with him any way it saw fit. He was banished from the colony.

Williams bought land in Rhode Island from the local Indians there, and acquired a charter from the Crown to found Rhode Island. Rhode Island became a safe haven for refugees from the Puritan colonies. Williams allowed anyone to live in Rhode Island and practice their religion as they desired (except, of course, Catholics — even Williams had his limits!)

Anne Hutchinson immigrated to Massachusetts in 1634. She settled in Boston. Several people from the ship that she arrived in told some of the Massachusetts leaders that she had expressed some rather odd ideas on the ship passage. A minister who had traveled on the ship even recommended to Winthrop that she should be put back on the ship and sent back to England. Several ministers examined her on her arrival and she said the right things to impress them with her orthodoxy. But, shortly after settling in at Boston, she began to hold Bible readings in her home. This wasn’t too worrisome because Puritans had traditionally done this in England where it was illegal to hold Puritan readings and discussions in public. But Hutchinson began to say some very troubling things at them. First, she began to teach that when a person had received grace, the Holy Spirit entered them and spoke to them, and kept them on the path of righteousness (Antinomianism). Election essentially offered a Saint a sort of hotline to God. This was contrary to Calvinist teachings. Next Hutchinson began to complain that God had told her that only two ministers in Massachusetts were saved, and all the rest were Strangers — they had not found Grace — and were thus damned. She became a threat to the Bible Commonwealth. A person who has the Holy Spirit handy to tell them that they are saved didn’t need ministers, a congregation, or a government to tell them how to behave or worship. Winthrop saw a threat of enormous proportions here.
Massachusetts leaders often told the Indians that if Puritans and Indians gradually pushed the latter out of the rapidly into a land grab, and a long series of wars between Colonial Expansion and Indian Relations the early 1700s.

that would grow into the chief industry of New England by center for mercantile trade, shipbuilding and a rum industry economic practices. Massachusetts began to thrive as a Massachusetts over flour prices, fur trading, and other to break down. Disputes began to break out all over Massachusetts over flour prices, fur trading, and other economic practices. Massachusetts began to thrive as a Massachusetts leadership.

In the 1650s and 60s Massachusetts began to gradually drift away from the its Puritan Utopian goals. A number of factors led to this “decline” of Puritan principles.

**Economic Success and the Puritan Experiment**

Massachusetts became economically successful. So much so that people began to act more out of motives of profit than religion and community. Bible utopianism began to break down. Disputes began to break out all over Massachusetts over flour prices, fur trading, and other economic practices. Massachusetts began to thrive as a center for mercantile trade, shipbuilding and a rum industry that would grow into the chief industry of New England by the early 1700s.

**Colonial Expansion and Indian Relations**

The missionary effort to convert the natives turned rapidly into a land grab, and a long series of wars between Puritans and Indians gradually pushed the latter out of the picture. Massachusetts leaders often told the Indians that if they wanted to avoid war, they should disarm. When they did so, they were often enslaved and sold off to the Spanish. The best example of these relations was the war that began in 1675 between the colonists and the Wampanoag tribe.

The Wampanoags' dependence upon English manufactured goods led them into ever-increasing land sales, resulting in further resentment and tension. In 1675, three tribal members were tried and executed by the English for the murder of a converted Wampanoag, touching off more than a year of hostilities called King Philip’s War.

Beginning in June 1675, the Wampanoag, outfitted with rifles and armor, attacked a series of settlements and took the lives of dozens of colonial men, women and children. English forces retaliated in kind by destroying native villages and slaughtering the inhabitants. Soon other tribes, including the Narragansett, joined the fray and the entire region fell into conflict.

The tide turned in April 1676, when the Narragansett were decisively defeated and their chief killed. Hostilities ground to a halt a few months later when Philip was betrayed, captured and killed. His corpse was drawn and quartered and his severed head placed on a stake to be paraded through Plymouth Colony. Philip's son was sold into slavery in Bermuda and many other captives were forced into servitude in homes throughout New England.

The colonists prevailed in King Philip's War, but the cost was tremendous. It would be more than two decades before all of the devastated frontier settlements could be reoccupied, and longer still before they began further expansion in the West. The New England Native Americans had been decimated to the extent that their impact on future events would be almost nonexistent.

**Religious Declension**

By the late 1650s it had become clear to Puritan ministers and leaders that church membership was declining because the new generation of Massachusetts youth were no longer having religious experiences that would allow them to declare themselves of the church Elect. The steady decline in Congregationalist church members was politically dangerous because of the relationship between church membership and political rights within the colony. Ministers were concerned for their congregations and the colonial leaders began to worry over the possible dissolution of their Bible Utopia. In 1662, the Half-Way Covenant was created by New England Puritans who felt that the people of their colonies were drifting away from their original religious purpose. First-generation settlers were beginning to die out, while their children and grandchildren often expressed less religious piety, and more desire for material wealth.
The Half-Way Covenant provided a partial church membership for the children and grandchildren of church members. Those who accepted the Covenant, as in accepting to follow the creed and rules of the church, could become church members, but they did not have to entirely devote themselves to the strict principles of the church. As a cost, these members could not vote on any issues within the church. Specifically, it made baptism alone the condition to the civil privileges of church membership.

Despite the growing influence of materialism, preachers hoped that this plan would maintain some of the church's influence in society. It was hoped that these 'half-way members' would see the benefits of full membership and eventually take the full oath of allegiance. Many more religious members of Puritan society rejected this plan as they felt it did not fully adhere to the church's guidelines.

Overall, religious piety began to decrease and secular values began to become more prevalent in colonial society.

The Dominion of New England

In 1686, in an attempt to make the colonies in North America more efficient and more profitable, King James II created the Dominion of New England. It comprised the five New England colonies, plus the Province of New York, East Jersey, and West Jersey. The union was decreed in 1686 by King James II as a measure to enforce the Navigation Acts and to coordinate the mutual defense of colonies against the French and hostile Native Americans. James chose as his governor an old hand in colonial administration, former New York governor Sir Edmund Andros. The Dominion government consisted of the governor and his council. The colonial assemblies of the various member colonies, including Massachusetts, were dissolved. The composition of the governing council was haphazardly comprised of members from all of the Dominion provinces as well as some Englishmen, among them Roman Catholic friends of James II. Put simply, Massachusetts was to be ruled by Strangers. Soon after his arrival in Boston, Andros announced that he wished to use one of the Boston churches to hold Anglican services for himself and his friends. The Saints of Boston were scandalized. Andros demanded that Anglican Easter services be held in the Boston South Church. The Congregationalist members of the church tried to keep him out, but services were held there for Anglican communicants for the next year. At the same time, Anglicans began to build their own Anglican chapel in Boston.

In 1688, England underwent the Glorious Revolution (we’ll talk about it later), and the folks in Massachusetts hosted a revolution of their own. They arrested Andros and his cronies who were sent back to England, then they requested a new charter. Unfortunately, the Lords of Trade in London were not amused at the antics of the Massachusetts revolutionaries. A new charter was not immediately forthcoming. In fact, the government in London would wait until 1692 to send a new charter and governor. In the meantime, the leaders of Massachusetts fought an expensive and futile war with the French in Canada, fought with each other over government, laws and religion, and generally made a mess of things. At this time also, the colony got involved in an amazing controversy that took place in the little town of Salem.

Witches & Salem

In the village of Salem in 1692, Betty Parris, age 9, and her cousin Abigail Williams, age 11, the daughter and niece (respectively) of Reverend Samuel Parris, fell victim to what was recorded as fits “beyond the power of Epileptic Fits or natural disease to effect,” according to John Hale, minister in Beverly, in his book *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* (Boston, 1702). The girls screamed, threw things about the room, uttered strange sounds, crawled under furniture, and contorted themselves into peculiar positions. They complained of being pricked with pins or cut with knives, and when Reverend Samuel Parris would preach,
the girls would cover their ears, as if dreading to hear the sermons. When a doctor could not explain what was happening to them, he said that the girls were bewitched. Others in the village began to exhibit the same symptoms.

The Salem authorities decided that witchcraft was at work here, and began to investigate the probable causes of the afflictions of the girls. The girls were most helpful in pointing out individuals that they maintained had “afflicted” them by means of witchcraft.

The first three people accused were arrested for allegedly afflicting Ann Putnam, Jr., age 12: Sarah Good, a beggar, Sarah Osburne, a bedridden old woman, and Tituba, a slave. Tituba, as a slave of a different ethnicity than the Puritans, was an obvious target for accusations. Sarah Good, a poverty-worn, easily angered woman, often muttered under her breath as she walked away from failed attempts of obtaining food and/or shelter from neighbors, and people interpreted her muttering as curses. Sarah Osburne, an irritable old woman.

All of these women fit the description of the “usual suspects,” largely disliked and unsupported in the community. Additionally, neither Osburne nor Good attended church, which made them especially vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft. These women were brought before the local magistrates on the complaint of witchcraft on March 1, 1692, and held in prison. Other accusations followed in March and April. All told, over sixty persons were arrested and would be tried for witchcraft.

By the time the hysteria had spent itself, 24 people had died. Nineteen were hanged on Gallows Hill in Salem Town, but some died in prison. Giles Corey at first pleaded not guilty to charges of witchcraft, but subsequently refused to stand trial. This refusal meant he could not be convicted legally. However, his examiners chose to subject him to interrogation by the placing of stone weights on his body. He survived this brutal torture for two days before dying.

As the trials took place and the numbers of the accused increased, the conservative Puritan leadership in Boston began to take greater notice. Here was proof positive that the people of Massachusetts had strayed and the Devil was abroad in the colony. The Council in Boston appointed Judge Samuel Sewall and William Stoughten, both conservative Council members, to go to Salem and take over the trials. Under Sewall and Stoughten, the Salem court began to employ “spectral evidence,” that is testimony about dreams and visions, accepted as evidence in court. The English Common Law does not allow such evidence. News of the proceedings at Salem became an embarrassment to the colonial agents in London who were trying to get a new charter.

Finally, a new charter was produced, and a new governor, William Phips was sent to Massachusetts with the new charter in hand. among his first acts was to inform the court in Salem that spectral evidence would no longer be permitted. Without spectral evidence the judges had no evidence beyond the antics and screams of three very badly

As the judges write notes, Betty Parris writhes on the floor calling out the names of her tormentors and Abigail Williams, standing, does the same, perhaps pointing to a demon sitting in the rafters.
behaved young women. The trials ended and those defendants who had not been convicted were set free.

The Salem witchcraft controversy had been written about by more historians than you have had hot dinners. Every historian has a different slant, a different interpretation, and some of them, at least a few, even make some sense.

Most of the interpretations point out some perceived failing of the Massachusetts Puritans, then explain that the witchcraft phenomena was the result of that failing. Puritans have been accused of having unliberal weaning practices (whatever that means), squabbles over land, conflicts between pre-modern economic practices and modern economic practices; you name it, some historian will figure out an angle. The Salem witchcraft trials have become a goldmine for folks who do gender studies because we equate witches with women (a slight majority of the accused were women, interestingly. ALL of the accusers were women). The main problem with most of these arguments is that, if all Puritans in Massachusetts, or New England, had these failings, why did the controversy take place only in the rugged backwash of the colony that was Salem? Several historians have offered a number of explanations for the Salem witchcraft episode, some interesting, some a bit silly. Here are a few.

1. Puritan weaning practices! Enough said. But if weaning practices led to the problem, why only in Salem? Were the weaning practices at Salem different from anywhere else in Massachusetts?

2. Agricultural historians argue that the witch hysteria was caused by the growth of a fungus on New England wheat called ergot. Ergot puts out a hallucinogenic byproduct that taints flour, and causes both hallucinations and odd behavior and blood poisoning. In short, they argue, witches were tripping. But again, why just Salem?

3. This one is my favorite, and actually the most sensible, but most historians REALLY hate it! A historian named Chadwick Hansen (Witchcraft at Salem, 1969) begins with the premise that not all of those accused of witchcraft were all that innocent. Some were, by the standards of the day, witches. There is good physical evidence. To Hansen, what is really astonishing is that so few were executed, and in the growing hysteria no one was lynched! All of the defendants were given all of the possible protections available under the law of the time. There was little torture. Nothing on the order of the witch trials and persecution of England, Scotland, or Europe at the same time. If you confessed you might be redeemed and released, but no one who confessed was executed. This attests to the strength of faith of those who refused to confess. There were no water trials (called dunking) and less of the other dreadful tortures associated with European witch-hunts. Both men and women were executed, and both men and women were acquitted. No one was burned alive; those who were executed were hanged.

From Puritan to Yankee

All of this was still considered a mark of God's disfavor. And the Massachusetts leaders didn't know why. The colony was a tremendous commercial success, a sure sign of God's favor, yet bad things were happening to God's chosen. Success was producing selfishness, communities in conflict, even ungodliness. By 1670, Puritans are no longer concerned about taking the true faith back to England as they are with getting their own house in order.

The 1692 colonial charter ended the Massachusetts theocracy. It required that all Protestant freeholders of the colony have full civil rights, not just Congregationalists. The charter created a colonial government presided over by a royal governor appointed by the king. It ended Massachusetts' independence and brought the colony closer to British control.

By 1700, the colony had begun to reproduce the class system of England, gradually the rich became fewer and richer, and the poor larger and poorer. The wealthy trade aristocrats began to leave the Puritan Church in favor of the Anglican Church because it was a good business move. Even the Puritans began to aim their talents away from godly pursuits toward commercial, scientific and secular ones.

The Winthrops are a good example. John Winthrop was devoted to the creation and maintenance of a religious Utopia. His son with the same energy that dad had devoted to religion, was a scientist, a salt magnate, founded metal mines, and invented methods of making all of them more productive and more profitable. Father was governor of Massachusetts. John senior's son, John Winthrop, Jr. was governor of Connecticut. John Junior hanged no Quakers, banished no heretics. Here we see in graphic detail the transition from Puritan to Yankee that took place in one generation. By 1763, the Puritan “City Upon a Hill” was long dead, mentioned only in sermons from time to time. Massachusetts had come to closely resemble the England that righteous Puritans 100 years before had worked so hard and struggled so long to escape.
The earliest English settlement in North America was motivated, not by religion, or any real felt need to escape the old world to find freedom, or any such noble goal. The stimulus for this American settlement was primarily for profit.

Expecting to profit from western colonization as the East Indian Company had in India, a group of merchants and wealthy gentry set up a joint-stock company called the Virginia Company in 1606, it proposed to found a settlement in north America and produce gold.

Joint-stock companies had been developed in England during the sixteenth century as a mechanism for pooling the resources of a large number of small investors. These forerunners of modern corporations were funded through the sale of stock. Until the founding of the Virginia Company, they had been used primarily to finance trading voyages; for that purpose they worked well. No one person risked too much money, and investors usually received quick returns. But joint-stock companies turned out to be a poor way to finance colonies, because the early settlements required enormous amounts of capital and, with rare exceptions, failed to return much immediate profit. The colonies founded by joint-stock companies accordingly suffered from a chronic lack of capital. This was because investors did not want to send good money after bad, and also because of constant tension between stockholders in Britain, who wanted to see a return on their investments, and colonists who believed that they had a right to keep the fruits of their own labor.

The Virginia Company was no exception to this rule. It was chartered by King James I in 1606. The company tried but failed to start a colony in Maine, and barely succeeded in planting one in Virginia. In 1607, it dispatched 144 men and boys to North America. Ominously, only 104 of them survived the voyage. In May of that year, they established the settlement called Jamestown on a swampy peninsula on a river they also named for their monarch (James River). The colonists were ill equipped for survival in an unfamiliar environment, and the settlement was afflicted by dissension and disease.

By January 1608, only 38 of the original colonists were still alive (a survival rate of only about 20%). Many of the first migrants were gentlemen and professional soldiers unaccustomed to working with their hands, and artisans with irrelevant skills like glass making, jewelry making and watch making. Having come to Virginia expecting to make easy fortunes, most could not adjust to the conditions they encountered. They resisted living “like savages,” retaining English dress and casual work habits despite their desperate circumstances. Such attitudes, combined with the effects of chronic malnutrition and epidemic disease took a terrible toll. The survivors began bickering among themselves.
They refused to do the necessary manual labor required for their survival, like planting food, and finding clean water. They were gentlemen, after all, and proper English gentlemen didn’t do that sort of thing. It became necessary for the group leader, Captain John Smith, to impose martial law on the settlement, and force his reluctant comrades to do the work that was necessary for their own survival. Smith posted a sign in the colony that stated, “Who does not Work, Does not Eat.”

It became fairly clear fairly quickly that there was no gold. Investors realized that the only way that they would ever see a return on their investment would be to find some kind of profitable cash crop that might be produced in Virginia. That crop was tobacco. The tobacco produced in Virginia by the natives was very strong and harsh. Europeans would not buy it, but John Rolfe brought a sweet variety of Spanish origins into the colony in 1611, that grew well in Virginia and was popular with Europeans. Sotweed (as tobacco was called) quickly became the most important crop in Virginia. By 1620 Virginians exported 40,000 pounds of cured tobacco to Europe, and by 1630 they were exporting 1.5 million pounds. In the 1620s, a visitor to Jamestown reported that every square foot of cultivatable land in Virginia was planted in tobacco. It even grew in the streets of the town. Some worried that the colony was growing so much tobacco to the exclusion of everything else that Virginians would starve because they were neglecting to grow corn and vegetables.

As the need to acquire labor in the colony grew with the production of tobacco. Virginians needed a way to bring in more labor. This was tough because it was reasonably well known, despite the tempting lies produced in travel books, that the survival rate for new colonists was very high. So Virginians developed a system called the headright system. The Company would give each family member 50 acres of land. So if you go with a wife and two children, you get 200 acres of land. This offer was very appealing to poor and especially displaced Englishmen. They could never expect to own land, and the prestige and political rights that went with it in England, so the Virginia company was selling them not only land, but social mobility in return for their labor. The problem though, was getting to Virginia. Most folks couldn’t afford the passage. They had to indenture themselves to pay for their transportation. Under an indenture agreement, the migrant would barter his labor for passage. Once the period (usually seven years) was over, only then could the migrant claim the headright land. Thousands of English families were willing to take the risk. For many, in the early period of Virginian settlement the risk paid off, and some of the greatest planter families came from the humble beginnings of indentured servitude.

From Company to Royal Colony

The Virginia Company did not fare very well. Although after 1616 the planters of the colony began to prosper, by 1620, the company was bankrupt. In 1623 the company folded up. King James I decided to take over the company charter because, although the colony had not been profitable to the Virginia Company, it had been to the Crown. The reason for this was tobacco. James I hated the stuff. He even wrote a book on how horrid “sotweed” was. But customs revenues on tobacco, and export profits on it were enormous. The Crown took the colony over in 1624.

Virginia had been governed by the company in London, and by a colonial council and assembly. After 1624 the king appointed a governor (usually English), and a council (increasingly made up of important Virginia planters) and the freeholders of Virginia elected their assembly (the House of Burgesses). So the Virginia colony passed, relatively painlessly from a private concern to a royal colony.
Virginia Society

Virginia, over the next 60 or so years, began to become more socially stratified, and more like old England, just as Massachusetts had. Whereas Massachusetts society followed an English urban and merchant pattern, Virginia followed the English rural pattern. As the earliest planters acquired more and more land, they began to resemble the great landed country gentry of England. Newer arrivals were able to form small farms on the periphery of the great estates, and came to resemble the small freeholders of England. By 1700 all of the great families of Virginia were well established -- the Byrds, the Burvilles, the Carters, the Lees, and so forth were all great plantation families by 1700. By 1700 there were fewer and fewer Englishmen who chose to immigrate to Virginia. The traditional means of rising to wealth in Virginia was no longer possible. Traditionally the best way to join the planter aristocracy was to marry a rich widow. Women in Virginia could expect to outlive at least 2 and sometimes 3 husbands. But by 1700 the great planter families were well enough established that they tended to only marry within their own class. Also, by then the life expectancy of men was generally longer.

These great planter families tried very hard to recreate English country society within Virginia. Their society more closely resembled an idealized squirearchy, than a nobility. Squires were the English landholding class just below the titled nobility. They tended to be more “country” than “city” in their view of life, and less refined than the English court nobility, but the Virginia tobacco barons were definitely aristocratic. They were not a nobility because nobility is a condition of blood, one must be born into a titled family, but these powerful planter families were aristocratic nevertheless. They took the attitudes of the great squires of the 18th century and the English aristocrats of an earlier age. They believed that rich, wellborn and able were synonymous. They believed in noblesse oblige. The best and brightest (i.e. richest and most fortunate) should govern for the benefit of all.

Virginia Politics

They believed in representative government, but they believed that the role of a representative was not to reflect the will of the people (what 51% of the voters wanted), but to do what they felt was in the best interest of the people (the public good). They viewed the freeholders as a “vulgar herd” that could never have informed ideas about politics, and certainly could not be trusted to govern themselves. The commonality (as opposed to the quality) made decisions with their stomachs, their hearts — their interests and passions — and not their heads. They were incapable of maintaining “disinterested” politics, so the duties of government had to be left up to their betters (the planter aristocracy).

In Virginia political selection (note, not election) went like this. Candidates did not actively seek office, to do so was crass and unifying the humility and modesty of a gentleman. They were called by their friends to run, and if they agreed, their friends nominated them and they, reluctantly, agreed to serve, if elected. Then, having agreed (with heavy heart), they withdrew from politics. Their friends campaigned for them. They gave great “treats” to the voters, usually barbeques or picnics, most notable for the quantity of rum consumed at them. George Washington’s friends, for example, gave a treat for 391 voters in his county. They consumed 160 gallons of rum (nearly two quarts each!) on the spot.

The small freeholders, the “vulgar herd” in Virginia expected to defer to the Virginia gentry. Their only choice on election day was generally whether to vote for a candidate allied with one wealthy family or another (if there was more than one candidate). Voting requirements were fairly loose. In general, if you owned some farmland or a city plot and were an Anglican, (and were, of course adult, male, and free) you could vote, but even the rules on landholding and religion were not always strictly enforced. In most cases the voting body of Virginia included all adult males who owned some property. Elections were held by voice vote, and were usually in order of social importance. For instance, in lord Fairfax’s county (Fairfax was the only real hereditary lord who actually resided in Virginia), he voted first, then any other important planters who resided in the county. Then the Anglican ministers voted, then militia officers, and so forth on down the social ladder to the smallest freeholder. All of them generally voted for whomever Fairfax supported. Often in districts where there was a planter of great importance (like Fairfax) there was only one candidate. To run against Fairfax’s choice would be impertinent and disrespectful. Virginians only voted for one person — their representative in the House of Burgesses. Compare this to other colonies. For instance, Rhode Islanders voted annually for two legislators, governor, justices of the peace, town councilmen, constables, and so forth, all the way down to the “viewer of butter in firkins.”

Virginians had very different ideas about what constituted good government. They saw the Northeast as dangerously democratic (and, of course New Englanders believed that Virginians were dangerously aristocratic). But the most effective political power in the Virginia Colony was the House of Burgesses. Gradually this became true in other colonies as well; assemblies gained great power.
The Church in Virginia

Virginia was established as an Anglican colony, but Virginian Anglicanism drifted over time to come to resemble New England’s Congregationalism in some important ways. Effective control of each Virginia parish church was in the hands of the vestry. Vestrymen were the most important members of the church who met to decide important issues within their parish. The ministers of Anglican churches in Virginia were appointed by the Bishop of London. The British government then sent them to their church in Virginia. If the vestrymen liked him, he was selected to be the minister of the parish church; he was effectively tenured to that church. But, over time the vestrymen quit registering the minister with the Bishop of London. That meant that the minister was not officially installed into his parish. His tenure then became dependent on his pleasing the vestry. Essentially, he served on good behavior. If he kept his sermons short, and didn’t preach on anything that upset the local planters, he was kept on, if not, he was out of a job. So, as Massachusetts drifted toward an enforced orthodoxy and a hierarchical church structure, Virginia Anglicanism became less hierarchical and more congregational. By the beginning of the revolution there existed a fairly broad consensus of what American Protestantism should be like, regardless of the particular sect.

By 1763 Virginia was a long way from the expectations of its founders. It was very like rural England, with great aristocrats and squires (the planters), whose slaves resembled the tenant farmers of England. There was a sizable freeholder population comparable to the English freeholders. As was the case in England, the largest share of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few great landholders, who governed with the support and deference of the smaller freeholders.
The first Africans arrived in North America in 1619. We aren’t sure whether these first arrivals were considered slaves, that is, individuals who were forced to spend their lives in servitude, as chattel property, or were treated as indentured servants. There is ample evidence of the latter.

The African slave trade is very old. Africans were traded into slavery from East Africa into Egypt and Asia as early as the Bronze Age. Slavery was the lot of conquered peoples in Europe, Asia and Africa from at least that period. The first European/African slave trade of the post-Classical period began in 1444 when Portuguese traders acquired slaves from coastal tribes of West Africa and took them to Portugal and Spain. Slavery quickly became a racial condition rather than only a legal condition. In the Ancient and Classical Worlds, slavery had nothing to do with race or skin color. People might become slaves because they were conquered, or went into debt, or, in the Roman World, because there were more opportunities for them to become rich and Roman as slaves and later freedmen. Another difference was that slavery was never a permanent condition for all slaves in the Ancient or Classical Worlds — it was to become so in the Pre-Modern Era.

The European/African slave trade lasted for 400 years, during which time some 30 million Africans were taken from that continent, and 15-20 million came to the New World. The majority went to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the West Indies and Central and South America.

By the 1650s the slave trade was very profitable. Traders netted as much as 5000% for their efforts. We could say that the trade was the most profitable economic venture of that, or, indeed, of any, period. In addition to the Spanish and Portuguese, French, Swedes, Dutch, Prussians and British all invested in slavery, and were enriched by it. Slaves were generally members of the smaller tribes of inland West Africa. They were captured and brought to the west coast by moors and powerful coastal tribes, and were there sold to whites for the middle passage.

Awaiting Sale
Seated on a stool and lashed on the ankles, thighs, wrists and neck to a pole in the ground. This West African tribesman captured by Dahomey slavers, awaits sale, and possibly eventual resale in some European colony in the New World.
The Middle Passage

Africans sold prisoners to Europeans who held several coastal ports, or, on very rare occasions, the Europeans themselves kidnapped African people. The captives were usually force-marched to these ports along the western coast of Africa, where they were held for purchase to the European or American slave traders. The purchased Africans were usually packed into the ships transporting nearly 300 humans as cargo accompanied by approximately 35 crew. The male captives were normally chained together in pairs to save space — right leg to the next man's left leg — while the women and children may have had somewhat more room. The captives were fed very small portions of corn, yams, rice, and palm oil, normally just enough to sustain them. Sometimes captives were allowed to move around during the day, but many ships kept the shackles on throughout the journey.

In the passage from Africa to America the death rate was appalling. Packed together so closely, Africans died from disease, suicide, madness, or mutiny. There were over 100-recorded cases of successful mutinies on slave ships, and who knows how many mutinies failed. We do know that slavers took out mutiny insurance at the London coffee house (later Lloyd's of London) to protect their investments. The death rate only slowed slightly once they reached land. Slaves were worked in the West Indies for a year or two, in order to “season” them to the rigors of the New World. The survivors were then sold on the mainland.

About 18 million Africans were transported from Africa with 3 million dying during the journey. Disease and starvation due to the length of the passage were the main contributors to the death toll with amoebic dysentery and scurvy causing the majority of deaths. Additionally, outbreaks of smallpox, measles, and other diseases spread rapidly in the close-quarter compartments. The number of dead increased with the length of voyage, since the incidence of dysentery and of scurvy increased with longer stints at sea as the quality and amount of food and water diminished with every passing day.
Latin vs. British Slavery

It made some difference where slaves ended up. In the Latin colonies slavery was rarely as harsh as it became in British North America by at least 1660. Spanish masters were not prevented by law from manumitting their slaves, as British masters often were. In Spanish colonies some form of citizenship followed manumission. In Brazil there was a state official whose only duty was to protect the rights of slaves. In the Latin colonies some days were set aside by law or custom for slaves to work for themselves. In the Latin colonies slave marriages were recorded, and thus given some legal status — this was not the case in the British colonies after about 1650.

In British colonies slaves were taught a sort of pacified version of Christianity and given a carefully expurgated Bible. In Latin colonies slaves were catholicized, and observed Roman Catholic rites. So why were the Latin and British systems so different?

1. Different legal traditions. Spanish and Portuguese law was based on the Roman Law. So when these Latin nations re-instituted slavery they used the Roman Law to govern it. Roman civil codes had fairly strict rules governing the treatment of slaves and a process in place for their manumission. Slavery was a stranger to the English Common Law, so it lacked institutional checks. Colonists had to make the laws controlling slavery up as they went along, and these laws became more inhumane and brutal as a result.

2. The Catholic Church was both a powerful religious institution and a powerful political institution in Latin colonies. Where its interests were at stake, the Church stood between the slave and the master. The Church often insisted that marriage, a holy sacrament, be performed for slaves as much as for free persons, and that the institution of marriage be respected. This was not the case in the British Protestant churches.

3. The Spanish and Portuguese had a much longer history of dealing with slavery at home before colonization, the British didn't. Similarly, the Spanish and Portuguese had a longer familiarity with non-Europeans, which may have softened their views of Africans as human beings.

African Slavery and White Freedom

Ironically, slavery came to North America because it offered so much freedom to Europeans. It was hard to get free people to work for someone else. There was too much land for the taking (generally from the Indians), and too much opportunity to rise socially by independent labor. Indentured servants didn’t solve the labor shortage problem, in fact they complicated it. The first year that they were in America they were usually so sick as to be unfit for work. The next 6 years, if they survived they were profitable for the planter who owned their labor. But then, once freed, they expected to be given land of their own (headright), and would then enter into competition with their previous employers. Slavery solved the problem. A seasoned slave was capable of productive labor immediately after purchase, and since their condition was for life, they would always produce for their master, never compete with him.

British slavery began in the West Indies. It was very profitable. By 1660, blacks outnumbered whites in Barbados. It became cheaper in some West Indian colonies to work slaves to death over 5 years and replace them, then to feed and care for them adequately. By the 1660s, smaller white farmers were forced off of the islands by slave labor on large plantations. Many of these small planters went to North America (especially the Carolinas) and once settled they wanted slaves. In the north agricultural labor of a large scale was rarely feasible. Slaves usually served as domestic servants, artisans or artisan’s assistants.

By the 1650s the major characteristics of slavery in British North America were pretty much already in place. 1) Slavery was a life condition; 2) The status was transmitted to children through the mother. By the 1650s the slave trade had become a regular feature of the New England merchant trade. A great deal of Northeastern capital was invested in it. They bought slaves and sold them in the south. So slavery was also a significant portion of the northern as well as the southern economy.
The British Colonial System Matures

The classic system of North American slavery existed in the staple production areas of the South. It first developed in Virginia and Maryland. Punishments became worse for slaves than for indentured servants (who had more legal protection). By 1649 bills of sale routinely included children, present and future, of female slaves. It became illegal for free blacks to carry weapons, serve with the militia, serve on juries, or, eventually to testify against whites in court. Inheritance, which passed from the father under the Common Law, went through the mother in the case of a slave, so no matter who the father, the child of an enslaved mother was a slave. By 1669 Virginia passed a law that stated that if a master accidentally killed a slave during an act of punishment, the death was presumed to be accidental, and thus carried no penalty. Who would deliberately destroy his own property? By 1700 in colonies like Virginia and South Carolina, slavery was the major source of labor. But slavery persisted in all of the colonies until the American Revolution when the northern colonies decided that the institution was incompatible with the ideals of the Revolution. It persisted in a South that found slave labor indispensable.

Depictions of Slavery

Left, a colonial tobacco label shows a Virginia planter sampling his product while slaves surround him. Right, an advertisement for a slave sale in a Carolina newspaper. Below, slaves work in a sugar factory in Cuba in the late 1700s.