The Economic Development of English Colonial America

[[1]](#footnote-1)

Goal: To demonstrate to students that there is nothing foreordained or predetermined about either the success or the development of England’s early colonies.

Method: Through a close study of a rich set of demographic and economic statistics, students will see the development over 150 years of two similar yet divergent colonies. After one lecture on the Atlantic slave trade and another on family life in New England (both of which will explicate a few statistical charts in order to begin to introduce the students to this method), the class will work with the statistics on their own and then in class. Part A represents the preparation each student will do for class; Parts B and C will be done in class, and then the students will write a brief (500-word) paper comparing and contrasting the two colonies in an attempt to answer the question: how were colonial societies able to succeed after their inauspicious beginnings, and what were the costs of that success?

**Part A (for class preparation/homework):**

For each set of statistics, answer these three questions:

1. What does this set of statistics measure?
2. How did what is being measured change over time?
3. How does that change take place? The answer to this last question can often be found in *another* statistical set or sets. When you are able to connect one set to another like this, you have made a “linkage.” Please note the set number that explains how or why the change takes place.

**Part B (Chesapeake).**

What factors were responsible for the evolution of a colonial society (rather than a settler frontier) by the mid-1700s? What part did the Chesapeake region play in England’s emergence as a major economic power? What were the negative aspects to that region’s growth and change? To answer these large questions, you must first be able to answer the more specific questions below.

1. How did the rate of white population change over time? How might you explain the phenomenon? What does the increase of the black population suggest?
2. Some historians have argued, based on these statistics, that from the late seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a socio-economic revolution in the Chesapeake? What were the principal features of that revolution? How did tobacco culture cause other important changes?
3. Tobacco is an extremely labor-intensive crop. What were the traditional sources of agricultural labor in the Chesapeake? How did those sources change over time? Can you account for the change?
4. Tobacco also requires a lot of nutrients and exhausts soil quickly. How did patterns of landholding change over time? Combined with changing labor patterns, what kind of economy and society was emerging in the Chesapeake by the mid-eighteenth century? What are the trends of the distribution of wealth (note that source 3 is rather tricky here – the “wealth clusters” are different in different periods).
5. Sometime in the eighteenth century, the Chesapeake began to face serious demographic and economic troubles. What was the nature of these difficulties? Could one raise too much tobacco? How did poor and wealthy farmers respond differently to these difficulties?

**Part C (Barbados):**

What role did Barbados play in England’s emergence as a major power? How did Barbadian society change in this period? What were the negative aspects of these changes?

1. How did the rate of white population change over time? How did landholding patterns change? How can you explain the changes?
2. What is the importance of sugar to Barbados? How did the colony come to embrace sugar production? How did the shift to sugar change labor sources?
3. How do you explain the demography of slavery and slave imports in Barbados compared to the Chesapeake?
4. What was the impact on poor whites of Barbados’ changing society?

1. This assignment is very heavily derived from Wheeler, Becker, and Glover, *Discovering the American Past: A Look at the Evidence*, chapter 3 (Cengage Learning, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)