

Road to the Revolution: Background Causes

In explaining why the Revolution took place, it is necessary to look both at the background causes and the events that led to conflict.

Between 1680 and 1776, a distinctly American society emerged -- a society that shared some features in common with England, but also had features that made them very different from England. What were some of these characteristics that made the 13 colonies different from England?

1. **The lack of a powerful aristocracy**

There were clearly different social classes in the colonies, but the difference between rich and poor in the colonies was nowhere near as large as the difference between rich and poor in England. While colonial elites often looked to England as a source of culture and values (speaking with an English accent, wearing English clothes, listening to English music, filling their houses with English furniture...), very few colonists had the wealth to afford this kind of lifestyle. As a result, the colonial elite did not have nearly the amount of control over the colonies that the English elite had over England.

2. **The widespread ownership of property**

Except for slaves, most physical labor in the colonies was performed by people who owned their own farms or shops. Compared to England, few of the colonists were tenant farmers and most farmers (especially on the frontier) prided themselves on their independence. In contrast, most land in England was controlled by a small percentage of wealthy individuals.

3. **The relative absence of poverty**

In 18th century England, half the population was dependent on charity for some of their food, clothing, or shelter. Apart from slaves, the American population was far better off. One striking example of this difference is the fact that colonists were on average three inches taller than the English... due almost entirely to their much healthier diet.

4. **A lack of large cities**

The colonies had few of the characteristics of an urban society: there was no large-scale manufacturing, no stock markets, few large cities, and virtually no banks. England had all of these things. In 1760, the largest city in the colonies (Philadelphia) had just 20,000 people. In contrast, London had a population of 750,000 people.

5. An unwillingness to listen to authority

The American colonists were far less willing to accept subordination than their English counterparts. Although the right to vote in colonial America was restricted to property owners, property owning was so widespread that roughly 80 percent of white adult males could vote. In contrast, most English had little-to-no say in the way that their government was run.

6. The presence of slavery

In 1776, one-fifth of people living in the American colonies were slaves. While most slaves lived in the south (enslaved Africans made up nearly 40 percent of Virginia's population), slaves could be found in each of the 13 colonies, and were especially numerous in New Jersey and in New York's Hudson River Valley. The widespread presence of slavery made adult white males very aware of the difference between independence and dependence -- even as they continued to treat slaves as property.