

Six Degrees of Separation

1. Jamestown (1607)

The founding of Jamestown was the first successful permanent settlement of the English in the Americas. The Virginia Charter used to settle there guaranteed the new colonists the same rights as the English in Europe; this set the foundation for the systems of rights and the sense of equality the new colonists demanded in the new colonies from then on. Having a settlement here also provided a physical gap of three thousand miles from the mother country, thus providing a sizable buffer area that would give them a greater degree of autonomy and eventually protect them from Europe in the wars to come. The settlers of Jamestown encountered many of the same hardships as many of the colonies to come, such as interactions with the Native Americans (in the Anglo-Powhatan Wars) and the simple struggle for survival (which was alleviated by help from the Native Americans). They also set the foundation for tobacco planting in the Americas, which became a very common cash crop for the plantation colonies involving many people and labor systems (both indentured servants and slaves).

2. The Great English Migration (1620-40)

The Great English Migration was a great movement of English, especially Puritans seeking refuge from religious persecution, to the American colonies, especially in New England. Not only did this greatly increase the population of New England, but society greatly changed to adhere to Puritan beliefs. They founded Puritan-tolerant colonies such as Massachusetts, which Governor Winthrop said would be a “city upon a hill,” a model for future cities in terms of religious freedom—it did fulfill this goal with many following cities, as well as the most fundamental American ideals, practicing religious freedom. This differed from most of the western world, such as Great Britain in which Puritanism was persecuted; this religious difference from England was one of the first great point of contention between the English and the Americans that separated them. Lifestyle changes happened as well, with the “Protestant work ethic” based on their religion becoming common. Politics in the New England colonies also changed to become more religious as well, with Puritan men being able to participate in town hall “governments” in every town, a system very close to democracy.

3. Bacon's Rebellion (1676)

Bacon's Rebellion was the uprising of the oppressed majority—the poorer indentured servants such as Nathaniel Bacon—against the privileged minority—the aristocratic ruling class, such as Governor Berkeley. This represented the overall hatred for an oligarchy or for corrupt officials, which were abundant in England and in English-appointed colonial ministers. The rebellion shows that this sentiment was very popular in the colonies, enough to unseat authority (Bacon temporarily ousted Berkeley), which was a demonstration of the feasibility of the revolution that later enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke advocated. To the aristocratic Americans, it showed that having white, freedom-fighting laborers were not the most reliable because of the newfound potential for revolt; hence, the slave trade grew as a source of labor, replacing the headright system of indentured servants as the predominant labor system in the colonies. To England, Bacon's Rebellion (and later Leisler's Rebellion) showed the need for stricter discipline on the unruly colonies, which led to developments such as the Dominion of New England to have greater control.

4. The Dominion of New England (1686-9)

Ten years after Bacon's Rebellion, the English wanted to consolidate power over the Americans by creating the Dominion of New England. This was a super-colony consisting of most of New England with a British governor, Edmund Andros. The colonists had previously created the Confederation of New England, but that was to their own benefit and governance; this development, however, led to a great hatred by the colonists of the extra colonial power, such as by increasing taxes for the Church and restricting town hall meetings—Andros was a strong believer in England's absolute control over the colonies. The colonists were infuriated and forced Andros out, creating another successful rebellion by the colonists over British rule. This was followed in 1689 by Leisler's Rebellion, which similarly ousted a New York British ruler. This had a similar effect on the colonists, who celebrated another victory against extra and unwarranted British rule.

5. The First Great Awakening (1730s-40s)

The First Great Enlightenment was a movement to revive the diminishing religious fervor that had helped found the colonies. Jonathan Edwards began the movements, who was an emotional speaker that carried very orthodox lessons to the people, such as with his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Later on came George Whitefield, a similarly captivating speaker that preached new ideals such as the fact that people were allowed to interpret religion in a more personal way. This was a "new light" approach to religion, as opposed to Edward's "old light" view that was common among most of Europe; again, this was a source of religious difference that the Americans fostered: a newer, livelier, freer religion that England didn't have.

6. The Seven Years' War (1756)

The Seven Years' War was the first major international conflict that the American colonies had participated in. In it, the Americans were introduced to formal military engagement, as opposed to the more informal wars they had had with the Native Americans and the unruly rebellions against the English. As a result, they gained a great military experience from this, which would help them in fighting the British during the Revolutionary War. Secondly, this war greatly humiliated the French, whose loss of land and prestige led to a sense of revenge that showed in the Revolutionary War when they agreed to help the American colonies battle their strongest colonial competitor in Europe, Great Britain. This war also was the source of the discontentment between the American colonies and Great Britain, because Great Britain had come under heavy debt because of this war and had to cause the controversial taxes that had set the Americans over the tipping point and into the American Revolutionary War.