

The Southern Colonies

Colonial America Articles

Article 6

1607-1732

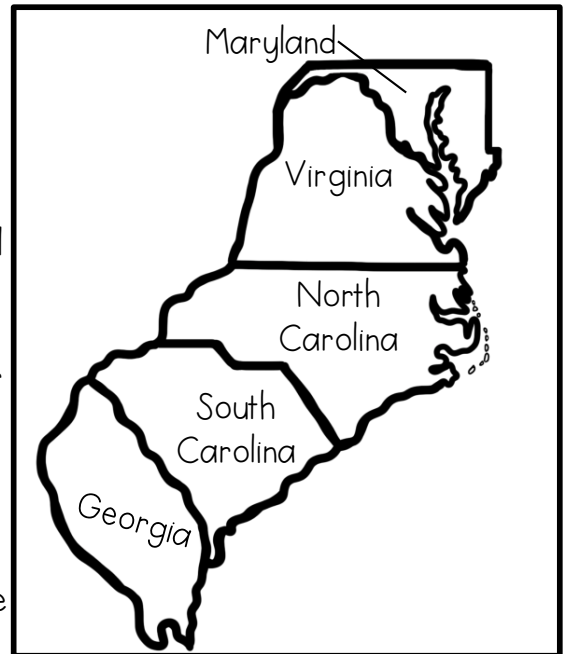
The southern colonies were made up of the colonies of Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.

Geography and Climate

The southern colonies were made up of mostly coastal plains and piedmont areas. The soil was good for farming and the climate was warm, including hot summers and mild winters. The growing season here was longer than any other region.

Economy

The southern colonies' economy was based on **agriculture** (farming). Many of the colonists who came to the southern colonies were rich aristocrats or businessmen from England and they wanted to become even more wealthy from owning land. The flat land was good for farming and so the landowners built very large farms called plantations. The crops that were grown were called **cash crops** because they were harvested for the specific purpose of selling to others. The cash crops of the southern colonies included cotton, tobacco, rice, and **indigo** (a plant that was used to create blue dye). In Virginia and Maryland, the main cash crop was tobacco. In South Carolina and Georgia, the main cash crops were indigo and rice. The cash crops grown in each colony depended on which crop grew best in that colonies' type of soil. There were fewer towns and cities in the southern colonies because farming took a lot of land that was spread apart.



Plantations

Some of the founders of the southern colonies became owners of large areas of land there. They knew that there was rich soil and the warm weather was perfect for large farms called **plantations**. Plantations were huge, almost like towns of their own, and required many workers. Plantations had to be tended to all year long and there were jobs on plantations other than just working in the fields. Plantation owners had a hard time finding people to work the farms. Plantation owners used indentured servants and slaves from Africa to work the fields. Their plantations would not have been successful if there hadn't been so many people working there to get the cash crops harvested. Slaves also worked within the main house as servants to the plantation owner's family. Plantation owners were the wealthiest families in the southern colonies. Most plantations provided everything the family and workers would need throughout the year, which was why plantations were spread so far apart. They were also usually along the coastal plains, near the ocean or rivers to help with shipping their cash crops to other colonies or countries. Children who lived on plantations often had private teachers who taught them to read and write.

Small Farms

Although there were many plantations in the southern colonies, most of the colonies were full of small farms. These farms were also spread out, and instead of being along the coast, they were in the backcountry. The backcountry was the area considered the piedmont, just beyond the coastal plains, further inland. The backcountry was further from towns and schools, so children who lived on small farms rarely went to school or learned to read and write, unless their parents taught them. Small farms were on small pieces of land. The farm owner often worked the fields, which was different from a plantation owner. A small farm owner may have had a few, if any, indentured servants and slaves helping, but the owner worked along side of them if he did.

Indentured Servants

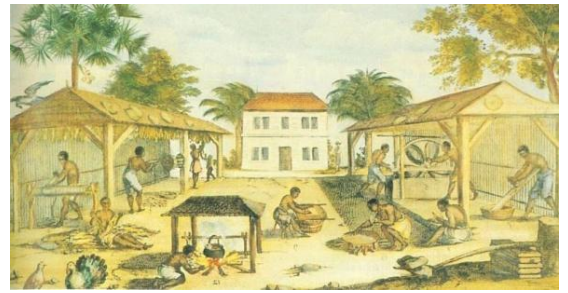
Once landowners realized the potential to become wealthy from farming in the southern colonies, they knew they needed workers. There was plenty of land, but not enough people to work the land. The opposite was true in England. Many landowners had lost their land and were out of work. They were willing to move to North America to earn an opportunity to have their own land and start new. Landowners in the colonies agreed to pay for the food, clothing, transportation, and shelter of these willing people (indentured servants) to bring them to North America. In return, these indentured servants would work on the landowners farms for a period of 4 to 7 years to repay the debt owed to the landowner for bringing them to the colonies. An **indentured servant** was a free person who agreed to work for another person for free and they would sign an indenture, or a contract, that stated the terms of the agreement. Once the indentured servant had worked for the period of time agreed upon in their indenture, they'd be given something called freedom dues, which could include clothing, seeds to start their own crop, or a gun. Many were hopeful for a piece of land. Many indentured servants would work off the debt that the owner had paid within one year. Many indentured servants did not survive to work through their 4-7 years of indentured servitude due to disease and poor nutrition. Owners wanted to get the most for their money, and often overworked their servants. Also, once landowners paid for the indentured servant, they also received 50 more acres of land that could be planted. Many indentured servants, who survived the 4-7 years of work, had not earned any money. Once their indenture was finished, they were forced to begin a new indenture because they could not afford to support themselves. Their hopes of beginning their new farm was dashed with the task of being able to afford to start their own farm.



Indenture of apprenticeship binding Evan Morgan, a child aged 6 years and 11 months, for a period of 14 years, 1 month.

Slaves

The first slaves were purchased in Jamestown in 1619. Plantation owners were short-handed and needed able workers. This began the slave trade. Many slaves were brought from Africa. Slaves were captured and brought to America and considered the property of the person who bought them. The landowner was in charge of providing food, clothing, and shelter. They worked for free, but unlike indentured servants, they were expected to work for their entire life. Slaves were treated cruelly, often beaten and forced to complete difficult work over the course of many hours each day on plantations. If a child was born from a slave, they were also considered a slave and put to work as soon as they were able or sold as a slave to another owner. Slaves received no education and were not taught to read and write. Because the labor was free, the southern colonies became dependant on slaves to be successful. Eventually, many other colonies would see that slavery was wrong, but the southern colonies did not want slavery to end because their wealth depended on these workers.



Slaves working on a tobacco plantation.