

Large vs. Small Republics: Time and Space in Colonial America

Grade Level: 9-12

Time Required: 1 hour

Historical Thinking Skill: Analysis

Objective: To better understand Americans' debate over whether a large republic was possible in 1787, it is first necessary to understand the nature of their world. Its survival would depend on the connections between its many component parts. Thus, we must mentally transport ourselves back to their time and attempt to grasp to what extent this was possible. They did not enjoy the rapid travel provided by our interstates and airlines or the comforts of Marriott Courtyards along the way. Nor could they learn about election results in real time on iPhones. To understand the factors that shaped their thinking and the choices they made, we must first comprehend the world in which they made them.

Required Materials: Included image and background information about 18th century travel.

Directions: Students should read the background information here and look at the picture showing average travel times in 1800. Reflection questions can be answered independently or in small groups. Sample responses are included below.

Travel in the 18th Century

Were a visitor from ancient Rome to suddenly appear in colonial America, he or she would immediately recognize the modes of travel, which had little changed since their era. It was painfully slow, often dangerous, and exceedingly uncomfortable and unpleasant. A horse's fractured ankle, a broken wagon wheel, a storm, a flooded river, breezeless days, and a myriad of other factors could delay one's journey for days. Lodging at an inn meant sharing a room (and likely the bed!) with strangers, washing up with a basin of water and an already used towel and praying you would not be robbed. People and news all moved at the same snail-like, uncertain pace. For example, when George Washington died in 1799, settlers in Kentucky did not learn of it until 6 weeks later!

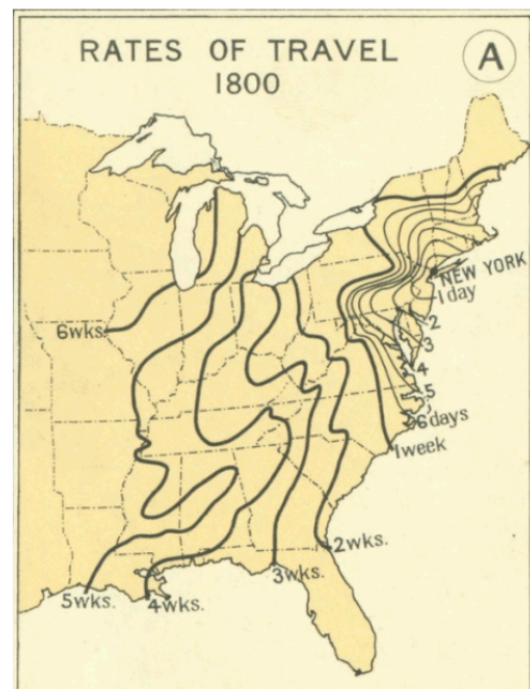
Travel Methods and Times

Horseback: About 4 mph and 30-40 miles per day

Wagon: 10-20 miles per day

Stagecoach: About 5 mph and up to 60-70 miles per day

Sailing ship: Times varied according to the winds. You might cover 100+ miles in a day or sit idle and move zero miles in a day.



Reflection Exercise:

Example:

The nation's capital—now the seat of incredible federal power—almost certainly will be far away, and you likely will never see it or know what it looks like. Will this be a problem?

- Americans would lack confidence in a government so remote from them. They would be disinclined to obey it. Laws coming from an unknown place would remind them of royal orders coming from across the Atlantic.
- In the colonies and states, for example, many people would have visited their capital such as Williamsburg or Charleston. Seeing the seat of government would inspire some confidence. What would happen with a distant capital they never saw or visited?
- Today we constantly see our representatives or our president in Washington, D.C. through television or the internet so we have a sense they are working for us even if we don't agree with their decisions. Anything familiar is always more comfortable.

Questions:

1. How would a national presidential election work? Could it be done effectively?
 - Coordinating a national election would require lots of planning. Ballots would not be uniform (they still aren't), counting processes would differ from county to county and state to state.
 - Tallying a state's votes would take much longer than it does now with our automated machines. There would be greater likelihood of human error in the counting.
 - Reporting results would take much longer than it does today.
2. Could voters and their representatives make informed and knowledgeable decisions in a large republic?
 - It would be more difficult for voters to know what candidates stood for without television and the internet.
 - Candidates would not be able to see as many voters in-person as they do today.
3. Would elites and wealthy individuals have unchecked power in a large republic?
 - Wealthier individuals would be more educated and connected to those in power. They would have to be checked by something above them – like the Constitution. It would be more difficult for the average person to know when elites were not acting as they should be because news traveled more slowly.

