The Southern Colonies

In many ways, modern America is a land of businesses, and work, and money. It is not necessarily surprising to learn that the very first settlers who traveled from the British Isles did so under the auspices of a company, created and run for profit. You see, while explorers funded by the British government had mapped out the coastline of a part of North America, it was cheaper and simpler for the government to sell or give the right to explore and settle to other groups. To take advantage of all this seemingly unsettled land that had been discovered, companies were formed. These were groups of men who would plan on sailing to the New World in order to explore and somehow make money. To raise money to buy a ship and supplies, they would sell shares in their company. People could buy those shares, and in exchange, they would be entitled to a set percentage of whatever money the company made.

There were a few companies that were formed and that successfully petitioned for a Charter from the crown. What this meant was that the King (or Queen) would give official permission for a Company to claim land in America. The document that outlined who could settle, and where, and for how long was the Charter itself. There were a few abortive attempts to create English colonies, but the settlers either vanished as at the Roanoke settlement, or returned home as at the Cuttyhunk and Popham settlements. It was not until the Virginia Company sent a new mission of ships in 1607 that the first steps were taken towards a permanent English Settlement.

The arrival of the Virginia Company in what would become Jamestown would not initiate a glorious new settlement. The first years at Jamestown were ones of desperation, starvation, and death. The relationship with the local tribe was fraught with misunderstandings and violence, and at several times, the settlement hovered on the edge of extinction. The turning point in the history of Jamestown, Virginia and our country was the arrival of a man by the name of John Rolfe.

Rolfe was an agriculturalist more than a simple farmer. He had arrived at Jamestown with the intention of trying to grow a new crop in the rich and fertile soil of the meadowlands near the Virginia Coast. The crop in question was an import from an island in the Caribbean, where it had been cultivated by the natives, mainly for uses in religious rituals. They were known to take the leaves, and then either dry them, or boil them. By burning the dried leaves, or inhaling the steam as they boiled, or by drinking the water they simmered in, they were able to sometimes achieve what they believed to be a transcendent religious state. This was dangerous, of course, and these experiences could result in tremors, vomiting, and even death, because the chemical within the leaves was a toxic alkaloid that is now known to vastly increase the likelihood of cancer.

The plant in question was of course the tobacco plant, and the poisonous alkaloid was the chemical nicotine. Very quickly after being introduced to European Explorers, tobacco had gained the status of being a very popular and very profitable recreational drug. When John Rolfe arrived at Jamestown in 1611, he was bearing the seeds of a sweeter and more pleasant strain of tobacco. With this new cash crop to export to addicts in Europe, Jamestown suddenly boomed. John Rolfe became a leading citizen, and in 1614 he married a daughter of the local Chief. We are more familiar with her from the stories of how she saved the life of the explorer John Smith, but Pocahontas only became famous after her marriage, when she traveled to England with Rolfe and their son.

The important fact to realize, is that from the introduction of tobacco, Virginia became an agricultural society. To a man, commoner and noble born settlers worked to claim land and convert it into a place to grow profitable crops. The major obstacle was that of all agricultural societies: to grow enough crops to make lots of money, one must farm a large area. To farm a large area requires a lot of work. If this was necessary, where were the workers to come from?

In general, in any economy, the preferred workers will be the cheapest workers, especially in cases of unskilled labor. In the Virginia Colony, the cheapest workers didn’t need to be paid at all. There were two varieties of such unpaid laborers at the time, and both were a sort of slave. The first were indentured servants. Such people had for some reason entered into a contract where they were transported to the New World. Once there, they were required to work for whoever owned their contract. For free, sometimes. For years. They had very few rights, and were expected to work well and work hard. Some of them had entered an indentured servitude contract in order to earn a trip to the New World where they could later make their fortune after their contract was done. Others had built up such debt back in England that they were at risk of being thrown into debtor’s prison, but instead of being turned into the authorities for trial and prison, their creditors instead allowed them to sell themselves into temporary slavery. In either case, once the term of their contract was done, they were free, and typically were rewarded with a plot of land to turn into their own farm, and sometimes to then staff with indentured servants and slaves of their own.

The other category were those who had been sold into actual, permanent slavery. For some of these, slavery was a punishment for crimes. Others were captives, prisoners of the occasional war of conquest in Ireland, or elsewhere. The truly fateful shift, though, came in 1619, when the first ship coasted into a harbor in Virginia, bearing captives from Africa. These humans had originally been captured by tribal enemies, who then transported them to costal forts where they could be sold, and then shipped. The major markets were South America, the Caribbean, and now the Virginia Colony.

There were a few great advantages to African slaves. They were Old World, and so they had an inherited resistance to many of the deadly Old World diseases that their ancestors had survived. They appeared distinctive from both the English Colonists and the Natives, so that if they escaped their slavery there were fewer opportunities for them to hide. Plus, there was the benefit that unlike Irish slaves, they theoretically could be converted to Christianity, which might compensate their current misery by helping them avoid eternal damnation. (The Irish were nominally Christian already, but they were the “wrong sort” of Christians.) In any case, the sale of African slaves quickly became a popular solution to the labor dilemma in Virginia Colony. (It should be noted that historical records do not make it entirely clear if those first Africans were considered slaves or indentured servants…there are records that show some did go on to own land themselves, which would imply that at least a few were not treated as lifelong slaves.)

Along with the advent of slavery (or something that would grow into slavery,) Virginia would lose its Charter and cease to be leased for profit by the Virginia Company. In its place, King James I would appoint a royal governor to rule the colony for him, and it would become a royal colony. In essence, Virginia was to be treated as a miniature version of England, with a Governor taking the place of the King, although he was expected to rule for the King, as the King would want him to. In England, the King was responsible for appointing Judges as well, but there had been a parliament (literally, a council that gathered to talk) that was responsible for debate, passing laws, and advising the King. In Virginia, the equivalent would be the House of Burgesses.

Originally, the House of Burgesses was formed in 1619 as a group of elected officials to rule the colony. In fact, it was partially their failures that led the King to revoke the original Charter and appoint a governor. Eventually, the House became an elite body of wealthy landowners, but it was nonetheless the first elected legislature in the European colonies, and as such remains famous today.

At roughly the same time that Virginia was building a thriving economy based on crops like tobacco and the slavery required to grow it, England itself was plunged into a disastrous Civil War. King Charles, the son of James I and the great nephew of Queen Elizabeth, had been losing popularity with the British Parliament for quite some time. As the nobles who made up the House of Nobles and wealthy members of the House of Commons tried to gain more power and limit the power of the King, the King struggled to maintain control. Eventually, the disagreement erupted into armed conflict. The royalist supporters were termed the Cavaliers, while the supporters of Parliament were known as the Roundheads. Within a few years, the Roundheads had emerged victorious, and King Charles was tried and found guilty for treason: his head was separated from his shoulders before a cheering crowd.

Back in Virginia, most men remained loyal to the King. Consequently, after the King was executed and Parliament took full control of the nation, many Cavaliers fled England and immigrated to Virginia. Thus, the Civil War dramatically increased the number of so-called gentlemen in the colony, which would have long-term impacts on the society of Virginia and on the Southern Colonies in general. Naturally, many of the Cavaliers who immigrated to America brought whatever wealth they possessed with them. In short order, many of them had established themselves as owners of large networks of farmland, frequently referred to as a plantation. (Planation as a noun, basically meaning a planting: in this case, a place not only where crops were planted, but also people and cultures. Plantations were lands where English nobility in a sense planted itself. Over time, it also became synonymous with a place where slavery was maintained.) In the five or so decades since the establishment of Jamestown, Virginia had grown and flourished under the terms of the original charter, becoming one of the wealthiest and noblest of the new lands in America. But by then it was not the only colony in the region.

In 1632, King Charles I granted Cecil Calvert (the Lord Baltimore) rights to land north of the Virginia colony. This colony was neither a Charter granted to a business, nor a Royal colony that was owned more or less directly by the King. Instead, it was a Proprietorship. What this meant was that Lord Baltimore essentially owned it outright, and could run it as he pleased (within the limits of his oath of loyalty to the King.) Unusually, Lord Baltimore was himself a Catholic, which placed him at odds with the majority of England, and with the King. (Although the King was married to a Catholic, he himself was a member of and the supreme leader of the Anglican Church.) In honor of the Queen, Lord Baltimore named the new colony Maryland. Quickly, it became a refuge for English Catholics, and by 1649, a council in Maryland passed the Maryland Toleration Act, which declared full tolerance for any and all Trinitarian Christians. Whether one was Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, it was now legal to worship openly without interference. (This religious freedom did not extend to any other religions, of course. Judaism, Islam and all other non-European religions were still effectively banned.) Soon after being established, Maryland followed the general model of Virginia, with an economy primarily focused on tobacco production on large plantations using slaves.

The remaining Southern Colonies were those of North and South Carolina, and Georgia. In the case of the Carolinas, they were originally a single colony assigned as a proprietorship in 1629, but little came of this. The Carolinas would not emerge as a true Colony until several decades later. After the English Civil War when the monarchy was restored and King Charles II took the throne, he rewarded some supporters by giving them Carolina Colony as a proprietorship. Within a few decades, the colony had split in two, and had become a destination of sorts for Englishmen emigrating from Bermuda in the Caribbean. It was known as a prime resource for the oak timbers needed to build the best ships in the British Navy, and also adopted the plantation model from Virginia.

Finally, Georgia would be the last of these Colonies to be formed. Originally envisioned as a sort of utopia by its founder, Georgia was begun in 1733, over a century after the colonization effort had truly begun with Virginia and Massachusetts. Named for King George II, it was intended to be a collection of small farms, independently owned, and operated without slaves, which were to be prohibited. Men and women who had been thrown into prison in England because they could not pay their debts could immigrate to Georgia to begin these small farms and earn their living through honest work. While these intentions were good, they were also much less profitable than larger plantations, and the border with Spanish Florida made Georgia far more expensive to maintain than it was worth. It had begun as a Charter, operated and governed by an independent board of trustees, but in 1752 they abandoned the effort and returned the colony to royal control, whereupon the King appointed a royal governor. By the time of the revolution, Georgia had also adopted the plantation model.

All of these Southern Colonies had adopted an agrarian economy, with most of their profits derived from exporting valuable crops like tobacco that were grown by slaves. In the long term, this dependence on slavery will very nearly tear the country apart, but to appreciate how the different parts groups of colonies would develop to become the United States. We must now look north, to New England…

Use the CARs format to answer the following questions.

1. Explain how events in England affected the developing culture of Virginia/
2. Explain how the development of an agricultural economy in the Southern Colonies affected southern culture.
3. Compare and contrast the different colonies of the south.