Settling the Middle Colonies

A land of wide river valleys, thick forests, and excellent harbors lay between New England and Virginia. By the early 1600s, the Dutch and the Swedes already had settlements here. Eventually the English would acquire this entire region, which became known as the Middle Colonies.

The Middle Colonies

1. New York
2. New Jersey
3. Pennsylvania
4. Delaware

1. New York

New York actually started as a colony called New Netherlands. In 1621, the Dutch (from the Netherlands) set up a trading colony and a few years later in 1624 they sent 30 families to settle the area. The colony of New Netherlands grew slowly because most Dutch people had no real reason to migrate to a colony. Their home country was prosperous and tolerant of different religions. To encourage more settlers, it was known that the colony welcomed all people, including those who had fled New England for religious reasons. The center of the new colony was New Amsterdam, located on the tip of present day Manhattan Island where the Hudson River enters New York Harbor. In 1626 Peter Minuit, the governor of the colony, paid the Native Americans about $24 in beads, knives, and other trading goods in exchange for the entire island.

- How was the Dutch’s approach to encourage settlement in New Netherlands different then the Puritans in the New England colonies?
How Does New Netherlands Become New York?

England’s King Charles II wanted to hold all of America’s Atlantic coast and the Dutch and the New Netherland colony was stopping him. King Charles II sent his younger brother, James, Duke of York, to seize the Dutch colony. In August 1664, the people of New Amsterdam were surprised to see four English warships anchored in their harbor. The governor tried to get the colonists to fight but they ended up surrendering to the English. New Amsterdam was given to and renamed New York in honor of the king’s brother, the Duke of York, who captured the colony from the Dutch. Although the people could keep their lands, religion, and customs, New York colonists no longer had a say in their government which kept many English away. The Duke of York appointed a governor and a council to rule the colony.

- How did the lives of the colonists of New Netherlands change once the English took over the colony?

2. New Jersey

The Duke of York hoped to make a profit from his land, but his property was so large he could not manage it all. He gave some of his land, between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, to two friends, Lord John Berkeley and Sir George Carteret. The area was named New Jersey after Carteret’s birthplace.

3. Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania was founded by William Penn. Penn’s father had once loaned the King Charles a large sum of money. To repay the loan, in 1681 the king gave William Penn a large grant of land in America. Penn named it Pennsylvania which means Penn’s woods. Penn’s colony was a home to his religious community, the Quakers. Penn was a strong champion of tolerance for all people.
What were the Quakers like?
Quakers were persecuted because their beliefs angered authorities. Quakers believed that all people, whether they were wealthy or poor, were equal in the sight of God. They also...

- refused to take oaths.
- allowed women to speak in their meetinghouses.
- opposed war.
- would not serve in the army.
- refused to pay taxes.
- opposed slavery.

- Which of the above beliefs do you agree with? Why?
- Which do you disagree with? Why?

4. Delaware

One problem William Penn and Pennsylvania had was that they had no land along the Atlantic Ocean. Pennsylvania farmers produced large quantities of wheat, barley, and rye to export to other countries but had no access to the ocean. James, the Duke of York gave Penn three counties along the Delaware River, called Delaware, which gave the colony the much needed access to the Atlantic Ocean and shipping to England. The counties eventually broke away from Pennsylvania to form the separate colony of Delaware.
Life in the Middle Colonies

Farming

Growth and prosperity were evident throughout the Middle Colonies. Here the land was gentler, and the people were more varied in background than in New England. For farmers, the Middle Colonies had many advantages such as rich soil, a mild climate, and a longer growing season. The region included several long deep rivers that made it easy to transport produce from inland farms to the ocean. Because of the good climate and soil, farmers in the Middle Colonies could produce more food - especially meat and grains - than they needed to feed themselves. They were able to sell these extra crops, called cash crops. Middle Colonies produces so much grain that they became known as the “breadbasket colonies.”

- How does the Middle Colonies having cash crops differ from the New England Colonies?

Business and Trade

Besides the farmers themselves, other people in the Middle Colonies prospered from agriculture. Millers ground grain, and many people worked on ships or built ships that transported farm goods. Many families spun thread, wove linen, or knit wool at home. Artisans, such as iron-makers, tailors, and glassblowers, and silversmiths, had workshops attached to their homes.

Cities

In cities, small shops sold goods such as hats, books, and tea brought by ship from England. In smaller towns, a general store sold everything that people did not make for themselves. At sawmills workers cut wooden boards and lumber. Using local clay, brick-makers baked bricks for building houses or paving streets.