Overview of the Middle Colonies
Native Americans

Algonquin
The Algonquin nation lived in coastal areas and were divided into the Lenni-Lenape (also known as Delaware), Mohican, Montauk, Munsee, and Wappinger tribes. Most Algonquins lived in wigwams, frameworks of saplings bent to form dome shapes covered with bark. The women farmed the “three sisters” (corn, squash and beans) in fields near the villages of wigwams. Men hunted and fished for food in the forests and waterways. Children learned living skills by working alongside their parents and they learned customs, beliefs, and values by listening to the stories of their elders. Algonquins developed wampum, special belts made of woven polished shells. Wampum served as money, and was sometimes woven into pictures to communicate history or messages.

Throughout this area, white settlers were initially welcomed by the Algonquin. They invited homeless Europeans into their wigwams and gave food to starving arrivals from across the seas. They taught the settlers to hunt and fish and helped them build shelter. They even shared the land. Like all the gifts of nature, the Algonquin believed that land was to be used, not owned. They allowed colonial settlers to farm the lands. They even accepted gifts and signed treaties to honor these friendships, only to realize later that they had sold the land they thought they were sharing.

Iroquois
Iroquois tribes were generally located inland and were divided into the Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca tribes. They lived in structures called longhouses, and were called the People of the Longhouse. A longhouse was like a very long wigwam, perhaps 100 feet long and 25 feet wide. Inside a longhouse, animal skins divided living areas for each family. Like the Algonquins, farming and hunting provided most of the food for the tribe. One special foodstuff gathered from the wild was maple sap, which the Iroquois boiled to make syrup.

The Iroquois shared many traits with the Algonquin, but they united their major tribes in a League of Five Nations. This confederacy made them a strong and unified group. Unlike the Algonquins, who traded with Europeans, the Iroquois were worried about protecting their freedom and the land. This difference provoked conflict between the Algonquin and Iroquois tribes.
Overview of the Middle Colonies
Government

New Netherland (later named the state of New York) and Delaware were chartered colonies, controlled by trading companies that allowed the colonists to choose a governor, council, or legislative assembly. New Jersey and Pennsylvania were founded as proprietorships. They were owned and governed by individuals.

Once England took control of New York, the Duke of York became proprietor and appointed governors to rule the colony. A New York General Assembly met in 1683, but its laws had to be approved by the governor. In 1704 the Assembly seized power from the royal governor.

Delaware was sold to William Penn, the proprietor of Pennsylvania. Penn created a two-house legislature made up of a council and an assembly. The council helped the governor propose laws. The assembly discussed and voted on the proposals of the council. In 1701, a new constitution in Pennsylvania gave more control of the government to the people and granted Delaware a separate legislature.

Overview of the Middle Colonies
Geography

The first European settlers to the area now known as the states of Delaware, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania found fertile coastal plains, dense forests and many large, navigable rivers that ended in protected harbors. The climate was temperate with warm, rainy summers. Further inland, explorers found the rolling hills east of the Appalachians, also an area of deep, rich soil. The rivers tumbled over rapids and waterfalls, which in later years became a source of power.

These geographical features made the middle colonies a good place for farmers to make a living off the land. Once lands were cleared, a farmer could raise food for his family and cash crops, like wheat and corn, that were easily transported to market on the areas' rivers. This trade led to the rise of urban areas along major waterways.
Overview of the Middle Colonies
European Settlement

The French, Dutch, Swedish, and English all claimed land in the middle colonies. In 1609, a Frenchman named Samuel de Champlain allied himself with a group of Algonquins to explore the northern regions of present day New York. Skirmishes between his party and Iroquois residents created ongoing conflict. The French were interested in fur trading and did not colonize.

Dutchman Henry Hudson explored the area in 1609 and named it New Netherland. The Dutch West Indies Trading Company secured permission from the Netherlands to build settlements in New Netherland. Fort Orange, the first permanent European settlement in this area, was founded in 1624. The next year more Dutch settled on Manhattan Island and called their town New Amsterdam. In 1626, Peter Minuit gave the equivalent of $24 to the Wappinger tribe inhabiting the island. In 1631 a Dutch settlement named Zwanendael began in present day Delaware.

Peter Minuit was hired by Sweden to lead an expedition to settle in the New World in 1637. This group sailed up the Delaware River and built Fort Christina, the beginning of New Sweden. New Netherland was better armed and larger, and took control of New Sweden in 1655.

English leaders realized that if they controlled New Netherland, the English empire in the new world would stretch from the northern colonies to the Carolinas. In 1664, King Charles II gave all land from Maine to Delaware not already settled by English colonists to his brother, the Duke of York. The English easily outnumbered the Dutch, and New Amsterdam surrendered peacefully.

Charles II gave another important piece of land to an Englishman in 1681. He settled a debt owed to the Penn family, by giving Pennsylvania to William Penn. Penn had been imprisoned in England for teaching people about the Quakers, a persecuted religious sect that believed in equality, peace, simple living and personal faith. William Penn established the Pennsylvania Colony on principles of religious tolerance, self government, and individual property ownership. He welcomed settlers from many countries, making Pennsylvania the first “ethnic melting pot” in America.
Overview of the Middle Colonies

Everyday Life

The earliest settlers of the middle colonies either participated in the fur trade or farmed for a living. Their farms were larger than those in the northern colonies and the work was more labor intensive. Besides clearing the land, plowing, and planting, colonists had to build houses, furniture, barns and fences. They hunted for meat. Indoors, they cooked, preserved food for winter, spun wool, wove cloth, made clothes and candles, and cleaned. As farmers became more established and had more land to farm, they grew crops to sell or trade in addition to what they needed to live on. The middle colonies eventually became known as the “bread basket of the new world.” Their need for trade led to settlements, villages, towns and cities. They built mills to grind corn and wheat, and sawmills to provide lumber.

At first, colonists traveled by water, by foot, or by horse. All of the earliest settlements were accessible by water. But as colonization moved further inland, travel on land became important, and eventually colonists built roads. As roads stretched throughout the area, the need for inns and waystations arose. Roads created a thriving business for wagon and harness makers.

Overview of the Middle Colonies

Key People

Patience Lovell Wright was born into a Quaker family in New York, and later moved to New Jersey. While most colonial women lived in their parents’ or their husbands’ homes their whole lives, Wright was rebellious and left home at about age 20. She moved to Philadelphia, where she tried to make a living out of her interest in art and sculpture. This venture was not financially successful, so she married and moved back to New Jersey, where she bore five children before her husband died in 1769. Needing to support herself and her children, she again tried to make a living with her art. Wright and her sister, also a widow, began making wax statues of people. They put on real hair, and the sculptures were very lifelike. She became extremely successful, even sculpting statues of the king and queen of England.
Overview of the Middle Colonies

Key People

Goody Baily and her husband farmed 150 acres in Chester County, Pennsylvania, in the 1760s. Her life was like that of most women in the middle colonies. She started her day building fires, then milked the cows before cooking breakfast for her large family. Much of the morning she spent preparing food for the rest of the day—making stews, baking bread, and brewing beer. She churned the cream and made the butter. She washed and mended clothes. She tended the vegetable garden and got the grain to the mill to be ground. Seasonal duties included raising calves, making cheese and sausage, smoking bacon, and preserving fruits and vegetables for winter. To make the family’s clothing, she spun the wool and sewed the garments.

Ben Franklin was apprenticed to his brother in a print shop in Boston when he was 12 years old. He learned the trade well and was able to take over printing The New England Courant when his brother was jailed. But the brothers disagreed about many things and Ben bristled under the conditions of the apprenticeship. At 17, he fled to Philadelphia, where he launched a successful printing firm and newspaper.

Franklin invented dozens of devices: bifocal glasses, an efficient wood-burning stove, the odometer, and a rocking chair. He conducted scientific experiments with electricity, ocean currents, and parasailing. He even theorized about plate tectonics centuries before geologists accepted it. He started the first general hospital, the first fire department, the first library, and the first home delivery of mail in America. He was a statesman and held offices in the Philadelphia City Council, The Pennsylvania Assembly, and the Continental Congress. He planned the unification of the colonies, and eventually led America to independence from England. He garnered the support of the French in the Revolutionary War, helped draft the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. After turning 80, he served as president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Hiawatha was a Mohawk chief in present day New York. According to legend, Hiawatha silenced himself after the cruel death of his wife and seven daughters. He was drawn out of his seclusion by Degandawida, a Huron man who promoted peace among the Iroquois. Degandawida had a speech disability and Hiawatha, who had been a great orator before his vow of silence, broke that vow to travel with Degandawida and give voice to his ideas. Together they united the tribes into the Iroquois League of Five Nations, a carefully organized confederacy that governed the tribes fairly.

Henry Hudson made four famous voyages from England to America in the early 1600s to find a polar route to Asia. When that proved impossible, he tried to find a northern passage across America. Again unsuccessful, he was fired by the English, but rehired by the Dutch to continue his search. He explored much of the eastern
coast, laying claim to the area known as New Netherland for the Dutch. The English hired him back, and he made one more try for a northwest passage. His ship was stranded by ice in Canada's Hudson Bay in the winter of 1610-11. When ice thawed in the spring, his crew mutinied and returned to England, setting Hudson, his son, and seven loyal sailors adrift in Hudson Bay. Henry Hudson was never heard from again, but the Hudson River, Hudson Bay, and Hudson Strait were named in his honor.

Peter Minuit became governor of New Netherland in 1625. He made the historic purchase of Manhattan Island from the native Americans for the equivalent of $24. He helped New Amsterdam (later New York city) grow into a thriving colony, but was criticized for favoring wealthy friends, and ultimately fired by the Dutch. Sweden then hired him to lead an expedition to colonize the Delaware Valley. They founded Fort Christina at the sight of present day Wilmington, Delaware. He perished in a hurricane while on a trading expedition for Sweden.

William Penn was born to a wealthy family in London, but by the age of 22 had become a Quaker against the wishes of his father. He was imprisoned several times for preaching and writing about Quaker ideals. King Charles II settled a debt he owed to the Penn family by giving William Penn land in America. Penn was imprisoned in England in his later years for being in debt, after being cheated in business dealings. Ill health kept him from ever returning to Pennsylvania, the "holy experiment" he established so successfully.

Peter Stuyvesant was a dutchman who began his career in the new world in 1635 as a clerk in Brazil, a land controlled by the Dutch. He held posts in the Caribbean, and became governor of New Amsterdam in 1647. He was responsible for many improvements to the city. By raising taxes he controlled public drunkenness, increased safety for pedestrians, introduced fire codes and fire fighting provisions, established a police force, and fortified the city against attack.

Stuyvesant led a successful raid on New Sweden in 1655 and claimed Delaware for the Dutch. He also made peace with the Native Americans of the New York area. When England, under the leadership of the Duke of York, sailed into the harbor intent on capturing New Amsterdam, he surrendered to avoid bloodshed. He negotiated the English takeover so that the Dutch residents were allowed to maintain their way of life.

However, some historical accounts allege Stuyvesant was prejudiced against Jews and tried to refuse settlement to them in New Amsterdam. In addition, he imprisoned Quakers who preached in the streets. He was strongly disliked for his arrogance.