Old English

Review of the OE situation:

- Negation is expressed by the negative particle (preverbal adverb) *ne*, which precedes the finite verb (1).
- The negated verb is usually initial in main clauses (2); however, the personal pronoun subjects can sometimes precede the negated verb (3);
- Especially in West-Saxon *ne* can be optionally cliticised (3);
- Negation can also be expressed by a negative indefinite pronoun (including adverbial pronoun) or quantifier (must be expressed so in non-finite clauses), but the negative adverb *ne* is still usually present (see sentences (4) and (5)). Combining *ne* with nā or nāwiht could produce a more emphatic form of negation in OE (once again see (4) and (5)).

(1) ...ac hie ne dorston þær on cuman
...but they not dared there in come (Or 1.17.27)
‘...but they did not dare enter there.’

(2) Nat Ic, cwæð Orosius ...
not-know I said Orosius ...
‘I do not know said Orosius...’

(3) He nolde beon cyning.
he not-want to-be king
‘He did not want to be king.’

(4) ...þæt he na siþþan geboren ne würde
... that he never after born not would-be
‘...that he wouldn’t be born afterward.’

(5) Nis he na gesceapen, ne he nis na gesceaf
not-is he not created, nor he not-is not created
‘He (God) is not created, nor is he a creation.’

Middle English

Between the OE and ME periods some important changes took place in the system of sentence negation.

- *ne* ....*naht* (*na* disappears fairly quickly) used more and more frequently and cannot be considered truly emphatic.

- In early ME *naht* acquires a fixed position; it follows *ne* and is placed after a finite verb. In the course of the ME period *ne* .... *naht* (also *nat*, *nought*, *not*) becomes the regular negator.

(6) he no schuld nouȝt fram hem go (Sir Orfeo late 13th/early 14th c.)
he no should not from them go
‘He would not go from them’.

(7) ne reche ich nouȝt (the Owl and the Nightingale)
not care I not
‘I do not care.’

- Because *ne* was now normally supported by *naht* it could be dropped (phonologically it is a weak element). By late ME *nat/not* alone becomes the common negator while *ne* and *ne* .... *not* become infrequent.

(8) I know not þe (Sir Gawain late 14th c.)
I know not you
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‘I don’t know you.’

(9) Arthure wolde not ete   (Sir Gawain)
    Arthur wanted not eat
    ‘Arthur didn’t want to eat.’

- The disappearance of *ne* precipitates the corrosion of multiple negation, but the PDE norm was not established until the MnE period. Where MnE has *not ....anything/ not ... ever*, ME normally (this usage persists into the 17th and 18th c. has *not .. nothing/ not ... never*.

(10) But nevere gronte he at no strook but oon   (CT)
    but never groaned he at no blow but one
(11) They cowd not fynd no londe   (Torkington 62)
    they could not find no land

Modern English

- In early MnE, after the loss of *ne*, there is a tendency to place *not before* the verb, possibly associated with the wish to express negation early in the sentence. This tendency may have been strengthened by the general movement of adverbs to a pre-verbal position.

(12) I not doubt He came aliue to Land   (Shakespeare *Tempest*)
(13) They.... possessed the island, but not enjoyed it. (1740, Johnson *Life Drake*)

- This construction (*S + not + verb*) is first attested in late ME. It is rare in early 16th c.; more common by the end of the century. In the 17th c. it gives way to *do*-periphrasis (see the handout on *do*-periphrasis for details). In non-standard English survives even later, typically in spoken language.