



# HOMESICKNESS

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~ An American History ~

SUSAN J. MATT

# Homesickness

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## *An American History*



Susan J. Matt

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In memory of Joseph Matt  
and in honor of  
Barbara J. Matt,  
Elizabeth Matt Turner,  
and  
Luke O. Fernandez

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## CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments*      *ix*

Introduction      3

1. Emotions in Early America      12
2. Painful Lessons in Individualism      36
3. A House Divided      75
4. Breaking Home Ties      102
5. Immigrants and the Dream of Return      141
6. Transferring Loyalties      176
7. Mama's Boys, Organization Men, Boomerang Kids,  
and the Surprising Persistence of the Extended Family      214

Conclusion: Of Helicopter Parents, Facebook, and Walmart:  
Homesickness in Contemporary America      248

*Notes*      269

*Bibliography*      305

*Index*      333



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# Homesickness

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## Introduction

In 1887, forty-two-year-old Rev. Father J. M. McHale left Ireland to take up a position in a Brooklyn parish. Shortly after arriving in New York, he became afflicted with nostalgia and began to waste away. Newspaper accounts reported that McHale proclaimed, “I cannot eat; my heart is breaking.’ In his troubled sleep he talked of Ireland and his friends there. He often murmured: ‘I am homesick. My dear country, I will never set a foot on your green shores again. Oh, my mother, how I long to see you.’” He eventually lost consciousness and died.<sup>1</sup> His death was attributed to homesickness, or nostalgia, as it was then called. Such a diagnosis was not unusual in nineteenth-century America, nor was the newspaper coverage of McHale’s death. Papers sometimes reprinted the pathos-filled letters of migrants separated from their loved ones and sometimes carried news of their sorrowful deaths.

Before the twentieth century, homesickness was a widely acknowledged and discussed condition. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Americans moved frequently, but they were not fully accustomed to leaving home and did not find the process easy or natural. There was a trauma associated with migration, a trauma they did not shy away from expressing. Americans took homesickness seriously—as did their doctors, many of whom maintained that the only cure was to return sufferers to their homes before the condition turned fatal.

More than a century after Rev. McHale’s death, the *New York Times* carried news of another homesick migrant to New York. In 2004, the writer Katherine Lanpher moved from Minnesota to Manhattan. She found the move painful: “My first week ended with a sharp bout of homesickness.” To cheer herself up she decided to get a manicure. She told the Korean woman



who was doing her hands, “I’m pretty homesick,” but encountered little sympathy. The manicurist, herself far from home, looked at Lanpher with impatience: “Her eyes narrowed, she sucked in some breath and then she barked out an uppercase admonition: ‘DON’T BE BIG BABY.’”<sup>2</sup> This is the modern attitude toward homesickness, an attitude predicated on the belief that movement is natural and unproblematic and a central and uncontested part of American identity. Today those who suffer from homesickness are considered immature and maladjusted. To feel pain at migration and to discuss it openly is, as one psychologist noted, “taboo.”<sup>3</sup>

While this perspective on homesickness is now widespread, it developed slowly. Americans have not always been able to leave home with ease. This book explores how they learned to do so. It begins with European colonization and continues up through the twenty-first century, tracing changes both in emotional prescriptions and lived experience. It examines how homesickness was transformed from a dire and potentially fatal malady to an inconsequential emotion rarely mentioned, and from an adult condition to a childhood one. The book explores how love of home, once seen as the mark of a refined and sensitive nature, eventually came to signify backwardness, prissiness, and a lack of ambition. It seeks as well to illuminate how Americans dealt with these changing norms, and how, in doing so, they gradually learned the habits of modern individualism.

During the colonial era, a significant number of those who came to America hoped to return home. Those who could go back did so, at a surprisingly high rate; for instance, as many as one in six Puritans eventually left New England and returned home to old England.<sup>4</sup> Many more colonists would have liked to do the same, but could not, for a majority came to America in some state of unfreedom. Whether slaves, servants, or wives, they had to submit themselves to the patriarchal and communal order that guided social life and subordinate their desires to the will of the larger society. They grappled with their longings. Some regarded their circumstances as God’s will and resigned themselves to sadness. Others took action to resolve their homesickness, but often to no avail since an ocean separated them from their homes.

By the mid-eighteenth century, a new set of ideas began to alter both the colonial social order and individual outlooks. Enlightenment philosophy celebrated the freely moving individual who maximized happiness and who could be at home anywhere in the world. Colonists who could act on this cosmopolitan philosophy—generally white, generally male—began to develop new expectations about their lives. They became less willing to submit to communal imperatives that dictated their location, and they manifested a new spirit of autonomy as they searched for contentment. For some this independence led to novel opportunities and points unknown;

for others it carried them home. Faced with unprecedented liberty, many individuals came to realize that even freely made decisions—to leave home or to stay—carried hefty emotional costs.

This became more apparent to nineteenth-century Americans who lived through the market revolution and the emergence of a full-fledged capitalist economy. Influenced by the ideal of the self-made man, American men and women abandoned the familiar in search of new profits and possibilities. Yet they did so with some hesitation. Although later remembered as a period of great restlessness and individualism, antebellum America also was characterized by a great deal of homesickness. Explorers, pioneers, gold miners, and mill girls all moved forward, but often did so with some reluctance and looked back with regret. To them their destiny was not manifest, whether they should go or stay not a settled question. They discussed publicly their reservations about moving and worried about the implications of their restlessness, since love of home and mother was a mark of good and refined character.

While attentive to their own pain at parting, white Americans were often unmoved by the emotional plight of Native Americans, who were forced to vacate ancestral lands. Natives' attachment to home was seen as an atavistic trait, standing in the way of progress. Similarly, the homesickness that slaves experienced as they were bought and sold generally went unacknowledged by whites, who presumed that "primitive" blacks lacked their level of emotional sensitivity and capacity.

The phenomenon of homesickness, so widespread during the antebellum period, received systematic attention during the Civil War. During that time, European conceptions of the condition as a disease became popular, and the diagnostic category of nostalgia gained acceptance. The term *nostalgia* was used to describe the acutely homesick, who many doctors believed might die if their condition went untreated. In fact, during the war, Union doctors diagnosed more than five thousand soldiers as suffering from nostalgia, seventy-four of whom succumbed to the condition. Given such alarming statistics, some army bands were prohibited from playing "Home, Sweet Home" for fear the song might provoke the deadly illness in soldiers.

After the war, the idea that homesickness might be fatal continued to circulate among laypeople and physicians alike. Native-born Americans flocked from farms to cities, and European and Asian immigrants streamed into the United States, and these migrations inspired prolific commentary on homesickness and nostalgia. As the nation's racial and ethnic diversity increased, many observers claimed they saw patterns among homesick populations and suggested that nostalgia was a condition to which particular groups were especially susceptible. For instance, psychologists and

social commentators influenced by Darwinian theory hypothesized that the groups least able to conquer their homesickness were the least culturally advanced. Those who succumbed to it were unfit for life in modern American society, for they lacked the prized characteristic of adaptability. As the charity worker Morris Fishberg observed in 1906, "Nostalgia . . . is the first and most effective aid to the natural selection of desirable immigrants."<sup>5</sup> According to this view, those unable to adapt to a new environment and stricken with nostalgia were doomed to fail in life and business, perhaps even to perish. Observers maintained that a variety of different ethnic groups as well as African Americans, Native Americans, and women of all races were unsuited to movement and independence because of their alleged vulnerability to homesickness. Homesickness gradually became a marker of dependence and inadequacy.

If there was a new condemnation of homesickness, there were also new ways to assuage it, for during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, revolutions in transportation made migration easier. Transcontinental railroads spanned the country, and fast steamships linked nations. Leaving and returning home became much easier for migrants and immigrants, rich and poor alike. Yet the rapid industrialization of the late nineteenth century that produced these new technologies also led to radical transformations in daily life. Migrants who returned after years away discovered that home was no longer what they had imagined it to be. Their homes had changed and so had they. As a result, many Americans began to yearn not just for a lost home—the longing of the homesick—but for a lost time as well. As they journeyed between old homes and new, many began to wonder if they had any home whatsoever. A sense of homelessness began to emerge that would become endemic to modern life.

In the twentieth century, the imperative to move became greater, the need to accept dislocations more pressing. From expanding corporations, government agencies, and the military, Americans heard they should subordinate themselves to the large institutions of modern society and move cheerfully when asked. Child-rearing experts suggested that parents prepare their offspring for these inevitable partings by sending them away from home so that they might master their homesickness early in life. Psychologists, corporate leaders, and government officials hoped that ultimately individuals would learn to transfer their loyalties from mother, home, and hometown, to their employers and the government, and would be transformed from mama's boys into organization men. Impatience with those reluctant to leave home grew over the course of the twentieth century, and the perception that homesickness was a sign of immaturity solidified. Americans learned a code of behavior and emotion management that taught them to repress all signs of homesickness in public life in order to appear modern and mature.

Only in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first, as faith in organizational culture declined, did Americans begin to publicly question the relocations that the modern workplace demanded of them. Yet even today, those who resist moving on are reluctant to discuss their misgivings in terms of homesickness or the love of home, for this would mark them as lacking ambition and drive. Instead they express their emotions in other ways. As the historian Peter Stearns has noted, in the twentieth century individuals faced increasing pressure to restrain their emotions in public yet found greater opportunities in leisure time and private life for emotional release.<sup>6</sup> As they type on their Facebook pages or email accounts, watch Bollywood films on satellite television, or visit the taqueria to eat foods redolent of the flavors of home, Americans move through a culture of memory and connection and try to re-create what they have left behind. Although it has been repressed in speech and overt action, homesickness makes its appearance in daily rituals, in ways that often go unnoticed precisely because they are so commonplace.

The history of homesickness recovers the story of how Americans learned to manage their feelings, but beyond that, it reveals how Americans learned habits of individualism that supported capitalist activity. Central to modern individualism is the ability to separate oneself from home and family, to wander in pursuit of happiness, to leave communities (if only to rejoin others), to be fluid and unfettered.<sup>7</sup> That ability has been portrayed by some observers as a trademark American behavior; however, the ability to be mobile is not innate. This book explores the long education Americans went through in order to be able to act like rugged individualists and to make movement appear unproblematic. In so doing it offers a new history of mobility and individualism, a history that shows the ambivalence, hesitation, and reluctance so often experienced by those who moved on. As their society came to enshrine movement as necessary for an expanding, capitalist order, Americans learned to live with these mixed feelings and to subordinate the desire to stay behind to the goal of getting ahead.

Being a rugged, mobile individualist involves mastering an emotional code, knowing how and when to express some emotions and repress others. It means acting optimistically, cheerfully, and with little regret, while embracing change and novelty. The demands for such traits first emerged in the late eighteenth century but did not become dominant until the twentieth. Individuals and families were watch-guards of emotional expression and helped to inculcate such habits and behaviors in each other, but so too did influential success advisors, child-rearing experts, and modern psychologists, who helped shape emotional norms and worked to create models of personality well suited to the needs of the capitalist economy. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they have celebrated those individuals

who can separate and move on and have portrayed as pathological and mal-adjusted those who cannot. Scholars commenting on contemporary attitudes toward homesickness suggest that in modern America, since “homesickness is seen as something childish, it is socially sanction[ed] even among children.”<sup>8</sup>

Because it has become a taboo emotion, homesickness is not a category that Americans use to assess their society or their past. The emotion is absent from nationalist narratives, in which historical actors are largely portrayed as happy movers. Alexis de Tocqueville offered perhaps the most famous sketch of American mobility when he wrote, “An American will build a house in which to pass his old age and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave others to reap the harvest; . . . settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires.”<sup>9</sup> Later commentators such as Frederick Jackson Turner elaborated on this vision, portraying unceasing movement as essential to American identity.<sup>10</sup> Modern historians have continued to use this interpretative mode, describing Americans as “uprooted,” “restless,” and a “nation on the move.”<sup>11</sup> The emphasis on effortless mobility and the silence on the topic of homesickness have been self-perpetuating. Because homesickness is absent from modern accounts of the past, it is seen as an illegitimate emotion in the present. For instance, the mythology of individualistic pioneers has been used to motivate successive generations to move on bravely and without hesitation, despite the fact that the pioneers themselves were homesick and hesitant, and that many hoped to—and sometimes did—return home.

In telling their stories, the history of homesickness restores emotional complexity to U.S. history and undercuts the idea that American society and culture is strictly a product of individualism. Again, Tocqueville was an early exponent of this view, suggesting that everything from newspapers to civic associations to familial relations bore the imprint of individualism. Turner elaborated on this idea, describing the “dominant individualism” of American culture and character.<sup>12</sup> Understanding the mix of feelings that Americans experienced as they moved allows for a different interpretation, for American culture was created by people in search of connection and community, trying to restore and re-create what they had left behind. Their yearnings left an indelible mark on the physical and social landscape of America. For example, the paths of homesick migrants can be traced through the repetition of place-names across the American landscape. English town names were transplanted to New England; subsequent generations settling in the Midwest and West carried these names with them and tried to reestablish a sense of place by affixing old names to new locales.<sup>13</sup> In gardens around their newly built homes, settlers planted seeds and cuttings

they had carefully transported over land and sea in order to establish a semblance of the landscapes they had left behind. That lilacs bloom in southern California yards is testimony to the homesickness of eastern migrants trying to make foreign terrain familiar.<sup>14</sup> National patterns of culture and communication also reflect longings for connection. For decades, American men and women sang songs and read novels that mourned the necessity of leaving home and celebrated the prospect of return. Whether sitting around campfires on the Overland Trail or at pianos in comfortable parlors, Americans sang with passion melodies like “Home, Sweet Home,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” To maintain connections with the old folks at home, Americans became a letter-writing nation in the nineteenth century, and a telephoning, emailing, and texting population in the twentieth and twenty-first.<sup>15</sup> These patterns illustrate that other values besides individualism left a deep and enduring mark on American social and cultural life.<sup>16</sup>

The history of homesickness also challenges the myth of America’s magnetic allure. Rather than the United States exerting an irresistible pull on immigrants, home, wherever it was, was frequently the true magnet. Early colonization efforts were carried out by individuals who often intended to go back home, who regarded America as settlers at Jamestown did, “not as a place of Habitacon but onley of a short so[j]ourning.” They were interested not in long-term settlement but in “present profit.”<sup>17</sup> That motivation has been shared by generations of immigrants. Although millions end up staying, they often set out with the belief that they will soon return to England, Italy, China, Poland, or Mexico. For many, the American dream has always been to come to America, get rich, and return home.

What the history of homesickness, and the history of the emotions more generally, brings to the American narrative is a record of intention, motivation, and feeling. To focus only on external behaviors misses much of what went on in the past. Understanding how individuals felt about their migrations and how they responded to social rules that guided their behavior and their feelings allows for a more nuanced appraisal, both of how society shapes personality and how emotions shape history.<sup>18</sup> While generations of scholars long assumed that emotions were “tangential” to the fruitful study of the past, historians of the emotions argue that they are central to historical narratives, for their shifting meanings reveal much about the social attitudes and outlooks that were prevalent in earlier eras.<sup>19</sup> This is clear in the case of homesickness, for the fact that it was a problem emotion for much of the nation’s history suggests that at one time many people were unaccustomed to long-distance migrations. Indeed, before the seventeenth century, the word *nostalgia* did not exist, and before the eighteenth century the English word *homesickness* did not either. The invention of these terms



reflected a new concern about the emotions that were becoming apparent in early modern society; their recent disappearance from adult conversation is a sign that, at least to some degree, modern Americans have become accustomed to moving on.

Jean Starobinski, the first historian to critically study homesickness and nostalgia, maintained that while individuals longed for home throughout history, the invention of new names for the longing changed the meaning and experience of the emotion, transforming private feelings into a socially recognized problem and a disease.<sup>20</sup> This book builds on that observation, beginning its examination in the colonial period, when the words *nostalgia* and *homesickness* first were coined. It employs the words in accordance with their historical usage. It also takes seriously the fact that homesickness meant different things to different people at different times. Some who used the word longed for family, some for houses, others for towns or landscapes, for all of these were constituents of the idea of home. By including all of these meanings, this book allows the historical actors themselves to define their feelings.

Although the book focuses on homesickness, it does not deny that other emotions played a role in patterns of mobility, nor does it deny that some individuals felt no homesickness whatsoever. Nevertheless, the emotion has been far more common than previously acknowledged. Chapter 1 explores the feelings of colonists far from home and examines how a hierarchical social order shaped opportunities for emotional expression. It also charts the ways that Enlightenment philosophy and revolutionary social movements began to alter these patterns. Chapter 2 examines the antebellum period, the era of the highest rate of interstate mobility in U.S. history. Americans coming of age in the early nineteenth century—explorers, farmers, mill girls, and miners—had to learn how to move on. Despite the distances they traveled, many continued to hold out hope that they might return to and reunite with those they had left behind.

Civil War soldiers, raised in the midst of this culture, experienced homesickness and nostalgia with great frequency and expressed it quite publicly. They found that civilians and military officials alike took their condition seriously and gave it unprecedented attention. Chapter 3 examines soldiers' experiences of the emotion and the larger society's evolving views of the condition. The trauma of the war, as well as changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization in the years that followed, made many wonder if they could ever really return to the homes—or the pasts—they had left behind. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture was marked by widespread longings for homes lost in time as well as in space, the subject of chapter 4. Chapter 5 examines how the 20 million immigrants who flooded into the country during these years regarded their old and new homes, and

how homesickness shaped their social lives. Able to avail themselves of rapid transportation, they traveled back and forth between their native lands and their adopted one, and often wondered where their true home was. Their sense of placelessness was part of an emerging modern sensibility.

That sensibility was increasingly necessary during the twentieth century. An organizational society began to take shape that required mobility of workers, soldiers, and citizens. Psychologists and child-rearing experts urged families to push their children out the door to prepare them for life in the mobile world. Chapter 6 examines the expansion of this organizational culture during the first half of the twentieth century and explores how the homesick fared within it. Chapter 7 looks at its postwar growth and eventual decline and considers modern responses to mobility. The conclusion looks at commercial culture and technology and how they have both affected and been affected by the longing for home.

Although the book ends there, the emotion continues. Over the years, many observers have predicted that rapid transportation, high-speed communication networks, and the global consumer economy, which provides a smorgasbord of the world's goods, would eventually eradicate homesickness, making it an artifact of earlier times. That has not proven to be the case, however. While internal migrants and immigrants can find many of the tastes of home on grocery store shelves, and while they can travel and phone home with unprecedented ease, their homesickness has yet to be conquered. It may have disappeared from adult conversation, but homesickness lurks inside the heads of many Americans on the move.



## CHAPTER 1



# Emotions in Early America

In reports he sent back to the West India Company, Johan Printz, the governor of New Sweden (now Delaware), repeatedly asked that he be allowed to return home to Sweden. In 1644, he wrote, “It is . . . my humble prayer and request that when this term of three years is over I may be relieved and allowed to return again to . . . my Most Gracious Queen and my Fatherland, especially since I am no longer young and since the greatest part of my days have been hard and toilsome.” In 1647, he asked again: “I for a great while (namely twenty-eight years) have been in the service of my dear native country. . . . My humble request . . . is, that I be relieved, if possible, and sent home by the next ship to my beloved native land.”<sup>1</sup> Although Printz was a man of power and prominence, he could not control where he went or when he could return home. It was only in 1653 that his wish was granted and he was able to return to Sweden.

Three hundred miles to the north, Peter Bulkeley, a Puritan minister who emigrated to America in 1635 and founded Concord, Massachusetts, still looked homeward after more than a decade. In a sermon he exclaimed, “O *England*, my deare native Countrey (whose womb bare me, whose breasts nourished me, and in whose arms I should desire to dye).”<sup>2</sup> Despite his longing for home, Bulkeley remained in Massachusetts for the rest of his life, believing that this was God’s will and desire for him.

Almost a century later, in 1733, the *Boston Gazette* carried news of the disturbing actions of a woman who had similar longings for her native land and even fewer options: “A Negro woman at Salem determined to go into her own Country, as she call’d it, took a Bottle of Rum & two Biskets and carried them into the Burying Place there where she dug a hole & cover’d ’em, and then took a Knife and cut her Belly so much that her Guts came out,

her Wound was sew'd up but she dy'd a day or two afterwards."<sup>3</sup> The woman acted on the belief, common among slaves imported from West Africa, that after death, individuals were reincarnated in Africa and would be free. Without liberty or income, her best hope for returning home lay in death.

Despite differences in race, religion, gender, and power, Printz, Bulkeley, and the anonymous slave woman all experienced the same powerful emotion, which today is termed homesickness. The ways that they coped differed dramatically from one another and from modern ways of coping with the yearning for home.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many colonists felt constrained and unable to act on their longings, since a startling number could not control if they left home or if they might return to it. Between 1607 and 1789, roughly half of the 600,000 Europeans and all 300,000 of the Africans who landed on American shores were not free, arriving either as servants or slaves.<sup>4</sup> They frequently had little control over their destinations or their destinies. Even those with greater power and independence still faced limits on their migrations. European nations imposed a variety of restrictions on their citizens' movements, for they regarded their populations as part of their national wealth. In some countries, citizens were blocked from leaving their native lands without government permission and frequently faced questioning if not outright prohibition when they desired to return.<sup>5</sup> Some migrants also felt controlled by divine edict and feared their migrations might offend God. Their lack of autonomy influenced how they thought about the places they left and the journeys they made.

Those European colonists who longed for home, however, probably had different expectations about pain and suffering than do modern Americans, for they came from societies that assumed that unhappiness, discontent, and pain were to be expected and were to be dealt with patiently and passively.<sup>6</sup> This melancholy but accepting disposition was well suited to life in a society where individuals frequently had little control over their fates.<sup>7</sup>

Then too, Europeans and American colonists often thought of their emotions as unruly passions that needed to be subordinated to community will or religious injunction. Many Protestants believed that sadness and pain were signs of an unholy life, evidence that an individual lacked God's grace.<sup>8</sup> Too much interest in the state of one's emotions, whether happy or sad, was sinful as well. Some Puritan divines believed that the more individuals focused on their own desires and feelings, the further they were from God.<sup>9</sup> Such attitudes informed how colonial Americans understood their longings for home and how they responded to them; many felt they had little choice but to tolerate and accept the pain they experienced.

These attitudes began to change in the mid- to late eighteenth century, as new ideas of personal autonomy and volition began to spread and as a social

order built on deference and hierarchy gradually crumbled. Alongside revolutionary views of the place, power, and role of the individual came new expectations about personal happiness. This gave select groups within the American colonial population more control over their migrations and conferred legitimacy on their efforts to find personal happiness. Yet such attitudes did not always eliminate homesickness, for the new spirit of individualism that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century could as easily propel people away from their homes as toward them. Many Americans during the Revolutionary era came to see homesickness as the price of independence.

### EMOTIONS AMONG EARLY COLONISTS

European colonists began to stream into the Americas after Columbus's voyages, as nations across Europe competed to lay claim to the abundant land and resources of the Western Hemisphere. In search of opportunity and prosperity, many made the voyage willingly, but did so with the hope of eventually returning to their native lands.<sup>10</sup> As many as 10 to 20 percent of all Spanish immigrants returned home after years, and in some cases, decades in the Americas. Those who remained in the colonies generally kept their eyes and thoughts on their native land, sending back remittances to support their kin. Some French colonists likewise saw their time in America merely as a way to gain wealth that would ultimately enable them to enjoy a better life back in France.<sup>11</sup> British colonists nursed similar hopes, and these sometimes undermined their early efforts at colonizing. In 1585, English settlers made the first of two ill-fated attempts to establish the colony of Roanoke. They lasted only a year and then, according to reports, grew homesick, and imposing on the goodwill of Sir Francis Drake, managed to return to England. An attempt in 1607 to colonize along the Kennebec River in Maine lasted for just a year. A seventeenth-century report explained, "They[,] after a winter stay dreaming to themselves of new hopes at home[,] returned backe with the first occasion."<sup>12</sup>

Even the colonies that became permanent settlements initially attracted colonists who envisioned their time in America as temporary. In Jamestown, Virginia, the first successful English colony, Capt. John Smith reported that members of his company attempted to commandeer a ship and sail back to England. These efforts were put down and the men punished, since returning so early would doom the colonizing enterprise.<sup>13</sup>

Those who stayed on in Virginia, often against their will, suffered greatly from a combination of afflictions. Conflicts with local Native Americans led many to fear for and ultimately lose their lives. Brackish water and

malaria were natural hazards of the locale; colonists also lacked sufficient food.<sup>14</sup> While violence, starvation, disease, and poor protection from the elements contributed to a high mortality rate, so too did mental turmoil. One early colonist, George Thorpe, who arrived in 1620, believed that his comrades' ill health indicated more than just physical pain. He noted, "I . . . am pswaded that more doe die here of the disease of theire minde then of theire body."<sup>15</sup> The more apathetic and depressed colonists became, the less able they were to provide for themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Even colonists who did not withdraw fully from life displayed their depression and their pain at being so far from home. Those who lived in Virginia during its first few decades often turned to alcohol to drown their sorrows. Edmund Morgan suggested that Virginians consumed substantial amounts of liquor "to solace them for losing the comforts of a settled life." Because they had come to make a quick profit and planned to go back to England, they invested little time or effort in making the colony habitable or pleasant. As a result, the settlement was hastily and poorly constructed, full of "ramshackle hovels."<sup>17</sup> The colonist Edward Hill wrote to his brother that the poor conditions in Virginia made him want to return to England; as soon as he earned sufficient profit, he would do so. "And to speake the truth I stay to get what I haue lost and then god willing I will leaue the Countrey: for this is the worst yeare here that . . . [ever] I saw like to bee." Phoebus Caner described his desperate desire to go back to England: "I beseech god to give me life & health that I may this yeare end this troublesome voyage. I am quite out of hart to live in this land god send me well out of it."<sup>18</sup>

In the early years of Virginia's history, colonists expressed such laments repeatedly, and the colony's leaders looked for a way to allay settlers' homesickness. Some concluded that a chief source of discontent that prompted colonists to return to England was the dearth of women. Without wives men could not establish households or a sense of home. To rectify that problem, Sir Edwyn Sandys, leader of the Virginia Company, recommended in 1619 that the colony import women. Sandys wanted women who were "young and uncorrupt to makes wives to the Inhabitānte." The motive was "to make the men there more settled & lesse moueable who by defect thereof . . . stay there but to gett something and then to returne to England, w<sup>ch</sup> will breed a dissolucon, and so an ouerthrow of the Plantacon."<sup>19</sup> If women came, perhaps the men could be induced to put down permanent roots in Virginia. John Smith's history of the colony reports that as a result, ninety "young women to make wives" were imported to America.<sup>20</sup> They agreed to marry colonists once they disembarked in Virginia, and their future husbands agreed to pay the cost of their journey, which was about 120 pounds of tobacco.<sup>21</sup>

Women were not sufficient to diminish the men's desire for England, and in fact, they themselves often longed for home. William Rowsley wrote to his brother from Jamestown, "My wife doth nothing but talke of going home."<sup>22</sup> Some men and women made good on such dreams of return. Affluent settlers in Virginia could afford to make migrations back and forth across the Atlantic, some returning to England for supplies, others to visit family and friends, and still others to settle back in their native homes for good. In a letter written in 1614 telling of his marriage to Pocahontas, John Rolfe noted that he still had "hope but one day to see [his] Country," and eventually did return to it, bringing with him his bride, who died there, far from her own home.<sup>23</sup> The Virginia Assembly was troubled by the significant number of departures for England, but nevertheless decided in 1626 that rather than prohibit returns they would monitor them: "*It is thought fitt at this quarter Court, that there shall be noe generall restraint of people frō goeing for England, but y<sup>t</sup> such as desire their passes shall repaire to the Court held weekly at James Cittye.*"<sup>24</sup>

Virginia colonists with the lowest social status generally had most cause to long for home and the least ability to act on their longings. During the seventeenth century, ninety thousand indentured servants were brought into the colony (75 percent of the total European population there), and few were pleased with their new circumstances.<sup>25</sup> Some objected to the harsh living conditions, others to the grueling work, and many to their distance from home. Richard Frethorne, a servant, wrote his parents in 1623, "This is to let you understand that I yo<sup>r</sup> child am in a most heavie Case by reason of the nature of the Country, [which] is such that it Causeth much sickness, as the scurvie and the bloody flix and diverse other diseases, wch maketh the bodie very poore, and Weake and when wee are sicke there is nothing to Comfort vs." So wretched and hard were the conditions, so hungry were the colonists, and so fearful were they of Indian attack that Frethorne heard "people crie out day, and night, Oh that they were in England without their lymbes—and would not care to loose anie lymbe to bee in England againe, yea, though they beg from doore to doore." He told his parents, "If you love me you will redeeme me suddenlie, for wch I doe Intreate and begg." A few weeks later, he made another plea, telling them that could they see his condition they would be moved: "Oh, that you did see may daylie and hourelie sighs, grones, and teares, and [the] thumpes that I afford mine owne breast. . . . I thought no head had beene able to hold so much water as hath and doth dailie flow from mine eyes." Despite his wrenching pleas, he remained in Virginia; by 1624, he was listed among the colony's dead.<sup>26</sup>

Another indentured servant, James Revel, described servants' predicaments in a poem. After being transported to America as punishment for a

crime and forced to do labor, he fell sick and despaired both of his condition and his slim chances of returning home:

Oft on my knees the Lord I did implore,  
To let me see my native land once more,  
For through his grace my life I would amend,  
And be a comfort to my dearest friend.

His prayers were eventually answered, and he returned to England and his parents.<sup>27</sup>

Colonists forced to remain in Virginia during the early decades of settlement had to reconcile themselves to the fact that they were in a new and unfamiliar world, where English village order, traditions, and populations were largely absent. There were very few towns for most of the seventeenth century; instead settlers established widely scattered plantations on which they built small and rather sparsely furnished houses.<sup>28</sup> Such living arrangements left individuals separated from one another, exacerbating feelings of loneliness, alienation, and homesickness.

Over time, however, they gradually transformed this bleak world so that it came to resemble the one they had left behind. Although it took several decades, the architecture and physical landscape that the colonists built and named gradually embodied their longings for England.<sup>29</sup> Their new towns and counties were named after those they left behind: Norfolk, Southampton, New Kent.<sup>30</sup> Through this landscape moved many who continued to wish that they were back home in the real Norfolk, Southampton, or Kent.

The Pilgrims, who established Plymouth Colony in 1620, and the Puritans, who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, felt at least as constrained in their movements and choices as those who settled in Virginia, perhaps more so, because they believed that they were bound by divine edict. In their view, the Church of England had not distanced itself sufficiently from Catholic doctrine and practice. They risked incurring the wrath of God if they stayed in corrupt England and believed the Lord wanted them to remove themselves to a purer place.

Most of the 21,500 settlers who arrived in New England between 1620 and 1641 believed that while leaving England might result in pain and sorrow, God's will could not be denied. William Bradford, who became governor of the Plymouth Colony in 1621, explained that the move was emotionally wrenching for some. First they had left England for Holland, and this had been very difficult, for, "being thus constrained to leave their native soil and country, their lands and livings, and all their friends and familiar acquaintance, it was much; and thought marvelous by many. . . . It



was by many thought an adventure most desperate; a case intolerable and a misery worse than death." If that move was hard, the Pilgrims' next migration, to America, was even more daunting, for they remembered "their former troubles and hardships in their removal into Holand, and how hard a thing it was for them to live in that strange place, though it was a neighbour countrie." Consequently, when they bid adieu to friends and family and embarked for America, "truly dolfull was the sight of that sade and mournfull parting; to see what sighs and sobbs and praies did sound amongst them, what tears did gush from every eye." Yet they set forth, believing they were following God's will.<sup>31</sup>

Despite their belief that God had brought them to New England, many still yearned for their native land, particularly once they saw the rough conditions of their new one. Bradford reported that in 1623, the ship *Anne* arrived at the Plymouth Colony. The ship's "passengers, when they saw their low and poore condition a shore, were much danted and dismayed, and according to their diverse humores were diversely affected; some wished them selves in England againe; others fell a weeping, fancying their own miserie in what they saw now in others; other some pitying the distress they saw their friends had been long in, and still were under; in a word, all were full of sadness."<sup>32</sup> Settlers coming to the Massachusetts Bay Colony reacted similarly to their new home. The combination of harsh living conditions, inadequate food, and great distance from England made colonists miserable, and they showed both physical and emotional symptoms. Governor John Winthrop claimed that while many of the new settlers suffered from scurvy, it became fatal only to those longing for home: "It hath always been observed here, that such as fell into discontent, and lingered after their former conditions in England, fell into the scurvy and died."<sup>33</sup> Edward Johnson, in his *Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior*, reported of the settlers, "That which added to their present distracted thought, the Ditch betweene England and their now place of abode was so wide, that they could not leap over with a lope-staffe." Of the early years in Massachusetts Johnson noted that "the beginning of this worke seemed very dolorous."<sup>34</sup>

What offset the pain for many was the conviction that God wanted them to go to America. The Puritan Roger Clap explained that he was grateful to God for giving him "contentedness": "I do not remember that ever I did wish in my Heart that I had not come into this Country, or with my self back again to my Father's House: Yea I was so far from that, that I wished and advised some of my dear Brethren to come hither also." Clap believed it was the Puritans' religious fervor that made them content in their new home: "Our Hearts were taken off from *Old England* and set upon *Heaven*. The Discourse . . . was not, How Shall we go to England? (tho' some few did not only so discourse, but also went back again) but, How Shall we go to

heaven?"<sup>35</sup> Like Clap, many Puritans took comfort in the belief that their real home was wherever God was, and as He had withdrawn his grace from England, so they should withdraw themselves from it too.

Calvinists also tried to console themselves by remembering the teaching that all places were equally distant from God, and that earth was but a temporary resting stop on the pilgrimage to heaven. Consequently, they should not be overly attached to particular places. Some Puritans saw their ability to withstand separation as proof of their piety; others reminded themselves that mortal life and earthly homes were but temporary and that their true home and eternal life were in heaven.

Yet such ideas went only so far in soothing the homesick; and despite their piety, many colonists in Massachusetts ultimately returned to England. Their willingness to pay a return fare indicates the depth of their desire. The cost of passage across the Atlantic has been estimated at £5.<sup>36</sup> Not only did boat fare cost dearly, but colonists who came to New England had already sold land and outfitted their families for the journey to America. For a household of six to move to America might cost between £50 and £80—this at a time when small farmers earned between £20 and £60 per year.<sup>37</sup> Yet despite the considerable investment they had made to come to America, a significant number were willing to spend more to return home. Perhaps as many as one out of six migrants to New England eventually sailed back to England during the seventeenth century, some after the installation of a Puritan government following the English Civil War.<sup>38</sup>

Those homesick colonists who returned often earned the animus and contempt of those who remained in New England. Return migrants were accused of being weak in their faith. John Winthrop, for instance, cast a harsh judgment on "one Austin (a man of good estate) [who] came with his family in the year 1638 to Quinipiack, and not finding the country as he expected, he grew discontented, saying that he could not subsist here, and thereupon made off his estate, and with his family and £1000 in his purse, he returned for England in a ship bound for Spain." When that ship was captured by the Turks, and Austin and his family were sold into slavery, Winthrop saw it as divine retribution sent to punish those who undermined the colonizing enterprise. True and devout Christians would stay in New England rather than return home and ignore divine ordinance.<sup>39</sup>

Like Virginians, homesick Puritans who remained in the colonies tried to make the new and unfamiliar landscape of Massachusetts more comforting and homelike. A significant portion of Massachusetts towns founded in the seventeenth century were named after English towns: Haverhill, Ipswich, Cambridge, Groton, Dedham, Springfield, Marlborough, Lancaster, Andover, Gloucester. Their streets were lined with Cape Cod, saltbox, and gabled box houses, styles reminiscent of homes left behind but not forgotten.<sup>40</sup>



While Massachusetts, Virginia, and all the other colonies differed from each other in culture, religion, and settlement patterns, there were commonalities. They all were populated by individuals who looked backward rather than forward, who nurtured a connection to the land and cultures they had left behind, and who often tried to replicate at least some part of those cultures. As they established homes and towns, they were guided by practical concerns, but they were also motivated by a desire for the familiar, for objects, rituals, and architecture that could bring order and comfort in a new land.<sup>41</sup>

To hold on to an identity, to preserve a continuity of self, some went home, some imagined themselves there, and some tried to create their old world in the new. Their children and their children's children, to varying degrees, clung to a sense of their Englishness. David Cressy maintains that it took until the third generation for colonists in New England to feel at home there, to no longer believe that their true home was in England.<sup>42</sup> A new sense of nativity grew slowly.

Alongside these English colonists, who only gradually came to think of themselves as Americans, were colonists from other nations who looked back to their own homelands. Between 1700 and 1775, more than 110,000 Germans emigrated to America, a significant portion of whom settled in the mid-Atlantic colonies.<sup>43</sup> Between the late seventeenth century and the early nineteenth, more than 400,000 Irish immigrants came to North America. The majority were Protestants, arriving with a mix of motives—some religious, others financial. Many came with very high expectations of what they would find in the colonies; many were disappointed. A common lament among newcomers to America, even those coming to colonies that had been established for some years, was the lack of town culture, familiar faces, cultivated landscapes, and communal life.<sup>44</sup> An Irish poem from the mid-eighteenth century described a new immigrant's experiences in America:

I once took a notion that I would leave my people and depart for the  
New Island, and so I did. . . .  
Once there I walked twenty miles and never met a Christian—  
No, nor even a horse or a cow or a sheep grazing on the meadow.  
There was nothing but dense woods and deep glens resounding  
with the roar of wild beasts. . . .

Continuing on his journey, the narrator came upon a house occupied by Irish people from his own region, and determined to return home. Although the verse was fiction, it represented a widely acknowledged reality.<sup>45</sup>

In some colonies, immigrants who found such conditions dispiriting could find help returning home, particularly if they hailed from the British

Empire. Private charitable organizations such as the Scots Charity Box, founded in 1657 in Boston, and the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, founded in New York in 1784, offered funds for immigrants to “enable them to return to their native land.”<sup>46</sup> Immigrants from countries outside of the British Empire who wanted to return home often found that their native lands forbade it. In Germany, immigrants’ lands were confiscated when they left the country, so there was little to return to. Basel, Switzerland, allowed its citizens to migrate only so “that they might see how foolishly they had acted.” Upon departing they lost all of their land and their inheritance and were barred from ever returning.<sup>47</sup> The idea was to discourage potential emigrants and make them hesitant to sever home ties.

As a result, for many colonists there was no way to remedy the yearning for home. Hierarchical communities shaped their emotional lives, teaching them to obediently subordinate themselves and their desires to the larger social order. Individual needs and feelings were accorded little importance in colonial society, and many expected sadness and submission as their lot in life.

#### THE EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF BONDAGE

While the principle of order and the expectation that life was a vale of tears influenced how European colonists viewed their separations from home, it offered little comfort to African slaves. Slaves expressed a mix of emotions, including anger at the injustice of their situation, despair at their lack of control, and fear about the future, but a recurring theme in the writings of and about those sold away from their families and their native lands was the desire to return home.


The first slaves brought from Africa to America were twenty individuals delivered to Virginia in 1619, but their numbers soon increased. During the colonial period, around 300,000 slaves were imported to the colonies, with the pace of importation accelerating over time.<sup>48</sup> A far larger number started the journey than arrived; some estimate that 15 percent died during the sea passage, and on some ships mortality rates were far higher.<sup>49</sup> En route to America, slaves were stripped naked and faced dreadful and life-threatening conditions on the overpacked ships that transported them across the Atlantic. They also suffered psychological trauma. Separated from their communities and families, many succumbed to a condition called the “fixed melancholy,” a state of such despondency that they could not eat and soon died.<sup>50</sup>

Other slaves, overcome with despair, threw themselves overboard. Thomas Phillips, captain of the slave ship *Hannibal*, wrote of his captives’ behavior on a voyage in the 1690s: “The negroes are so wilful and loth to

leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats, which pursued them; they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we can have of hell, but home is home, etc. We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves, and others starv'd themselves to death; for 'tis their belief that when they die they return home to their own country and friends again."<sup>51</sup> Many slaves en route to the Americas took less drastic measures, but still felt and expressed their deep pain at being forcibly removed from their homes. One ship's doctor reported, "They sing, but not for their amusement. The captain ordered them to sing, and they sang songs of sorrow. Their sickness, fear of being beaten, their hunger, and the memory of their country, &c, are the usual subjects."<sup>52</sup>

Those who survived the arduous journey did not easily relinquish memories of home, and many attempted to return to Africa. Colonial newspapers carried ads for slaves who had tried to make their way back to their own countries. Five slaves tried to float down the Ogeechee River in a canoe, hoping the river would lead them back to Africa, and a group of Angolans enslaved in South Carolina struck an eastward course, hoping they could find their way home.<sup>53</sup> In the *Virginia Gazette*, George Robertson offered "twenty pounds reward" for the return of his slaves, twenty-year-old Step, who "has his Country Marks on his Temples," and twelve-year-old Lucy. "Neither of them can speak good English, as they have not been long in the Country. They went off with several others, being persuaded that they could find the Way back to their own Country."<sup>54</sup> By 1768, Will, a thirty-year-old slave, had already made three unsuccessful attempts to "get to his country." When he made a fourth attempt, his master, Jordan Anderson, warned all vessels against letting him board and aiding his escape.<sup>55</sup> Although slaves' efforts to return to Africa were futile, they attest to the depth of desire to return home and the limitations slaves faced when trying to act on those desires.

Africans were forced into slave labor throughout the Atlantic world. Many were sent to the West Indies before being imported to British North America. Some started families in these locations, and when moved from them they tried to return. Very quickly, enslaved people began to define home not only as a particular place in Africa from where they or their parents had been taken, but as the spot where their immediate family lived. This could be Antigua or Jamaica or Bermuda or any number of locales in the Atlantic world. A Virginia slave owner, Robert Donald, described Brazil, who had run away from him, as a "Negro man" and "a Spaniard" and a "very good seaman," and noted, "I imagine his intention is to get to his own country, therefore I forewarn all masters of vessels, and others, from



**R**UN away from the subscriber in *Chesterfield*, about the end of *August* last, a middle sized Negro man named *WILL*, about 30 years old, of a yellowish complexion, very much marked on his face, arms, and breast, his country fashion, speaks very broken, and can hardly tell his master's name; had on when he went away a new olinaburgs shirt, *Virginia* linen short trowsers, old cotton jacket, and felt hat, with part of the brim burnt off. He has made three attempts, as he said, to get to his country, but was apprehended. All masters of vessels are hereby forewarned from carrying the said slave out of the colony. Whoever apprehends him, and brings him to me, shall have 20 s. reward, besides what the law allows. **JORDAN ANDERSON.**

Ad for an escaped slave, Will, who had made three previous escapes in an effort to return to his native land. *Virginia Gazette*, October 27, 1768, supplement.

Source: Library of Virginia, Courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

carrying him off." Similarly, seventeen-year-old Jack, born in Antigua, was suspected of trying to run either to his former plantation in Norfolk or trying "for a passage to the West Indies."<sup>56</sup> In 1766, the *Georgia Gazette* carried an advertisement for a runaway described as a "mulatto boy named Billy," who had been born in Jamaica. He had run away from his Georgia master and was "supposed to be skulking about some vessels in order to get there [Jamaica] again."<sup>57</sup> Sue, "Bermuda born" and described as "of a middle size inclinable to be fat," was believed to have run from South Carolina to a vessel bound for her birthplace.<sup>58</sup>

Some slaves who were born in Africa eventually developed roots in America and were loath to leave their new connections. Rather than trying to return to another continent, they often tried to maintain connections in an adjoining county. For instance, Aberdeen, an enslaved blacksmith born in Africa, missed his family in Virginia when he was sold away from them. His master, William Black, reported, "He ran away from the Falls Plantation, in Chesterfield. . . . He is an African, but came in the Country young, and speaks very good English. . . . He had a wife at the Plantation of John Parke Curtis, Esquire, in King & Queen, where I formerly lived, and it is probable he may be in that Neighbourhood, as he would sometimes stay a Month there when I gave him liberty to go and see his wife, or he may be lurking about my plantation in Prince George."<sup>59</sup> Aberdeen was no anomaly. Philip Morgan tells of a "'Mandingo' slave, [who] after spending most of his youth in South Carolina, was shipped off and sold in Jamaica; he was captured in Charlestown a year later." Such patterns demonstrate "the early identification of African-born slaves with particular New World neighbourhoods."<sup>60</sup>

Slaves born in America also felt homesick for the places where their kin lived and from which they had been taken.<sup>61</sup> Colonial newspapers were full of notices for slaves who had run back to their former plantations. Sufferer,