Throughout the colonial period, after the middle of the seventeenth century, the one great source of irritation between the mother country and her colonies was found in the Navigation Acts. The twofold object of these acts was to protect English shipping, and to secure a profit to the home country from the colonies. As early as the reign of Richard II steps had been taken for the protection of shipping, but not before 1651 were there any British statutes that seriously hampered colonial trade. The Long Parliament, in 1642, exempted New England exports and imports from all duties, and a few years later all goods carried to the southern colonies in English vessels were put on the free list.

In 1651, however, while Cromwell was master of England, the first of the famous Navigation Acts was passed. The chief provisions were, that no goods grown or manufactured in Asia, Africa, or America should be transported to England except in English vessels, and that the goods of any European country imported into England must be brought in British vessels, or in vessels of the country producing them. The law was directed against the Dutch maritime trade, which was very great at that time. But it was nowhere strictly enforced, and in New England scarcely at all.

In 1660 the second of these memorable acts was passed, largely embodying the first and adding much to it. This act forbade the importing into or the exporting from the British colonies of any goods except in English or colonial ships and it forbade certain enumerated articles—tobacco, sugar, cotton, wool, dyeing woods, etc.—to be shipped to any country, except to England or some English plantation. Other goods were added at a later date. Such goods were to pay heavy duties when shipped to England, and in 1672 the same duties were imposed on goods sold from one colony to another. Had these laws been strictly enforced, the effect on the colonies that produced the "enumerated" articles would have been disastrous, for they enjoyed a flourishing trade in these goods with other countries. Other articles, such as grain, salt provisions, and fish, were not put on the list, because these were produced in England, and, had the entire colonial production been sent to that country, the English producer would have been ruined. Rice was also allowed to be shipped direct to all ports south of Cape Finisterre. Some things, however, the Parliament did purely to favor the colonies,—it prohibited the raising of tobacco in England and kept Spanish tobacco out by high duties, it kept out Swedish iron by a high tariff, to the advantage of the colonies, and it paid a bounty on various colonial products.

In addition to these laws there were two other classes of laws, all, however, belonging to the same system, which tended to impede the development of the colonies,—the corn laws and the laws against manufacturing. The corn laws in the interest of the British farmer, beginning about 1666, practically shut out from England grain raised in the colonies. This drove New England and New York to manufacturing, and this again led England to forbid manufacturing in the colonies. These laws were far more effective than the Navigation Acts. It is stated that in 1708 New York manufactured three fourths of the woolen and linen goods used in the colony, and also fur hats in great numbers, many of which were shipped to Europe and the West Indies. This trade was largely suppressed by English laws passed at various times. In 1732 an act forbade the exporting of hats to England, to foreign countries, or from one colony to another. It also limited the number of persons a maker of hats might employ. Iron was found in all the colonies, and
forge and furnaces were established in many places. But in 1750 Parliament enacted a law declaring that "no mill or other engine for rolling or slitting iron," "nor any furnace for making steel shall be erected in the colonies"! After this only pig and bar iron could be made. Parliament also enacted laws at various times restricting the manufacture of woolen goods. These laws bore heavily on the northern colonies, but were little felt in the South, where manufactories were rare.

Probably the harshest of England's laws in the suppression of colonial trade was the Molasses Act of 1733. By this act prohibitive duties were placed on molasses and sugar, from the French West Indies to the colonies. New England enjoyed a great trade with the islands, receiving molasses and sugar for flour, stock, lumber, and fish, part of which could not be sold to England owing to the corn laws. Had the Molasses Act been enforced, the prosperity of New England would have been at an end.

The northern colonies, which produced the same kinds of goods as England produced, and consequently were barred from the English trade, suffered deeply by the trade laws, while the southern colonies, which raised commodities, such as tobacco and rice, which could not be duplicated in England, suffered far less.

The Board of Trade and Plantations, established as a permanent body in 1696, kept account of the acts of colonial legislatures, corresponded with the governors, and informed itself thoroughly concerning all matters of colonial trade. But in spite of all efforts the Navigation Acts could scarcely be enforced at all. It may be said that the whole people became lawbreakers, and often the customs officials and even the governors connived at their practice. Smuggling was universal. It went on regardless of the admiralty courts established in most of the colonies. "Juries found their verdicts against the most undoubted facts." The Molasses Act was certainly an economic and a political blunder; it not only made the people lawbreakers, it led them to hold Parliament in contempt, as not able to enforce its own laws.

But the colonists were not without examples in smuggling. It was estimated that forty thousand people in Great Britain were engaged in smuggling. The illegal imports of French silks, of India tea, and the like exceeded the legal imports. On moral grounds, therefore, England could not reproach America.

In fairness to England it must be said that not all her colonial trade laws were unfavorable to the colonies. As we have noticed, the raising of tobacco in England was forbidden--at first under James I, because the weed was offensive to that monarch, but later for the protection of the colonies. But further, at the beginning of the eighteenth century there was a heavy balance of trade against England with Norway, Sweden, and Russia, from which she purchased large naval stores. To correct this and to discourage manufacturing in the colonies, Parliament offered bounties on American hemp, lumber, tar, turpentine, etc. So effective was this law, passed in Anne's reign, that England was soon exporting a surplus of these articles received from her colonies.

In viewing the subject of England's colonial policy during this period, two things should be borne in mind; namely, that the subject has usually been treated, on this side of the Atlantic, from a purely American point of view, and that England was no more severe in the treatment of
colonial trade than were other countries having colonial possessions. The British government acted throughout on the ground, taken by all European countries at the time, that the existence of colonial possessions was for the purpose of benefiting the mother country. The system involved the subordination of the interests of the colonies to those of the mother country.⁹ The aim of Great Britain was to export manufactured goods to America, and to import raw materials, and at the same time to retain the balance of trade in her own favor. This she usually succeeded in doing. In 1759 New England sent to England goods to the value of £38,000 and purchased goods to the amount of £600,000¹⁰—chiefly with money made by smuggling. But in one respect the British policy greatly stimulated American industry. It made New England a shipbuilding community. This was brought about by the fact that the Navigation Laws placed the colonial-built ship on the same footing with the English-built ship.

On the whole, the British policy was unfortunate for British interests; it served to alienate the colonists, little by little, and prepared them for the final break with the mother land. Lecky, one of the ablest of the British historians, says:¹¹ "The deliberate selfishness of the English commercial legislation was digging a chasm between the mother country and the colonists."