Florida, burning houses and barns, killing whites they encountered, and shouting "Liberty." (Florida's Spanish rulers offered "Liberty and Protection" to fugitives from the British colonies.) The group eventually swelled to some 100 slaves. After a pitched battle with the colony's militia, the rebels were dispersed. Some forty were killed, but others managed to reach Florida, where in 1740 they were armed by the Spanish to help repel an attack on St. Augustine by a force from Georgia. The Stono Rebellion led to a severe tightening of the South Carolina slave code and the temporary imposition of a prohibitive tax on imported slaves.

In 1741, a panic (which some observers compared to the fear of witches in Salem in the 1690s), swept New York City. After a series of fires broke out, rumors spread that slaves, with some white allies, planned to burn part of the city, seize weapons, and either turn New York over to Spain or murder the white population. Over 150 blacks and 20 whites were arrested and 34 alleged conspirators, including 4 white persons, executed. Historians still disagree as to how extensive the plot was or whether it existed at all. But dramatic events like revolts, along with the constant stream of runaways, disproved the idea, voiced by the governor of South Carolina, that slaves had "no notion of liberty." In eighteenth-century America, dreams of freedom knew no racial boundary. When white colonists rose in rebellion against British rule, tens of thousands of slaves would seize the opportunity to strike for their own liberty.

AN EMPIRE OF FREEDOM

BRITISH PATRIOTISM

Despite the centrality of slavery to its empire, eighteenth-century Great Britain prided itself on being the world's most advanced and freest nation. It was not only the era's greatest naval and commercial power but also the home of a complex governmental system with a powerful Parliament representing the interests of a self-confident landed aristocracy and merchant class. In London, the largest city in Europe with a population approaching 1 million by the end of the eighteenth century, Britain possessed a single political-cultural-economic capital. It enjoyed a common law, common language, and, with the exception of a small number of Jews, Catholics, and Africans, common devotion to Protestantism. For much of the eighteenth century, Britain found itself at war with France, which had replaced Spain as its major continental rival. This situation led to the development of a large military establishment, high taxes, and the creation of the Bank of England to help finance European and imperial conflicts. For both Britons and colonists, war helped to sharpen a sense of national identity against foreign foes.

British patriotic sentiment became more and more assertive as the eighteenth century progressed. Symbols of British identity proliferated: the songs "God Save the King" and "Rule Britannia," and even the modern rules of cricket, the national sport. The rapidly expanding British economy formed another point of pride uniting Britons and colonists. Continental

peoples, according to a popular saying, wore "wooden shoes"—that is, their standard of living was far below that of Britons. Writers hailed commerce as a progressive, civilizing force, a way for different peoples to interact for mutual benefit without domination or military conflict. Especially in contrast to France, Britain saw itself as a realm of widespread prosperity, individual liberty, the rule of law, and the Protestant faith. Wealth, religion, and freedom went together. "There is no Popish nation," wrote the Massachusetts theologian Cotton Mather in 1710, "but what by embracing the Protestant Religion would . . . not only assert themselves into a glorious liberty, but also double their wealth immediately."

THE BRITISH CONSTITUTION

Central to this sense of British identity was the concept of liberty. The fierce political struggles of the English Civil War and the Glorious Revolution bequeathed to eighteenth-century Britons an abiding conviction that liberty was their unique possession. They believed power and liberty to be natural antagonists. To mediate between them, advocates of British freedom celebrated the rule of law, the right to live under legislation to which one's representatives had consented, restraints on the arbitrary exercise of political authority, and rights like trial by jury enshrined in the common law. On both sides of the Atlantic, every political cause, it seemed, wrapped itself in the language of liberty and claimed to be defending the "rights of Englishmen." Continental writers dissatisfied with the lack of liberty in their own countries looked to Britain as a model. The House of Commons, House of Lords, and king each checked the power of the others. This structure, wrote the French political philosopher Baron Montesquieu, made Britain "the one nation in the world whose constitution has political liberty for its purpose." In its "balanced constitution" and the principle that no

Even though less than 5 percent of the British population enjoyed the right to vote, representative government was central to the eighteenth-century idea of British liberty. In this painting from 1793, Prime Minister William Pitt addresses the House of Commons.

man, even the king, is above the law, Britons claimed to have devised the best means of preventing political tyranny. Until the 1770s, most colonists believed themselves to be part of the freest political system mankind had ever known.

As the coexistence of slavery and liberty within the empire demonstrated, British freedom was anything but universal. It was closely identified with the Protestant religion and was invoked to contrast Britons with the "servile" subjects of Catholic countries, especially France, Britain's main rival in eighteenth-century Europe. It viewed nearly every other nation on earth as "enslaved"—to popery, tyranny, or barbarism. One German military officer commented in 1743 on the British "contempt" of foreigners: "They [pride] themselves not only upon their being free themselves, but being the bulwarks of liberty all over Europe; and they vilify most of the nations on the continent . . . for being slaves, as they call us." British liberty was fully compatible with wide gradations in personal rights. Yet in the minds of the free residents of Great Britain and its North American colonies, liberty was the bond of empire.

A 1770 engraving from the Boston Gazette *by Paul Revere illustrates the association of British patriotism and liberty. Britannia sits with a liberty cap and her national shield, and releases a bird from a cage.*

THE LANGUAGE OF LIBERTY

These ideas sank deep roots not only within the "political nation"—those who voted, held office, and engaged in structured political debate—but also far more broadly in British and colonial society. Laborers, sailors, and artisans spoke the language of British freedom as insistently as pamphleteers and parliamentarians. Increasingly, the idea of liberty lost its traditional association with privileges derived from membership in a distinct social class and became more and more identified with a general right to resist arbitrary government.

On both sides of the Atlantic, liberty emerged as the battle cry of the rebellious. Frequent crowd actions protesting violations of traditional rights gave concrete expression to popular belief in the right to oppose tyranny. Ordinary persons thought nothing of taking to the streets to protest efforts by merchants to raise the cost of bread above the traditional "just price," or the Royal Navy's practice of "impressment"—kidnapping poor men on the streets for maritime service.

REPUBLICAN LIBERTY

Liberty was central to two sets of political ideas that flourished in the Anglo-American world. One is termed by scholars "republicanism" (although few in eighteenth-century England used the word, which literally meant a government without a king and conjured up memories of the beheading of Charles I). Republicanism celebrated active participation in public life by economically independent citizens as the essence of liberty. Republicans assumed that only property-owning citizens possessed

"virtue"—defined in the eighteenth century not simply as a personal moral quality but as the willingness to subordinate self-interest to the pursuit of the public good. "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom," wrote Benjamin Franklin.

In eighteenth-century Britain, this body of thought about freedom was most closely associated with a group of critics of the established political order known as the "Country Party" because much of their support arose from the landed gentry. They condemned what they considered the corruption of British politics, evidenced by the growing number of government appointees who sat in the House of Commons. They called for the election of men of "independence" who could not be controlled by the ministry, and they criticized the expansion of the national debt and the growing wealth of financial speculators in a commercializing economy. Britain, they claimed, was succumbing to luxury and political manipulation—in a word, a loss of virtue—thereby endangering the careful balance of its system of government and, indeed, liberty itself. In Britain, Country Party publicists like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, authors of *Cato's Letters*, published in the 1720s, had little impact. But their writings were eagerly devoured in the American colonies, whose elites found appealing Trenchard and Gordon's stress on the political role of the independent landowner and their warnings against the constant tendency of political power to infringe upon liberty.

The Polling, *by the renowned eighteenth-century British artist William Hogarth, satirizes the idea that British elections are decided by the reasoned deliberations of upstanding property owners. Inspired by a corrupt election of 1754, Hogarth depicts an election scene in which the maimed and dying are brought to the polls to cast ballots. At the center, lawyers argue over whether a man who has a hook for a hand can swear on the Bible.*

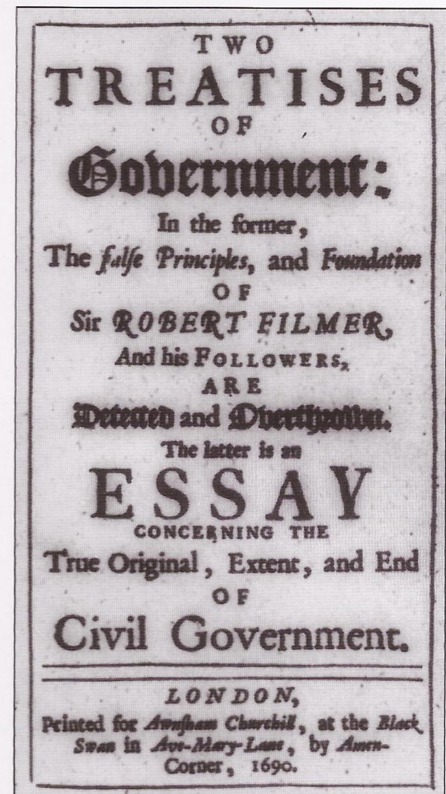
LIBERAL FREEDOM

The second set of eighteenth-century political ideas celebrating freedom came to be known as "liberalism" (although its meaning was quite different

from what the word suggests today). Whereas republican liberty had a public and social quality, liberalism was essentially individual and private. The leading philosopher of liberty was John Locke, whose *Two Treatises on Government*, written around 1680, had limited influence in his own lifetime but became extremely well known in the next century. Many previous writers had compared government to the family, assuming that in both, inequality was natural and power always emanated from the top. Locke held that the principles that governed the family were inappropriate for organizing public life. Government, he wrote, was formed by a mutual agreement among equals (the parties being male heads of households, not all persons). In this "social contract," men surrendered a part of their right to govern themselves in order to enjoy the benefits of the rule of law. They retained, however, their natural rights, whose existence predated the establishment of political authority. Protecting the security of life, liberty, and property required shielding a realm of private life and personal concerns—including family relations, religious preferences, and economic activity—from interference by the state. During the eighteenth century, Lockean ideas—individual rights, the consent of the governed, the right of rebellion against unjust or oppressive government—would become familiar on both sides of the Atlantic.

Like other Britons, Locke spoke of liberty as a universal right yet seemed to exclude many persons from its full benefits. Since the protection of property was one of government's main purposes, liberalism was compatible with substantial inequalities in wealth and well-being. Moreover, while Locke was one of the first theorists to defend the property rights of women and even their access to divorce, and condemned slavery as a "vile and miserable estate of man," the free individual in liberal thought was essentially the propertied white man. Locke himself had helped to draft the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, discussed in Chapter 3, which provided for slavery, and he was an investor in the Royal African Company, the slave-trading monopoly. Slaves, he wrote, "cannot be considered as any part of civil society." Nonetheless, by proclaiming that all individuals possess natural rights that no government may violate, Lockean liberalism opened the door to the poor, women, and even slaves to challenge limitations on their own freedom.

Republicanism and liberalism would eventually come to be seen as alternative understandings of freedom. In the eighteenth century, however, these systems of thought overlapped and often reinforced each other. Both political outlooks could inspire a commitment to constitutional government and restraints on despotic power. Both emphasized the security of property as a foundation of freedom. Both traditions were transported to eighteenth-century America. Ideas about liberty imported from Britain to the colonies would eventually help to divide the empire.



TWO
TREATISES
OF
Government:
In the former,
The false Principles, and Foundation
OF
Sir ROBERT FILMER,
And his FOLLOWERS,
ARE
Detected and Overthrown.
The latter is an
ESSAY
CONCERNING THE
True Original, Extent, and End
OF
Civil Government.

LONDON,
Printed for Awnsham Churchill, at the Black Swan in Ave-Mary-Lane, by Amen-Corner, 1690.

The title page of John Locke's Two Treatises of Government, *which traced the origins of government in an original state of nature and insisted that political authorities must not abridge mankind's natural rights.*

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

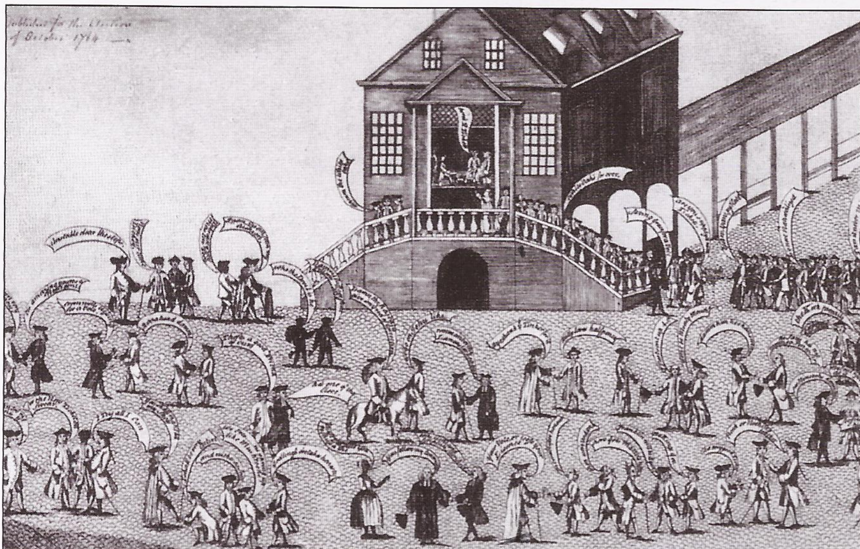
Colonial politics for most of the eighteenth century was considerably less tempestuous than in the seventeenth, with its bitter struggles for power and frequent armed uprisings. Political stability in Britain coupled with the

maturation of local elites in America made for more tranquil govern
New York stood apart from this development. With its diverse popul
and bitter memories of Leisler's rebellion (see Chapter 3, p. 109), New
continued to experience intense political strife among its many econ
interests and ethnic groups. By the 1750s, semipermanent political pa
competed vigorously for popular support in New York elections. Bu
most other colonies, while differences over policies of one kind or an
were hardly absent, they rarely produced the civil disorder or politica
sions of the previous century.

THE RIGHT TO VOTE

In many respects, politics in eighteenth-century America had a more dem
ocratic quality than in Great Britain. Suffrage requirements varied fr
colony to colony, but as in Britain the linchpin of voting laws was the pro
erty qualification. Its purpose was to ensure that men who possessed an
economic stake in society and the independence of judgment that w
with it determined the policies of the government. The "foundation of
liberty," the parliamentary leader Henry Ireton had declared during th
English Civil War of the 1640s, "is that those who shall choose the law
makers shall be men freed from dependence upon others." Slaves, serva
tenants, adult sons living in the homes of their parents, the poor, an
women all lacked a "will of their own" and were therefore ineligible to v
The wide distribution of property in the colonies, however, meant that a
higher percentage of the population enjoyed voting rights than in the O
World. It is estimated that between 50 and 80 percent of adult white m
could vote in eighteenth-century colonial America, as opposed to less th
5 percent in Britain at the time.

Colonial politics, however, was hardly democratic in a modern se
In a few instances—some towns in Massachusetts and on Long Islan
propertied women, generally widows, cast ballots. But voting was alm
everywhere considered a male prerogative. In some colonies, Je
Catholics, and Protestant Dissenters like Baptists and Quakers could n
vote. Propertied free blacks, wh
enjoyed the franchise in Virginia, No
Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia in
the early days of settlement, lost that
right during the eighteenth centu
(although North Carolina restored it in
the 1730s). In the northern coloni
while the law did not bar blacks from
voting, local custom did. Native Amer
icans were generally prohibited from
voting.



This anonymous engraving depicting a 1764 Pennsylvania election suggests the intensity of political debate in the Middle Colonies.

POLITICAL CULTURES

Despite the broad electorate amo
white men, "the people" existed only on
election day. Between elections, me

members of colonial assemblies remained out of touch with their constituents. Strongly competitive elections were the norm only in the Middle Colonies. Elsewhere, many elections went uncontested, either because only one candidate presented himself or because the local culture stressed community harmony, as in many New England towns. Considerable power in colonial politics rested with those who held appointive, not elective, office. Governors and councils were appointed by the crown in the nine royal colonies and by the proprietors of Pennsylvania and Maryland. Only in Rhode Island and Connecticut were these offices elective. Moreover, laws passed by colonial assemblies could be vetoed by governors or in London. Outside New England, where most town officers were elected, local officials were appointed by the governor or by powerful officials in London. The Duke of Newcastle alone could appoint eighty-three colonial officials.

Property qualifications for officeholding were far higher than for voting. In South Carolina, for example, nearly every adult male could meet the voting qualification of fifty acres of land or payment of twenty shillings in taxes, but to sit in the assembly one had to own 500 acres of land and ten slaves or town property worth £1,000. As a result, throughout the eighteenth century nearly all of South Carolina's legislators were planters or wealthy merchants. Despite its boisterous and competitive politics, New York's diminutive assembly, with fewer than thirty members, was dominated by relatives and allies of the great landed families, especially the Livingstons and DeLanceys. Of seventy-two men who sat in the New York assembly between 1750 and 1776, fifty-two were related to the families who owned the great Hudson River estates.

In some colonies, a majority of free men possessed the right to vote, but an ingrained tradition of "deference"—the assumption among ordinary people that wealth, education, and social prominence carried a right to public office—sharply limited effective choice in elections. Virginia politics, for example, combined political democracy for white men with the tradition that voters should choose among candidates from the gentry. Aspirants for public office actively sought to ingratiate themselves with ordinary voters, distributing food and liquor freely at the courthouse where balloting took place. In Thomas Jefferson's first campaign for the House of Burgesses in 1768, his expenses included hiring two men "for bringing up rum" to the polling place. Even in New England, with its larger number of elective positions, town leaders were generally the largest property holders and offices frequently passed down from generation to generation of the same family. Few Americans vigorously pursued elective office or took an active role in public affairs. By the mid-eighteenth century, the typical officeholder was considerably richer than the norm when the century began.

COLONIAL GOVERNMENT

Preoccupied with events in Europe and imperial rivalries, successive British governments during the first half of the eighteenth century adopted a policy of "salutary neglect" toward the colonies, leaving them largely to govern themselves. With imperial authority so weak, the large landowners, merchants, and lawyers who dominated colonial assemblies increasingly claimed the right to control local politics.

Convinced that they represented the will of the people, elected colonial assemblies used their control of finance to exert influence over governors and appointed councils. While governors desired secure incomes for themselves and permanent revenue for their administrations (some, like Robert Hunter of New York, demanded a life salary), assemblies often authorized salaries only one year at a time and refused to levy taxes except in exchange for concessions on appointments, land policy, and other issues. Generally members of the British gentry who had suffered financial reversals and hoped to recoup their fortunes in America, governors learned that to rule effectively they would have to cooperate with the colonial elite.

THE RISE OF THE ASSEMBLIES

In the seventeenth century, the governor was the focal point of political authority, and colonial assemblies were weak bodies that met infrequently. But in the eighteenth, as economic development enhanced the power of American elites, the assemblies they dominated became more and more assertive. Their leaders insisted that assemblies possessed the same rights and powers in local affairs as the House of Commons enjoyed in Britain. The most successful governors were those who accommodated the rising power of the assemblies and used their appointive powers and control of land grants to win allies among assembly members.

The most powerful assembly was Pennsylvania's, where a new charter, adopted in 1701, eliminated the governor's council, establishing the only unicameral (one-house) legislature in the colonies. Controlled until mid-century by an elite of Quaker merchants, the assembly wrested control of finance, appointments, and the militia from a series of governors representing the Penn family. Close behind in terms of power and legislative independence were the assemblies of New York, Virginia, South Carolina, and, especially, Massachusetts, which successfully resisted governors' demands for permanent salaries for appointed officials. Many of the issues between governors and elected assemblies stemmed from the colonies' economic growth. To deal with the scarcity of gold and silver coins, the only legal form of currency, some colonies printed paper money, although this was strongly opposed by the governors, authorities in London, and British merchants who did not wish to be paid in what they considered worthless paper. Numerous battles also took place over land policy (sometimes involving divergent attitudes toward the remaining Indian population) and the level of rents charged to farmers on land owned by the crown or proprietors.

In their negotiations and conflicts with royal governors, leaders of the assemblies drew on the writings of the English Country Party, whose emphasis on the constant tension between liberty and political power and the dangers of executive influence over the legislature made sense of their own experience. Of the European settlements in North America, only the British colonies possessed any considerable degree of popular participation in government. This fact reinforced the assemblies' claim to embody the rights of Englishmen and the principle of popular consent to government. They were defenders of "the people's liberty," in the words of one New York legislator.

POLITICS IN PUBLIC

This language reverberated outside the relatively narrow world of elective and legislative politics. The "political nation" was dominated by the American gentry, whose members addressed each other in letters, speeches, newspaper articles, and pamphlets filled with Latin expressions and references to classical learning. But especially in colonial towns and cities, the eighteenth century witnessed a considerable expansion of the "public sphere"—the world of political organization and debate independent of the government, where an informed citizenry openly discussed questions that had previously been the preserve of officials.

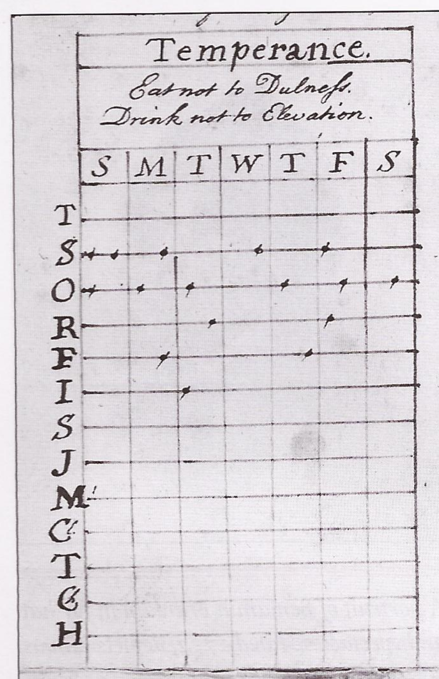
In Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, clubs proliferated where literary, philosophical, scientific, and political issues were debated. Among the best known was the Junto, a "club for mutual improvement" founded by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in 1727 for weekly discussion of political and economic questions. Beginning with only a dozen members, it eventually evolved into the much larger American Philosophical Society. Such groups were generally composed of men of property and commerce, but some drew ordinary citizens into discussions of public affairs. Colonial taverns and coffeehouses also became important sites not only for social conviviality but also for political debates. Philadelphia had a larger number of drinking establishments per capita than Paris. In Philadelphia, one clergyman commented, "the poorest laborer thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiments in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentleman or scholar."

THE COLONIAL PRESS

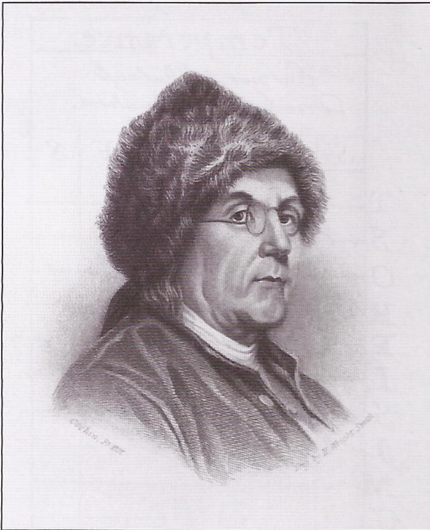
Neither the Spanish possessions of Florida and New Mexico nor New France possessed a printing press, although missionaries had established one in Mexico City in the 1530s. In British North America, however, the press expanded rapidly during the eighteenth century. So did the number of political broadsides and pamphlets published, especially at election time. Widespread literacy created an expanding market for printed materials. By the eve of the American Revolution, some three-quarters of the free adult male population in the colonies (and over one-third of the women) could read and write, and a majority of American families owned at least one book. Philadelphia boasted no fewer than seventy-seven bookshops in the 1770s.

Circulating libraries appeared in many colonial cities and towns, making possible a wider dissemination of knowledge at a time when books were still expensive. The first, the Library Company of Philadelphia, was established by Benjamin Franklin in 1731. "So few were the readers at that time, and the majority of us so poor," Franklin recalled in his *Autobiography* (1771), that he could find only fifty persons, mostly "young tradesmen," anxious for self-improvement and willing to pay for the privilege of borrowing books. But reading, he added, soon "became fashionable." Libraries sprang up in other towns, and ordinary Americans came to be "better instructed and more intelligent than people of the same rank" abroad.

The first continuously published colonial newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter*, appeared in 1704 (a predecessor, *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and*



Benjamin Franklin's quest for self-improvement, or, as he put it in his autobiography, "moral perfection," is illustrated in this "Temperance diagram," which charts his behavior each day of the week with regard to thirteen virtues. They are listed on the left by their first letters: temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility.



A portrait of Benjamin Franklin in fur hat and spectacles, dated 1777, depicts him as a symbol of America.

Domestick, established in Boston in 1690, had been suppressed by authorities after a single issue for criticizing military cooperation with the Iroquois. There were thirteen colonial newspapers by 1740 and twenty-five in 1765, mostly weeklies with small circulations—an average of 600 sales per issue. Probably the best-edited newspaper was the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, established in 1728 in Philadelphia and purchased the following year by Benjamin Franklin, who had earlier worked as an apprentice printer on his brother's Boston periodical, the *New England Courant*. At its peak, the *Gazette* attracted 2,000 subscribers. Newspapers initially devoted most of their space to advertisements, religious affairs, and reports on British society and government. But by the 1730s, political commentary was widespread in the American press.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ITS LIMITS

The public sphere thrived on the free exchange of ideas. But free expression was not generally considered one of the ancient rights of Englishmen. The phrase "freedom of speech" originated in Britain during the sixteenth century in Parliament's struggle to achieve the privilege of unrestrained debate. A right of legislators, not ordinary citizens, it referred to the ability of members of Parliament to express their views without fear of reprisal, on the grounds that only in this way could they effectively represent the people. Outside of Parliament, free speech had no legal protection. A subject could be beheaded for accusing the king of failing to hold "true" religious beliefs, and language from swearing to criticism of the government exposed a person to criminal penalties.

As for freedom of the press, governments on both sides of the Atlantic viewed this as extremely dangerous, partly because they considered ordinary citizens as prone to be misled by inflammatory printed materials. During the English Civil War of the 1640s, the Levelers had called for the adoption of a written constitution, an Agreement of the People, containing guarantees of religious liberty and freedom of the press. But until 1695, when a British law requiring the licensing of printed works before publication lapsed, no newspaper, book, or pamphlet could legally be printed without a government license. The instructions of colonial governors included a warning about the "great inconveniences that may arise by the liberty of printing." After 1695, the government could not censor newspapers, books, and pamphlets before they appeared in print, although it continued to try to manage the press by direct payments to publishers and individual journalists. Authors and publishers could still be prosecuted for "seditious libel"—a crime that included defaming government officials—or punished for contempt.

Elected assemblies, not governors, most frequently violated freedom of the press in colonial America. Dozens of publishers were hauled before assemblies and forced to apologize for comments regarding one or another member. If they refused, they were jailed. James Franklin, Benjamin's older brother, spent a month in prison in 1722 after publishing a piece satirizing public authorities in Massachusetts. Colonial newspapers vigorously defended freedom of the press as a central component of liberty, insisting that the citizenry had a right to monitor the workings of government and subject public officials to criticism. Many newspapers reprinted passages from *Cato's Letters* in which Trenchard and Gordon strongly opposed pros-