

The Pests that Plagued Colonial America

from an article for History Magazine by Jack Tamisiea

When we picture life in colonial America, we often imagine log cabins, farms, horse-drawn wagons, and the struggle for independence. What we may not consider are the countless pests that shared that world with the colonists.

Some were native to North America, while others arrived aboard ships from Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Once established, they became unwelcome—and sometimes dangerous—neighbors.

Here are six pests that plagued colonial Americans.

Cicadas: A Deafening Arrival

In the spring of 1634, the residents of Plymouth Colony were startled by an extraordinary sound coming from the woods. Governor William Bradford described a “constant yelling noise” so loud that it threatened to “deaf the hearers.”

The culprit was the periodical cicada. Emerging from the ground by the thousands—or even millions—the insects covered trees and filled the air with their distinctive buzzing.

Although Bradford provided one of the earliest written accounts of periodical cicadas in colonial America, Indigenous peoples were already familiar with them. Some Native communities collected the insects and roasted them over fires.

Cicadas, of course, were more nuisance than threat. Other colonial pests were considerably more troublesome.

Cockroaches: Unwelcome Passengers

The American cockroach is not actually native to America. It is believed to have arrived from Africa aboard ships during the 1600s.

Colonists quickly developed the same dislike for cockroaches that many people have today. John Smith, one of the leaders at Jamestown, complained about an insect known as the “cucaracha,” which he said would eat food and leave behind an unpleasant mess.

By the seventeenth century, cockroaches had become a familiar—and despised—part of colonial life.

Rats: From Pest to Food

Rats were another unwelcome import. European ships carried them across the Atlantic, where they found an abundant supply of food in colonial settlements.

At Jamestown, however, rats became more than a nuisance. During the colony's disastrous “Starving Time” of 1609–1610, colonists were reduced to eating whatever they could find.

Archaeologists excavating Jamestown have discovered hundreds of black rat bones dating to this desperate period. The evidence suggests that colonists actually ate the rats.

Rats, along with horses, snakes, and other animals, became part of the grim menu for settlers struggling simply to survive.

Beetles: Destroyers of the Food Supply

Rats were not the only unwanted passengers arriving on colonial ships. Archaeologists working at Jamestown have discovered the remains of numerous European beetle species.

Some probably arrived hidden in firewood, while others traveled in food stores. Among them were grain beetles that infested the colony's food supplies.

John Smith complained about the problem. In 1607, he reported that the colony's grain contained “as many wormes as grains.” The following year, he observed that grain had become so infested that even the hogs would scarcely eat it.

For a struggling settlement dependent on stored food, insects could be more than an annoyance—they could threaten survival.

Lice: A Problem from Ship to Shore

Crossing the Atlantic during the colonial period was an uncomfortable experience. Voyages could last for weeks, with passengers packed into cramped quarters and exposed to poor sanitation.

Lice were inevitable companions.

A traveler making the journey from Germany to Pennsylvania in 1750 complained that lice were so abundant, particularly among sick passengers, that they could be “scraped off the body.”

The problem continued after arrival. Archaeological excavations at Jamestown have uncovered numerous fine-toothed combs made from bone. Many were designed specifically for removing lice and their eggs, known as nits.

For colonial Americans, a lice comb was not simply a grooming accessory—it was an essential tool of personal hygiene.

Mosquitoes: The Most Dangerous Pest

Of all the pests encountered by colonial Americans, mosquitoes may have been the most dangerous.

In 1749, Swedish naturalist Pehr Kalm described mosquitoes as “troublesome” and wrote of their incessant nighttime humming. During the summer, he observed, they could become so numerous that “the air seems to be full of them.”

Colonists did not yet understand that mosquitoes could transmit deadly diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. That connection would not be established until the nineteenth century.

Mosquito-borne disease nevertheless had a profound effect on colonial America. Malaria outbreaks struck Jamestown and other settlements, particularly in the South.

During the Revolutionary War, however, mosquitoes inadvertently became an ally of the American cause. Colonists living in mosquito-infested regions had developed greater resistance to some of the diseases than British troops arriving from Europe.

In 1780, malaria ravaged British forces in South Carolina. The following year, during the siege of Yorktown, disease again struck British troops. More than half of the British soldiers were reportedly too sick to perform their duties.

The mosquito, an insect too small to see as a military force, had nevertheless become an unlikely participant in the struggle for American independence.

A Colonial Reality

Life in colonial America was difficult enough without adding swarms of insects, blood-sucking parasites, rodents, and food-destroying beetles to the daily struggle.

These pests were more than historical curiosities. They affected what colonists ate, how they traveled, how they maintained their health, and sometimes whether they survived.

And in the case of the mosquito, a tiny colonial pest may even have helped change the course of American history.