The Early English Colonies

Because England got such a late start in the colonization game, they couldn’t just set up their colonies wherever they wanted. Spain dominated South America, Mexico, the West Indies, the American Southwest, and Florida. The French held sway along North America’s major waterways. In addition, the dense forests and occasionally hostile Native American tribes prevented English settlers from moving westward past the Appalachian Mountains. The early English settlements were therefore concentrated along the eastern coast of North America.

There were three types of British colonies: royal, proprietary, and self-governing. Each type had its own characteristics.

* **Royal colonies** were owned by the king.
* **Proprietary colonies**, such as Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware, were basically land grants from the British government. Individuals were awarded huge tracts of land that they would then supervise and govern, usually in return for political or financial favors. These colonial governors reported directly to the king.
* **Self-governing colonies**, including Rhode Island and Connecticut, formed when the king granted a charter to a joint-stock company, and the company then set up its own government independent of the crown. The king could revoke the colonial charter at any time and convert a self-governing colony into a royal colony.

The SAT II test will focus on the particularly important English colonies of Jamestown, Plymouth, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

**Jamestown**

Nearly twenty years after the failure of the English settlement at Roanoke, two separate joint-stock companies set out to found settlements along the Atlantic seaboard. In 1606, England’s King James I authorized a charter granting land in what was then called Virginia (but stretched from modern-day Maine to North Carolina) to the Virginia Company of Plymouth and the Virginia Company of London. Colonists, considered employees of their respective companies, journeyed to America in 1607. The Virginia Company of Plymouth failed miserably, and its settlement in Sagadahoc, Maine was abandoned within two years. The Virginia Company of London was more successful, though in the New World, success was something of a relative term.

**Jamestown’s Early Years**

The 105 original Jamestown colonists were all men. Jamestown was a business venture, not a place to raise a family. The colonists took this ethic to heart and focused all their efforts on getting rich, neglecting to tend to any sort of agriculture. As a result, more than half of the colonists died of malnourishment and starvation within the first year. Only 38 colonists remained when reinforcements arrived in 1608.

Captain **John Smith**, one of the surviving original colonists, soon emerged as a prominent leader. In 1608, Smith organized work gangs to ensure the colony had food and shelter and made rules to control sanitation and hygiene. During the winter of 1608–1609, only twelve of 200 men died. Smith also excelled in diplomacy, maintaining friendly ties with the nearby Powhatan Confederacy. But when Smith was wounded in 1609 and returned to England, the colony staggered toward collapse. Out of a population of about 500 colonists in Jamestown in September 1609, 400 died by May 1610. Relations with the nearby Native Americans deteriorated, and in 1610 the first Anglo-Powhatan War erupted.

**Tobacco, Money, and Success**

In the end, Jamestown was saved—not by gold or silver—but because it had the perfect climate for growing tobacco. **John Rolfe**, an Englishman who married the Powhatan leader’s daughter, Pocahontas, introduced to the colony West Indian tobacco, a salable strain with many advantages over local varieties. From 1616 to 1619, Jamestown’s tobacco exports grew nearly twenty-fold. Sensing the possibility for great profit, the Virginia Company dispatched money and supplies and awarded land grants to anyone able to pay for his own passage to Jamestown, or for the passage of another laborer.

*The profits produced by tobacco saved Jamestown and ensured the settlement’s success.*

As the colony grew in size, its members began to desire a better system of government. In 1619, the colonists formed a general assembly, the **House of Burgesses**. The House of Burgesses was the first representative government in the New World, though its power was limited because the Virginia Company could still overrule its actions. That same year, the first Africans were brought to Jamestown. Originally working as indentured servants, by the 1640s most Africans were bought and sold as slaves.

*Jamestown’s House of Burgesses, formed in 1619, was America’s first representative government.*

The year 1622 was a tragic one for Jamestown. A second war with the Powhatan tribe, a slump in tobacco prices, fraudulent practices by local officials, and high death rates from disease, all conspired to transform the normal rigors of colonial life into extremely hard times. Under this strain, the joint-stock company collapsed and James I revoked its charter, making Virginia a royal colony in 1624.

**Plymouth Plantation**

In 1620, 102 settlers sailed across the Atlantic on the **Mayflower**, having procured a patent for settlement from the Virginia Company of London. These colonists agreed to send lumber, fish, and fur back to England for seven years before they could assume ownership of the land. Most of these settlers were *Separatists* from England, who wanted to separate from the Anglican Church (the Church of England). These Separatists had originally left England for the Netherlands to escape religious persecution. The voyage to the New World offered an even greater escape.

*Separatists renounced the Church of England and established their own self-governing congregations. Among the Separatist groups are Pilgrims, Quakers, and Baptists. Separatists are distinct from Puritans, who originally wanted to “purify” the Anglican Church without separating from it.*

In November of 1620, the *Mayflower* landed at Plymouth Bay, outside the bounds of the British possession of Virginia. Since they had no legal right to settle there, the leaders of the *Pilgrims*, as the Separatists who came to the New World were called, insisted that all males sign the *Mayflower Compact*, which established the colony of Plymouth Plantation as a “civil body politic” under the sovereignty of James I of England.

*The Mayflower Compact is often described as America’s first example of true self-government.*

The Pilgrims were unprepared for the harsh New England winter, and about half of the settlers died by March 1621. Those who survived owed their lives to the aid of some English-speaking Native Americans, who taught the Pilgrims how to grow corn. After that terrible first winter, Plymouth quickly grew and prospered. Within a few years, the colony expanded into Cape Cod and the southeastern part of modern Massachusetts.

**The Massachusetts Bay Colony**

During the first half of the seventeenth century, religious and political oppression in England grew worse. In 1628, the **Puritans** struck a deal with the English government, under which the Puritans would leave England and settle north of the Plymouth Plantation on the condition that they would have political control of their colony. The Puritans wanted their colony to be a theocracy, and emphasized religion over trade. In 1630, under the leadership of **John Winthrop**, who had been elected governor, about 900 Puritans traveled to Massachusetts. These Puritans eventually settled at the site of modern-day Boston. Winthrop’s colony was a community based on the Bible. He saw Massachusetts Bay as “a city upon a hill,” a beacon of religious righteousness that would shine throughout the world. As happened in most settlements, the colonists were unprepared for the first winter and almost one-third of the settlers died. But by mid-1631, the colonists had put the worst behind them and the Massachusetts Bay Colony began to thrive.

**Government of Massachusetts Bay**

The Massachusetts Bay colony was initially run by a General Court that allowed membership only to landholding Puritan men. After public outcry, all Puritan freemen, regardless of wealth or holdings, were allowed entrance. As the number of settlers increased and the General Court became too large, the settlers established a representative government, electing two representatives from each district to the General Court.

**Religion and Massachusetts Bay**

The Massachusetts Bay Colony operated according to a system called **congregationalism**, in which each independent church congregation served as the center of a community’s political and social life. Only those individuals with good standing in the church could participate in government.

Some inhabitants, however, broke with the Puritan leaders over the strong relationship between church and state. One such dissenter was **Roger Williams**. Unlike those in power, who believed that there must be legal separation but substantial cooperation between church and state, Williams argued that total separation was necessary. He feared that without separation the state would corrupt the church. In 1635, Williams was banished from Massachusetts. He eventually established the colony of Rhode Island in 1647, where the government renounced the Church of England and permitted religious freedom. Another dissenter was **Anne Hutchinson**, whose religious teachings were taken by some to be attacks on Puritan religious codes. Hutchinson found support in Henry Vane, who had become governor of the colony after Winthrop left office. But Winthrop staunchly opposed Hutchinson and succeeded in ousting Vane from office. In 1637, Hutchinson and her followers were banished; most of them settled in Rhode Island.

*Some Massachusetts dissenters who went on to found new settlements in New England: Roger Williams (Providence, RI), Anne Hutchinson (Portsmouth, RI and Pelham Bay, NY).*