

Colonial Cities

Questions for colonial cities

You will read about one of four colonial cities (Boston, New York, Philadelphia, or Charleston) depending on which group you are assigned to. The selected passages were taken from observations of visitors to or inhabitants of the cities. After completing the reading, assign one member of each group to do an oral summary of the article, describing what life was like in that city. Next, your group should put together a 60 second tourism video about the city, using details from the reading. After reading your article and viewing other group's presentations and commercials, answer the following questions.

1. Overall, what impressions of life in colonial cities in the 1700s do you have?
2. What functions did the cities serve for the colonies and for England?
3. What kind of standard of living/quality of life did cities support for their inhabitants?
4. What features of the various cities were commonly noted by the observers?
5. What features of 21st-century cities that one would commonly find in tourist pamphlets or websites are missing or minimized in these colonial descriptions? Why do you think that is?
6. Choose two cities, and compare them. What is similar or different about them?
7. Which colonial city would you have chosen to live in in 1750? Why?

NEW YORK

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century NEW YORK before the Revolution by a Maryland physician in 1744, a Swedish botanist in 1750, and an Anglican clergyman in 1760.

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (itinerarium) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited.

July 9, 1744. . . . It is a very rich place, but it is not so cheap living here as as Philadelphia. They have very bad water in the city, most of it being hard and brackish. Ever since the negro conspiracy, certain people have been appointed to sell water in the streets, which they carry on a sledge in great casks and bring it from the best springs about the city, for it was when the negroes went for tea water that they held their cabals [secret meetings] and consultations, and therefore they have a law now that no negro shall be seen upon the streets without a lanthorn [lantern] after dark.

They have a diversion here very common, which is the barbecuing of a turtle, to which sport the chief gentry in town commonly go once or twice a week.

There are a great many handsome women in this city. They appear much more in public than in Philadelphia. It is customary here to ride thro' the street in light chairs. When the ladies walk the streets in the daytime they commonly use umbrellas, prettily adorned with feathers and painted.

There are two coffee-houses in this city, and the northern and southern posts [mail] go and come here once a week. I was tired of nothing here but their excessive drinking, for in this place you may have the best of company and conversation as well as in Philadelphia.

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Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America* [1750], 1770, English edition, excerpts.

A Swedish botanist, Kalm travelled through the middle and northern colonies and into French Canada, compiling an extensive survey of the region's plants, animals, peoples, and cultures, always interwoven with his personal impressions.

In size it comes next to Boston and Philadelphia, but with regard to fine buildings, opulence, and extensive commerce, it vies with them for supremacy. . . .

The streets do not run so straight as those of Philadelphia, and sometimes are quite crooked. However, they are very spacious and well built, and most of them are paved, except in high places where it has been found useless. In the chief streets there are trees planted, which in summer give them a fine appearance, and during the excessive heat at that time afford a cooling shade. I found it extremely pleasant to walk in the town, for it seemed like a garden. . .

The Port is a good one. Ships of the greatest tonnage can lie in it, close to the bridge; but its water is very salt[y] as the sea continually washes into it, and therefore is never frozen except in extraordinarily cold weather. This is of great advantage to the city and its commerce, for many ships enter or leave the port at all times of the year unless the winds be contrary, a convenience which, as I have before observed, is wanting [lacking] at Philadelphia.

Trade in New York. New York probably carries on a more extensive commerce than any town in the English North American provinces; at least it may be said to equal them. Boston and Philadelphia, however, come very close to it. The trade of New York extends to many places, and it is said they send more ships from there to London than they do from Philadelphia. They export to that capital all the various sorts of skins which they buy of the Indians, sugar, logwood, and other dyeing woods, rum, mahogany and many other goods which are the produce of the West Indies, together with all the specie [coin money] which they get in the course of trade. Every year several ships are built here which are sent to London and there sold, and of late years a quantity of iron has been shipped to England. In return for all these, cloth is imported from London and so is every article of English growth or manufacture, together with all sorts of foreign goods.

England, and especially London, profits immensely by its trade with the American colonies; for not only New York but likewise all the other English towns on the continent import so many articles from England that all their specie, together with the goods which they get in other countries, must all go to Old England to pay their accounts there, for which they are, however, insufficient. Hence it appears how much a well regulated colony contributes to the increase and welfare of its mother country.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America. In the Years 1759 and 1760, London: 1775.

An Anglican clergyman from England, Andrew Burnaby travelled throughout British America from Virginia to Massachusetts.

At the point I embarked for New York and, after a pleasant passage over the bay, which is three leagues wide, and various delightful prospects of rivers, islands, fields, hills, woods, the Narrows, New York city, vessels sailing to and fro, and innumerable porpoises playing upon the surface of the water, in an evening so serene that the hemisphere was not ruffled by a single cloud, arrived there about the setting of the sun.

This city is situated upon the point of a small island, lying open to the bay on one side, and on the others included between the North and East rivers, and commands a fine prospect of water, the Jerseys, Long Island, Staten Island, and several others, which lie scattered in the bay. It contains between two and three thousand houses, and 16 or 17,000 inhabitants, is tolerably well built, and has several good houses. The streets are paved and very clean, but in general they are narrow. There are two or three, indeed, which are spacious and airy, particularly the Broadway. The houses in this street have most of them a row of trees before them which form

an agreeable shade and produce a pretty effect. The whole length of the town is something more than a mile, the breadth of it about half an one. The situation is, I believe, esteemed healthy, but it is subject to one great inconvenience, which is the want of fresh water, so that the inhabitants are obliged to have it brought from springs at some distance out of town.

CHARLES TOWN (Charleston)

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century CHARLES TOWN before the Revolution by a South Carolina resident in 1742, a German clergyman in 1750, a Philadelphia merchant in 1765, and a British ship captain in 1769.

Eliza Lucas [Pinckney], Letter to her brother, Thomas Lucas, 22 May 1742, excerpts. Born in the West Indies where her father, a British army officer, was based, Eliza Lucas was educated in England and moved with her family to South Carolina in 1738 when she was fifteen. Her younger brothers lived in London, England.

I am now set down, my Dear brother, to obey your commands and give you a short description of the part of the world I now inhabit. South Carolina then is a large and Extensive Country [colony] Near the Sea. Most of the settled parts of it is upon a flat _ the soil near Charles Town sandy, but further distant clay and swamplands. It abounds with fine navigable rivers and great quantities of fine timber. . . .

The people in general [are] hospitable and honest, and the better sort add to these a polite gentile behaviour. The winters here are very fine and pleasant, but 4 months in the year is extremely disagreeable, excessive hot, much thunder and lightning, and muskatoes [mosquitoes] and sand flies in abundance.

Charles Town, the Metropolis, is a neat, pretty place. The inhabitants [are] polite and live in a very gentile manner; the streets and houses regularly built; the ladies and gentlemen gay in their dress. Upon the whole you will find as many agreeable people of both sexes for the size of the places as almost anywhere. St. Philip's Church in Charles Town is a very Elegant one and much frequented. There are several more places of public worship in this town and the generality of people [are] of a religious turn of mind.

Rev. Johann Martin Bolzcius, Reliable Answer to Some Submitted Questions Concerning the Land Carolina . . . , 1750, excerpt.

Bolzcius was a leader of the German Lutheran settlement of Ebenezer, Georgia, founded in 1734. In 1750 he published a pamphlet in a Q&A format to inform other Germans of the promise and realities of emigrating to Georgia or Carolina.

How much will a genteel family need per year for its upkeep in Charlestown, if it consists of 9 persons including servant girls and one butler, and which is more than well supplied with linen and all necessary housewares? It is expensive and costly to live in Charlestown. The splendor, lust, and opulence there has grown almost to the limit. If the family did not go along with it, it would be despised. Young people there are in great danger. I am sorry that I have to write this. Its European clothes it would have to change according to the often changing Charlestown fashion. Otherwise there would be much humiliation and mockery. House rent is excessively dear [costly] in Charlestown.

Pelatah Webster, Journal of a voyage from Philadelphia to Charles Town, May-June 1765, excerpts.

A Philadelphia merchant, Pelatah Webster kept a daily journal of his two-month business trip to Charles Town.

May 27. Spent in viewing the town. It contains about 1000 houses, with inhabitants, 5000 whites and 20,000 blacks; has 8 houses for religious worship, viz. [namely] St. Philip's & St. Michael's, Ctch. [Church] of England, large stone buildings with porticos with large pillars and steeples. St. Michael's has a good ring of bells. The streets of this city run N. & S., and E. & W., intersecting each other at right angles. They are not paved except the footways within the posts about 6 feet wide, which are paved with brick in the principal streets.

There are large fortifications here but mostly unfinished and ruinous. There is a pretty fort on James Island called Johnson's fort³ which commands the entrance of the harbour . . .

The laborious business is here chiefly done by black slaves of which there are great multitudes. The climate is very warm; the chief produce is rice & indigo; the manufacture of hemp is set afoot & likely to succeed very well. They have considerable lumber and naval stores [tar, pitch, and turpentine]. They export annually 100,000 barrels of rice & 60,000 lbs. indigo, . . .

Now I have left Charlestown, an agreeable & polite place in which I was used [treated] very genteely & contracted much acquaintaince for the time I stayed here. The heats are much too severe, the water bad, the soil sandy, the timber too much evergreen; but with all these disadvantages, 'tis a flourishing place, capable of vast improvement: will have, I fear, some uncomfortable bands of banditti on its frontiers soon, its distance from proper authority having already drawn there great numbers of very idle dissolute people who begin to be very troublesome.

BOSTON

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century BOSTON before the Revolution from a Bostonian clergyman in 1702, an English historian in 1720, a Maryland physician in 1744, an English clergyman in 1759, and a mapmaker in 1769.

Rev. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* [The Great Works of Christ in America]: Or, The Ecclesiastical History of New England, 1702, Book I, excerpts.

Rev. Cotton Mather was the pre-eminent Puritan clergyman of Boston in his time, which meant he was the pre-eminent clergyman throughout New England. In his massive religious history of New England, he reviews the history of Boston.

Years after the first Settlement it grew to be The Metropolis of the Whole English America. Little was this expected by them that first settled the Town, when for a while Boston was proverbially called Lost Town for the mean and sad Circumstances of it. The Angels of Death have often Shot the Arrows of Death into the midst of the Town; the Small-Pox has especially Four Times been a great Plague upon us. In one Twelve-month, about one Thousand of our Neighbours have one way or other been carried unto their long Home. And yet we are after all, many more than Seven Thousand Souls of us at this Hour living on the Spot.

Never was any Town under the Cope of Heaven more liable to be laid in Ashes, either through the Carelessness or through the Wickedness of them that Sleep in it. That such a Combustible heap of Contiguous Houses yet stands, it may be called A Standing Miracle. Ten Times has the Fire made notable Ruins among us, and our good Servant been almost our Master; But the Ruins have mostly and quickly been Rebuilt. I suppose that many more than a Thousand Houses are to be seen on this little piece of Ground, all fill'd with the undeserved Favours of God.

But if ever this Town saw a Year of Salvations, transcendently such was the Last Year unto us. A Formidable French squadron hath not Shot one Bomb into the midst of thee, O thou Munition of Rocks. Our Streets have not run with Blood and Gore, and horrible devouring Flames have not raged upon our Substance. Those are Ignorant and Unthinking and Unthankful Men who do not own [admit] that we have narrowly escaped as dreadful things, as Carthage, or Newfoundland, have suffered.

1744. Dr. Alexander Hamilton, *Itinerarium*.

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (*itinerarium*) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited.

August 16, 1744. I need scarce take notice that Boston is the largest town in North America, being much about the same extent as the city of Glasgow in Scotland, and having much the same number of inhabitants, which is between twenty and thirty thousand. It is considerably

larger than either Philadelphia or New York, but the streets are irregularly disposed and in general too narrow. The best street in the town is that which runs down towards the Long Wharf, which goes by the name of King's Street. This town is a considerable place for shipping, and carries on a great trade in time of peace. There are now above one hundred ships in the harbour, besides a great number of small craft, tho' now upon account of the war the times are very dead.⁴ The people of this Province [colony] chiefly follow farming and merchandise. Their staples are shipping, lumber, and fish.

The Government is so far democratic as that the election of the Governour's Council and the great officers is made by the members of the Lower House, or Representatives of the people. Mr. Shirley, the present Governour, is a man of excellent sense and understanding, and is very well respected there. He understands how to humour the people, and at the same time acts for the interest of the Government.

Boston is better fortified against an enemy than any port in North America, not only upon account of the strength of the Castle, but the narrow passage up into the harbour, which is not above 160 feet wide in the channel at high water.

There are many different religions and persuasions here, but the chief sect is that of the Presbyterians. There are above twenty-five churches, chapels, and meetings in the town, but the Quakers here have but a small remnant, having been banished [from] the Province at the first settlement upon account of some disturbances they raised.

The better sort are polite, mannerly, and hospitable to strangers _ such strangers I mean as come not to trade among them (for of them they are jealous). There is more hospitality and frankness shown here to strangers than either at York or at Philadelphia, and in the place there is an abundance of men of learning and parts so that one is at no loss for agreeable conversation, nor for any set of company he pleases. Assemblies of the gayer sort are frequent here, the gentlemen and ladies meeting almost every week at concerts of music and balls. I was present at two or three such, and saw as fine a ring of ladies, as good dancing, and heard music as elegant as I had been witness to anywhere. I must take notice that this place abounds with pretty women, who appear rather more abroad [socializing outside of their homes] than they do at York, and dress elegantly. They are for the most part free and affable as well as pretty. I saw not one prude while I was here.

September 27, 1744. . . . In this itineration [journey] I completed, by land and water together, a course of 1624 miles. The northern parts I found in general much better settled than the southern. As to politeness and humanity they are much alike, except in the great towns, where the inhabitants are more civilized, especially at Boston.

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Rev. Andrew Burnaby, Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America, In the Years 1759 and 1760.

An Anglican clergyman from England, Andrew Burnaby travelled throughout British America from Virginia to Massachusetts.

Boston, the metropolis of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England, is one of the largest and most flourishing towns in North America. It is situated upon a peninsula, or rather an island joined to the continent by an isthmus or narrow neck of land half a mile in length, at the bottom of a spacious and noble harbour, defended from the sea by a number of small islands. The length of it is nearly two miles, and the breadth of it half a one; and it is supposed to contain 3000 houses, and 18 or 20,000 inhabitants. At the entrance of the harbour stands a very good light-house; and upon an island, about a league from the town, a considerable castle, mounting near 150 cannon: there are several good batteries about it, and one in particular very strong, built by Mr. Shirley [governor]. There are also two batteries in town, for 16 or 20 guns each; but they are not, I believe, of any force.

The buildings in Boston are in general good. The streets are open and spacious, and well-paved; and the whole has much the air of some of our best country towns in England. The country round about it is exceedingly delightful; and from a hill, which stands close to the town, where there is a beacon erected to alarm the neighbourhood in case of any surprise, is one of the finest prospects, the most beautifully variegated, and richly grouped, of any without exception that I have ever seen.

The chief public buildings are three churches, thirteen or fourteen meeting-houses, the governor's palace, the court-house or exchange, Faneuil's-hall, a linen-manufacturing-house, a work-house, a bridewell, a public granary, and a very fine wharf, at least half a mile long, undertaken at the expense of a number of private gentlemen for the advantage of unloading and loading vessels. Most of these buildings are handsome; the church, called King's Chapel, is exceedingly elegant and fitted up in the Corinthian taste. There is also an elegant private concert-room, highly finished in the Ionic manner. — I had reason to think the situation of Boston unhealthy, at least in this season of the year; as there were frequent funerals every night during my stay there.

PHILADELPHIA

Descriptions of Eighteenth-Century PHILADELPHIA before the Revolution by a Maryland physician in 1744, a Swedish botanist in 1750, a German immigrant in 1750, Benjamin Franklin in 1757, and an English clergyman in 1759.

Dr. Alexander Hamilton, *Itinerarium*, 1744, excerpts.

A Maryland physician, Dr. Alexander Hamilton (not the Founding Father) took a four-month journey from Maryland to Boston and back in 1744, keeping a diary (*itinerarium*) that displayed his caustic wit as well as his impressions of the places he visited. His impressions of Philadelphia changed from his first to his second visit.

June 4, 1744. At my entering the city I observed the regularity of the streets, but at the same time the majority of the houses mean and low, and much decayed; the streets in general not paved, very dirty and obstructed with rubbish and lumber, but their frequent building excuses that.

June 8, 1744. I dined at a tavern with a very mixed company of different nations and religions. There were Scots, English, Dutch, Germans, and Irish; there were Roman Catholics, Churchmen, Presbyterians, Quakers, Newlightmen, Methodists, Seventhdaymen, Moravians, Anabaptists, and one Jew. The whole company consisted of twenty-five, planted round an oblong table, in a great hall well stocked with flies. . . .

June 9, 1744. . . . The heat in this city is excessive, the sun's rays being reflected with such power from the brick houses, and from the street pavement, which is brick. The people commonly use awnings of painted cloth or duck over their shop doors and windows, and at sunset throw bucketsful of water upon the pavement, which gives a sensible cool. They are stocked with plenty of excellent water in this city, there being a pump at almost every fifty paces' distance.

The market in this city is perhaps the largest in North America. It is kept twice a week, upon Wednesdays and Saturdays. The street where it stands, called Market Street, is large and spacious, composed of the best houses in the city. . . .

Here is no public magazine of arms [weapons warehouse], nor any method of defense either for city or Province in case of the invasion of an enemy. This is owing to the obstinacy of the Quakers in maintaining their principle of non-resistance. It were pity but they were put to a sharp trial to see whether they would act as they profess.

I never was in a place so populous where the gout for public gay diversions prevailed so little. There is no such thing as assemblies of the gentry among them, either for dancing or music; these they have had an utter aversion to ever since Whitefield preached among them.⁵ Their chief employ, indeed, is traffic [trade] and mercantile business, which turns their thoughts from these levities.

Sept. 19, 1744. At my seeing of the city of Philadelphia, I conceived a quite different notion of both city and inhabitants from that which I had before from the account or description of others. I could not apprehend this city to be so very elegant or pretty as it is commonly represented. In its present situation it is much like one of our country market towns in England. When you are in it, the majority of the buildings appear low and mean, the streets unpaved, and therefore full of rubbish and mire. It makes but an indifferent appearance at a distance, there being no turrets or steeples to set it off to advantage, but I believe that in a few years hence it will be a great and flourishing place, and the chief city in North America.

The people are much more polite, generally speaking, than I apprehended them to be from the common account of travellers. Drinking here is not at all in vogue, and in the place there is pretty good company and conversation to be had. It is a degree politer than New York, tho' in its fabric not so urbane, but Boston excels both for politeness and urbanity, tho' only a town.

Gottlieb Mittelberger, Journey to Pennsylvania in the Year 1750, and Return to Germany in the Year 1754, 1756, excerpts.

In 1750 the German schoolmaster Gottlieb Mittelberger travelled to America with four hundred other emigrants, arriving in the port of Philadelphia. Distressed by the fate of many who were sold into indentured servitude, he returned to Germany in 1754 and published an account to dissuade others from emigrating to America.

Said city is the capital of Pennsylvania where all the commerce is carried on. It is already very large, regularly and handsomely built, and laid out with broad streets and many cross-alleys. All the houses are built of stone or brick up to the fourth story, and roofed with shingles of cedar wood. It takes almost a day to walk around the town; about 300 new houses are built every year. It is thought that in time it will be one of the largest cities in the world. . . .

The trade of the city and country to other countries and colonies increases perceptibly from year to year. It consists in fruit, flour, corn, tobacco, honey, skins, various kinds of costly furs, flax, and particularly a great deal of flax-seed or linseed, also fine cut lumber, horses, and all kinds of tame and wild animals. In return the incoming vessels bring all sorts of goods, such as spices, sugar, tea, coffee, rice, rum, which is a brandy distilled from sugar, molasses, fine china vessels, Dutch and English clothes, leather, linen, stuffs, silks, damask, velvet, etc. There is actually everything to be had in Pennsylvania that may be obtained in Europe, because so many merchantmen land here every year.

Rev. Andrew Burnaby, Travels through the Middle Settlements in North-America. In the Years 1759 and 1760,

Philadelphia, if we consider that not eighty years ago the place where it now stands was a wild and uncultivated desert, inhabited by nothing but ravenous beasts and a savage people, must certainly be the object of everyone's wonder and admiration. . . The streets are laid out with great regularity in parallel lines, intersected by others at right angles, and are handsomely built. On each side there is a pavement of broad stones for foot passengers; and in most of them a

causeway in the middle for carriages. Upon dark nights it is well lighted, and watched by a patrol.

The city is in a very flourishing state, and inhabited by merchants, artists, tradesmen, and persons of all occupations. There is a public market held twice a week, upon Wednesday and Saturday, almost equal to that of Leadenhall; and a tolerable one every day besides. The streets are crowded with people, and the river with vessels. . . .

Can the mind have a greater pleasure than in contemplating the rise and progress of cities and kingdoms? Than in perceiving a rich and opulent state arising out of a small settlement or colony? This pleasure everyone must feel who considers Pennsylvania.