

Comparing the English Colonies

What were the similarities and differences among the colonies in North America?

Introduction

In the mid-1700s, a German schoolteacher named Gottlieb Mittelberger boarded a ship bound for the colony of Pennsylvania in far-off North America. Most of his fellow passengers had borrowed the cost of the passage by signing on as indentured servants. They would have to settle the debt by working for the person who bought their services.

The voyage across the Atlantic was horrible. “The people are packed densely,” Mittelberger wrote. “One person receives a place of scarcely 2 feet width and 6 feet length ... There is on board these ships terrible misery, stench, fumes, horror, vomiting, many kinds of seasickness, fever, dysentery, headache, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot, and the like, all of which come from old and sharply salted food and meat, also from very bad and foul water.”

When the nightmarish voyage ended, Mittelberger recounted that many of the passengers had to stay on board until their services were purchased. Most indentured servants had to work for three to six years. As Mittelberger noted, “young people, from 10 to 15 years, must serve till they are 21 years old.”

Why were people willing to go through such hardships to come to the colonies? Many colonists came to North America for the chance to own land and start a new life. Others sought freedom to practice their religion without fear of persecution. There were also some who did not have a choice. A number of convicts (people found guilty of a crime) were forced to go to North America to work off their debts as indentured servants, and millions of Africans were kidnapped from their homelands and enslaved in the colonies by Europeans. Enslaved Africans were treated far worse than indentured servants, and their enslavement would span across generations.

In this lesson, you will learn about the people who settled the English colonies. You will read about the similarities and differences in eight of the 13 colonies.

Social Studies Vocabulary

cash crop

charter

democratic

Mayflower Compact

mercantilism

Vocabulary Cards Glossary

1. The New England, Middle, and Southern Colonies

The English settlers established colonies in North America for several reasons. Some colonies were created by groups of businesspeople who hoped to profit from the natural resources found in the Americas. Others were colonized by people looking for a place to practice their religion without fear of persecution. One colony was even established as a refuge for debtors (people who owe money), who would otherwise have been imprisoned. Although the colonies were established for different reasons, they all had something in common: the land had originally been inhabited by Indigenous people.

The English government supported the creation of colonies in part because it was competing for land in the Americas with other nations such as France and Spain. England had another reason for establishing colonies: it was also competing for wealth. Like most western European nations in the late 1600s, England followed an economic policy called **mercantilism**. Under this policy, nations attempted to gain wealth by controlling trade and establishing colonies. The colonies made money for England by supplying raw materials for its industries. England turned these raw materials into goods that could then be sold to other nations and to its own colonies.

By 1733, there were 13 British colonies along the Atlantic coastline. They can be grouped into three distinct regions: the New England, Middle, and Southern

colonies. These regions had different climates and resources that attracted colonists and encouraged the development of different ways of life.

The New England Colonies The New England region included the colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. The early colonizers in this region came to America seeking freedom from the religious persecution that they had previously faced in England.

In New England, farming was difficult because of the long, cold winters and the region's rocky, hilly wilderness. But the forests and the sea provided useful resources and ways to make a living. New Englanders built their **economy** on small farms, logging, fishing, shipbuilding, and trade.

The Middle Colonies The four Middle Colonies were New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. The first colonists in this area came from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. The landscape of this region ranged from the rich soil of coastal New Jersey and Delaware to the valleys and wooded mountains of New York and Pennsylvania. Farmers in the Middle Colonies raised a variety of crops and livestock. Logging, shipbuilding, and other occupations added to the many opportunities here.

The Europeans who settled the Middle Colonies represented many cultures and religions. One important group, the Quakers, started the colony of Pennsylvania. Like the early colonizers of New England, the Quakers were looking for freedom to practice their religion without fear of persecution. Other groups seeking religious freedom soon followed, and settlements of French, Dutch, Germans, Swedes, Danes, Finns, Scots, Irish, and English began to spread throughout the Middle Colonies.

The Southern Colonies The five Southern Colonies were Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. This region featured broad rivers and vast wetlands that gradually merged with the sea. The soil and the hot, wet climate were ideal for growing tobacco, rice, and other **cash crops**.

Wealthy colonists took advantage of these conditions by establishing large farms called plantations. Plantation owners relied on unpaid workers—indentured servants and kidnapped and enslaved Africans—to sow and harvest their fields. After being harvested, the crops could be brought by river to the coast and loaded on ships for transport to other colonies and to Europe.

Government in the Colonies All the colonies were settled with the permission of the king of England. For each colony, the king issued a **charter**, a formal document that outlined the colony's geographic boundaries, without considering the area's

Indigenous inhabitants, and specified how it would be governed. Because the colonies were so far from England, however, they needed to be able to make their own laws and keep peace and order.

Most of the colonies developed different forms of government depending on the settlement's purpose. Within most of these colonies, colonists elected members of their community to a general assembly, which made their laws.

Many colonies also had a governor appointed by the king. As the king's representative, the governor could overrule the elected assembly. Some colonies also had councils, or groups of men who represented the English businessmen whose money helped fund the colony's creation.

In Massachusetts, religious colonists established a theocracy, a government based upon religious principles and whose leaders rule in the name of God. In time, however, a system of town meetings emerged in which colonists voted for representatives to govern them.

In many ways, the colonies were more **democratic** than England. Still, not all colonists had a voice in the government. Usually, only free, White landowning men were allowed to vote. In some colonies, voters also had to belong to the preferred church. Other colonists— including women, servants, enslaved Africans, and skilled tradesmen who did not own land—had no voting rights.



By 1770, the 13 American colonies had developed a distinctive way of life that would affect the development of America for years to come. Although this map shows the establishment of colonies, it does not show the original Indigenous groups who had long occupied the land. They were often violently displaced by European colonizers or killed by European diseases, to which they had no immunity. The Europeans were not interested in Indigenous ways of life or claims to land, although they needed help from Indigenous people to find and grow food and to survive.

2. Massachusetts: A New England Colony

In the early 1600s, kings presided over the Church of England, also called the Anglican Church. However, not everyone agreed with the church's practices.

One group, later called Puritans, wanted to "purify" the Anglican Church by making services simpler and getting rid of ranks of authority. A sub-group of Puritans, called Separatists, wanted to separate entirely from the English church. When the king began jailing Separatists for not attending Anglican services, some moved to the Netherlands, where they could practice their religion freely.

In 1620, about 102 Separatists sailed for America on the *Mayflower*. The Separatists, also called Pilgrims, hoped to build their idea of a perfect society in America. During their voyage, they signed the [Mayflower Compact](#), which described how they would govern themselves in the Americas.

When the Pilgrims landed, they were met by the local Indigenous people, the Wampanoag (WAWM-pah-NAW-ahg), who taught them how to plant crops, trap animals, and catch fish. Without their help, the Pilgrims might not have survived their first winter. In 1621, the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest in a three-day feast. The Wampanoags were not invited. However, fearing war, Wampanoag fighters came running when they heard celebratory gunfire. Told it was a celebration, the Wampanoags joined the feast. Today, many Americans celebrate this event as Thanksgiving.

Ten years later, a large group of Puritans decided to follow the Pilgrims to America. The king sent them off with a charter for the colony of Massachusetts Bay. The charter said that they would govern themselves. The Puritans were pleased with the charter because they wanted to build a community governed by the rules of the Bible.

Massachusetts New England Colony

- **Founders** Pilgrims led by William Bradford (1620) and Puritans led by John Winthrop (1630)
- **Colonizers** Puritans escaping religious persecution
- **Climate** Harsh winters, warm summers
- **Geography** Sandy coast with good ports, rich pastures, forests
- **Economy/Occupations** Crop and livestock farming, logging, shops, shipping
- **Religion** Puritan
- **Government** Self-governing, with strong religious influence
- **Indigenous tribes** The Massachusett, the Wampanoag, the Nipmuc

3. Rhode Island: A New England Colony

The Puritans of Massachusetts gained the freedom to practice their religion without being persecuted. However, instead of granting similar freedom to others, they created a government that required everyone in the colony to worship the same way as they did.

When a young minister named Roger Williams began preaching different ideas, the Puritans put him on trial. Williams believed that all people should be able to worship in any way they chose. "Forced worship," he declared, "stinks in God's nostrils."

Although the Puritans ordered Williams to be sent back to England, he left his wife and children on a cold winter day in 1636 and escaped to the south. After trudging through snow for days, he met a group of Indigenous people near Narragansett Bay, the Narragansett people, who cared for him until spring. When his family and a few followers joined him, Williams bought land from the Narragansetts for a settlement. He called it Providence, a word meaning "the guidance and care of God."

Williams welcomed people with different religious beliefs to Providence. Two years after he and his followers settled Providence, a colonist named Anne Hutchinson was forced to leave Massachusetts for preaching against the Puritans. She followed Williams, and together they established a settlement called Portsmouth. In 1647, these and other settlements united to become the colony of Rhode Island. In 1663, Rhode Island elected an assembly to govern the colony.

Although the people of Rhode Island sought freedom to follow their own beliefs, this ideal did not extend to enslaved Africans. Sea merchants soon discovered the riches that could be made by buying and selling kidnapped Africans. As a result, Rhode Island became one of the largest centers for the trade of enslaved people in the world. Some of the wealthiest families in New England made their fortunes from trading people who were enslaved. At the same time, the **isolated** coves along the Rhode Island coast provided perfect refuges for pirates and smugglers.

Puritans in other colonies were disgusted by the enslavement, pirating, and smuggling taking place in Rhode Island. Reverend Cotton Mather of Boston called Rhode Island "the sewer of New England." The actions of traders of enslaved people in Rhode Island led many Puritans to believe that rejecting these people and their ideas was justified. Using a word that implied "criminals," they invented their own name for the colony: "Rogues' Island."

Rhode Island New England Colony

- **Founders** Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson
- **Colonizers** People seeking religious freedom
- **Climate** Hot, humid summers; cold, snowy winters
- **Geography** Coastal lowlands; flat, rocky woodlands
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming (large cattle and dairy farms, small independent farms), logging, shipbuilding, fishing, whaling, trade
- **Religion** Various faiths
- **Government** Self-governing
- **Indigenous tribes** The Narragansett, the Pokanoket

4. Connecticut: A New England Colony

Even among the Puritans who stayed in Massachusetts, not all of them shared exactly the same ideas. Thomas Hooker was a Puritan clergyman who lived in New Towne, a fast-growing community next to Boston. Hooker did not always agree with the laws and leadership in Massachusetts. When he heard about a fertile valley along a river to the west, he convinced his family and about 100 other people to move there with him.

It took Hooker and his followers two weeks to travel to the Connecticut Valley with their animals and belongings. There, they established a settlement on the site of an old Dutch fort, where an earlier group of English colonists had settled. Hooker and his followers called their new community Hartford. In 1639, Hartford joined with two other English settlements to form the colony of Connecticut.

Hooker believed that government should be based on, "the free consent of the people," to whom belongs, "the choice of public [officials] by God's own allowance." He helped draw up the first written plan of government for any of the colonies, which was called the Fundamental Orders. The Fundamental Orders

guaranteed the right to vote to all free men who were members of the Puritan church.

Meanwhile, other Puritans formed a separate colony nearby, on the land of the Quinnipiac people, called New Haven. The Puritans of New Haven agreed to live by the "word of God," so their laws were stricter than those in Hooker's Connecticut colony.

Neither of these colonies, however, was legally **authorized** by the king. In 1662, King Charles II granted a charter for a new Connecticut colony that included New Haven. The charter gave Connecticut colonists more rights than those enjoyed by any other colonists except Rhode Island's. A popular legend states that when King James II sent Edmund Andros, the governor of New York, to Hartford 25 years later to take back the colonists' charter, someone stole it and hid it in the trunk of a huge white oak tree. The "Charter Oak" became a symbol of Connecticut's freedom.

Connecticut New England Colony

- **Founder** Thomas Hooker
- **Colonizers** Puritans seeking a new settlement
- **Climate** Cold winters, mild summers
- **Geography** Forested hills, seacoast
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming (crops and livestock), shipbuilding, fishing, whaling
- **Religion** Puritan
- **Government** Written constitution (Fundamental Orders), self-governing
- **Indigenous tribes** The Mohegan, the Mahican (Mohican), the Quinnipiac

5. New York: A Middle Colony

The English took control of the settlement of New Netherland in 1664. The English renamed the colony New York in honor of its new **proprietor** (owner), James, the Duke of York. The duke gave huge chunks of his colony to two friends, Sir George Carteret and Lord John Berkeley, who then established the colony of New Jersey to the south of New York.

The duke also awarded large estates along the Hudson River to wealthy Englishmen. The new landowners charged high rents to farmers working their land. This practice created a great difference in wealth between the landowners and their poor tenants, and it discouraged people from settling in New York.

The Duke of York expected his colony to be a moneymaking business. As its owner, he appointed people to run the colony. He also issued his own laws and decided what New Yorkers should pay in taxes.

Although New York's rich landlords approved of the duke's approach to governing his colony, farmers, fishers, and tradespeople did not. They demanded the right to elect an assembly to make laws for New York. The duke refused, saying that elected assemblies had a habit of disturbing the "peace of the government."

After years of protest, the duke finally allowed New Yorkers to elect an assembly in 1683. Only male landowners had the right to vote. This first assembly passed 15 laws, the most important of which was a charter listing a number of rights that most colonists believed they deserved as English citizens. Among them were the right to elect their own lawmakers, the right to trial by jury, and the right to worship as they pleased.

When the duke, who was now King James II, saw what the assembly had done, he abolished it. New Yorkers did not get a new assembly until 1689. It was this year that Jacob Leisler (LIES ler), led a rebellion. Supported by small farmers and city workers, he was able to quickly take control of the colony. That year, New York was finally granted the right to elect an assembly with the power to pass laws and set taxes for the colony.

New York Middle Colony

- **Founders** Dutch West India Company (1624); James Duke of York (1664)
- **Colonizers** Dutch and English seeking new lives
- **Climate** Cold, snowy winters; hot, humid summers
- **Geography** Wetlands along the coast and Hudson River, forested mountains to the north
- **Economy/Occupations** Fur-trapping, logging, shipping, trade of enslaved people, merchants and tradesmen, farming, iron mining
- **Religion** Various faiths
- **Government** British-appointed governor and council alternating with elected assembly
- **Indigenous tribes** The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, the Oneida, the O-non-dowa-gah (Seneca)

6. Pennsylvania: A Middle Colony

When William Penn asked King Charles II to let him establish a colony in America, the king had two reasons for granting Penn's request. First, he could repay a large debt that he owed to Penn's father, Admiral Penn. Second, he could get rid of William, who had been a thorn in the king's side for several years.

William Penn was a member of the Society of Friends, or Quakers. The Quakers believed in a simple lifestyle and in treating all people equally. Because of their belief in equality, they refused to bow before the king. They also refused to fight in wars or pay taxes to the Church of England. Although they initially took part in the trade and enslavement of kidnapped Africans, they would eventually ban enslavement. Later, the Quakers became prominent in the fight to end enslavement and to increase women's rights.

In 1668, the king jailed Penn to stop him from preaching the Quakers' ideas. To the king's dismay, Penn continued preaching after his release.

With the Quakers unwelcome in England, Penn sought to establish a colony in America where they could practice their beliefs. In 1681, the king granted Penn a huge area of land, which was then inhabited by the Lenape (Delaware) and Susquehannocks. The land was between the Puritan colonies of New England and the Anglican colonies of the South. In honor of Penn's father, the colony was called Pennsylvania.

Penn advertised his colony all over Europe. Many were drawn to Pennsylvania by his Great Law of 1682, which guaranteed that people of all faiths would be treated equally.

Penn's appeal attracted people from several European countries. An early colonist in Pennsylvania wrote, "Poor people (both Men and Women) of all kinds, can here get three times the Wages for their Labour they can in England or Wales."

Penn named his capital city Philadelphia, which is Greek for "City of Brotherly Love." From there, he wrote important government documents that made Pennsylvania the first democracy in America.

Pennsylvania Middle Colony

- **Founder** William Penn
- **Colonizers** English Quakers and other Europeans seeking freedom and equality
- **Climate** Cold winters; hot, humid summers
- **Geography** Rolling hills, trees, and fertile soil
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming (crops and dairy), merchants and tradesman, logging, shipbuilding
- **Religion** Various faiths
- **Government** Self-governing
- **Indigenous tribes** The Susquehannock, the Lenape (Delaware), the Erie

7. Maryland: A Southern Colony

The founding of Maryland was a family enterprise. Sir George Calvert, named Lord Baltimore by King James I, was an English gentleman who became a Roman Catholic. In England, with its official Anglican Church, Catholics were treated harshly. Calvert wanted to start a colony “founded on religious freedom where there would not only be a good life, but also a prosperous one for those bold enough to take the risk.” As a businessman, he also hoped the colony would make his own family more **prosperous**, or wealthy.

Unfortunately, Calvert died while he was still bargaining with the king. The new king, King Charles I, granted a charter for the colony to Calvert's son Cecil, the new Lord Baltimore. The charter gave the Calverts complete control of the colony, which was called Maryland.

Armed with these powers, Cecil named his brother Leonard as governor. To make money from the colony, Cecil needed to attract both Protestant and Catholic settlers. He told Leonard to be “very careful to preserve unity and peace ... and treat the Protestants with as much mildness and favor as justice will permit.”

Leonard's expedition arrived in Maryland in 1634. There, he and his followers built St. Mary's City on a high, dry bluff they purchased from the Yaocomico, an Algonquian-speaking Indigenous group. The following year, Leonard agreed to let Maryland elect an assembly to govern the colony.

As more and more colonizers arrived, Leonard could see that Catholics would always be outnumbered in the colony. To protect their rights, he helped pass America's first law guaranteeing religious liberty, the Act Concerning Religion, in 1649. This law, however, applied only to Christians. Atheists (people who do not believe in the existence of God) and Jewish people were not included.

Despite the Calverts' efforts, Protestants and Catholics remained suspicious of one another and waged a tug-of-war in Maryland for more than a century. During this time, the colony's founding family lost and regained power several times. Still, George Calvert's dream was fulfilled. Catholics in Maryland worshiped freely and took part in the colony's government alongside Protestants.

Maryland Southern Colony

- **Founder** Cecil Calvert (Lord Baltimore)
- **Colonizers** Catholics and Protestants seeking religious and political freedom
- **Climate** Cold, rainy winters; hot, humid summers
- **Geography** Low, fertile land surrounding Chesapeake Bay
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming and ranching (crops, beef, dairy), logging, shipping, fishing, iron mining
- **Religion** Various faiths, particularly Catholic
- **Government** Self-governing
- **Indigenous tribes** The Piscataway, the Nanticoke

8. Virginia: A Southern Colony

After a shaky start with the founding of Jamestown, Virginia grew and prospered. In 1693, James Blair co-founded the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

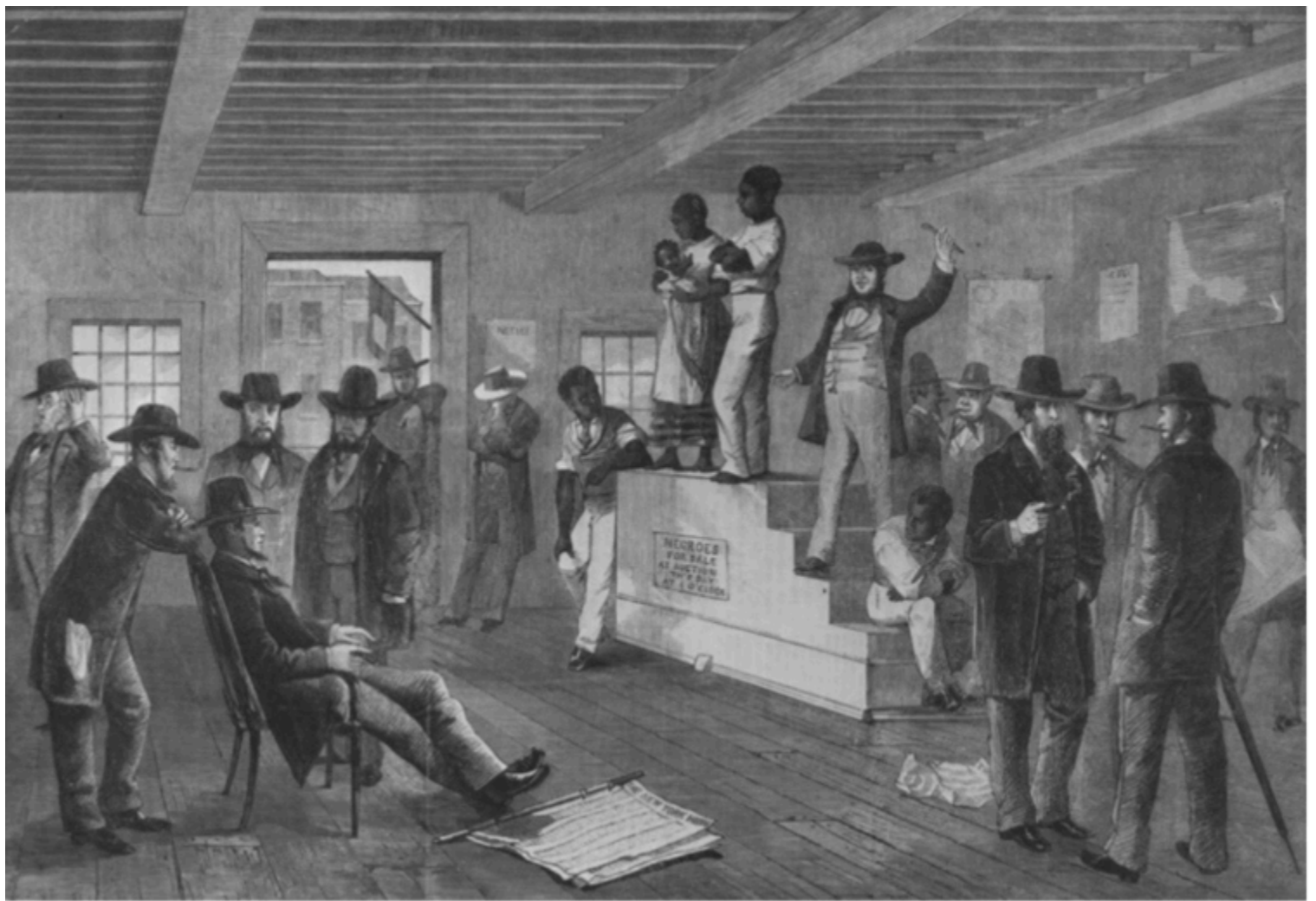
The economy of Virginia was based on tobacco. Tobacco planters needed vast areas of land to be profitable. They also needed a large number of laborers to grow their crops.

Planters, looking for inexpensive labor, initially tried to enslave Indigenous people. Virginia had varying laws regarding the enslavement of Indigenous people, with laws changing over time to ban or permit it. Many enslaved Indigenous people died of diseases they caught from colonists. Others escaped bondage and fled into the woods.

During this time, tobacco planters also brought impoverished people from England to work their land. In exchange for passage to Virginia, the workers agreed to become indentured servants for five to seven years. When their service ended, they were given their freedom along with a small plot of land, some clothing, tools, and seeds.

Colonists brought the first Africans to Virginia to work as indentured servants. Initially, they had the same rights and freedoms as White servants. Once their service ended, they could buy land and servants of their own. However, as fewer Europeans wanted to endure the brutal conditions on plantations, planters enslaved Africans and their descendants. The term of enslavement had no end, and the children of enslaved people were also enslaved. Ultimately, this form of enslavement continued for generations and was a major part of the economic development of the colonies and, later, the United States.

Virginia's elected assembly, the House of Burgesses, helped enable and formally legalize slavery. In 1705, the House of Burgesses passed a law defining enslaved people as property and strictly regulating their actions. By 1700, more than one-fourth of Virginia's population—more than 16,000 people—were Africans or their descendants who were enslaved. Colonists in Virginia came to view slavery as essential to the colony's economic success.



The English brought the first enslaved Africans to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. Over time, Virginia began to rely heavily on tobacco farming, and colonists' demand for enslaved Africans, whom they forced to work on their plantations, increased. This illustration shows a 19th-century auction at which African Americans were sold as property.

Virginia Southern Colony

- **Founders** Sir Walter Raleigh and the Virginia Company
- **Colonizers** English landowners, skilled laborers (shoemakers, bricklayers, tailors), people seeking profit
- **Climate** Mild winters; hot, humid summers
- **Geography** Coastal lowlands, wooded mountains
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming (plantations and small independent farms)
- **Religion** Church of England
- **Government** Self-governing, with elected assembly (House of Burgesses)
- **Indigenous tribes** The Powhatan, the Manahoac, the Monacan

9. Georgia: A Southern Colony

Georgia, the 13th and last colony, was founded by a group of Englishmen whose business plan was based on an innovative idea. In England, people who could not pay their bills went to jail. James Oglethorpe inspired wealthy Englishmen to give money to help establish a colony where the poor could build better lives instead of going to jail.

King George II and his government liked this plan because the Georgia colony would help keep the Spanish from moving north out of Florida. Georgia would stand between Spanish Florida and the rest of the British colonies to the north.

However, few poor debtors took up the offer to start new lives in the wilderness of North America. The colonizers who went with Oglethorpe to Georgia in 1732 were adventurers much like the Europeans in the other colonies. In addition, many Protestants and Jews came to Georgia in search of religious freedom.

When Oglethorpe arrived, he found a powerful ally in Tomochichi, the chief of the Yamacraw people. Oglethorpe was granted land through a treaty, and Tomochichi secured the right to trade with colonizers. However, the colonizers still faced conflicts with the Spaniards in Florida, who wanted to control Georgia and continually attacked the new settlements.

Additionally, Oglethorpe had specific ideas about how the colonists should live in this new land. He envisioned that his new colony would be a perfect society, and he established laws against drinking alcohol and enslaving Africans to fulfill this vision. He also believed that the colonists should live on small farms and learn to farm their land themselves.

The colonizers were unhappy with Oglethorpe's rules and did not want to live according to his strict views on society. They wanted to farm large plantations and enslave Africans like the wealthy planters in neighboring colonies.

After 12 years of governing the colony, Oglethorpe returned to England. In 1752, the people of Georgia elected an assembly.

Georgia Southern Colony

- **Founders** George II and James Edward Oglethorpe
- **Colonizers** Debtors from English prisons, Europeans seeking religious freedom and cheap land
- **Climate** Short, mild winters; long, hot, humid summers
- **Geography** Wetlands and red-clay plains; forested mountains
- **Economy/Occupations** Farming (plantations and independent farms), trade, skilled labor
- **Religion** Various faiths
- **Government** Self-governing
- **Indigenous tribes** The Cherokee, the Muscogee (Creek), the Yamassee