

Colonists and Immigrants

Who were the first Americans?

by Henry Pratt Fairchild

[Editor's note: Henry Pratt Fairchild (1880-1956) was professor emeritus of sociology at New York University and one of the early leaders of the immigration restriction and conservation movements. Dr. Fairchild served as the first president of the Population Association of America. This essay is taken from his book *Race and Nationality As Factors in American Life* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1947, pages 118-122). His book, *The Melting Pot Mistake*, was reviewed by Brent Nelson in the Spring 1996 issue of *The Social Contract* (Vol. VI, No. 3, pp. 184-191).]

The American nation, as we know it today, is the direct consequence of the establishment of settlements of white Europeans upon the shores of an unexploited continent. The natives, although of fine physical stock and high mentality, had not got up the ladder of cultural progress nearly so far as the newcomers. They lived essentially on a hunting economy, although they had begun to develop the rudiments of agriculture. From the point of view of the newcomers, granted the prevailing attitudes of the world conquerors of the day, the natives represented little more than natural obstacles, lower

animals that had to be brushed out of the way to make room for a superior type of being. They never represented military opposition in the full sense of the word.

The settlers at Plymouth Rock, Jamestown and New Amsterdam

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— Henry Pratt Fairchild, 1947

came under the banner of colonization, not of conquest. The natives were pushed steadily backward into the interior as the aggressors needed the territory. They were never exterminated; as a matter of fact they were not so nearly eliminated as is commonly supposed. Estimates of the total number of Indians on the continent of North America north of the Rio Grande at the time of the arrival of the white man vary from half a million to perhaps twice that number. According to the Census of 1940 there were in the United States 330,969 Indians, which represented an increase of about 90,000 over 1920. This

aboriginal population constitutes a special problem by itself, but does not figure largely in the major issues at stake.

The original white population came almost entirely from two or three Western European countries, with Great Britain standing far in the lead. Physiologically, they were so clearly akin that it is safe to say that no genuine racial problems were involved whatsoever. During the colonial period there were considerable additions from Germany, and the predominantly English element from Great Britain was supplemented by large contingents of the Scotch-Irish. But these, in turn, added no serious racial complications. The Germans were of the same basic Nordic stock represented so largely in the English population, and the other element, in spite of its name, was "very little Scotch and much less Irish," but really represented a very typical cross section of the British people. Consequently, when the North American settlements passed from the stage of colonies into an independent nation, the population was highly homogeneous, comprising racial elements closely similar to those of the British Isles, and with a culture representing simply a local variant of the English nationality.

Just what were the proportions

of the population traceable to different European sources has been a matter of some uncertainty and considerable controversy. According to an estimate of the United States Bureau of the Census, based upon a careful study of the names of the original settlers as recorded in the first census of 1790, the proportions were as follows:

English	82.1%
Scotch	7.0%
Irish	1.9%
Dutch	2.5%
French	0.6%
German	5.6%
All other	0.3%

When the time came, after World War I, that the people of the United States finally reached the point of setting up definite quantitative limitations as a part of their immigration regulations, this matter became of great practical importance. For the quota system finally adopted was based upon the principle of "national origins," and this involved a determination of the proportions of the population of 1920 which could be traced back ultimately to their sources in various European countries. The foregoing estimate of the Bureau of the Census was adopted as one of the most important starting points in this investigation. Consequently, certain interested groups undertook to make a more thorough investigation, taking more account of given names as well as surnames. The principal results of this study were to reduce the representation of Great Britain and Ireland to around 80 per cent, to increase the German representation to around 10 per cent, and to

increase slightly the other contingents. However, even assuming that these studies were more accurate than the original, the general situation remains practically unchanged; the original American population was overwhelmingly British in whatever sense that word can be used to indicate both race and culture.

The oft-repeated cliché, "We are all immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants," is typical of the sort of nonsense that is all too frequently uttered in the name of liberalism. Nearly half of us are the descendants, n o t o f immigrants, but of colonists. Well, what's the difference?

There is a lot of difference. The colonist and the immigrant are functionally two quite different types of person. The colonist comes to a new land which is a dependency of the country from which he departs. The immigrant (typically) comes to a country already well established, and under a different political jurisdiction from his homeland — he crosses a political boundary in his journeying. The colonist braves the dangers of crude travel and of primary settlement. He may run about a fifty-fifty chance of dying on the way to his destination. If he gets there, he finds himself confronted with

undeveloped territory, peopled perhaps by hostile natives. He has to carve out a place for himself. The immigrant comes to a land already well developed, with a stable economy, established services of protection and order, and abundant opportunities to make a living in varied occupations. He travels in vessels that are uncomfortable enough, heaven knows, but not particularly dangerous to health or life. The colonist comes to a life that he expects to be, in physical ways, harder, more arduous, and more dangerous than that which he leaves. The

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immigrant comes to a country which he hopes to find easier, more comfortable, more financially profitable than his old home — that is why he comes in the majority of cases. The colonist helps to build a new people, to give character to a new nationality. The immigrant seeks admission to a nationality already developed, in which in the beginning he must necessarily be

something of a stranger.

All this does not mean that the colonist is a better man than the immigrant. It does not even mean that he is necessarily a different sort of person inherently. But the chances are that on the whole he is. The qualities that are needed for true colonization, and that prompt an individual to undertake that particular kind of venture, are quite different from those that

personal qualities that lead to migration are frequently the precise opposite of those of the pioneer. Within the limits of the regulations set by the receiving country, it is the unsuccessful, the weak, the dependent, the followers instead of the leaders, who make up a large part of a modern immigration stream.

Of a kind with the foregoing observation, and frequently associated with it, is the pious platitude that "The only real Americans are the Red Indians." This too has a spacious and generous ring, but precisely what does it mean? What is an American? What is America? The only possible sense in which that statement can be true is that America is just a section of

group of sea-weary Englishmen landed on a southern shore. America was built, step by step and piece by piece, by the colonists — from England, from Holland, from France, from Sweden — and by their descendants generation after generation. It was built by blood and sweat and tears, by suffering and hardship, by thinking and planning, by joy and love and achievement.

America is still being built. A nationality is not a static thing. It is dynamic, alive, vital, constantly growing. Even the recent immigrant has an infinitesimal part in shaping its development. But the older a nationality is the more firm become its foundations, the more stable its institutions, the more precise and distinctive its features, and the more constant its spiritual unity. By the time colonization came to an end with the Revolutionary War, America had emerged as a genuine nationality in its own right. All its essential characteristics were well established. Later comers must logically be thought of as being admitted into a going nationality, not as helping to build one.

George Washington summed the situation up concisely when he said in his Farewell Address:

The name of AMERICAN, which belongs to you, in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shade of difference, you have the same Religion, Manners, Habits, and Political Principles. **TSC**

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encourage a dissatisfied member of an overcrowded old land to seek a better lot in a less congested and more progressive country.

It is true that the first immigrants from any particular area have something of the qualities of colonists — they are pioneers in a sense. They must have some endowment of courage, initiative, and determination. They blaze a trail socially. But once the current is well established, and the channels of passage are made familiar and well lubricated, the

the earth's surface, and anybody who lives on it is an American.

But it was not even called America before the white men came. In the only sense which has any true significance America (obviously meaning the United States) is a cultural entity — it is a nationality. There was no America when the Indians held undisputed sway, not on this continent or anywhere else. America did not exist at the time Columbus reached the end of his voyage, or when a band of Pilgrims moored their bark, or a