

Everyday Life in Early America
By John McNamara, Senior Education Fellow

Examples of “Essential Questions” and Lesson Plan Objectives

Rationale: A carefully-crafted lesson is structured with a well-defined focus and a clearly-stated, thought-provoking purpose. The lesson presents the class with a topic that is phrased in the form of an issue to be examined and evaluated or a question to be analyzed and assessed by the class. Effective lessons do not merely “cover” information; they present students with opportunities to “discover” major concepts, ideas, and situations through inquiry-based learning and challenge students to think critically and take positions on thought-provoking, open-ended “essential questions.”

1. “To what extent was life in early America similar to and/or different from Europe?”
2. “How well did European settlers in America adapt to their new environment?”
3. “How were the lives Native Americans affected (. . . disrupted?) by European colonization?”
4. “Did the initial interaction between Europeans and Native Americans lay the foundation for their future race relations in America?”
5. “To what extent have Puritan values shaped American society?”
6. “Does a close relationship between church and state lead to a more moral society?” (Case Study: Puritanism)
7. “How effectively did colonial society handle dissent?”
8. “How has the principle of religious freedom established in America?”
9. “Did the need for survival promote unity or division in colonial society?”
10. “Did deferential and dominant elites provide effective rule for colonial society?”
11. “To what extent was colonial America democratic?”
12. “Did colonial society spawn the roots of American democracy?”
13. “What aspects of American government today can be traced back to colonial times?”
14. “How important was slavery to the economic development of early America?”
15. “Should slavery be viewed as a regional or a national institution in colonial America?”
16. “To what extent was the colonial economy a slave economy?”
17. “How did enslaved people challenge the system?”
18. “To what extent did harmony and hierarchy co-exist in colonial society?”
19. “Was colonial America truly a land of opportunity?”
20. “How did the role and status of women in colonial America compare to their counterparts in Europe?”
21. “How did geography affect the development of colonial America?”
22. “To what extent was the colonial experience positive or problematic for the development and future of America?”

Everyday Life in Early America

By John McNamara, Senior Education Fellow

“The Colonial Americas”: Pivotal Points and Concepts to Ponder

- Theme:* The Colonial Americas created societies that reflected the influence of diverse peoples throughout the “Atlantic World.”
- Traditional view:* The British colonies were sources of America’s democratic, Protestant, capitalist, and individualistic society. New Spain was a source of great wealth and expanded royal rule, Catholicism, and slavery.
- More recent view:* colonies were sources of “*global exchange*” (animals, crops, culture, diseases, and humans) and “*cultural encounter and conflict*” (Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans).
- “New Worlds”* were created for Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans by these cultural encounters; e.g.: different languages and religious beliefs;
different clothes and foods (corn, potatoes);
different lifestyles and types of governance.
- Colonial Identities:* were rooted in *ethnicity, race, and religion* which usually emphasized *exclusivity* rather than *inclusivity*. There was *pluralism* among the colonies with “*multiple colonial stories*.”
Cruelty and misfortune more than *cooperation* defined colonialism:
a) millions of Indians were killed by diseases and mistreatment;
b) millions of Africans were coerced by migration and enslavement;
c) many thousands of Europeans died violent or lonely deaths.
- Colonial Challenges:* diverse peoples had to summon their wills to develop and sustain mutual trust and cooperation in the face of intense fears, frequent dangers, and cultural, religious, and regional differences.
- Colonial Achievement:* The “American Revolution,” beginning in 1776 and later the Constitution (1787) brought the convergence of “*multiple colonial stories*” into the development of “*one national story*.” However, “colonialism” did not end for African Americans and Native Americans. “Unfinished journeys” continued for equality, civil rights, and promises and principles of the Declaration of Independence.
- Colonial Connections:* From the vantage point of a “distant mirror”
a) “How did the people of the “Colonial Americas” deal with diversity?
b) “How are people in American society dealing with diversity today?
c) “To what extent are all Americans full participants and partners in our “*national story*?”