

Life in the Colonies

This text is adapted from an original work of the Core Knowledge Foundation.

By 1750, there were thirteen English colonies on the East Coast of what became the United States. All of them were strong and growing. Almost every week, a ship arrived with more immigrants.

More than nine out of ten colonial families lived on farms. They farmed their land by themselves. Every member of the family had a job to do. As a result, they produced nearly everything they needed to survive. They raised their own food. They made their own clothes and their own tools. They made their own furniture. Most of them even built the houses that they lived in. When the weather and the harvest were good, farmers sometimes had enough food left over to sell.



Colonists made almost everything they needed for themselves.

In the mid-1700s, there were still only four or five cities in all of the colonies, and just a handful of towns. These cities were small by today's standards, but they were growing quickly. In just a few short years, Philadelphia would become the second-largest city in the whole British Empire next to London, England.

What sparked this growth of towns and cities? Trade within the colonies and with other countries was the driving factor. From the docks of the cities on the East Coast, merchants sent lumber, fur, salted fish, flour, rice, indigo, and tobacco to many parts of the world. To those docks, ships returned with glass, paint, tea, wine, and other goods the colonists needed or wanted.

Trade also meant jobs. Men loaded and unloaded ships. They built boats. They made sails, rope, and barrels for shipping goods. The cities and towns offered other kinds of work, too. Men, and some women, ran stores and shops. Skilled workers baked bread and made pots and pans. Others printed newspapers or made fine shoes and clothes for other city dwellers.