

English, French, and Spanish Colonies: A Comparison

THE HISTORY OF COLONIAL NORTH AMERICA centers primarily around the struggle of England, France, and Spain to gain control of the continent. Settlers crossed the Atlantic for different reasons, and their governments took different approaches to their colonizing efforts. These differences created both advantages and disadvantages that profoundly affected the New World's fate. France and Spain, for instance, were governed by autocratic sovereigns whose rule was absolute; their colonists went to America as servants of the Crown. The English colonists, on the

other hand, enjoyed far more freedom and were able to govern themselves as long as they followed English law and were loyal to the king. In addition, unlike France and Spain, England encouraged immigration from other nations, thus boosting its colonial population. By 1763 the English had established dominance in North America, having defeated France and Spain in the French and Indian War. However, those regions that had been colonized by the French or Spanish would retain national characteristics that linger to this day.

	English Colonies	French Colonies	Spanish Colonies
Settlements/Geography	Most colonies established by royal charter. Earliest settlements were in Virginia and Massachusetts but soon spread all along the Atlantic coast, from Maine to Georgia, and into the continent's interior as far as the Mississippi River.	First colonies were trading posts in Newfoundland; others followed in wake of exploration of the St. Lawrence valley, parts of Canada, and the Mississippi River. Settlements include Quebec (1608) and Montreal (1642). Louisiana settled in the late 1600s.	Crown-sponsored conquests gained riches for Spain and expanded its empire. Most of the southern and southwestern regions claimed, as well as sections of the California coast. Settlements include St. Augustine, Florida (1565); Santa Fe, New Mexico (1610); and numerous cities in Texas and California.
Population Sources	Colonists were recruited from among middle-class farmers, artisans, and tradesmen. Indentured servants, specialists in certain areas (i.e., sawmill workers, lumbermen), and convicted criminals were also brought over. Immigrants from other countries were welcomed.	Initially fur traders, merchants, and missionaries. In 1665 some 1100 French soldiers arrived and were given land. Neither Protestants nor peasant farmers were allowed to emigrate.	Conquistadores, soldiers, and missionaries were the primary Spanish colonizers; farmers and traders came later.
Government	Distance from England and a frugal Parliament allowed colonists to set up local governments and representative assemblies and to tax themselves, as long as they did not take up arms against the Crown.	Colonies were fully subject to the French king. There were no political rights or representative government, and public meetings could not be held without permission.	Colonies were governed by crown-appointed viceroys or governors. Settlers had to obey the king's laws and could make none of their own.
Religion	Largely non-Catholics. Although some tolerance was practiced in most colonies, the Puritans in Massachusetts established an autocratic and restrictive religious leadership. Pennsylvania mandated complete tolerance.	Even though Protestants had played a role in the founding of New France, from around 1659 on they were excluded from the colony. Colonial life was largely controlled by the French Catholic clergy.	Settlers were restricted to Catholics; Protestants were persecuted and driven out.
Economy	Diverse economic activities included farming, fishing, and trading. Exports included tobacco, rice, timber, and fish. Tobacco was the main source of revenue in the Virginia and North Carolina colonies.	Although the French government encouraged farming efforts, the fur trade proved to be more lucrative. Plantations established in the Mississippi valley largely failed.	Largely a trading economy; some farming in the West. Commerce was controlled by the Spanish board of trade, with regulations enforced by the Spanish military.
Population Growth	Rapid growth due to liberal immigration policies. By 1627 Virginia had approximately 1,000 settlers. By 1754 total population in the English colonies had grown to 1.5 million; this included large proportions of German and French.	Slow growth; by 1672 no more than 5,000 colonists had settled throughout New France. In Canada the French population totaled just under 40,000 by 1734. In Louisiana, by 1763 there were approximately 10,000 settlers, including 5,000 slaves and Acadians.	Slow growth due to greater emphasis on military conquest, poor relations with Native Americans, and numerous early failures to establish permanent settlements. Largest Spanish populations were in Florida, Texas, California, and Mexico.
Relations with Native Americans	Originally friendly; early colonists relied on Native Americans for trade and for help with survival. Eventually greed for land led to major conflicts with Indians.	Despite conversion efforts of missionaries, French respect for Native Americans allowed many to forge alliances, especially in their wars against the British.	Spanish missionaries saw Native Americans as heathens to be converted to Christianity; soldiers viewed them as fit only for killing or subjugation.