

Name \_\_\_\_\_



## Government Under Colonial Charters

By Sharon Fabian

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Before 1776, the thirteen colonies in the United States were considered part of England. They were subject to British law. However, England was far away, and the colonies gradually developed their own unique forms of government. Colonial governments were part British law, part business, and part American democracy.

The first British laws that concerned the colonies were probably laws regarding trade. Most of the colonies had been begun by companies, such as the Plymouth Company, the Massachusetts Bay Company, and the Virginia Company, that were in business to make money. England passed laws to regulate their businesses. The laws required that these merchants conduct most of their trade only with England or other English colonies. There were also laws that limited the types of goods that could be manufactured in the colonies. These laws made sure that the profits made by the companies would stay in England. They also made sure that the colonists would continue to need goods produced in England.

England was too far away from the colonies to pass laws governing the everyday activities of the colonies, and at least for a while, it was not interested in doing so. So, it granted charters giving limited governing powers to the company that founded each colony. Major decisions would still be made in England, but then these regulations would be passed on to the colonial rulers who would be responsible for carrying out the laws. So, for years, the wealthy businessmen who owned the companies were often the local government leaders too.

Gradually, as more government services were needed, the colonial governments expanded. Courts were needed to settle disputes, and so a court system developed in the colonies. These colonial courts were allowed to try certain types of cases, both civil and criminal. The colonies also needed law enforcement to keep the peace, and so constables and sheriffs were included in the local governments. Local governments also took on tasks such as road construction and ferry service. They also organized militias of citizen soldiers. The colonists often got their ideas of how these local governments should operate

from the government offices that they remembered back in England.

As long as the colonies were small, Great Britain did not take a great interest in their government; however, once the colonies became larger and richer, Great Britain began to take more notice of what was going on over here. And the colonists were still subjects of Great Britain. The King or Queen of England was the final authority on government matters.

Eventually, the wants and needs of the colonists began to come into conflict with the laws passed by Great Britain. This began to happen especially during the time of the French and Indian Wars. One result of those wars was that the colonists began to feel more like Americans and less like British citizens. This too contributed to the conflict between the colonists and the British.

Rule by colonial charter had begun in the 1600's. It lasted until 1776. Then, as we know, the United States became an independent country.

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Government under colonial charters lasted from the 1600's until \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. 1700
  - B. 1699
  - C. 1776
  - D. none of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Colonial charters were granted to \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. sheriffs
  - B. presidents
  - C. companies
  - D. kings
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Under the system of colonial charters, the colonial rulers had \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. power to veto laws passed in England
  - B. limited power
  - C. absolute power
  - D. power to collect taxes only



