COLONIAL SOCIETY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

Characteristics of 18th century British Colonial America
A. Enormous population growth: common feature.
   1. Demographic changes resulted in shift in the balance of power between the colonies and England.
   2. 1700 = less than 300K people; 2.5 million by 1775 (20% black)
   3. Largest colonies were Virginia, Mass., Penn., NC, and Maryland
   4. Only four major cities: Philadelphia, NY, Boston, Charleston
   5. 90% lived in rural areas.
B. America as a melting pot
   1. Most mixed population in perhaps all the world despite being mainly English
   2. South held 90% of slaves
   3. African: 20% of population by 1775; mostly concentrated in the South
C. 90% of population were farmers; most were subsistence farmers, many were tenant farmers.

Commerce and Trade
A. Triangular trade (illegal trade designed to circumvent Navigation Laws)
   1. New Englanders exported timber, fish, cotton goods, and light manufacturing to French Caribbean in return for molasses.
   2. New England ships brought molasses back home to be distilled for rum production.
   3. Rum from New England shipped to West Indies where slave ships that had disposed of their human cargo, took rum to Gold Coast of Africa.
   4. Slave traders bartered with chieftains for slaves; rum used to stupefy native blacks and lure them on ships.
   5. Slaves transported on the Middle Passage to the colonies
B. Land speculation made many investors wealthy
C. Manufacturing
   1. Secondary in importance to farming
   2. Lumbering most important: shipbuilding
   3. Women spinners and weavers at home produced large output of cloth.
D. Increased trade
   1. Growth of American population created increased demand for British goods
   2. Once British demand for American products peaked Americans sought other markets
E. Transportation
   1. Inland transportation poor by road
   2. Waterways most important: Population located near rivers
   3. Taverns became important places to discuss politics; crystallized public opinion

Colonial Slavery
A. Most slaves came from West African coast (Senegal to Angola)
   1. Originally captured by African coastal tribes who traded them to European & American buyers – Estimated 40% of slaves captured by Africans in interior died en route to coast.
   2. Estimated 50 million Africans died or became slaves during 17th & 18th c.
B. Of about 10-15 million Africans sent into slavery in the New World, 400,000 ended up in North America. (Majority sent to Spanish and Portuguese South Am. or to W. Indies)
   1. Between 20% to 1/3 of slaves died during the “Middle Passage”
   2. Horrific conditions:
      a. Slaves often chained by neck and extremities to deck floor.
      b. Packed into spaces about the size of a coffin; lay in own excrement
      c. In some cases, next deck only 18” above deck floor; slaves could not turn over
   3. Survivors eventually sold at auction blocks at ports like Newport, RI or Charleston, SC
4. A few slaves gained their freedom & some even became slave-owners; -- However, this fact should not be over-exaggerated! Constituted minuscule number relative to entire slave population.

C. Slave Codes
   1. As Africans grew in numbers, threatened whites passed laws to severely control the slave population.
   2. Most common codes stated:
      a. blacks and their children were property for life of white masters.
      b. it was a crime to teach literacy to slaves.
      c. conversion to Christianity was not grounds for freedom.

D. Slavery became the root of racism in America as a distinct color line was drawn. -- The notion of inferiority based on skin color was imbedded in U.S. law until the 1960s

E. Slave Life
   1. Slavery harshest in the deepest South (esp. SC); least harsh in the middle colonies.
      a. Fresh import of slavery needed to sustain productivity
   2. Increase of female slave populations made family life more possible by 1720.
      a. Slave pop. increased through higher birthrate.
      b. America became one of few slave societies in history to grow by natural reproduction.

F. Slave culture became a mixture of American and African folkways
   1. language / music / dance
   2. Religion a combination of Christianity and African rituals -- The free afterlife became a beacon of hope; story of Exodus particularly appealing

G. Slave rebellions -- approx. 250 instances when minimum of ten slaves joined in a revolt or conspiracy.
   1. Stono Rebellion (1739): largest slave revolt in history of the 13 colonies
      a. SC slaves tried to march to Spanish Florida after Spanish authorities offered freedom to any slave who reached Florida.
      b. Stopped by militia after 25 whites killed; eventually scores of slave rebels killed by militia and settlers.

Southern Society -- 18th century
A. Southern class structure (from most powerful to least powerful)
   1. Plantation owners at top of social ladder -- Ruled region's economy and monopolized political power.
   2. Small farmers comprised largest social group.
      a. Considered far below the prestige and power of the planter class.
      b. Most lived meager existences; some owned 1 or 2 slaves
      c. Modest sized plots
   3. Landless Whites -- most were former indentured servants
   4. Indentured Servants (lowest of whites)
      a. Decreased in numbers as black slavery increased (esp. after Bacon's Rebellion)
      b. Only black slaves were lower in the class structure
   5. Constituted about 20% of colonial population by 1775

B. South remained underdeveloped
   1. Few cities emerged
   2. Life revolved around southern plantations.
   3. Poor transportation -- waterways provided principal means of transportation