

CHAPTER I



Population and Immigration

1

IT was growth—growth consistently sustained and eagerly welcomed, growth as a source of grand imperial hopes and calculating private speculation—which was the outstandingly visible fact of mid-eighteenth-century life in the American colonies. Populations surged upward everywhere in the Atlantic world, brightened as it was by improvements in agriculture, feeding, and sanitation, but nowhere was there a century-long growth comparable to that of the North Atlantic colonies. The population of England and Wales grew healthily by about 23 per cent from 1700 to 1760. In the same years the population of the American mainland colonies, flourishing on open lands, attracting strong spurts of immigration, and progenerating at a goodly rate, multiplied six times. In 1700 the colonies were small outposts of Western civilization, an advance guard on the fringe of the raw continent numbering about 250,000 souls. By 1750 there were 1,170,000, and before the end of the century the United States was

a thriving nation that numbered more than 5,000,000.¹

In 1751 Benjamin Franklin wrote a little tract on the growth of the colonies to which, when it was printed four years later, he gave the title *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* His purpose was to oppose a recent act of Parliament which threatened to inhibit Pennsylvania industry by putting restrictions on iron manufacture in the colonies. His intellectual strategy was to project an American future in which the high cost of labor would prevent any considerable industrial production, by portraying a vast agricultural population that would long continue to serve England as a source of food supplies and as a great market for industrial goods. America, he argued, was not like the "settled old countries" of Europe: it had no crowded cities where men must delay marrying until they could bear the cost of a family. In settled countries laborers were abundant and wages low. But in America land was plentiful, "and so cheap as that a labouring man that understands husbandry, can in a short time save enough money to purchase a piece of new land whereon he may subsist a family." Under these conditions more of the people married, they married earlier, and the population grew rapidly, but since "no man continues long a labourer for others," labor would never be cheap. In Pennsylvania now, despite the immigration of many thousands, labor was no cheaper than it had been thirty years before.

1. I have used the estimates in *Historical Statistics of the United States* (edn. 1960), which will someday be superseded. The best brief account of colonial population is that of J. Potter, "The Growth of Population in America, 1700-1860," in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley, *Population in History* (1965), 636 ff.

Reckoning four births to a marriage in Europe and (here somewhat on the generous side) eight in America,² and assuming that half the children grew to maturity and married at twenty, Franklin concluded: "Our people must at least be doubled every twenty years." With this increase, an immense demand would arise for British manufactures, and the unnecessary effort to restrain manufacturing would only weaken "the whole family" of the empire and benefit foreign powers. How much better it would be to develop the internal balance of the empire, Franklin added, since even if the colonials were expected to double in number only every twenty-five years, they would "in another century be more than the people of England, and the greatest number of Englishmen will be on this side of the water." The two sides together would then comprise a vast, secure, and prosperous empire.

In asserting that the population doubled every twenty years, Franklin was astonishingly close to the mark, miscalculating only slightly on the side of generosity. (Malthus later said it had doubled every twenty-five years, but he may have underestimated the rate of growth.)³ During the years from 1730 to 1750, the colonial population had grown from 629,000 to 1,170,000, and in the next twenty years would grow to 2,148,000. His own province, Pennsylvania, showed by far the most impressive growth of all the colonies: it had leaped from 51,000 in 1730 when Franklin was still establishing himself as a young printer to 119,000 the year he wrote this pamphlet, and in another twenty years would rise to 240,000. Franklin, mildly

2. For family size, see Potter; and the projections of A. J. Lotka, "The Size of American Families in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 22 (1927), 154-70.

3. Cf. Potter.

avowing a prejudice for his own color, closed his pamphlet by pleading briefly for the exclusion of blacks. In the colonies as a whole, the black population, spurred by the slave trade, was outstripping the growth rate of the whites. Negroes, almost all of them slaves, were a good deal more than doubling their numbers every twenty years. In 1750 there were about 236,000 in the colonies, and the number had trebled since 1730. The number of blacks too would almost double again by 1770. In the economy of the South and in the mind of the white man the Negro already loomed large.

It suited Franklin at the moment, since he was not only against the importation of blacks but cherished an English prejudice against German immigrants which he later came to regret, to play down the effects of immigration and to stress the natural increase. Still, the natural increase was remarkable—Malthus spoke of it in 1798 as “a rapidity of increase probably without parallel in history”⁴—and the general rate of population growth in America was perhaps twice that of England. Franklin’s idea that early marriage was a major factor, an idea sometimes repeated by historians of the American family, is doubtful, at least in the North, where marriage was often delayed for economic reasons. In New England men commonly married in their middle twenties and women at about twenty. There were regions and classes in American society where delayed marriage was the usual practice: in New England villages, for example, especially those that had been settled for three or four generations, and everywhere among poor immigrants and indentured servants, colonial marriages were contracted at an age comparable to though perhaps

4. *Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Michael P. Fogarty (Everyman’s edn., 1958), I, 305-6.

slightly lower than European.⁵ But modern demographic studies show other grounds for rapid population growth: despite what has been written about heavy infant mortality in the eighteenth century, an unusually large proportion of American children for that epoch survived to maturity, and the longevity of the comfortable classes in the American colonies was surprising. The average number of births per fertile marriage may well have been as high as seven. In an agricultural society the work of children might easily be worth more than their keep as early as the age of eight or nine. Children were thus at a premium, family life was a material as well as a social and spiritual asset, and widows and widowers remarried as soon as they could. From New England to Georgia the average family size was buoyed up by some remarkably prolific families, and forty-year-old grandmothers were not uncommon. Near the end of the seventeenth century Governor Thomas Dongan of New York credited the story of an old Dutchwoman, still alive, who claimed "upwards of 360 living descendants." An extraordinary Rhode Island woman lived to a hundred and counted 500 descendants, 205 of whom were living at the time of her death. William Penn said of the Swedes along the Delaware: "They have fine children, and almost every house full: rare to find one of them without three or four boys and as many girls; some six, seven, and eight sons." Henry Melchior Muhlenberg, the patriarch of American Lutheranism, had eleven children; seven survived to maturity and gave him twenty-nine grandchildren to exult

5. For regional information on demographic questions, see Philip Greven, *Four Generations; Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (1970); Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (1970); and John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (1970).

in. In Virginia large planter families were common, and a few were astonishing: Patrick Henry, born in 1736, was one of nineteen children; John Marshall, born in 1755, was the eldest of fifteen. Governor Arthur Dobbs reported from North Carolina that among the thirty to forty families on his lands whom he had visited there were, with two exceptions, "not less than from five or six to ten children in the family, each going barefooted in their shifts in the warm weather."⁶

Franklin, rudimentary demographer though he was, included the superior birthrate of the country people in his calculations. Although with the exception of static Boston the five substantial towns on the eastern seaboard were growing at a respectable pace, and Philadelphia, soon to pass 20,000, was on its way to becoming one of the largest cities in the British Empire, the proportion of the whole population living in the major towns was actually falling.⁷ The largest concentration of population in 1750 lay in the two tobacco colonies, Virginia and Maryland, which together had more people—372,000—than any other region. Second to them were the four colonies of New England with 359,000. (The fourth New England colony, the frontier province of New Hampshire, was already nearly as populous as Rhode Island, and would overtake it well before the Revolution.) The four Middle Colonies numbered 294,000, Pennsylvania of course vastly overshadowing the others. New York, hampered by its vast patents and ungenerous land policies, grew slowly, and ranked in 1750 as a small or medium-sized colony

6. A. W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family*, I (1917), 170, 203, 286-7; cf. P. A. W. Wallace, *The Muhlenbergs of Pennsylvania* (1950), 268. For the Rhode Island woman, see Potter, 647n.

7. Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness* (1955), 303; *Cities in Revolt* (1955), 216-17.

little larger in population than New Jersey. Most of the 142,000 people of the three colonies of the deeper South were divided, more or less evenly, between North and South Carolina. The small buffer state of Georgia, still struggling after eighteen years to establish itself, had only about 5,000 colonists.

"So vast is the territory of North America," Franklin proclaimed, "that it will require many ages to settle it fully." After nearly a century and a half of settlement, the English provinces were still confined east of the Appalachian Mountains, the irregular line of settlement reaching its deepest point of penetration in the valley of Virginia, which was less than two hundred miles inland. Shorter fingers of settlement pointed into the continent along a dozen major rivers from the Merrimack to the Savannah, and here and there in the interior were distant and isolated enclaves of farmers. But east of the fall line there were enormous tracts of unsettled lands, and the half-known upland country west of it still belonged to scouts, trappers and traders, soldiers and Indians. The West, with its hundreds and hundreds of miles of wild forest and rugged mountains, prodded the energies of explorers and filled the dreams of land speculators, but in it also lurked dangers and uncertainties, French forts in the North, Spanish garrisons in the South, and everywhere potentially hostile Indians.

2

Pivotal to Franklin's vision of the American future was the assumption that since land was plentiful and cheap, labor would be dear. The vacant land seemed like an enormous sponge endlessly capable of soaking up the