

AMERICAN HISTORY

A weekly journey through the American story, twenty-five years at a time



Candles in the Wilderness

*War on the frontier, ink in Boston, and a charter of conscience in Philadelphia:
the quarter century when colonial America began to find its voice*



FAITH, FAMILY & FREEDOM READER · ISSUE NO. 1

The Night the Snow Drifted Over the Wall



The Deerfield raid of 1704, as imagined by Walter Henry Lippincott, published 1900.

Before dawn on February 29, 1704, the snow lay so deep against the stockade at Deerfield, Massachusetts, that it formed a ramp to the top of the wall.

Inside, the Reverend John Williams and his family were asleep. The village sat at the far edge of the New England frontier.

Then came the crash of doors and the cries of the raiders. A force of French soldiers and their Abenaki, Mohawk, and other Native allies poured over the drifts. By sunrise, much of the town was in flames. According to the [Library of Congress](#), some fifty English men, women, and children were killed, and more than a hundred captives were marched north through the winter woods toward Canada. Among them were Williams, his wife Eunice, and five of their children. Eunice, who had given birth only weeks before, fell crossing a frozen river on the second day and was killed.

Williams survived. Ransomed in 1706, he came home and wrote *The Redeemed Captive Returning to Zion* (1707), a story of grief, faith, and endurance that colonists read for generations. His seven-year-old daughter, also named Eunice, never came home. She was adopted by a Mohawk family at Kahnawake, married there, and chose to remain for the rest of her long life.

That is where our story begins: not with a tidy beginning, but with a frontier, a family, and a faith tested by fire.

A World at War

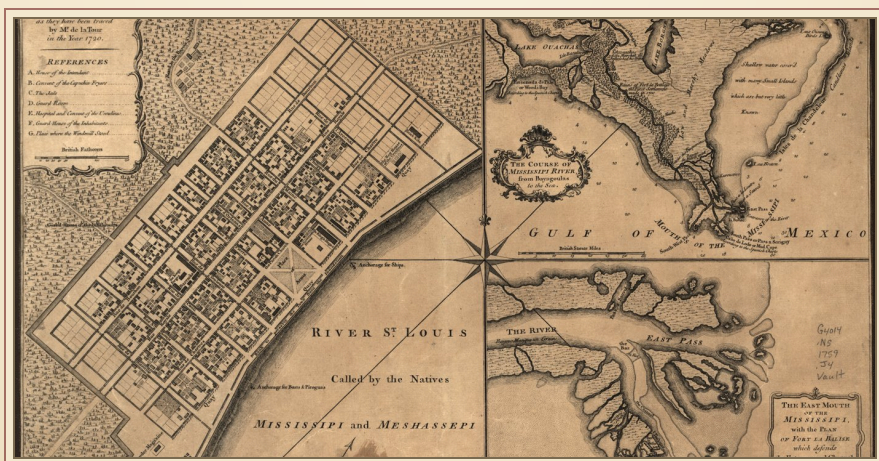


In 1700, roughly a quarter of a million people lived in England's mainland colonies, strung along the Atlantic from Maine to the Carolinas. They were English subjects, loyal to the Crown, and caught up in the great rivalry between Britain and France.

That rivalry erupted in 1702 as Queen Anne's War, the American chapter of Europe's War of the Spanish Succession. For eleven years, frontier towns like Deerfield lived in fear. When the Treaty of Utrecht ended the fighting in 1713, Britain gained Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and the Hudson Bay region.

Far to the south, another kind of conflict exploded on Good Friday, April 15, 1715, when Yamasee warriors killed Carolina trade officials at the town of Pocotaligo. Years of abusive trading and mounting debts had fueled the anger. The Yamasee War raged for two years and nearly destroyed the young colony of South Carolina.

Meanwhile France pressed its own claims. In 1718, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville began clearing ground on a bend of the Mississippi for a town he named for France's regent, the Duke of Orleans. New Orleans started as a few bark-roofed huts in a mosquito swamp.



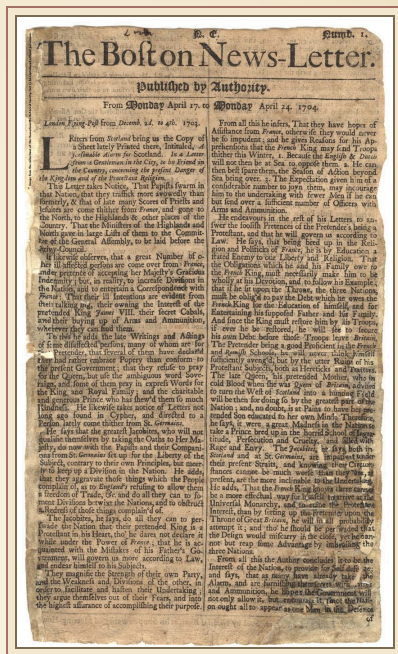
Plan of New Orleans "as traced by Mr. de la Tour in the year 1720," with the course of the Mississippi.

Ink, Learning, and a Boy on Milk Street

While armies marched, something quieter took root. On April 24, 1704, less than two months after Deerfield, Boston postmaster John Campbell published the first issue of the *Boston News-Letter*. It was a single small sheet printed on both sides, "Published by Authority." The Library of Congress calls it the first regularly published American newspaper.

Americans were also building schools. On October 9, 1701, Connecticut's legislature chartered a "Collegiate School" to train young men for service in church and civil life. It moved to New Haven in 1716 and was renamed Yale College in 1718 after a generous merchant named Elihu Yale.

And on January 17, 1706, in a modest house on Milk Street in Boston, a soap and candle maker named Josiah Franklin welcomed his fifteenth child. They named him Benjamin. (His town birth record reads January 6, because England still used the old calendar.) He would grow up in the shadow of a Boston minister you are about to meet.

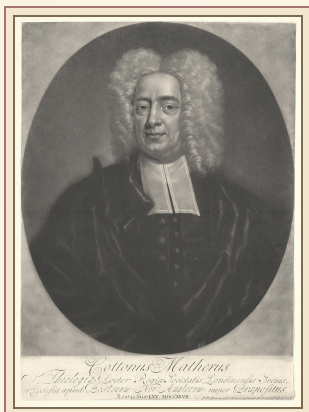


The first *Boston News-Letter*, April 17 to 24, 1704.

Zeal for upholding & propagating of the Christian & reformed Religion by a judicious & Christian men have expressed by Petition their earnest Desires that full Liberty and Privilege be granted unto certain Undertakers for the founding, suitably endowing & ordering a Collegiate School within his Majesty's Colony of Connecticut wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts & Sciences who thorough the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Publick employment both in Church & Civil State ~ To the intent therefore that all due encouragement be given to fush Bious Resolutions and that some necessary & Religious an undertaking may be set forward supported & well managed ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Connecticut's 1701 charter for the Collegiate School, later Yale College.

◆ KEY FIGURE ◆

Cotton Mather, 1663 to 1728*Peter Pelham's mezzotint, 1727.*

Pastor of Boston's Second Church, son and grandson of famous ministers, and author of hundreds of published works, Cotton Mather was perhaps the most learned man in colonial America. His 1710 book *Bonifacius*, better known as *Essays to Do Good*, urged ordinary Christians to look for practical ways to serve their neighbors. Benjamin Franklin later credited it with influencing his conduct throughout his life.

Mather's record is mixed, and honest history says so. He defended the Salem witch trials of 1692 in print. He also held a man named Onesimus in slavery. Yet it was Onesimus who taught him about inoculation. In a 1716 letter, Mather wrote

that Onesimus had "undergone an Operation, which had given him something of the Small-Pox, & would forever preserve him from it," a practice known in West Africa.

When smallpox struck Boston in 1721, Mather urged doctors to try it. Only Dr. Zabdiel Boylston agreed, inoculating his own six-year-old son on June 26. In November, someone hurled a crude bomb through Mather's window. It failed to explode. The results spoke for themselves: about 14 percent of those who caught smallpox naturally died, compared with roughly 2 percent of those inoculated.

At a Glance: 1700 to 1725

- 1701 Penn's Charter of Privileges; Collegiate School chartered
- 1702 Queen Anne's War begins
- 1704 Deerfield raid (Feb. 29); first *Boston News-Letter* (Apr. 24)
- 1705 Virginia's Act concerning Servants and Slaves
- 1706 Benjamin Franklin born in Boston (Jan. 17)
- 1712 Slave revolt in New York City
- 1713 Treaty of Utrecht ends Queen Anne's War
- 1715 Yamasee War begins (Apr. 15)
- 1718 New Orleans founded; Yale College gets its name
- 1721 Smallpox in Boston; inoculation begins (June 26)

Liberty, and Its Glaring Exception



Meanwhile colonists were practicing self-government. Elected assemblies levied taxes, passed laws, and quarreled with royal governors. In 1701, William Penn granted Pennsylvania a Charter of Privileges that created a yearly elected assembly and guaranteed liberty of conscience. It remained in force until the Revolution.

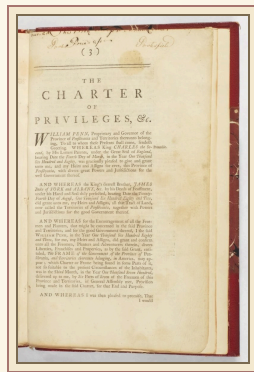
But we cannot tell this story honestly without its darkest thread. The same years that nurtured liberty for some deepened bondage for others. In 1705, Virginia's assembly passed An Act concerning Servants and Slaves, hardening slavery into a lifelong, inherited, race-based system. Thousands of enslaved Africans were carried to the Chesapeake and the Carolinas to build tobacco and rice fortunes. In 1712, enslaved people in New York City rose in revolt, and the colony answered with brutal executions. The contradiction between liberty and slavery was planted early, and it would take a terrible war to uproot it.

◆ PRIMARY SOURCE OF THE WEEK ◆

"BECAUSE no People can be truly happy, though under the greatest Enjoyment of Civil Liberties, if abridged of the Freedom of their Consciences, as to their Religious Profession and Worship..."

William Penn, Charter of Privileges, October 28, 1701, Article I.

Text via the Avalon Project, Yale Law School.



Penn's Charter, 1701.

Why it stands out: Penn put religious liberty first, and he declared that this article alone could never be altered. Political freedom, he reasoned, is incomplete without freedom of conscience. Notice, too, its limits: public office was open only to those who professed faith in Christ. It was a bold step, not the last one.

Faith and Freedom: Why It Matters Today



The colonists of 1700 to 1725 did not think of themselves as Americans yet. But look at what they built. A frontier pastor who kept his faith through captivity. A postmaster who believed ordinary people deserved the news. Legislators who insisted on governing themselves. A Quaker proprietor who wrote that no people can be "truly happy" without freedom of conscience. A minister who learned from an enslaved African and risked his reputation, and nearly his life, to save his neighbors.

They were flawed people, and some of their worst failures cast long shadows. But they planted habits that would one day flower into a nation: a free press, local self-rule, schools grounded in faith, and the conviction that God, not government, is the Lord of the conscience. Candles in the wilderness, yes. But candles have a way of lighting other candles.



The Road Ahead: Our Series in 13 Chapters

1700 TO 1725	Candles in the Wilderness
1725 TO 1750	Fire from Heaven
1750 TO 1775	An Empire Won, a Union Imagined
1775 TO 1800	The Glorious Cause
1800 TO 1825	Westward the Course of Empire
1825 TO 1850	Revival, Reform, and Manifest Destiny
1850 TO 1875	A House Divided
1875 TO 1900	Steel, Steam, and the Gilded Age
1900 TO 1925	Over There and Back Again
1925 TO 1950	Depression, War, and the Greatest Generation
1950 TO 1975	The Long Twilight Struggle
1975 TO 2000	Morning in America
2000 TO 2025	A Republic Tested

◆ NEXT WEEK ◆

1725 to 1750: "Fire from Heaven"

A revival sweeps the colonies. Jonathan Edwards preaches in Northampton, and George Whitefield draws crowds so vast that even a skeptical young printer in Philadelphia empties his pockets. That printer, Benjamin Franklin, launches *Poor Richard's Almanack* and rises to fame. And in 1733, James Oglethorpe plants a new colony called Georgia on the banks of the Savannah River. Don't miss it.

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Thirteen chapters, one quarter century at a time, from 1700 to 2025. Every story true, every quote checked, every image from the public record.