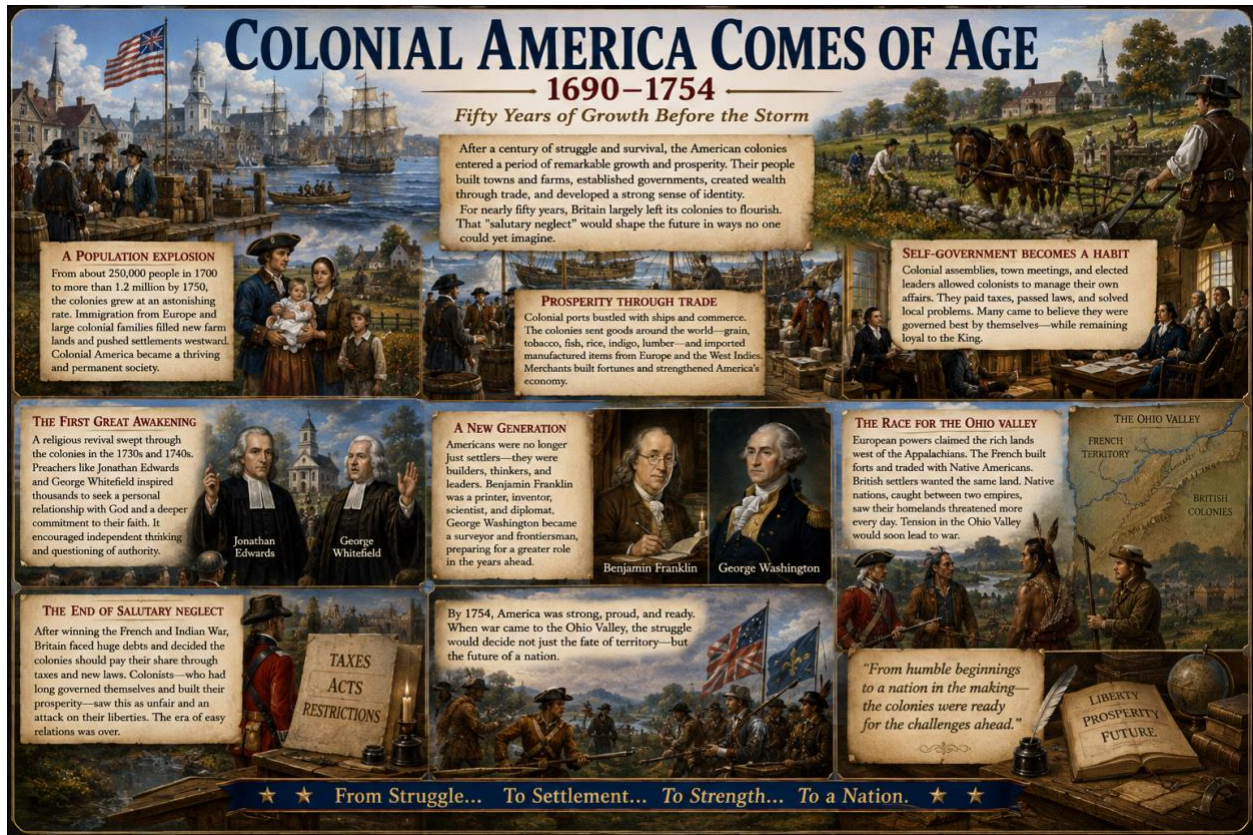




Colonial America Comes of Age (1690–1754)

Fifty Years of Growth Before the Storm

By the close of the seventeenth century, England's American colonies had survived their uncertain beginnings. Jamestown was no longer a desperate outpost plagued by starvation, and Plymouth had grown from a tiny band of Pilgrims into an established New England community. From New Hampshire to the Carolinas, permanent English settlements now lined the Atlantic coast.

The next sixty years witnessed one of the most remarkable periods of growth in American history. During these decades the colonies evolved from isolated frontier settlements into prosperous communities with expanding farms, thriving seaports, representative government, and a growing sense of confidence. Ironically, much of this success resulted from something Britain did **not** do. For nearly half a century, Parliament largely allowed the colonies to govern themselves while England concentrated on European affairs. Historians call this period **salutary neglect**.

By the time Britain finally turned its attention back to North America, the colonists had grown accustomed to managing their own affairs. That quiet habit of self-government would eventually prove more powerful than any army.

A Population Explosion

Colonial America grew at an astonishing pace during the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1700, Britain's mainland colonies contained roughly 250,000 inhabitants. By 1750, the population had exceeded one million, making the colonies one of the fastest-growing regions in the Western Hemisphere.

This dramatic increase resulted from both immigration and large colonial families. English settlers were joined by Scots-Irish farmers, German craftsmen, French Huguenots fleeing religious persecution, and immigrants from many other parts of Europe. Children often grew up on family farms where large households provided much-needed labor, and each new generation pushed settlement farther inland.

As forests gave way to farms and villages, the Atlantic colonies gradually became a thriving and permanent society rather than a string of isolated settlements.

Prosperity Through Trade

Economic opportunity flourished throughout the colonies. New England prospered through fishing, shipbuilding, timber, and overseas commerce. The Middle Colonies became the breadbasket of North America, exporting wheat and flour throughout the Atlantic world. In the South, tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations generated enormous wealth.

Busy ports such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston connected America to markets throughout Europe and the Caribbean. Colonial merchants built ships, financed trade, and accumulated fortunes that rivaled those of many businessmen in England.

Although Britain regulated colonial commerce through the Navigation Acts, enforcement was often inconsistent. Merchants frequently found ways to conduct business with surprisingly little interference from the Mother Country.

Self-Government Becomes a Habit

Perhaps the most important development during these years was political rather than economic.

Each colony possessed its own elected assembly that passed local laws, raised taxes, and addressed community concerns. Royal governors represented the Crown, but colonial legislatures increasingly exercised real influence over everyday government. New England town meetings gave ordinary citizens an opportunity to participate directly in local affairs, while Virginia's House of Burgesses had already demonstrated that representative government could flourish in America.

Most colonists continued to think of themselves as loyal English subjects. They proudly celebrated the king's birthday, traded with British merchants, and regarded English law as the foundation of their liberties.

Yet after decades of making many of their own political decisions, self-government had become second nature. Few colonists realized that this experience would eventually make British attempts to exert tighter control seem both unnecessary and offensive.

The First Great Awakening

The colonies also experienced a powerful religious revival known as the **First Great Awakening** during the 1730s and 1740s.

Dynamic preachers such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield urged believers to experience a personal relationship with God rather than relying solely upon established churches. Their emotional sermons attracted enormous crowds and challenged traditional religious authority.

The movement encouraged Americans to think independently, question long-established institutions, and accept the idea that ordinary people could make important decisions for themselves. Although primarily a religious movement, the Great Awakening also strengthened habits of independent thought that would later influence political life.

A New Generation of Americans

The first generation of settlers had struggled simply to survive. Their grandchildren enjoyed a far different world.

Schools, colleges, newspapers, libraries, and printing presses appeared throughout the colonies. Benjamin Franklin became the very symbol of colonial achievement. A printer, scientist, inventor, publisher, diplomat, and civic leader, Franklin demonstrated that Americans could equal—or even surpass—the accomplishments of Europe's finest thinkers.

Another young Virginian named George Washington also represented the emerging generation. Beginning his career as a surveyor on Virginia's frontier, Washington became familiar with the western lands that many colonists hoped to settle. Those same frontier experiences would soon draw him into the conflict that changed American history.

The Race for the Ohio Valley

As the colonies expanded westward, they inevitably collided with the ambitions of other European powers.

French explorers and traders had gradually established a chain of forts stretching southward from Canada through the Great Lakes and into the Ohio Valley. English settlers, meanwhile, viewed those same fertile lands as the natural direction for colonial expansion.

Native American nations found themselves caught between two competing empires. Many tribes had long-standing trading relationships with the French and feared the relentless expansion of English settlement. Unlike French trappers and traders, English colonists often intended to remain permanently, clearing forests and establishing farms that displaced Native communities.

By the early 1750s, the Ohio Valley had become a powder keg. French soldiers built new forts, British land companies claimed vast tracts of territory, and both empires prepared to defend what they considered their rightful possessions.

War had become almost inevitable.

The End of Salutary Neglect

For more than fifty years, Britain's policy of salutary neglect had allowed the colonies to prosper with relatively little interference. That comfortable relationship would soon come to an abrupt end.

The struggle for control of the Ohio Valley erupted in 1754, beginning what Americans call the **French and Indian War** and Europeans remember as part of the global **Seven Years' War**. Britain eventually emerged victorious, driving France from Canada and becoming the dominant power in North America.

Victory, however, came at an enormous cost. Britain's national debt soared, and Parliament concluded that the American colonies should help pay for the soldiers, forts, and supplies that had secured the victory.

The colonists saw matters differently. They believed they had already contributed men, money, and sacrifice to the war effort. Many expected to enjoy the benefits of Britain's triumph by settling the rich lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains. Instead, they found new taxes, tighter trade regulations, and the Proclamation of 1763 restricting westward settlement.

Within little more than a decade, disagreements over taxation, representation, and colonial rights would transform loyal British subjects into determined revolutionaries. Ironically, Britain's greatest military victory in North America would become the first step toward losing its American colonies forever.