

Alan Taylor

COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

To increase South Carolina's security against Spanish Florida, the British had recently established a new colony along the Savannah River. Named "Georgia," in honor of King George II, the new colony was entrusted to a set of London philanthropists and social reformers led by General James Oglethorpe. In 1733 Oglethorpe

led the first Georgia colonists across the Atlantic to found the town of Savannah, on a bluff near the mouth of that river.

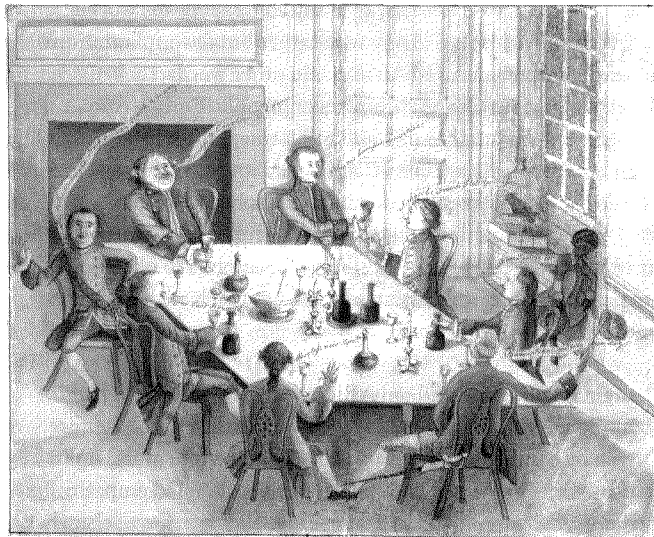
The "Georgia Trustees" hoped to alleviate English urban poverty by shipping imprisoned debtors to their new colony, where hard work on their own farms would cure indolence. By this moral alchemy, people who drained English charity would become productive subjects working both to improve themselves and to defend the empire on a valuable but vulnerable frontier. In effect, the trustees revived the scheme of the sixteenth-century West Country promoters, who had proposed Virginia as a colonial workhouse to redeem England's sturdy beggars. From 1733 to 1742 the trustees freely transported, and provided small farms to, about 1,800 charity colonists. Other immigrants paid their own way, lured by the prospect of free land.

The trustees wanted a colony of many compact farms worked by free families instead of one with larger but fewer plantations dependent upon enslaved Africans. In other words, the trustees sought to prevent Georgia from becoming like Carolina. By maximizing the number of white militiamen, the trustees tried to enhance security against attack by Indians or the Spanish. Moreover, black slavery made manual labor seem degrading to white men, who aspired, instead, to acquire their own slaves to do the dirty work. Consequently, slavery threatened to corrode the labor discipline that the trustees meant to teach to the Georgia colonists.

Georgia was the first and only colony to reject the slave system so fundamental and profitable to the rest of the British Empire. Driven by concerns for military security and white moral uplift, the antislavery policy expressed neither a principled empathy for enslaved Africans nor an ambition to emancipate slaves elsewhere. Indeed, by securing the southern frontier, Georgia promised to strengthen slavery in Carolina by closing an escape hatch to Florida that invited both slave flight and rebellion.

These restrictions rankled the more ambitious colonists, who resented the trustees as unrealistic, unresponsive, and dictatorial. Frustrated and impatient, the settlers contrasted their hardships and poverty with the relative ease and prosperity of the whites in Carolina. Seeking a quick fix, the discontented settlers became fixated on the antislavery ban as the chief obstacle to their ambitions. The Georgia malcontents rallied behind the slogan, "Liberty and Property without restrictions"—which insisted that white men could be free only if allowed to hold blacks as property. This seems hypocritical to modern readers committed to universal principles of human rights, but the reasoning made sense in an eighteenth-century empire where liberty was a privileged status that depended upon the power to subordinate someone else.

Colonial America



8. Gentlemen of the Manigault family—one of the most prominent in eighteenth-century Charleston—gather to drink and toast. The Manigaults made their fortune as rice planters and merchants.

In 1751 the trustees gave up, surrendering Georgia to the Crown, which permitted slavery. The rapid development of rice and indigo plantations spurred a surge in immigration, principally by Carolinians bringing in slaves. From about 3,000 whites and 600 blacks in 1752, Georgia's population surged to 18,000 whites and 15,000 blacks in 1775. As in the West Indies and in Carolina, a planter elite became immensely rich, leisured, and politically powerful by exploiting enslaved Africans and Indian land.

Because the society of Georgia and Carolina so closely resembled Barbados, imperial officials commonly referred to the region as "Carolina in the West Indies." Plantation society had driven from Barbados the emigrants who became the first Carolinians. But they went to Carolina with no radical vision of an egalitarian alternative to the staple and slave system of the West Indies. On the contrary, the emigrants sought their own place to achieve the mastery and wealth of great planters.

West Indies and Carolina

else's religion. In addition, Pennsylvania did not conscript its inhabitants for war.

But most of the immigrants to eighteenth-century British America did not come by their own free will in search of liberty, nor were they Europeans. Instead, most were enslaved Africans forced across the Atlantic to work on plantations raising American crops for the European market. During the eighteenth century, the British colonies imported 1,500,000 slaves—more than three times the number of free immigrants. British America was a land of black slavery as well as a land of white opportunity.

A brutal business, the slave trade killed about 10 percent of the slaves in transit. The survivors then suffered the shock of enslavement in a strange and distant new land. Separated from friends and kin, they were ordered about in a new language and brutally punished if they balked or resisted. Arriving with many distinct languages and identities, they had to form a new culture as African Americans. Meanwhile, they suffered from the minimal food, shelter, and ragged clothing provided by their profit-seeking masters driven to lower their costs. As a rule, the slaves had to work at least twelve hours a day, six days a week under the close supervision and sharp whip of a white overseer. Masters and overseers compelled enough labor and obedience to profit from the slave system, but they did so with greater difficulty and chronic fear of a slave revolt.

About three-quarters of the new slaves went to the West Indies, where the sugar plantations were especially profitable but deadly, so it paid masters to work slaves to death and then to replace them. In the mainland colonies, however, the masters made a greater effort to provide minimal housing and food to keep their slaves alive and reproducing. The largest number lived in the Chesapeake, where they comprised about 40 percent of the total population in 1775. Although legal in every colony, African slaves

were only 2 percent of the population in New England and 8 percent in the Middle Colonies.

As British America became more ethnically and racially diverse, the free colonists became more closely tied to the economy and culture of the mother country. Although colonists often protested some feature of the Navigation Acts, none wanted an abolition of the whole system. Indeed, the colonists benefited from the mother country as a protected market for the produce of their farms and plantations, while the British manufacturers increasingly relied on colonial consumers.

Far from dividing the colonists from the mother country, the Atlantic Ocean drew them closer together during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Thanks to a tripling in the number of transatlantic voyages, colonists became significantly better informed about events in, and ideas from, Britain and especially London. The swelling volume of shipping also boosted the colonial economy, which grew faster than did that of the mother country. From just 4 percent of England's gross domestic product in 1700, the colonial economy blossomed to 40 percent by 1770, assuming a much greater importance to the empire. Thanks to substantial farms and booming trade, most of the free colonists enjoyed a higher standard of living than did the common people in Europe. The rising incomes enabled colonists to purchase more British manufactured goods—which reinforced the economic ties between the mother country and the colonies.

During the eighteenth century, the expanding transatlantic commerce produced a "consumer revolution," which meant cheaper and more diverse goods in greater abundance. At the same time, demand swelled as colonial consumers sought a wider array of new things, especially Asian tea and spices, and British manufactured goods. Women played a leading role in the consumer revolution, for the imported goods reduced their long and hard labor to spin thread and to weave cloth. By acquiring