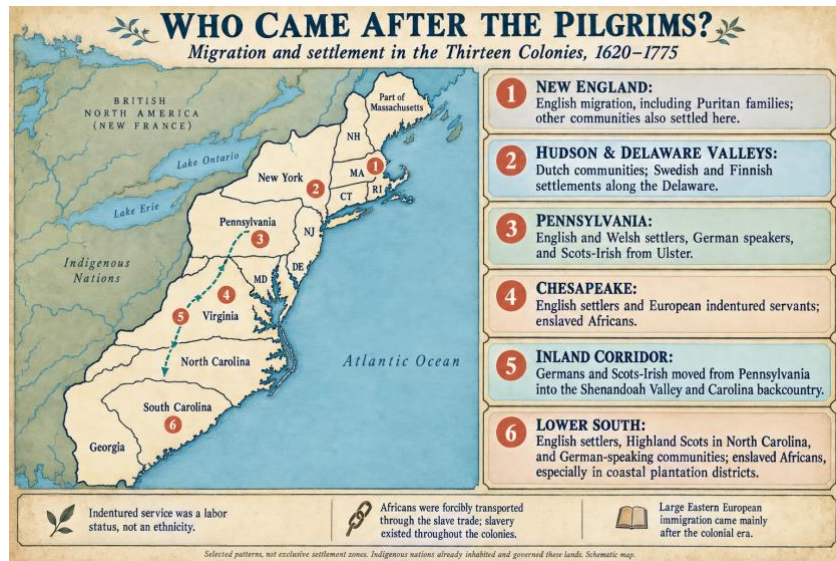




Who Came After the Pilgrims?

The people and journeys that shaped the thirteen colonies

The Pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth in 1620 is a familiar chapter in American history, but it was one episode in a much larger movement of people. English settlement at Jamestown had begun in 1607. Over the following century and a half, newcomers brought different languages, religions, skills, and expectations to lands already inhabited by Indigenous nations.

Some crossed the Atlantic seeking opportunity. Others exchanged years of labor for passage. Enslaved Africans were transported against their will. These journeys created colonial communities far more varied than the familiar image of Pilgrims suggests.

English settlers kept coming

Migration from England continued long after Plymouth. During the 1630s, Puritan families established communities in Massachusetts Bay and neighboring settlements. English migrants also traveled to the Chesapeake and southern colonies, while Quakers helped build Pennsylvania.

Religious concerns mattered, but so did employment, trade, family connections, and access to land. English settlers included farmers, merchants, craftspeople, laborers, and servants—not simply people escaping religious persecution. [Library of Congress](#)

Indentured servants: a labor arrangement, not a nationality

Many Europeans lacked money for an ocean passage. Indentured service offered a difficult bargain: transportation and maintenance in exchange for a specified term of labor, often several years.

Servants came from England, Ireland, Scotland, and elsewhere. They worked in agriculture, households, workshops, and industries. Their contracts restricted their freedom, and abuse could be severe. Some arrived through criminal transportation or as war prisoners rather than freely negotiated agreements.

Unlike hereditary racial slavery, indentured service generally had a legal endpoint. Completing a term, however, did not guarantee land or prosperity. Maryland's Hampton site documents both convict labor and servants' attempts to escape harsh treatment. [National Park Service](#)

The Scots-Irish: from Ulster to the backcountry

"Scots-Irish," also historically called "Scotch-Irish," generally describes migrants from Ulster, in northern Ireland, many descended from Scottish settlers. It does not mean everyone who came from Scotland or Ireland.

During the eighteenth century, economic pressures and religious restrictions encouraged migration. Many newcomers entered through Pennsylvania. Families subsequently traveled into Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and the Carolina backcountry. [Library of Congress](#)

Highland Scots formed another migration stream, settling notably in North Carolina's Cape Fear region. Their background differed from that of Ulster migrants. [NCpedia](#)

German-speaking migrants: more than one community

German-speaking settlers came from numerous European territories; a unified Germany did not yet exist. Pennsylvania became an important destination, with Germantown established in 1683.

These migrants included Lutherans, Reformed Christians, Mennonites, Amish, and other religious communities. Their reasons for leaving included religious pressures and hopes for economic security. The familiar term "Pennsylvania Dutch" refers to German-speaking heritage, not primarily ancestry from the Netherlands. [Library of Congress](#)

Some German families later moved into western Maryland, the Shenandoah Valley, and the Carolinas. Colonial migration often involved several moves after the ocean crossing. [National Park Service](#)

Dutch, Swedish, Finnish—and Eastern European?

Dutch communities developed around the Hudson River and New Amsterdam, later New York. Swedish and Finnish settlers established New Sweden along the Delaware River in 1638. Their communities did not disappear when English authority eventually replaced earlier colonial governments. [National Park Service](#)

People from central and eastern Europe also appeared in small numbers. Polish craftsmen, for example, reached Jamestown in 1608, before the Pilgrims. But the large Eastern European immigration waves associated with industrial cities belong mainly to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They should not be projected backward onto the thirteen colonies. [Congressional historical account](#), [Library of Congress](#)

Forced migration must remain visible

Any account of colonial arrivals must include Africans brought through the transatlantic slave trade. They came from diverse societies, sometimes through Caribbean colonies, and endured forced transportation and enslavement.

Slavery existed throughout the thirteen colonies, including New England. Coastal plantation districts became major centers of enslaved African life and labor. These were forced migrations, not voluntary searches for opportunity. [National Park Service](#)

The colonial population emerged from overlapping journeys, not neatly separated ethnic territories. Understanding who arrived requires asking where people came from, what brought them, and how much control they had over their destination and future.