

# LIFE IN THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

by [David Lee Russell](#)

As the mid-eighteenth century arrived, life for the Southern colonists was the best that the British colonial experience could ever have yielded. In almost every aspect of their lives, these peoples had achieved a standard of life not equaled even in the mature societies and economies of Western Europe. The evidence of details of the lives of these people has not been balanced across the economic and social ladder as one might expect. While there has always been a reasonable body of knowledge covering the landed gentry and the upper class of the colonial era, there is still comparatively little known of the majority of the middle and lower classes in the South. Because of the lack of diaries, letters or official documents for most of the population, the details of the lives of these forgotten population remains rather sketchy. What we do know about this largest segment of the Southern population is that they were a hardy, self-respecting and self-supporting people.

From the very beginning the key to prosperity for the Southern colonist was the near universal opportunity to acquire land. Land was the source and measure of wealth in the world at that time. A tobacco planter wrote, “If a man has Money, Negroes and Land enough he is a complete Gentleman.”<sup>[1]</sup> And land was abundant. In Jamestown the investors in the parent London Company were given 100 acres for each share of stock they owned.<sup>[2]</sup> Later, as the colony developed, the colonial government gave anyone who paid his own passage to the New World 50 acres free through the “headright system.” In Maryland, Lord Baltimore granted manorial estates to any who would import 50 persons to his colony, and as a result over 60 manors were established there.<sup>[3]</sup> Around Charles Town, South Carolina in the late seventeenth century, land was valued at only one penny per acre.<sup>[4]</sup> Thus, the acquisition of land was not the issue. The more critical issue of the colonial period was not how to obtain land; it was how to obtain adequate labor to work the land.

Overall the living standards of the typical white family were the highest in the world in the mid-1700s. Land was readily available, the population density was low, the air and water was not polluted, food was plentiful, disease was low, abject poverty was rare, energy was abundant, and the environment was essentially untouched and beautiful. The struggles to survive, as in the early colonial period, were mostly a past concern for the majority of the population. The median income

per capita was around £10 (\$900 in 1985 equivalent dollars). Pretax incomes were similar to those in Great Britain, yet the colonists paid little to no taxes. Therefore, the colonist had more disposable income. A study on Maryland's Eastern Shore found that a typical household spent one quarter of their income for products that came from outside their colony of residence. This was a significant finding, and a real indicator of a high level of economic activity for the eighteenth century in North America.

The sure sign of the well being of the colonists were their diets. The typical family spent a third of their income on food such as grains and vegetables. The high meat consumption was a key indicator of their relative wealth. The colonists had high quantities of pork and dairy products, with the average adult consuming about 1/2 pound of meat per day. Hard evidence of the impact of good nutritional diets in the American colonies as compared to that of Great Britain was researched by Kenneth Sokoloff and Georgia Villaflor based on the muster rolls of soldiers in the French and Indian War and the American Revolution on both sides. Their work found that native-born colonial soldiers were two inches taller than the British soldiers, a clear scientific indicator of the superior diets of the North American colonists.[\[5\]](#)

The majority of the Southern colonial farms were sized at between 75 to 125 acres, and were worked by the immediate family. With hard work and some money for tools to clear the forests into arable land, a family could provide an adequate diet. Developing large farms was difficult when one considers that it took a farmer a month to clear around 3 acres if he left the tree stumps in the ground. Although this was a backbreaking way to exist, it represented up to 75 percent of the livelihood of the population of colonists. The typical Southern small farmer planted corn, wheat, barley, oats, and rye and a variety of vegetables in season on 15 to 35 acres of his farm, leaving the rest of the acreage to forest or pasture. He raised livestock cattle and hogs for meat, and cows for hides and dairy products. Horses were used for transportation and for working the fields. Sheep were raised for wool. Some farms had a small orchard for growing fruits.

For the first 15 years after settlement in 1607, dwellings at Jamestown continued to be rather crude shanties of green timber and poor workmanship, always falling into decay and disrepair. But gradually the houses improved and became more substantial. Most of houses were framed wood structures. The standard dwelling was indeed small at 350 to 400 square feet. It consisted of two rooms, on one story, with a brick fireplace and a packed dirt floor. The cost of this dwelling was about

\$270 in building materials. The wood frame structures had weatherboard exteriors with shingle roofs. Windows were small and shuttered, made of glass or oiled paper. Sometimes the floor was of brick, set in sand. The front door was of heavy wood planks.[\[6\]](#)

The homes found in the Southern towns had similar attributes of the farm dwellings. In the town of Williamsburg, Virginia, as described in an account by Reverend Hugh Jones, the homes were being “built with Brick, but most commonly with Timber lined with Ceiling, cased with feather-edged Plank, painted with white lead and Oil, covered with Shingles of Cedar...”[\[7\]](#) In Jamestown Governor Sir Harvey in a letter to the Privy Council in 1638 described 12 new homes in the town, with “the fairest that was ever known in this countrye” being built of brick by the secretary, and the others were framed houses that were constructed “consonant to his Ma’ties Instruction that we should not suffer men to build slight cottages as heretofore.”

The type of housing a person or family had usually varied according to social class. For those families that prospered, they would build or acquire a three-room home of brick, with a wood floor, two brick fireplaces and some 800 or more square feet of living space. Homes outside Jamestown, owned by planters, were constructed of brick foundations and chimneys only, with the remaining made of wood, which was in great abundance. A typical dwelling in Virginia was the parsonage of the vestry of Northampton County, which was built in 1635. It was 40 feet long, 18 feet wide and “nyne foot to the wall plates,” with a chimney at each end. A partition ran through the middle of the home which divided it into the “Kitchinge” and the “Chamber” and at each end there was a room—a study and the other a buttery. All homes lacked plumbing and water closets. Lighting was by candle or by lamp of metal or glass, fueled by whale oil. During the last half of the seventeenth century in Virginia, while houses varied from one-story or two-story cottages to two-story-and-a-half brick structures, the most common house was a story-and-a-half of wood or brick, with the occasional rear wing and often a “shedd-room” kitchen.[\[8\]](#)

The large plantation manor homes of the wealthy gentry were extremely impressive. During the eighteenth century the most common plantation, whether of brick or wood, was a large square building of two stories high, with a wide hall—often called the “great hall”—with four large rooms on each floor, and four chimneys. The building often had one or more wings, or even detached buildings

for laundry, kitchen, office or school. The stable or carriage house was usually further away from the primary dwelling. The mansion “Rosewell” on the York River in Virginia had, including the wings, a frontage of two hundred and thirty one feet, with the central building containing fourteen rooms sized at twenty foot square, and nine rooms measured fourteen by seven feet. There were some nine passages and a “great hall” with a grand stairway displaying a mahogany banister carved with fruit and flower designs, leading up to a hardwood landing which commanded an impressive view of the York River and the surrounding countryside.<sup>[9]</sup>

Homes in Maryland looked very much like those in neighboring Virginia. Lord Baltimore had directed that the colonists construct homes in “as decent and uniforme a manner as their abilities and the place will afford, and neere adjoining on to an other.” In 1638 Father White wrote Lord Baltimore recommending that he send a brickmaker to the colony to allow each planter to build a brick home that would be cheaper, more healthful “against heate and coale,” and “fitter for defense against the infidels.” But the Marylanders evolved from hut, to framed wood story-and-a-half houses as was done in Virginia. A French visitor in 1781 to Maryland commented on the contrast between the luxury homes found at Annapolis and the small structures father north. He wrote, “As we advance towards the south, we observe a sensible difference in the manners and customs of the people. We no longer find, as in Connecticut, houses situated along the road at small distances, just large enough to contain a single family, and the household furniture nothing more than is barely necessary; here are spacious habitations, consisting of different buildings, at some distance from each other, surrounded with plantations that extend beyond the reach of the eye...Their furniture here, is constructed out of the most costly kinds of wood, and that most valuable marble, enriched by the elegant devices of the artists hand.”

The settlers in North Carolina in the Albemarle region before 1700 still lived in rude cabins since they were without large sums of capital. Yet John Lawson wrote around 1700 that most citizens “...lived very nobly.” Brick was made in the area, and the presence of skilled carpenters, joiners, masons and plasterers supported the building of many attractive and substantial residences. In South Carolina, in and around Charles Town, the homes were mostly of wood, yet brick houses were in evidence. Staying with a Frenchman some 36 miles outside the town, he noted “a very curious contrived house built of brick and stone.” For the wealthy planter class, that began to flourish by mid-17th century, it was very common for them to

have not only their mansion on their plantation, but also to maintain a home in the city. These town houses were “large and handsome, having all the conveniences one sees at home [England]...the most considerable are of Brick, the other Cypress and yellow Pine.”[\[10\]](#)

The frontier houses in the backwoods of the Carolinas remained crude for most of the colonial period. In 1729 in Winyaw Parish the parsonage was described as, “a wooden building but plaster’d within, a story & half high & 25 foot Square.” Around 1767 Reverend James Harrison in St. Mark’s Parish, located 8 miles from Charles Town, was provided a representative house “...just finished, 36 ft. front, with four good rooms, lobby and staircase-a good kitchen, garden, orchard, stables and necessary out houses.” In Charlotte, North Carolina in 1766 regulations required each lot have, “one well framed sawed orhewed Log-House” some 20 feet long, 16 feet wide and 10 feet “in the clear” with brick or stone chimney.[\[11\]](#)

In Georgia by the middle of the 17th century most houses were still made of wood. Sir Francis Bathurst in 1735 tells of a house 20 feet long, by 12 feet wide, divided into two apartments, a bedroom and dining room, and the house covered with clapboards. By the mid-18th century houses in Georgia had become grander, especially in Savannah. In 1765 John Graham advertised a house of two stories, with a first floor containing “a handsome balcony in the front, with a dining room, two “good bed-chambers,” one of which had a fireplace, a passage of “eight feet wide, and an easy well finished staircase,” a “kitchen adjoining the house well fitted up,” and a piazza running the full length of the house, at one end of which was a “bedroom lined, plastered and glazed,” and at the other a convenient storeroom. On the second floor was a “large well finished dining-room, a good bed-chamber, both with fire places, and a light closet that will hold a field-bed.” The home also had a cellar, several out buildings including two worthy lodging rooms. But most Georgia backwoods houses were one and two room structures of hewed logs, notched to fit together, with the cracks filled with moss, sticks, straw and clay. These simple houses had a roof of clapboards, and a chimney of logs backed with stone.[\[12\]](#)

The colonial houses of the average farmer were furnished with a minimum of simple household objects, usually consisting of half split logs on peg-legs, a chest, a sawbuck wood table, barrels for chairs and a bed of straw either laying on the floor or suspended by rawhide strips on a wood frame.[\[13\]](#) The most prominent

and often the most expensive item of furniture in many homes was the bed, which was found in nearly every room in the house except the kitchen. Soon the grand four-poster beds covered with soft feather mattress, adorned with pillows and sheets of oznaburg, canvas Holland or linen, blankets and quilts of bright colors, was the norm. The estates of the planters contained a great variety of beds, tables, chairs, chests, trunks, portraits, rugs, tapestries and clocks.[\[14\]](#) The furniture was made of oak, pine, cypress, bay, cedar, maple and walnut, while mahogany was to appear in the eighteenth century. Refinements included brass or iron andirons, shovel, tongs, and bellows at each fireplace, with curtains at the window, and cushions for the chairs.

Personal property was scarce for the average colonist, consisting of a few handmade clothing items (including a few wool items for winter) and a pair of shoes. Lower classes ate from wooden bowls. Middle-class families had earthenware or pewter, bed and table linen, knives, forks, and a Bible. Tumblers, mugs, flagons, tankards and cups were used for drinking. Other eating articles were “saltcellars, porringers, sugar-pots, butter-dishes, castors, cruets, bowls and Jugs.”[\[15\]](#) Above the median families had a few fancy clothes, a watch, china plates, fine furniture, some silver items and a few small amenities. Those in the wealthy class had fine clothes, imported furniture, tapestries, clocks, exquisite china and silver, non-religious books, a man’s wig artwork, a carriage, and a volume of luxury goods. The wealthy also had household chores performed by servants or slaves.[\[16\]](#)

Cooking of any meal was a major undertaking. Activity was centered around the fireplace, with wood-fired cooking with hanging pots swung over the fire or in the oven on the side of the brickwork. Cook stoves, invented by Franklin in 1740, were not commonly used at this time. Cooking utensils and methods were basic.[\[17\]](#) Mealtimes were different than today. The farmer rose early and headed out to handle his chores. At around 10 AM he returned for a big breakfast of smoked beef or turkey, sugar, and sometimes milk, butter or eggs. The remaining meal of the day was dinner occurring at 9 PM followed shortly with bedtime. Game, fish, smoked beef or pork, vegetables, wheat bread, pie and pudding were some of the usual dinner staples. The potato was new to the diet of the colonist, appearing after 1720 when the Scots-Irish introduced it.[\[18\]](#) Corn was popular, with cornbread being as available on a royal governor’s table as it was in the log cabin of the black slave field hand. Hogs and hominy was seasoned with cabbage or greens.[\[19\]](#)

While an image of a life of idleness and leisure for the Southern colonial woman may have evolved over time, the impression is not one of fact for most females. The lives of the planter's wife and the ladies in the town mansions was quite different than that of the poorer lot in the backwoods areas. The mistress of the plantation was spared from much drudgery with servant and slave help, as she primarily handled the duties of providing food for her large family and guests. She was responsible for the management of the large family in an era of limited home technology for even the most basic of activities. In addition to handling the servants, she personally handled the sewing by hand of most of the clothing worn by the family, cared for the children, made butter from milk, processed pickles and preserves, handled the poultry and meats like sausage, cured the ham, managed the washing of the clothes, sometimes acted a tutor for the children's schooling, cared for the sick black and white members of the family, and attended to the meal preparation.

Wealthy ladies were often supported by a large number of servants. Eliza Pinckney living in Charles Town in a modest home after the marriage of her children wrote of her domestic help: "I shall keep young Ebba to do the drudgery part, fetch wood, and water, and scour, and learn as much as she is capable of Cooking and Washing. Mary-Ann Cooks, makes my bed, and makes my punch. Daphne works and makes the bread, old Ebba boils the cow's victuals, raises and fattens the pountry, Moses is employed from breakfast until 12 o'clock without doors, after that in the house. Pegg washes and milks." Wives of tradesmen in the towns were usually at home caring for the children and housekeeping with the help of servants.

Women in the backwoods settlements and remote farms were dependent on their own labors. These women were significantly more independent and self-sufficient, and endured many hardships even in the mid-1700s. Keeping house was more trying as the food was more scarce, the clothing crude, furniture was quite basic and limited, and houses small. A visitor commented that Carolina women "...take care of Cows, Hogs, and other small Cattle, make Butter and Cheese, spin Cotton and Fax, help sow and reap Corn, wind Silk from the Worms, gather Fruit, and look after the House." Bricknell wrote that he found the wives of poorer farmers "ready to assist their husbands in any Servile Work, as planting when the Season of the Year requires expedition."[\[20\]](#)

Even in the earliest settlements colonial women were uniquely efficient. While working to settle on the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina, Mrs.

Francis Jones entertained the Commissioners who had passed her home remarking “she is a very civil woman and shews nothing of ruggedness, or Immodesty in her carriage, yett she will carry a gunn in the woods and kill a deer, turkeys, &c., shoot down wild cattle, catch and tye hoggs, knock down beeves with an ax and perform the most manfull Exercises as well as most men in those part.”[\[21\]](#)

For a segment of the population whose chief duty was to bear children and keep the master’s home, the Southern colonial women, whether a planter’s wife or frontier homemaker, was critical to the success of the American experience. Certainly the hospitality widely offered to visitors in the Southern colonies was largely due to the success of the home management of Southern women. As recorded by a historian, Robert Beverley, in travels in Virginia around 1700, “The inhabitants are very courteous to travellers, who need no other recommendation but the being human creatures. A stranger has no more to do but to enquire upon the road where any gentleman or good houskeeper lives and there he may depend upon being received with hospitality.”[\[22\]](#) Another visitor wrote that Maryland mansions were “as well known to the weary, indigent traveller as to the affluent guest.”[\[23\]](#) All the Southern states were known from the earliest time for their hospitality, especially in the rural areas and among the planter class. The seclusion of plantation life made entertaining friends and strangers desirable. But even in the frontier settlements, visitors were a welcome sight.

The clothing of the average Southern farmer was simple and practical. Men dressed in coarse linen shirts, stockings, leather coats or apron buckskin pants, caps and cowhide shoes. Women of the day also wore durable clothing.[\[24\]](#) The gentry class faired better in having a greater variety and style of clothing. The wealthy men had clothing based on the English styles and of various color (queen’s drab, sea-grey mouse’ ear, new brown, and London smoke), and of varied fabric (muslin, worsted Florentine cotton denim). They also wore their riding coats, jockey hats, muslin cravats and black bearskin muffs.[\[25\]](#)

In the colonial America of the eighteenth century, the typical family size was large, with some eight children. Women often married quite young, sometimes at an age of thirteen or fourteen. As John Lawson of North Carolina remarked, “she that stays single ’til 20 is reckoned a stale maid; which is a very indifferent character in that warm country.”[\[26\]](#) William Byrd wrote in 1729 that the most “antique virgin” he knew was his own daughter Evelyn, who was then about age twenty.[\[27\]](#) Childbirth was often for most female adults who were married, with



most Southern mothers having their first children in their late teens. The birthrate was 40 to 50 per 1000 colonists. According to available data, one in seven women died during their fertile years as a result of childbirth. It is not surprising that there is no evidence of any practice of birth control. The death rate in the colonies was from 15-25 persons per 1000 each year, compared to England that actually had some 40 persons died per 1000 each year. The reasons usually given for the lower death rates in the colonies was, first, that there were better food harvests leading to better diets, secondly that the lower population density held down the spread of communicable diseases, and lastly that the availability of wood from the vast forests provided a warmer winter for most people than in England. Even infant mortality was better in the colonies, where 12 to 15 of 100 babies died each year compared to England where no fewer than 20 per 100 died.[\[28\]](#)

Half of population in the 1770s was believed to have been below the age of fifteen. The lives of these youths were founded on the sense of obedience without question to their elders. They had to prepare for their lives as youths, with females taking on the marital and homemaking duties, while the males assumed their role of provider. Boys were legally established at the age of sixteen, and were expected to become taxpayers and members of the local militia. It was not a time for the idle pursuits of youth, but one for duty and serious responsibility.[\[29\]](#)

In considering the mortality rates of colonists, the colonial doctor seemed to play no significant part in increasing the chances of maintaining life. The scarce number of doctors or any other health services in the colonial South made no difference, primarily because even the best trained doctor of the time had no way to deal with infectious diseases. The basic treatment in colonial times was to bleed, sweat or purge the malady from the body. Disease just ran its course and hopefully one survived. Such was the case with George Washington and his bout with smallpox.[\[30\]](#) Incredibly, the life expectancy in the colonial South was better than in most of the world in the eighteenth century.[\[31\]](#)

The economic life of the Southern colonists was also most positive as the colonial period continued. Up until the end of French and Indian War, when strict supervision began, the British had allowed the colonists a fair degree of freedom in all their economic endeavors. While the mother country had attempted to stop trade with foreign countries, minimized manufacturing competition within the colonies, and required raw materials to be obtained from British firms, the colonies were unquestionably prospering.

The South fared well in the economic atmosphere of the times. The Southern colonies, in fact, held the largest share of colonial wealth by 1774, based on estate probate records of the 13 colonies. The average estate for the top one percent of the Southern wealthy was \$238,000, a figure twice as large as the largest estates in the Northern colonies. The first American millionaire emerged in this time. The largest estate of record was that of Peter Manigault who was a South Carolina planter and lawyer with assets of \$2.5 million. Indeed, 9 of the 15 largest estates (based on non-human assets) were in the South, and 8 of the 9 were in South Carolina. Research has indicated that the South held approximately 46% of the wealth, with the Middle colonies 29% and New England only 25%. Of interest was the composition of the Southern wealth, being 45.9% in land, 8.8% in livestock, 5.1% in personal goods and, incredibility, 33.6% in Black slaves and indentured servants.[\[32\]](#)

The wealth of the colonial South grew in spite of the rather primitive state of the financial system. In most cases financial services were provided by merchants who gave credit to buyers of their goods. There were no commercial banks, stock markets or other formal institutions to handle financial transactions. Since the British Parliament would not let English coins leave the British Isles, the money supply was made up of gold and silver coins mostly of Spanish origin, and paper currency issued by the various colonial legislatures. There were occasional shortages of coinage, but generally the money structure was not especially restrictive. The percentage of the money in circulation varied by colony and time period, but it is generally accepted that paper currency rarely exceeded more than 50% of the money supply. The North American colonies were among the earliest governments to issue paper currency, as no European nation had authorized its use on such a vast scale. Even in England, paper currency was not encouraged and it was rarely used as legal tender for payment of debts in favor of coin specie.[\[33\]](#)

With the highest economic level and an unmatched standard of living, the colonies, and especially the Southern colonies, were the premium locations in the world to live. It was such a thriving environment for the colonist in the 1770s that the population grew at near its biological limit. The estimated gross product was \$2.25 billion annually, which incredibility was one-third that of the mother country.[\[34\]](#) In the South the creation of wealth was almost entirely through the development of valuable agricultural crops. In the upper South of Maryland and Virginia, tobacco was the crop with the greatest market significance. This tobacco culture also moved with the settlers to North Carolina, but was never as significant

in production as in Virginia and Maryland due to the difficulty in getting the crop to market with few Tidewater rivers to transport it. The climate and the soil were perfect for this type of crop. By 1763 the tobacco exports in Maryland and Virginia was approximately 100 million pounds worth some \$6.3 million. Even in North Carolina the annual production was at 2 million pounds at that time, and ten years later the production had doubled.

Tobacco was a relatively easy crop to grow, and harvest. In order to expand tobacco cultivation, planters who acquired or held large tracts of land turned to slavery to work the fields. As a result of this desire for greater wealth, large plantations become more common. Some of these plantations supported over 100 black slaves to tend the tobacco crops. The average slave could maintain 3-4 acres of tobacco at a time.[\[35\]](#)

In North Carolina, the home of mainly small farmers, another crop of a different type emerged to some significance-forestry. The settlers began to fall pine trees for the naval stores of tar, turpentine and the lumber for use in British and New England shipyards. Naval stores of tar, pitch and turpentine were required for naval and merchant vessels. The Cape Fear River Valley, with the abundance of rosin-rich longleaf pines, soon became the production center for naval stores, with Wilmington as the shipping point.[\[36\]](#)

The cultivation of rice and indigo played the same role as tobacco did for the colonies of the upper South for South Carolina and Georgia. Rice was the most important crop of the lower Southern colonies. The cultivation of rice began in the swampy low country as early as 1700, but it was slow to evolve until McKewn Johnstone invented a method of flooding the fields using the tides to control the flow of water of the surrounding rivers and streams. Unlike tobacco, rice cultivation was physically quite demanding, and usually unhealthy. The rice, planted from March to May on plantations of 50 to 100 slaves, was harvested in August or September in stagnant water, which exposed workers to disease. Thus, the rice plantations of the lower South were especially harsh environments as compared to the tobacco operations of the upper South.[\[37\]](#) Rice was very profitable, and estimates of 25% profit from a plantation of 200 acres worked by 400 slaves were achieved in the 1770s. The revenue per slave in this period were \$830-\$2485.[\[38\]](#) By the 1770s the rice production supported exports from South Carolina as high as \$18 million per annum. The rice was shipped in barrels from ports like Charleston or Savannah to Holland or Germany by way of Britain. This

accounted for 60% of the South Carolina' production. The remaining crop was shipped to Portugal, Spain, Italy, and even to other colonies like New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island.[39]

In 1738, Eliza Lucas migrated to South Carolina from Antigua at age 16 to take over responsibility for three of her father's recently inherited plantations.[40] She decided that the semi-tropical region was ideal for the growing of indigo, which was in great demand in the British textile industry for its brilliant copper and purple dye. Thus, she was credited for introduction of this new and profitable crop in the South. Like tobacco, indigo was grown exclusively for export. The push to indigo production was prompted by an act of Parliament in 1748, which began to pay a bounty of sixpence (\$2.25) for each pound of dyestuff imported to Britain from the American colonies. Although this indigo was somewhat inferior to that grown in the West Indies of the French and Spanish colonies, it was successful in South Carolina and Georgia because of the governmental support of the American colonial market by the British.[41]

Indigo was grown in light, rich soil on high ground. The leaves were cut from the plant twice per year, and boiled in water to extract the dye. This product was dried, pressed into small blocks, and put into casks for shipping. A skilled slave could care for up to two acres of indigo plants and produce 120 pounds of dye worth \$1800-\$2700 per year in the 1770s. No other crop could produce a greater income per acre during the colonial period.[42] In the twenty years before the Revolution, exportation of indigo was at its greatest from this region, with an average of 500,000 pounds per year. During a few of these years, exports reached one million pounds, valued at more than \$18 million.[43] Based on the cash crops of tobacco, indigo and rice, the South provided the setting for the establishment of a distinct and elite group, the planter class. These planter elite were to rise in social and economic standing to become the defined Southern aristocracy. In order to rise to this level, a planter had to acquire both land and slaves, which typically was at least 500 acres and 20 slaves. Estimates put the total number of white planter households in Virginia to 3 to 10 percent after 1750.[44]

The great planters of the South were not only economically and socially successful, but they also gained the political control of the colonies. As these planters grew in wealth, they were able to pursue their personal activities without regard for the specific day-to-day operations of the plantation. Though they engaged in numerous interests, the pursuit of the political realm was the one engagement that served not

only to influence the course of the colonies, but it also served their egos. The lifestyle of the Southern planter in the 1770s, in contrast to their Northern peers, was in many ways like that of the landed gentry of England.<sup>[45]</sup> The great planter families, like those of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were among the Southern planter class that dominated the colonial legislatures of their time. These rich planters gave the Southern colonial society “a cohesion” and made it easier to maintain the public order since the humble immigrants were already conditioned to accept the aristocracy as the ruling class.<sup>[46]</sup>

An indication of the economic condition of many of the great Southern planters is exemplified by the correspondence of William Fitzhugh, a Virginia tobacco farmer and part-time lawyer, who managed his estate along the Potomac River in Northern Virginia:

“The plantation where I live contains a thousand Acres, at least 700 Acres of it rich thicket, the remainder good hearty plantable land,...together with a choice crew of Negroes,...twenty-nine in all, with Stocks of cattle and hogs at each Quarter; upon the same land is my Dwelling house, furnished with all accommodations for a comfortable and gentile living,...with 13 rooms in all,...nine of them plentifully furnished with all things necessary and convient, and all houses for use well furnished with brick Chimneys, four good Cellars, a Dairy, Dovecoat, Stable, Bar, Henhouse, Kitchen and all conveniences,...a Garden a hundred foot square,...together with a good Stock of Cattle, hogs, Mares sheep and etc.”

The documented account of Fitzhugh’s estate serves as an example of the great strength of the colonial economy in the South.

These most aristocratic lifestyles of the great planters were based on the significant agricultural foundation, where high value crops were produced with the toil of the ever-growing slave population. While not all agricultural enterprises were as successful and impressive as those of the great Southern planters, it is of significance that farming was indeed the key to the relative high standard of living in the colonial South. With 3 of every 4 families engaged in farming, it ultimately defined the economic, social and political fabric of their lives.

An event occurred in 1619 that would profoundly impact the Southern colonies to the present day. In that year the first 20 black slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia in a Dutch ship. These Blacks had been kidnapped from their homes in Africa by traders and sold to this Dutch ship captain. After arriving in the colony, he sold these blacks to the Virginia settlers. These first blacks were treated like

indentured servants, and eventually were freed. But soon the idea developed that the blacks should be kept as slaves to work the fields. Thus, began the dark period of legal slavery in the South.

In the early days, the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese slave traders found a better market for their human goods in the Spanish colonies to the South, so the slave population grew slowly in Virginia. Another significant factor that held the slave population down at this time was that a slaves cost 2-3 times more than indentured servants. Thus, the numbers grew slowly, and by 1649 there were only 300 black slaves in Virginia. In 1662, the Royal African Company was chartered under the protection of the crown to supply the American colonies with slaves. The numbers of slaves began to grow, especially after 1680. The beginning of the shift from use of white indentured servants to black slaves occurred for a variety of economic, political and social reasons. Economic conditions had improved in England after 1675, and those willing to sign indentured contracts began to decrease. With the expansion of the size of tobacco fields on large plantations, and with a shift in attitude towards obtaining non-temporary labor, the black slave was considered the best alternative.[\[47\]](#)

Black slavery was not a new phenomenon during the colonial period. It was indeed an established institution in the Caribbean and other areas in the Western hemisphere. Of interest is the fact that the trade of Africans to the American colonies represented only 6% of the total of such trade. The profit margins of those that transported slaves were a mere 8% to 12% as a rule. Plantations in the Caribbean had begun to shift to black slaves by 1640, when most of the arable land was occupied and opportunities for white immigrants diminished. The sad reality of slavery in the colonial period was that the major beneficiaries were the consumers of tobacco and sugar. These products were luxuries in Europe, but over the years the prices had fallen which made the decision to shift to black slaves more expedient.[\[48\]](#)

Once the idea of black slavery took hold in the South, it progressed rapidly. In the six years beginning in 1683, the population of blacks in Virginia grew from around 3,000 to 5,000. The pace of slave importation increased to some 1,800 per annum by 1705, and by the time of the Revolution, the colonies of Virginia and Maryland had a total black population of 206,000.[\[49\]](#) This growth in slave trade was profound even from a purely economic standpoint, for the average value of a slave in Virginia in the 1770s was £30 (\$2700). While they were expensive, in South

Carolina an entire ship's slave cargo was usually auctioned off in a single day, with each planter acquiring from two to twelve slaves.[\[50\]](#)

The motivation to obtain the black slave was indeed recognized and exploited. The typical slaveholder who used half of the output of a slave, and sold the other half could raise his standard of living by 15-20 percent.[\[51\]](#) There was some differing slave holding statistics between the planters in the upper South in the Chesapeake region, and those in the lower South centered around Charles Town. The average number of slaves owned by the Chesapeake planters was 8-10, and only a few held more than 100. In the Charles Town Lowcountry region, covering southeastern North Carolina, South Carolina and Northeastern Georgia, planters typically owned some 25-30 slaves, and a group of 79 planters held 100 or more slaves at their plantations.[\[52\]](#) Thus, it is not surprising that black slaves made up two-thirds of the population of South Carolina in 1775.[\[53\]](#) In the North, only New York, Newport, and Providence had slave population of over 10%, but in Charles Town, the majority of the city's population was slave.[\[54\]](#)

Conditions on the plantations were harsher to blacks in South Carolina than in the upper South, primarily because the owners did not live year around on their plantations. These great planters of South Carolina spent much of their year in quarters in Charles Town, and left control to hired overseers. The reputation of some of these overseers was one of cruelty toward blacks. Because of the vast number of black slaves in South Carolina during the colonial era, the laws that evolved were also harsher. In the tobacco colonies the slave code was based on English law, which gave at least limited rights to slaves. But in South Carolina the slave code was based on Spanish law, where the owners maintained "absolute" power over their slave property.[\[55\]](#)

While the moral aspect of slavery, as an evil, was present in the colonial era before the Revolution, it was not considered of overwhelming social, economic or political significance at the time. Since the land in New England was not as favorable for crops as in the South and the growing seasons were shorter, the Northern colonists did not pursue slavery with as much zeal as in the South. While the North never depended on slavery to any significant degree, primarily on economic circumstances, they did condone slavery.[\[56\]](#) In the South, slavery was considered an economic reality. The dependence on slavery in the South was so great that even the most revered framer of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the phrase "that all men are created equal", would not

release all his slaves until the death of his wife, when the economic impact was past.

Another curious group of human servants to the white colonist also came to North America up until the their services were assumed by black slaves over time. These colonists were indentured servants who came to the colonies to serve their masters under contract for a period of 4 to 7 years. Thousands of willing white immigrants came to the Southern colonies in this way to seek a better life and, perhaps, to eventually acquire land. Between 1630 and 1680, some two-thirds of all immigrants to Virginia were indentured. In return for transportation across the Atlantic, food, clothing and shelter, these people agreed to be indentured servants under a legal contract for a stated period. These contracts were of differing prices depending on the skills, age, sex, length of contract and, of course, the local demand for their talents.

Most indentured servant males served farmers to work the fields, while females handled the household chores. After their period of indenture, these people would usually receive some funds to help them get started in their new life in the colonies as free people. Even though they were servants for their indentured period, their general living conditions were not any worse, in most cases better, than they had known in their homeland. After 1680 black slaves replaced indentured slaves as the primary source of bonded labor in the Southern colonies. According to estimates, this unique method of supplying labor to the colonies brought some 350,000 indentured servants to North America during the colonial period.<sup>[57]</sup> By 1774, the indentured servant population had decreased to around 2%.<sup>[58]</sup>

Although the support of the agricultural economy engaged the majority of population of family farmers, great Southern planters, black slaves and indentured servants, another occupational group constituted from 15 to 20 percent of the white population- merchants and artisans.<sup>[59]</sup> This group was a widely dispersed group across the economy, and were concentrated in the towns and villages of the South. During the colonial era, the urban areas served as the commercial centers, where both merchants and artisans pursued their work. The concept of a factory was not a reality in this commercial environment, and they were overtly discouraged by various British regulations in order to restrict any manufacturing competition with such firms in the mother country.

Transportation in the eighteenth century was a major factor in the growth of economic activity in the colonial period. The most common transportation of the



day, and the fastest, was by horseback. As reported in 1779, a Whitmel Hill rode from Philadelphia to his home in Martin County, North Carolina in seven and one-half days. Horseback distances per day of fifty miles was considered extremely good, with a more usual day of thirty-five miles being the norm. Goods for many were transported by the local farmers and merchants via ox or horse-drawn cart or wagon. Carts usually carried no more than a half ton, while wagons carried loads of around a ton. The gentry owned horse-drawn carriages, a mark of distinction in its day. These carriages usually had two wheels and provided a rapid conveyance. Four-wheeled carriages and coaches were primarily used for long trips. Significant travel by foot was not at all uncommon in colonial times. One such trek by foot was taken by a group of Moravians as they walked a distance of around four hundred miles from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania to Wachovia, North Carolina in thirty days.[\[60\]](#)

Merchants were involved in a wide range of active commercial enterprises, from the simple storekeeper to the wealthy shipping trader in an Atlantic port. The small merchants, whether in the towns or out in the remote farming areas, brought a vast array of goods purchased at wholesale from the larger merchants and then sold the goods to the locals at retail prices. Due to the seasonal basis of the agricultural economy, the merchants allowed their goods to be purchased on credit for three to nine months until the crops came in. Except for the a few wealthy merchants in the large ports, most of the merchants did not specialize in a single line of goods. They sold a variety of goods, typically in the categories of food, alcohol, textiles, hardware, farm tools and household goods.[\[61\]](#) The chief Southern colonial imports from England and other European nations were British woolen, linen goods, furniture, coarse cottons, fine cloths, Madeira wine, strong beers, stockings, silks, shoes, hats and ornaments.[\[62\]](#)

By far the most important commercial center in the colonial South was Charles Town (later Charleston), South Carolina. Due to the extensive demand for the rice and indigo of the lower South in Europe, the mercantile activity there was impressive. During the period from 1735 to 1765 some 500 separate mercantile firms were identified in Charles Town. An example of the trading activities is aptly represented by that of the wealthy Charles Town' merchant Gabriel Manigault, who imported rum, sugar, wine, textiles, and wheat flour, and exported rice, naval stores, lumber, shingles, leather, deerskin corn, beef, peas and pork.[\[63\]](#)

By the early 1770s more than 800 vessels turned around at Charles Town annually including both British and American ships. A Charles Town visitor once remarked that he observed “about 350 sail lay off the town.” He was so intrigued at the number of vessels that he wrote “the number of shipping far surpasses all I had seen in Boston.” Incredibly the annual export-import trade in Charles Town exceeded even the tonnage through the port of New York, even though the population was only half as large.[\[64\]](#)

The beauty of Charles Town in the 1700s was not excelled in the American colonies. Josiah Quincy, a visitor to the city in 1773, said, “I can only say, in general, that in grandeur, splendor of buildings, decorations, equipages, numbers, commerce, shipping, and indeed in almost everything, it surpasses all I ever saw, or ever expect to see, in America.” In the diary of Hessian Staff Captain Johann Hinrichs in events in 1780 after the British siege of Charles Town, he described the city as follows:

The city itself (including the burnt buildings) consists of 1,020 houses, which are built along broad unpaved streets intersecting one another at right angles, each house having a garden and standing twenty to one hundred paces from any other. The warm climate makes the open spaces necessary...Broad Street is the most beautiful street. It is 100 feet wide and 1,120 long and extends from the Cooper to the Ashley, dividing the city into two parts. The principal street is King Street, 80 feet wide and 3,730 feet long...No other American city can compare with Charleston in the beauty of its houses and the splendor and taste displayed therein. The rapid ascendancy of familie which in less than ten years have risen from the lowest rank, have acquired upward of £100,000, and have, moreover, gained this wealth in a simple and easy manner, probably contributed a good deal toward the grandiose display of splendor, debauchery, luxury, and extravagance in so short a time. Furthermore, the sense of equality which all possessed during this time of increasing incomes induced the people to bid stranger to enjoy their abundance with them and earned the renown of hospitality for this city...The best houses are situated along the Cooper River and North Bay, where are also most of the wharves. In Bay Street, Meeting and Church streets are the many grand palaces, every one of which has porticoes with Ionic and Doric pillars.[\[65\]](#)

Other than Charles Town, two other Southern cities that were expanding in mercantile trade were Norfolk, Virginia and Baltimore, Maryland, the sixth and seventh largest cities in the colonies. In 1774, the population of Norfolk was

around 6,500, with Baltimore at around 6,000 residents. These two cities, located in the Chesapeake Tidewater region, were heavily engaged in exports of mostly grain to the West Indies and southern Europe. Tobacco exporting had slowed by this time in the upper South from these two ports. Baltimore had grown from an undistinguished economic town to a small commercial center, and the only one in Maryland. In a first-hand account in 1771, William Eddis called Baltimore “the grand emporium of Maryland commerce” and wrote that “Baltimore became not only the most wealthy and populous town of the province, but inferior to few in this continent, either in size, number of inhabitants, or the advantages arising from a well-conducted and universal connexion.”<sup>[66]</sup> Norfolk had found growth in trade in wheat and tobacco. The lesser ports of Wilmington, North Carolina and Savannah, Georgia were worthy of some note in the trading growth and economic expansion of those regions.

The inland economic centers of interest in the latter colonial era in the South, while scattered across the landscape, did play an important role in supporting Southern colonial growth. In Maryland were the towns of Hagerstown and Frederick. The New Jersey tutor Philip Vickers Fithian described Hagerstown in 1775 as “a considerable village” that “may contain two hundred houses...many stores...and it is a place of business.” By the Revolution, the town of Frederick, a German settlement, had grown to be larger than Annapolis or any other Tidewater town except Baltimore.

Annapolis was somewhat prevented from becoming a great port due to its location and poor roadways, even though it was a center of “official life and display” and the home of the Governor and his circle of high officials.<sup>[67]</sup>

In Virginia, Fredericksburg and Richmond were impressive. In the Tidewater of North Carolina the three key towns were Wilmington, Brunswick and New Bern. In the backcountry of North Carolina were towns that were largely slow to develop due to the lack of navigable rivers and limited roadways. The towns of note were Charlotte- described in 1771 as “an inconsiderable place hardly deserving the name of village”, Hillborough- the largest town in the Piedmont, Salisbury, and Salem- a growing commercial center.<sup>[68]</sup> Camden, in upper South Carolina was important. In Georgia, Savannah was the key capital and seaport town, and in the up country the town of Augusta was a prominent trading point, economic and social center. While each colony had pride in their towns, Charles Town remained the political, social, and economic center of the South at the eve of the Revolution.

Based in these key Southern towns, the merchants became among the wealthiest men in the South in colonial society. They played an important role in the political affairs, as well as in the economic realm of the South. By the 1770s they made up about 15% of the lower house of the Virginia legislature. Merchants were an esteemed group in their communities, which reflected the significance of the “business-driven” society of the colonies.[\[69\]](#)

The colonial artisan was generally an independent self-employed, entrepreneurial worker who had one or more specific craft skills. He generally owned his own materials and worked from his own home shop, or on the job. Most artisans owned land and were eligible to vote. His skills were often gained during some type of apprenticeship. Most artisans conducted their work in the towns and cities, but some were among the rural communities. For example, in Granville County, North Carolina evidence indicates that around 41 artisans lived there during the period between 1749 and 1776.

Since the pace of colonial life was slow, so was the change in technology for the artisan. The artisan practiced his craft using the traditional methods of his day, little changed over time. Like the merchant of his day, the artisan played an active role in the political life of the colonies. Without question, the colonial artisans participated in and had a greater impact on the political life of the colonies than their peers in Europe.[\[70\]](#) One could not forget the most renowned American artisan of the colonial era, Paul Revere of Boston.

While the economic life of the Southern colonies was a central theme of day-to-day activities for most families, all was not work and no play. For the rural farmers, the leisure activities included the usual drinking, hunting, fishing, and simple family-oriented pursuits. Involvement with their neighbors might encompass group activities like barn-raising, sheep shearing, and dining. The key social event for this rural crowd was the fair. Fairs often ran for several days and engaged the colonists in livestock trading, craft sales, wrestling matches, foot races, greased-pig chases, beauty contests, horse races, cockfighting, target shooting, cooking contests and the like.

While the city folk also took part in rural fairs, their leisure was centered around the community tavern, or “ordinary” as they were commonly known. A typical tavern of the colonial day was a combination hotel, restaurant, bar, civic arena, newsstand, dance hall, political party headquarters, gambling hall, card room

music hall, and social club by all accounts. Outside these local pubs various activities took place including shooting, bowling, cockfighting and even fist fighting. Taverns were the gathering place for almost all walks of life on occasion. Organizations grew up using these taverns, including a quite popular group known as the Masonic Order. The Masons, with members including George Washington, established some forty “lodges” between Portsmouth and Savannah by 1776.[71]

Drinking in the colonial South was quite widespread. In Virginia, a “julep” before breakfast was felt to be a protection against malaria. A toddy of liquor, or drink of wine or beer, at the end of the day was “good for the body” and cheers the spirit. Laws were passed as early as 1643 in Virginia to “prevent the importation of too great a quantity of strong liquors” from surrounding colonies. The wines of choice for the average folk were Madeira and Fial, as well as French and European claret and port wines for the “better sort”. Beer was made of molasses or malt and was consumed in vast quantities.[72] Cider was also a favorite drink, supported by the local planters apple orchards. The culture of the Southern hospitality was greatly enhanced by the free offer of spirits for the guests, rich and poor alike. At a funeral in Mecklenburg County in 1767, some seven gallons of whiskey were consumed and charged to the deceased estate.[73] Likewise, the history of the results of excessive drinking in the colonies remains permanently archived in the various country court records of these former Southern colonies.

Another interesting phenomenon of the colonial era associated with the tavern was the lottery. Over time lotteries were established by the colonies to obtain funds for the public good, including road building, bridge construction, colleges, churches and retiring the public debts. The lotteries usually involved ticket purchase in hopes of winning money, but lotteries also gave away houses, land, jewelry and furniture. These lotteries were quite popular, and esteemed personages like George Washington were known to have participated in them. Apparently, over time, these lotteries became rather corrupt and by 1726 every province, except Maryland and North Carolina, had banned all but government lotteries. The British crown in 1769 also outlawed even private lotteries, without specific approval. The leisure of the upper class tended to imitate rather closely that of the English aristocracy. They held great dances and balls where the attendees displayed their fineries. They also held horse races, fox chases and hunting events. For the well off aristocracy of the South, this lifestyle was quite popular. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were known to have actively supported these social pursuits. During

January and February 1769, Washington took part in 15 hunting events with hounds.[74]

In a letter to London from Hampton, Virginia in 1755, John Kello declared “Dancing is the chief diversion here, and hunting and racing”. Dancing may have been the most abundant amusement in all the colonies. The diaries of Philip Fithian, a tutor, speaks of an incredible ball given in January of 1773 by Squire Richard Lee at the Nomini mansion in Westmoreland County, Virginia, which lasted for four days-Monday morning through Thursday night when some seventy guests engaged in festive drinking, dining and dancing. On Wednesday evening at seven the ladies and gentlemen began to dance in the ballroom to French horns and violins, minuet; then jigs, then reels and lastly the “country dances with occasional marches.”[75] Often elaborate dinners, served by well-dressed black slaves, were given in the homes of the aristocracy in the South. Josiah Quincy of Boston was extremely impressed when he dined at the residence of one of the richest men in Charles Town, Miles Brewton. The comments about the dinner at 27 King Street revealed “the grandest hall I ever beheld,” gilded wallpaper, and the “most elegant pictures, excessive grand and costly glasses.” He observed, seated at the “most elegant table”, where three courses were served, with wine the “richest I ever tasted.”[76]

The cultural legacy of the South began in these colonial times. Theater gained some popularity even though there was religious objection. Though the earliest performances were held in taverns, between 1716 and 1736 buildings for theatrical use were built in Charles Town and Williamsburg. Again, Washington’s name comes up here as a theater supporter, having attended eleven events of the American Company in Williamsburg and eight in Annapolis between 1771 and 1772. At the time all plays were written by Europeans, until 1767 when the first full-length play written by a native American, Thomas Golfrey, Jr. of Wilmington, North Carolina, was performed by the American Company in Philadelphia (*The Prince of Parthia*).[77]

For those in all the rungs of the social ladder, the primary social events occurred during the holidays. Christmas was the most celebrated annual holiday in the South. The religious nature of this period was dominate in colonial days, since there was no Christmas tree and even Santa Claus, St. Nicholas, was only an active legend in Dutch New York. Merriment, feasting and the sharing of gifts was a part of the holiday. Thanksgiving, which originated in Virginia in 1623 to

commemorate the first anniversary “of our deliverance from the Indians at the bloodie Massaker”, was celebrated by all families after the harvest came in with a feast of roast turkey and pumpkin pie.<sup>[78]</sup> Although Thanksgiving did not become a universal holiday in all the colonies until long after the Revolution, the original feast traditions were maintained to the present day.<sup>[79]</sup>

During the colonial period, a significant day for many was that of the Lord’s Day or Sabbath. This day was a British custom, which not only had its religious importance, but was also a day during which the conduct of most business or many leisure activities were prohibited as set forth by colonial legislatures. Although the legislative prohibitions were largely ignored in the South, it did at least afford all a day of rest. This tradition continues even today in spirit.

When the first Southern settlers touched land on American soil, they set up a cross and claimed the country for their church, and then for their king.<sup>[80]</sup> The religious culture of the colonial South, and the faith shown by those original settlers at Jamestown, was that of the Church of England (Anglican), or better known as the Episcopalian Church. This church was the largest denomination in the South. As the oldest church in America, it had over half of its 480 churches located in the South at the time of the Revolution. Presbyterians were an outgrowth from the Scots-Irish peoples who came in the eighteenth century.

It was not until the end of the colonial period that the Baptist and Methodist churches were founded in the Southern colonies. The Baptist religion, although founded by William Rogers in Rhode Island, had spread into the South and was reasonably established. The Methodists, who first established a chapel in New York in 1767, were an evangelistic movement within the Anglican Church at the time, and did not consider themselves a significant body until after the Revolution. The remaining religious groups in the South included Quakers (in North Carolina), Catholics (based in Maryland), Lutherans (from the German immigration), Dutch Reformed, Jewish, French Huguenot and a few other smaller sects.<sup>[81]</sup>

Even though there were numerous religious groups in the South with varying theological beliefs, they all were based on a concept of God, and, in most cases, a God as described in the Bible. While there were certainly intense feelings of differences in creed, opinion, and religious perspective, it is noteworthy that there were few, if any (none in Virginia), actual documented deaths in the Southern colonies caused by ones religious view or witchcraft, which was not the case in the

North. For most of the colonial church congregations, the underlying doctrine was that all were to show good conduct towards his fellow man.

The number of actual churchgoers at the beginning of the Revolution was estimated to have been as low as one in twenty in the South. The reasons for such a low percentage were probably the relaxation of the intolerance of the religious dictates as known in Old World Europe and the mobility of the colonists, which spread the devout followers out across the lands.<sup>[82]</sup> Many who were living on the fringes of settlement in the South were not exposed to active religious groups until later in the colonial period. An attempt to turn this irreverent trend occurred in the 1740s with the “Great Awakening” as it was known. Much effort was put into this movement in America and many changes did occur among the religious sects, but by 1745 the zeal had waned somewhat.

In defining the full spectrum of the culture and character of the Southern colonists, is not complete without understanding the educational heritage of these people. In general the educational perspective of the South followed that of England, where only the rich, upper class received formal instruction. Education was considered an individual matter of no concern of the public. Education usually began at home, where children were taught the basics of spelling, reading and writing. Often the church did take up the cause of base instruction, as ministers, once they came on the scene, were often the most educated of the community. One interesting test of the literacy of a community was provided by noting the number of persons who could sign their name. Philip A. Bruce found that in Virginia in the seventeenth century, over fifty percent of jurors, and thirty-three percent of the women could write their name. Vast improvements occurred and by the mid-eighteenth century, only fourteen percent of the population could not write.

The great planters were able to provide their offspring schooling as taught by educated indentured servants or a local preacher. The subjects taught in that era usually included Latin, Hebrew, Greek, ancient history, arithmetic, geometry, trigonometry handwriting and bookkeeping. Although some schools and academies were established, there was only one institution of higher education in the South before the Revolution. With the support of many education enthusiasts, including the Virginia Governor Francis Nicholson, and Dr. James Blair, who was the Commissary to the Bishop of London-which placed him at the head of the clergy-appealed to King William and Queen Mary “for your Majesty’s charter to erect a free school and college for the education of their youth”. “Sir” replied his Majesty,



“I am glad that the Colony is upon so good a design, and will promote it to the best of my power.” Thus, was established the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia which was chartered in February of 1693.[\[83\]](#)

An attempt was made in the early 1770s to establish a local college in Charles Town, South

Carolina, as a bill was introduced in the colonial Assembly. This bill was voted down by the rich who opposed it because they feared that “learning would become cheap and too common, and every man would be giving his son an education.” The first institution of higher learning in South Carolina, the College of Charleston, opened its doors to students in 1790.[\[84\]](#) On January 15, 1771 the North Carolina Assembly passed “An Act for the Founding and Establishing and Endowing of Queen’s College in the Town of Charlotte in Mecklenburg County” North Carolina. While the charter was disallowed by the king and the Privy Council in April 1772, the school continued to operate as a private institution until the troubled period of the Revolution.[\[85\]](#)

For the poor masses, the apprenticeship system served to provide vocational skills training for a useful life. Along with the specific trade, the masters were required, often by law, to teach basic reading and writing. If college was in order, wealthy Southern planters sent their children either to England to attend a university like Oxford or Cambridge, or to one of the nine universities in the Northern colonies including Harvard, Yale, King’s College or Princeton.[\[86\]](#) In fact, very few youths ever attended college in the colonial era. By 1776, there were only some three thousand college alumni in all of the Thirteen Colonies. Of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, only nineteen had attended American colleges.[\[87\]](#) Formal education was a special privilege of the wealthy minority, while the average Southern colonist would remain only minimally educated or, at best, a learned man from self-study. As one surveys the events that led up to the Revolution and the formation of a new nation, it is important to realize that the Southern colonies were indeed fortunate to have such a learned and able class of men who served to lead the middle class majority towards a future of liberty and prosperity. Without these educated and responsible Southern men, it is unlikely that the South would have been as economically or politically successful as it was in the colonial period.

As the colonial period ended with the coming of the American Revolution in the mid-1770s, life in the Southern colonies had achieved a level that was unknown to

most of the world at that time. The privileged among the Southerner elite had certainly little to envy of others, except perhaps the wealthy upper classes and royals of Europe, but the middle classes in the South lived a significantly more rewarding life than their peers around the world. It was a life full of opportunity and freedom that was the envy of the world. Having achieved a legacy of such social and economic success, the political success gained with the American Revolution would serve as the foundation for all the grandeur of America, and for the life that we know here in the South in the twenty-first century.

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