**Authors: Stephen Huth, Ann McFeatters, Sylvia Sheperd, *Towards Nationhood,* News in Education Services Department for the Chicago Tribune**

**Colonial Classes, June, 2005**

1 The British colonies in the 18th century had a distinctive middle-class nature, especially when compared to other countries during the same period.

 2 The Pennsylvania Journal in 1756 noted, “The people of this province are generally of the middling sort, and at present pretty much upon a level. They are chiefly industrious farmers, artificers, or men in trade; they enjoy and are fond of freedom, and the *meanest among them* thinks he has a right to civility from the greatest.”

 3 The middle-class society that developed in the colonies was, of course, governed by the upper classes; and aristocracies did begin to develop, especially in New York and South Carolina, toward the middle of the century. Yet among the upper classes the middle-class ethic prevailed. This ethic included the acceptance of a wide range of religions, a belief in hard work, individual freedom, and a materialistic outlook.

 4 What made America attractive to the poor was the fact that one could come to the colonies in poverty and gain a comfortable livelihood. The ability to rise to the middle class helped to give the poor the values of the class they wish to be in.

 5 The rich subscribed to the middle class way of life for three reasons. First, most of the rich in the colonies had once been in the middle-class themselves. Second, the rich had to deal with a large and land-owning majority who made their wishes known through political assembly. Last, an American culture had not yet developed sufficiently to provide symbols of wealth and status. In housing, the rich did not begin to assert their wealth until midcentury; and neither religion, nor education, nor government were stratified enough to provide a refuge for the rich.

 6 All though the colonies were examples of the middle-class nature, many of which persist today: little churches of dissenting sects, taverns (called ordinaries), newspapers that resisted authority, county courthouses and town halls, how-to books, and *Poor Richard’s Almanac*.

 7 The middle class in the 18th century was not, however, the middle class of today. The colonies were essentially a rural society, and most of the people (eight out of 10 in 1750) were farmers. The economy, therefore, was not based on buying and selling of goods. Rather, ownership of land was the economic base in colonial America.

 8 Still, the major towns in 18th century America made money, mostly by the exportation of agricultural surpluses. Because there was money to be had in these towns, a social life did begin to grow. Many European visitors were impressed with the cities of colonial America, and they were happily surprised at the advances made in urban areas.

 9 In 1756, an English naval officer wrote of New York in his diary: “The nobleness of the town surprised me more than the fertile appearance of the country. I had no idea of finding a place in America, consisting of nearly 2,000 houses, elegantly built of brick, raised on an eminence, and the streets paved and spacious, furnished with commodious keys and warehouses, and employing some hundreds of vessels in its foreign trades and fisheries – but such is this city that very few in England can rival it in its show.”

 10 Class differences did exist, and they are most evident in the settled areas. Boston’s tax records from 1687 to 1771 show that the proportion of adult males without taxable income had increased from 14 to 28 percent. Gradually the rich were getting richer.

 11 Arthur Browne, an Anglican clergyman who lived in Newport, R.I., Boston, and Portsmouth, N.H., described in midcentury how the class differences arose:

12 The inhabitants of the town by more information, better polish, and greater intercourse with strangers, insensibly acquired an ascendancy over the farmer of the country; the richer merchants of these towns, together with the clergy, lawyers, physicians and officers of the English navy who had occasionally settled there, were considered as gentry; even being a member of the Church of England gave a kind of distinctive fashion. A superior order thus formed by better property and more information existed even to a degree sufficient to excite jealousy in the agricultural system, and to be a gentleman was sufficient in some parts of the country to expose the bearer of the name to mockery and rudeness.

**Land and Labor Force**

13 Despite the growing class differences, the upper class was open to all those who could acquire money. In 1748, a Rhode Island sea captain wrote in his diary that “ a man who has money here no matter how he came by it, he is everything, and wanting that he’s a mere nothing, let his conduct be ever so irreproachable. Money is here the true fuller’s earth for reputation, there is not a spot or stain but it will take out.”

 14 The best way to acquire money was through land, and those who owned no land and had to work for others did not succeed as quickly as landowners. Nevertheless, laborers in the colonies got along because America in the 18th century had an ever-increasing labor market, and people were willing to pay high wages. At the middle of the century, by the estimate of contemporaries, wages were two to three times that of England’s.

 15 Because land was so cheap, however, laborers often saved enough in wages to buy land. And as more and more people bought land, more and more laborers were needed.

 16 Because the labor force had a good chance of moving into land ownership and because they could fairly easily move from one place to another, the idea of subservience to an employer was rare in the colonies. The nature of the labor force in colonial America helped to develop the independent nature of the American people. In fact, the independence of the colonial laborer was a unique facet of life in America.

 17 In a letter written to a friend back in Europe, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur remarked on the independence of laborers in America: “When we hire any of these people we rather pray and entreat them. You must give them what they ask…They must be at your table and feed…on the best you have.”

 18 The English thought that the lack of a distinct social order in America was a definite sign of deterioration, and they were convinced that the independence of the common laborer could only cause trouble.