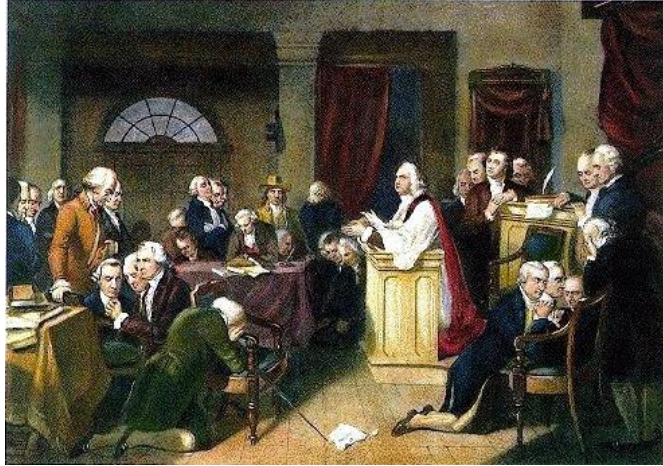


Early Colonial Self-Government Systems



New forms of government in the Thirteen Colonies were based on three basic principals that would become a basis for an American way of life. They were:

1. Political ideas based on the English political system
2. Political ideas based on the Enlightenment
3. Political ideas as the colonists were now thousands of miles from the Mother Country

These concepts in government led to the demands for political freedom in the colonies and many of the new political systems that would be formed would share the following political principles:

- Individual Rights
- Rule of Law
- Self-government
- Limited government
- Right to vote
- Participation in government
- Separation of powers

The early colonial governments were formed with several differences due to ethnicity, race, political beliefs, geography, economy, wealth, and cultural differences. Social mobility, resulting from the right to own land and becoming wealthy, played a major part of the thinking processes behind these new governments.

Charter Colonies

Twelve of the Thirteen Colonies fell under this system. A charter granted by the British government gave legal authority to companies or individuals to start a colony. Many were formed as **joint-stock companies**, the best example being Virginia.

Proprietary Colonies

This was when a colony was owned, managed, and governed by an individual. The best example is Pennsylvania, owned by William Penn. His goal was to offer religious freedom to people such as the Quakers under his “Holy Experiment” and make a profit from trade. He died virtually penniless! Another example of a Proprietary Colony was Maryland.

Royal Colonies

Most of the colonies were originally self-governing and private enterprises but by the 1770’s the king of England began to exercise his power in America. Eight of the thirteen colonies had now become royal colonies, where the king of England now had direct control over these regions. These were Georgia, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Representative Legislatures

By allowing a representative legislature, colonists were attracted to coming to America. The key issues were the rights of separation of powers and limits on government. Many of these legislatures were bicameral in organization, namely two houses of government. Elections by the people of the colonies formed these governments. The most common issues were taxation and the rights to life, liberty, and property.

In 1641, Massachusetts passed a law making it illegal for the British government to seize property already owned by a colonist. This right of owning property in America would lead to **suffrage laws**, the right to vote for those who owned land. It was believed that if a white male owned land, then they had a greater interest in the political systems. In addition, the Massachusetts Bay Colony also passed a law that in order to vote, a person also had to be a member of the church. The **Mayflower Compact** (which is a separate handout in this section) is the best example of this rule of law.

Freedom of the Press – Crown v. John Peter Zenger

In the colonial days it was illegal to publish or speak criticizing the British government, **Seditious libel** was a crime. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, a German immigrant to New York, was put on trial for publicly criticizing the British governor. Zenger’s lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, claimed that his client was not guilty as what he published about the wrongdoings of the governor were true, therefore no crime was committed. The Zenger case would lead to the principle of the First Amendment establishing the principle of freedom of the press in the United States.



Fundamental Orders of Connecticut

Adopted in 1639, it was a colonial self-government that created a constitution for the people of the colony. What made it different to others is that it did not require a church membership in order to vote.

Maryland Toleration Act

Maryland was originally founded in 1633 by the Calvert family as a safe haven for Catholics. However, by 1649, the majority of the population were now Protestants. Lord Baltimore, the proprietor of the colony had the right to make laws for the colony and he had permitted the creation of a legislature in order to recruit new settlers, who were mostly Protestant. That assembly approved the Maryland Toleration Act which protected all men and women who were of Christian religion to have a **freedom of religion**.

The Glorious Revolution in England and the establishment of the Church of England in 1702, forced the Calvert family from power. Any Catholics in Maryland could no longer hold office and lost their right to vote.

The House of Burgesses

This is probably the best-known example of Self-Government and local government in the colonies. In 1619, the colonists in Virginia created a republican government with the creation of this representative lawmaking body. The three best known members of the House of Burgesses were George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry.

Town Meetings

In New England, local government was at a town level and all male property holders governed themselves through a **direct democracy**. Voting was by majority rule.



The signing of the Mayflower Compact in 1620