

The Southern Colonies: Plantations and Slavery

One American's Story

George Mason was born to a wealthy Virginia family in 1725. Mason—who later called the slave trade “disgraceful to mankind”—described the skills of the enslaved people who worked on his family’s plantation.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“My father had among his slaves carpenters, coopers [barrel makers], sawyers, blacksmiths, tanners, curriers, shoemakers, spinners, weavers and knitters, and even a distiller.”

—George Mason, quoted in *Common Landscape of America*



George Mason

The Masons and other wealthy landowners set up self-sufficient plantations and had little need for the kind of densely settled towns that developed in New England. These scattered plantations, and the system of slavery needed to run them, shaped life in the Southern Colonies: Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia.

The Plantation Economy

KEY QUESTION What tensions developed between Tidewater and Backcountry?

In contrast to the small farms and numerous towns of New England, in the South large plantations developed. The earliest were built on the shores of the **Tidewater**—the flat land along the coast.

Geography and Climate The South’s soil and almost year-round growing season were ideal for plantation crops like rice and tobacco. These valuable plants required much labor to produce, but with enough workers they could be grown as **cash crops** and shipped to foreign markets for great profits. The Tidewater’s many waterways allowed oceangoing ships to load cargo at the plantation docks. This allowed the plantations to carry on a lively trade with other colonies and with England.