KC Narrative #1

New York City in the 1750s

New York City in the 1750s was first and foremost a commercial seaport, the third largest in America (after Boston and Philadelphia) but in many ways the most favorably situated. Its harbor provided a safe anchorage from but also quick access to the North Atlantic. The Hudson and East River sides of Lower Manhattan Island, the Brooklyn side of the East River and the New Jersey side of the Hudson combined to provide ships with over 500 miles of protected shoreline, much of it with deep water only a feet off the land. To the north, the Hudson River offered New York City greater waterborne penetrability into the North American heartland than did any other river in British North America. To the east the link between the East River and Long Island Sound (at Hellgate) put New York City within easy waterborne reach of Southern New England. Although further from Europe than Boston and further from the Caribbean than Philadelphia, New York easily overcame these competitive disadvantages by being far less subject to icing over in winter than either the more northerly and exposed Boston, or Philadelphia, which depended upon the freshwater Delaware River for access to the Atlantic.

In 1750 New York City supported a population of approximately 27,000, more than 2000 of whom were blacks, both free and enslaved. No city in British North America had a larger black population. New York City's whites constituted the most ethnically and religiously heterogeneous gathering of Europeans in the world. In addition to the original Dutch settlers, there were French Huguenots, who came to New York following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685, English and Scotch Irish, with a scattering of Scandanavians and Palantine Germans.

Religious groupings included Dutch and French Calvinists, Lutherans and Moravians, English Presbyterans, Quakers and Baptists, a small commnity of Sephardic Jews and, although officially banned after 17xx, an underground contingent of Catholics. While Anglicanism enjoyed the privileged status accorded to the religion of the English crown and that of the resident governors dispatched from England, New York City's Anglicans accounted for less than 15% of the City's denominational identifiable population, considerably than than of its total population. Little wonder, then, that one European visitior characterized New York City as a "religious bedlam," while others took note of how little religion intruded into the daily lives of most New Yorkers.

The economic leadership of New York City in the 1750s rested with its leading merchants, residents with large landholdings up along the Hudson and prominent members of the bar. Well below this economic elite, which may have accounted for 5% of the City's population, were lesser merchants, sea captains, shopkeepers and skilled artisans. And below them common laborers, sailors and servants, black and white.

This same economic elite generally controlled the City's political life. Property requirements sharply limited the suffrage among the lower classes, while many of the City's most important political offices, including that of mayor, were appointed by the royal governor and his Council, which dependably reflected the views of the City's leading merchants. Only in the popularly-elected and rural-dominated provincial Assembly were other interests vigorously pressed.

For all its economic activity and accumulating wealth, New York City in the 1740s remained a cultural backwater as compared with Boston or Philadelphia, much less with London. Its leadership was so completely given over to business that little time was left for the pursuit of the arts, music or polite literature. . Many of the City's leading merchants were only one generational remove from their privateering fathers. Few of the royal governors who shuffled in and out of New York were men of learning or culture.Nor was the City blessed with ministers of an intellectual turn of mind endemic to Boston or with a functional equivalent to Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia's intellectual impresario.

What passed for "high society" in mid-century New York City seems mostly to have been bibulous comings

together designed to accelerate the intermarrying of the offspring of the Anglican, Huguenot and Dutch first families that constituted the hybrid Knickerbockers in-the-making. When some recent Yale graduates proposed in 1747 that the City might be ready to support a learned society of the sort that had long existed in Boston and Philadelphia, no one could be certain. In all of New York City there were only a dozen or so college graduates, while fewer than half the adults were literate. What New York City needed was a first-class college.

Robert A. McCaughey
September 28, 1999
ram31@columbia.edu

Return to KC Narratives