Overview of the Northern Colonies
Everyday Life

Rugged, tree-covered land made farming difficult for the first European residents. Clearing enough space to plant crops required many long hours of hard work. As such, farmers generally grew only enough food for their own families. Eventually, the settlers learned to see the forests as an asset, and used the forests to create a thriving lumber industry. They set up shipping ports in Massachusetts and Rhode Island, which served ships carrying sugar, molasses, and slaves from all over the world. Molasses and sugar shipped from the West Indies was turned into an alcoholic beverage called rum. Fish from the ocean were caught, smoked or dried, and shipped to England. As industry grew, towns along the seacoast grew, too.

Each member of the colonial family shared in the work. Parents taught boys and girls daily living skills. Master craftspeople took in children as apprentices. Northern colonial settlers saw school as an opportunity to teach children to be good citizens. Reading, writing and simple arithmetic were taught. There was little time for entertainment. In fact, many Puritan parents in the northern colonies considered fun to be evil, and punished children caught playing.

Women and men had clearly defined roles in New England families, but both worked equally hard. Women raised and educated the children, cleaned the house, cooked, tended vegetable gardens, and made clothing, candles and soap. Men hunted, farmed, and performed craftsman duties. The only day families did not work was Sunday. Most colonists attended church, which often was an all day event.
Overview of the Northern Colonies
European Settlement

No one is quite certain which Europeans first explored the northern colonial region. Some historians think the Vikings first arrived around 1000 A.D. Others believe it was the French, Italian, Portuguese, and English explorers and traders who arrived between the late 1400s and 1600s A.D. Many early arrivals wrote about the land they saw. Others set up trading posts with the Native Americans.

The English, French, and Dutch who eventually settled in the region did so for a variety of reasons. Many were Separatists or Pilgrims and Puritans, who came to America to practice their interpretation of their belief in the Church of England. The Separatists, who arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, had fled England because of their religious beliefs. They and 71 other travelers aboard the Mayflower developed an agreement that they would obey the laws made by the majority of eligible voters in the colony. It was the first time settlers in the New World regarded themselves as the source of law. This was a step in the development of democracy: The Mayflower Compact. The Puritans came to America to “purify” the Church of England of the religious practices that they felt were still too Catholic.

Other people left Europe for America in hopes of becoming land owners. In many European countries, it was customary for the oldest son in any family to inherit the family land. As such, many Europeans had no hope of owning land. Other Europeans came to America to make money from trading and mining.

Many of the early European emigrants settled in present day Massachusetts. Later arrivals spread to other northern colonies, after living in Massachusetts first. Many moved from Massachusetts to other colonies in order to gain more land. Others, like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson moved to escape the controlling ways of the Puritans.
Overview of the Northern Colonies
Native Americans

Archaeological evidence accidentally unearthed by a construction crew in 1986 revealed that people have been living in the northern colonial region since about 5000 B.C. Artifacts (man made objects left behind by earlier civilizations) discovered at the site in Massachusetts indicated that early residents of the region were hunters and gatherers. In about 1000 B.C., Algonquian speaking groups moved into the area, likely forcing out the ancient residents.

The Native Americans living on the land when Europeans first arrived were Algonquins. While languages and shelter types varied among the tribes, many elements bound these people as an identifiable group.

Many Algonquins lived in wigwams, round-shaped homes made from trees and mud and covered with animal skins. They lived in villages of 50-200 people. Families were small, with only one or two children. Algonquins in present day Connecticut and Rhode Island lived in longhouses similar to the houses of the Iroquois south and west of them.

All Algonquins farmed corn, beans, and squash. However, farming practices varied from tribe to tribe. Among the Wampanoag, Massachusetts, Pennacook, and Ossipee tribes who lived in the areas of present day Massachusetts and New Hampshire, women farmed and men hunted and fished. In contrast, the Pequot, Tunxis, and Niantic who lived in the areas of present day Connecticut and Rhode Island, worked cooperatively to prepare the land for farming. The women cared for the corn and beans, while the men tended the tobacco.

At first, many Native Americans showed European settlers kindness and support. They taught the Europeans to farm and even gave them food. They traded land for items of little use or no value. These trades happened because Native Americans believed land could not be owned, but only cared for. They thought no one could lay claim to the land, and were amazed that the new settlers gave them things for using the land. It wasn’t long before they discovered the real intentions of many colonists—to permanently take the land from the Native Americans. The realization fueled tension and eventually led to war among the colonists and Native Americans.
Overview of the Northern Colonies

Geography

The area that made up the northern colonies was as diverse as the people who chose to settle there. Rugged coastlines, mountains, and fertile farm land were just some of the geographical features. The climate ranged from harsh winters to warm summers.

About 400 hundred years ago when the Algonquin people lived in the northernmost area of present day New Hampshire, it was covered by thick forests and mountains. Such geography made farming nearly impossible for people. The cold, harsh winters dumped more than 100 inches of snow and left settlers with a very short growing season. With such challenging living conditions, New Hampshire’s population never blossomed, compared with the other northern colonies.

The Massachusetts colony’s coastline offered settlers protected harbors and a rocky shore, now known as Cape Cod. Hilly land on the coastline leads to flatter, more fertile ground inland, especially along the banks of Massachusetts’ rivers, and mountains to the west.

Rhode Island’s many miles of seacoast and 36 islands earned it the nickname “the Ocean State.” The tiny colony eventually became the smallest state. While the colony had some suitable farming land, many European emigrants learned to use the colony’s harbors to set up shipping networks that brought goods from all over the world to the northern colonies.

The Connecticut colony had many rivers and fertile soil to offer the European colonists. Those resources made it one of the most successful farming areas of the region.
Overview of the Northern Colonies
Government

Many English colonists who settled in present day Massachusetts came to America in search of a separation of government and the Church. However, as the settlers set up their new government in the colonies, they relied on the only models they knew from Europe, and established a theocracy, a government based on the teachings of the Bible. The people who benefited from the laws were those who agreed with the teachings of the Church. In essence, disagreeing with the Church meant breaking the law! Those who didn’t follow the laws were expected to convert (change) their ways of thinking or be banished (sent away). Colonists set up praying towns to convert Native Americans to Christianity from their established spiritual beliefs. Converted Native Americans or praying Indians were viewed as “less savage” than other Native Americans.

People who left Massachusetts often moved west and south, establishing the colony Rhode Island. Determined to govern by what they considered more fair and equitable means, colonists in this new area established a government in which religion played no role. The colony’s charter (governing agreements with the King of England) called for separation of church and state, an ideal that became an important part of the U.S. Constitution more than 100 years later. Rhode Island’s promise to uphold religious and personal freedom attracted such groups as the Jews and Quakers, who had been punished in England or other colonies. Among its residents, Rhode Island earned the motto “hope.” Outside Rhode Island, people called the colony “a sink” or “latrine” (toilet), filled with “riffraff.”
Overview of the Northern Colonies

Key People

William Bradford dedicated his life to establishing a successful colony at Plymouth. He served as governor for 31 years and wrote a book called *Of Plimouth Plantation*. It is considered one of the most complete historical records of life during the colonial period.

Anne Hutchinson formed the first women's club in America. Her weekly meetings upset the religious leaders of Boston to the point that she was banished. She moved to Rhode Island and helped establish that colony.

Massasoit was the chief of the Wampanoag people when the Pilgrims arrived in 1620. He established a peace treaty with the Pilgrims that was upheld until his death 40 years later.

Metacomet, or King Philip, as he was called by the English, was the son of Massasoit. Metacomet became chief after his father and brother died. Angered by the colonists' greed for land and the diseases they spread to his people, Metacomet led a war on the colonists. It was called King Philip's War.

Squanto was a Patuxet Indian who lived in the area that became known as Plymouth. He was captured and sold into slavery in Europe by an English sea captain, but eventually returned to America to find all of his people dead from smallpox. When the Pilgrims arrived, Squanto taught them to farm and communicate with other Native Americans in the area.

Phillis Wheatley was brought from Africa to the colonies and sold as a slave when she was a young girl. Phillis' mistress taught her to read and write, which led Phillis to become the first African-American woman to publish a book. Her poems were admired in the colonies and England.

Roger Williams held differing views from the leaders of the Massachusetts colony. Williams was banished from the colony and helped establish Rhode Island. His sense of fairness also led to some of the most equitable land trades between the Native Americans and the colonists.