Encounters and Foundations to 1800
by Gary Q. Arpin

Think About...

The United States is a land of immigrants. The first people began entering North America on foot many thousands of years ago. Then people came in wooden sailing ships. Later millions were brought against their will in the stifling holds of slave ships. Millions of others, lacking money for better accommodations, endured weeks of discomfort in the cramped, uncomfortable steerage sections of passenger or merchant ships.

As you read about this period, look for answers to these questions:

1. What effect did European settlement have on American Indians—the people who already lived on this vast continent?
2. Who were the Puritans, and what were their beliefs about human nature?
3. How did rationalism differ from Puritanism, and what effect did rationalism have on the new American political system?

About five hundred years ago European explorers first set foot on land in our hemisphere. In some ways their voyages must have seemed as daring and ultimately triumphant as Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon in 1969. However, European feet were not the first to tread on American soil. American Indians lived here for thousands of years before the first Europeans stumbled across what they called the New World. As J. H. Parry states in his book The Spanish Seaborne Empire, "Columbus did not discover a new world; he established contact between two worlds, both already old."

**Forming New Relationships**
The first interactions between Europeans and American Indians largely involved trading near various harbors and rivers of North America. As the English began to establish colonies on these new shores, a mutual curiosity and increasing interdependence grew between the cultures. The Europeans relied on the American Indians to teach them survival skills, such as how to make canoes and
shelters, how to fashion clothing from buckskin, and how to plant their crops. At the same time and in exchange, the American Indians were eager to acquire European firearms, textiles, and steel tools.

In the early years of European settlement, American Indians vastly outnumbered the colonists. Historians estimate that in 1600, the total American Indian population of New England alone was from 70,000 to 100,000 people—more than the English population of New England would be two centuries later.

**Battling New Diseases**

The arrival of the European settlers had a deadly impact on Native Americans. Because the ancestors of American Indians probably crossed the ancient land bridge from Asia to North America during the Ice Age, their descendants weren't exposed to the diseases that had wracked Europe over the centuries. When European settlers made contact with Native Americans, the settlers unwittingly exposed them to diseases to which they had no immunity. These diseases, especially smallpox, sometimes killed off a village's entire population.

Here is how William Bradford (1590–1657), who was elected governor of Plymouth Colony thirty times, described the horrors of smallpox visited upon the American Indians:

> "For want of bedding and linen and other helps... they fall into a lamentable condition as they lie on their hard mats, the pox breaking and mattering and running one into another, their skin cleaving by reason thereof to the mats they lie on. When they turn them, a whole side will fly off at once as it were, and they will be all of a gore blood, most fearful to behold. And then being very sore, what with cold and other distempers, they die like rotten sheep."

—Of Plymouth Plantation 1620–1647

Against enormous odds some Native Americans managed to survive the epidemics. Many of these survivors, however, were eventually forced to vacate their land and homes by settlers, who, now able to survive on their own, no longer needed the American Indians’ friendship and guidance. Historian Francis Jennings writes bitterly of the effects of the European settlements:

> "Europeans did not find a wilderness here; rather, however involuntarily, they made one. Jamestown, Plymouth, Salem, Boston, Providence, New Amsterdam, Philadelphia—all grew upon sites previously occupied by Indian communities. So did Quebec and Montreal and Detroit and Chicago. The so-called"
settlement of America was a resettlement, a reoccupation of a land made waste by the diseases and demoralization introduced by the newcomers.

—The Invasion of America (1975)

Explorers’ Writings

The first detailed European observations of life on this vast continent were recorded in Spanish and French by explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These writings open a window onto a time when the so-called New World was the focus of the dreams and desires of an entire era. Christopher Columbus (c. 1451–1506), Francisco Vásquez de Coronado (c. 1510–1554), and many other explorers described the Americas in a flurry of eagerly read letters, journals, and books. Hoping to receive funding for further expeditions, the explorers emphasized the Americas’ abundant resources, the peacefulness and hospitality of the inhabitants, and the promise of unlimited wealth to be gained from fantastic treasuries of gold.

In 1528, only thirty-six years after Columbus first sighted a flickering fire on the beach of San Salvador, a Spaniard named Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (c. 1490–1557) landed with an expedition (he was its treasurer) on the west coast of what is now Florida. Cabeza de Vaca and others left the ship and marched inland. They did not return. Their fleet waited an entire year for them, then departed for Mexico, giving up the explorers for dead. Lost in the Texas Gulf area, Cabeza de Vaca and his companions wandered for the next eight years in search of other Europeans who would help them to get home. Cabeza de Vaca’s narrative of his journeys through what is now Texas is a gripping adventure story. It is also a firsthand account of the habits of some of the American Indians in what is now the southwestern United States: what they ate (very little), how they housed themselves, and what their religious beliefs were. Cabeza de Vaca also provides the first account of some animals and plants that the Europeans had never known existed.

Cabeza de Vaca and his shipmates were alternately captives and companions of the various
Native American peoples they encountered on their long trek: Here is part of his report of the expedition's experiences with a people in the Gulf Coast area, who are struggling to survive a famine:

"...Their support is principally roots, of two or three kinds, and they look for them over the face of all the country. The food is poor and gripes the persons who eat it. The roots require roasting two days: Many are very bitter, and withal difficult to be dug. They are sought the distance of two or three leagues, and so great is the want these people experience, that they cannot get through the year without them. Occasionally they kill deer, and at times take fish; but the quantity is so small and the famine so great, that they eat spiders and the eggs of ants, worms, lizards, salamanders, snakes, and vipers that kill whom they strike; and they eat earth and wood, and all that there is, the dung of deer, and other things that I omit to mention; and I honestly believe that were there stones in that land they would eat them."

—La relación (The Report)

A CLOSER LOOK: SOCIAL INFLUENCES

The Salem Witchcraft Trials

During the cold, dreary winter of 1691–1692, the daughter and the niece of Samuel Parris, a minister in Salem, Massachusetts, began to dabble in magic. By February the two girls started having seizures. Lesions appeared on their skin, and it seemed as if they were being choked by invisible hands. A doctor diagnosed the girls as victims of malicious witchcraft.

Urged to name those responsible for bewitching them, the girls accused Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, two unpopular women from the village, and Tituba, a slave whom Samuel Parris had brought back from Barbados. During the subsequent trial the girls writhed and moaned and behaved as if they were being choked. Based on this "evidence," Sarah Good was condemned to death. In an attempt to save her own life, Tituba confessed to being a witch. She claimed that there was a coven of witches in Massachusetts and testified that she had seen several names written in blood in the Devil's book. The witch hunt had begun.

Zealous ministers like Cotton Mather argued that the epidemic of witchcraft proved beyond a doubt that New England was a holy place, since the Devil was so interested in it. Mather and others demanded that all witches be rooted out and severely punished. Hundreds of people from Salem and other eastern Massachusetts towns came forward to testify that they were victims of witchcraft.

Before long the prisons were overcrowded, and a special court was established in Salem. Within the next ten months about 150 people in this small community were accused of witchcraft. Neighbors, especially those with long-standing quarrels, turned on one another. Between June and September nineteen people were hanged, and one man, Giles Corey, who had refused to plead either innocent or guilty, was crushed to death under a pile of stones.
The Puritan Legacy

Central to the development of the American literary tradition have been the writings of the Puritans of New England. *Puritan* is a broad term, referring to a number of Protestant groups that, beginning about 1560, sought to “purify” the Church of England, which since the time of Henry VIII (who reigned from 1509 to 1547) had been virtually inseparable from the country’s government. Like other Protestant reformers on the European continent, English Puritans wished to return to the simpler forms of worship and church organization that are described in the Christian Scriptures. For them religion was first of all a personal, inner experience. They did not believe that the clergy or the government should or could act as an intermediary between the individual and God.

What really happened at Salem? Many historians believe that Salem experienced a mass hysteria, a sort of shared delusion. Still others have suggested that a more restrictive form of government recently imposed on the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in addition to new economic pressures in the colony’s towns, may have led to bitterness, aggression, and outright paranoia. Perhaps the strict society of Puritan New England finally erupted under the strain of its repression. A recent theory proposes that fear of unusual or powerful nonconformists—particularly women—may have led to an attempt to constrain their behavior. Statistics show that the majority of the “witches” were unmarried women between the ages of forty and sixty, eccentric and independent loners with abrasive personalities. Some of them may have been “cunning folk,” that is, midwives or people with unusual healing abilities and knowledge of herbal remedies. Some of these were women who could potentially come into their fathers’ inheritances and therefore may have been seen as threats to male power.

The Salem trials fascinate to this day. They are the subject of one of the great American plays, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953). Set in 1692 Salem, *The Crucible* draws parallels between the Salem witch trials and the 1950s hunt for Communists in the U.S. government conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy.
Many Puritans suffered persecution in England. Some were put in jail and whipped, their noses slit and their ears chopped off. Some fled England for Holland. A small group in Holland, fearing that they would lose their identity as English Protestants, set sail in 1620 for what was advertised as the New World. There they hoped to build a new society patterned after God's word.

**Puritan Beliefs: Sinners All?**

For a people who were so convinced that they were right, the Puritans had to grapple with complex uncertainties. At the center of Puritan theology was an uneasy mixture of certainty and doubt. The certainty was that because of Adam and Eve's sin of disobedience, most of humanity would be damned for all eternity. However, the Puritans were also certain that God in his mercy had sent his son Jesus Christ to earth to save particular people.

The doubt centered on whether a particular individual was one of the saved (the "elect") or one of the damned (the "unregenerate").

How did you know if you were saved or damned? As it turns out, you did not know. A theology that was so clear-cut in its division of the world between saints and sinners was fuzzy when it came to determining which were which. There were two principal indications of the state of your soul, neither of them completely certain. You were saved by the grace of God, and you could feel this grace arriving in an intensely emotional fashion. The inner arrival of God's grace was demonstrated by your outward behavior. After receiving grace, you were "reborn" as a member of the community of saints, and you behaved like a saint. People hoping to be among the saved examined their inner lives closely for signs of grace and tried to live exemplary lives. Thus, American Puritans came to value self-reliance, industriousness, temperance, and simplicity. These were, coincidentally, the ideal qualities needed to carve out a new society in a strange land.
Puritan Politics: Government by Contract

In the Puritan view a covenant, or contract, existed between God and humanity. This spiritual covenant was a useful model for worldly social organization as well: Puritans believed that people should enter freely into agreements concerning their government. On the Mayflower, for example, in 1620, the Puritans composed and signed the Mayflower Compact, outlining how they would be governed once they landed. In this use of a contractual agreement, they prepared the ground for American constitutional democracy.

On the other hand, because the Puritans believed the saintly elect should exert great influence on government, their political views tended to be undemocratic. There was little room for compromise. In 1692, the witchcraft hysteria in Salem, Massachusetts, resulted in part from fear that the community’s moral foundation was threatened and therefore its political unity was also in danger.
The Bible in America

The Puritans read the Bible as the story of the creation, fall, wanderings, and rescue of the human race. Within this long and complex narrative, each Puritan could see connections to events in his or her own life or to events in the life of the community. Each Puritan was trained to see life as a pilgrimage, or journey, to salvation. Each Puritan learned to read his or her life the way a literary critic reads a book.

The Puritans believed that the Bible was the literal word of God. Reading the Bible was a necessity for all Puritans, as was the ability to understand theological debates. For these reasons the Puritans placed great emphasis on education. Thus, Harvard College, originally intended to train Puritan ministers for the rapidly expanding colony, was founded in 1636, only sixteen years after the first Pilgrims had landed. Just three years later the first printing press in the American Colonies was set up.

Their beliefs required the Puritans to keep a close watch on both their spiritual and their public lives. This focus of the Puritan mind greatly affected their writings. Diaries and histories were important forms of Puritan literature because they were used to record the workings of God.

The Age of Reason:
Tinkerers and Experimenters

By the end of the seventeenth century, new ideas that had been fermenting in Europe began to present a challenge to the unshakable faith of the Puritans.

The Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment, began in Europe with the philosophers and scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who called themselves rationalists. Rationalism is the belief that human beings can arrive at truth by using reason, rather than by relying on the authority of the past, on religious faith, or on intuition.

The Puritans saw God as actively and mysteriously involved in the workings of the universe; the rationalists saw God differently. The great English rationalist Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), who formulated the laws of gravity and motion, compared God to a clockmaker. Having created the perfect mechanism of this universe, God then left his creation to run on its own, like a clock. The rationalists believed that God's special gift to humanity is reason—the ability to think in an ordered, logical manner. This gift of reason enables people to discover both scientific and spiritual truth. According to the rationalists, then, everyone has the capacity to regulate and improve his or her own life.
While the theoretical background for the Age of Reason took shape in Europe, a homegrown practicality and interest in scientific tinkering or experimenting was already thriving in the American Colonies. From the earliest Colonial days, Americans had to be generalists and tinkerers; they had to make do with what was on hand, and they had to achieve results.

**The Smallpox Plague**

The unlikely hero of America's first foray into scientific exploration was the strict Puritan minister Cotton Mather (1663-1728), who was interested in natural science and medicine.

In April 1721, a ship from the West Indies docked in Boston Harbor. This was not unusual, for trade with the West Indies was one of the foundations of New England economic life. This ship was different, though. For in addition to its cargo of sugar and molasses, this ship carried smallpox.

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**The Rationalist Worldview**

- People arrive at truth by using reason rather than by relying on the authority of the past, on religion, or on nonrational mental processes, such as intuition.
- God created the universe but does not interfere in its workings.
- The world operates according to God's rules, and through the use of reason, people can discover those rules.
- People are basically good and perfectible.
- Since God wants people to be happy, they worship God best by helping other people.
- Human history is marked by progress toward a more perfect existence.

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Title page of the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640). The Granger Collection, New York.
In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, smallpox was one of the scourges of life, just as AIDS and the Ebola virus are today. The disease spread rapidly, disfigured its victims, and was often fatal. The outbreak in Boston in 1721 was a major public-health problem. What was to be done?

**An Unlikely Cure**

At the time of the smallpox epidemic, Cotton Mather was working on what would be the first scholarly essay on medicine written in America. In his opening sentences he reveals his Puritan perspective: "Let us look upon sin as the cause of sickness." Mather's religious point of view did not, however, prevent him from seeking cures for specific diseases. He had heard of a method, devised by a Turkish physician, for dealing with smallpox. The method seemed illogical, but it apparently worked. It was called inoculation. In June 1721, as the smallpox epidemic spread throughout Boston, Mather began a public campaign for inoculation.

Boston's medical community was violently opposed to such an experiment, especially one invented by a Muslim. The debate was vigorous, raging all summer and into the fall. Controversy developed into violence: in November, Mather's house was bombed.

Despite such fierce opposition, Mather succeeded in inoculating
nearly 300 people. By the time the epidemic was over, in March of
the following year, only 6 of these people had died. Of the almost
6,000 other people who contracted the disease (nearly half of
Boston's population), about 850 had died. The evidence, according
to Mather's figures, was clear: Whether or not inoculation made
much sense to scientists, it worked.

- A Practical Approach to Change
The smallpox controversy illustrates two interesting points about
American life in the early eighteenth century. First, it shows that
contradictory qualities of the American character often existed
side by side. Puritan thinking was not limited to a rigid and narrow
interpretation of the Bible; a devout Puritan like Mather could also
be a practical scientist.

Mather's experiment also reveals that a practical approach to
social change and scientific research was necessary in America.
The frontier farmer with little access to books shared a problem
with the scientist who had few books and a whole new world of
plants and animals to catalog. American thought had to be thought
in action: Improving the public welfare required a willingness
to experiment, to try things out, no matter what the authorities
might say.

FAST FACTS

Philosophical Views
- Native American worldviews, passed
down through oral
tradition, stress not progress but the
cyclical nature of
existence.
- The Puritans regard
life as a journey to-
ward salvation and
look for signs of self-
improvement and for
the workings of God
in their daily lives.
- The rationalists
regard reason and
logic as God-given
gifts and try to find
order in the universe.

Social Influences
- Slavery is legal and
common in all New
England colonies in
1620.
- Hysteria and paranoia
build as more than
one hundred people
are accused of
witchcraft in Salem,
Massachusetts.
- An epidemic of
smallpox strikes
Boston in 1721,
affecting nearly half
the city's population.
Deism: Are People Basically Good?

Like the Puritans, the rationalists discovered God through the medium of the natural world, but in a different way. Rationalists thought it unlikely that God would choose to reveal himself only at particular times to particular people. It seemed much more reasonable to believe that God had made it possible for all people at all times to discover natural laws through their God-given power of reason.

This outlook, called deism (dě'izəm), was shared by many eighteenth-century thinkers, including many founders of the American nation. American deists came from different religious backgrounds, but they avoided supporting specific religious groups. They sought instead the principles that united all religions.

Deists believed that the universe was orderly and good. In contrast to the Puritans, deists stressed humanity’s goodness. They believed in the perfectibility of every individual through the use of reason. God’s objective, in the deist view, was the happiness of his creatures. Therefore, the best form of worship was to do good for others. There already existed in America an impulse to improve people’s lives, as Cotton Mather’s struggle to save Boston from smallpox illustrates. Deism elevated this impulse to one of the nation’s highest goals. To this day social welfare is still a political priority and still the subject of fierce debate.

The American struggle for independence was justified largely by appeals to rationalist principles. The arguments presented in the Declaration of Independence are based on rationalist assumptions about the relations between people, God, and natural law.

Self-made Americans

Most of the literature written in the American Colonies during the Age of Reason was, understandably, rooted in reality. This

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What then is...this new man?... He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.... [In America] individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labors...will one day cause great changes in the world.

—Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecœur, Letters from an American Farmer (1782)

Thomas Jefferson (1805) by Rembrandt Peale. Oil on canvas.
Collection of The New-York Historical Society, negative number 6003, accession number 1867.306.
was an age of pamphlets, since most literature was intended to serve practical or political ends. Following the Revolutionary War (1775–1783), the problems of organizing and governing the new nation were of the highest importance.

The unquestioned masterpiece of the American Age of Reason is *The Autobiography* by Benjamin Franklin (page 69). Franklin used the autobiographical narrative, a form common in Puritan writing, and omitted its religious justification. Written in clear, witty prose, this account of the development of the self-made American provided the model for a story that would be told again and again. In the twentieth century it appeared in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It is still found in the countless biographies and autobiographies of self-made men and women that appear on the bestseller lists today.

**Talk About . . .**

Turn back to the Think About questions at the start of the introduction to this period (page 6), and discuss your views.

**Write About . . .**

*Who are we? Answers then and now.* Consider what you’ve learned about the dominant philosophical and religious beliefs in early America. The Puritans believed that the world was fallen and that people were sinners who could be redeemed only through the grace of God. The rationalists believed that the universe was basically good and that doing good for others was the best way to worship God. How do people today regard the universe and human nature itself? Write a brief essay explaining whether you find evidence of Puritanism and rationalism in American society today.