The primary motive for establishing the middle, or mid-Atlantic colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware was to develop profitable trading centers. The Dutch were some of the first to settle in this area. In the late sixteenth century, with the help of Protestant England, the people of the Netherlands won their independence from Spain. The Netherlands evolved into a major commercial and naval power and challenged its former benefactor, England, on several occasions during the seventeenth century.

With this newfound power, the Dutch became a leading colonial presence, especially in the East Indies. Like the English, the Dutch developed colonies by authorizing joint-stock companies to go forth and establish trading outposts and commerce. The Dutch East India Company established a trading empire that was profitable for over three hundred years. Seeking greater riches and a passageway around America to China, the Dutch East India Company hired Henry Hudson, an English explorer. Hudson sailed along the upper coast of North America, and in 1609 he encountered Delaware Bay and the river named for him, the Hudson River. He filed a claim to all of this land for the Dutch.

The Dutch West India Company was also influential, but operated primarily in the Caribbean, where it was more interested in raiding than trading. By 1624, based on Hudson’s earlier claim to the Hudson Valley, the Dutch West India Company permanently settled New Netherland, in the Hudson River area, as a fur trading port. In 1626, the Dutch bought Manhattan Island from the Indians for pennies an acre, and they started trading posts at New Amsterdam, later called New York, and upriver at Fort Orange, later called Albany.

The New Netherland colony was highly aristocratic, with large feudal estates along the Hudson River. These grand estates, called patroonships, were granted to stockholders who promised to have fifty adults living on the estate within four years. This approach to colonization met with little luck because volunteers for serfdom were hard to find.

New Netherland experienced difficulties from the outset. The shareholders demanded dividends even at the expense of the colony’s welfare. The New England colonies to the north regarded them as intruders. Although not as strict as the Puritans, the Dutch Company ran the colony in the interests of the stockholders and with little tolerance for free speech, religion, or democratic government. Peter Stuyvesant, the governor sent by the Dutch West India Company, was in absolute control of the colony’s government. However, the inhabitants showed nearly total indifference to his leadership.

The relationship between Holland and England alternated from alliance against nations such as Spain, to conflict as they both sought to become the dominant trading empire. During a time when the two countries were experiencing hostilities, James, the Duke of York and brother to King Charles II, felt that the New Netherland colony could easily be conquered. Precipitating a conflict, King Charles II granted his brother a charter for the region between Maryland and Connecticut, which included New Netherland.

As was the case for the New Netherland area, many of the original thirteen colonies were settled as proprietorships. The crown granted individuals or a group of partners a charter to develop these proprietary colonies. In contrast, Virginia and the New England colonies were essentially corporate ventures, sponsored by joint-stock companies that funded the settlements as investments.

An English fleet soon set sail to seize the Dutch colony, and in 1664, they threatened to take over New Netherland. Governor Stuyvesant could not get anyone to defend the colony and the Dutch surrendered without firing a shot. New Netherland was now an English possession, but the Dutch continued to exercise an important social and economic influence on the land and language, contributing such words as cookie, crib, and Santa Claus. Their merchants also gave Manhattan much of its original bustling, commercial atmosphere having developed such places as Wall Street and Broadway.

New Amsterdam was renamed New York in honor of the Duke of York. The English now ruled a stretch of land that ran from Maine to the Carolinas. Out of all of the English colonies, the settlers in the middle colonies came from the most varied backgrounds. By 1664, the city of New York best illustrated these varied backgrounds with inhabitants that included Scots, French, Dutch, Swedes, Germans, Norwegians, Irish, Poles, Portuguese, and Italians who were the forerunners of millions to come.

Soon after the Duke of York conquered New Netherland, he granted the land between the Hudson and the Delaware Rivers to two of his friends, Sir George Carteret and Lord John Berkeley. The new territory was named New Jersey in honor of Carteret’s native island of Jersey. To attract settlers the two men offered land on easy terms and established freedom of religion and a relatively democratic government. The new colony grew rapidly. Several of the migrants were New England colonists who were leaving the already overworked soil of their own colonies.

The two proprietors split New Jersey with a diagonal line into East and West New Jersey—Carteret taking the east side. In 1674, Berkeley sold West New Jersey to a group of Quakers who were trying to escape persecution. The Quakers, a group formally known as the Religious Society of Friends, were a religious movement founded by George Fox. Dismayed by the struggles among Calvinists, Anglicans, and Catholics in England, Fox preached that spirituality was rooted in an individual’s personal relationship with God. This religious view left little room for clergy, liturgy, or hierarchy, and rejected doctrines such as predestination. Fox’s followers were called “Quakers,” which was originally meant as an insult, because they “trembled at the name of the Lord.”

Quakers were deeply devoted to their beliefs. They opposed warfare and resorted to passive resistance whenever confronted. English authorities felt the Quakers were especially insulting dissenters because they believed that they could communicate directly with God. They also refused to pay taxes to support the Church of England, were unwilling to bow before any person of higher authority, and refused to surrender their right to worship as they pleased. These practices appeared treasonous and heretical to most English officials.

Quakers in England were being persecuted, killed, and imprisoned for their beliefs. As with the Puritans, however, the English government was willing to put up with colonies of Quakers in the Americas so long as they expanded the English presence on the Atlantic Coast. The Quakers eventually acquired East New Jersey in 1680 when Carteret died. The acquisition of New Jersey gave the Quakers a place where they could practice their religion in peace. Then in 1702, the crown reclaimed and combined East and West New Jersey into a single royal colony.

Pennsylvania and Delaware

The Quaker effort to colonize in the Americas continued west of New Jersey in a fertile area called Pennsylvania. This land belonged to William Penn, an athletic young gentleman who was the son of the wealthy English admiral. While a student at Oxford, Penn was attracted to the Quaker faith. He supported the belief that religion should involve a personal relationship with God and that there was no need for an established church. He also rejected the ideas of rank and hierarchy, along with the trappings of those things such as fancy dress for the wealthy or tipping the hat in deference to superiors.

When his father died, Penn inherited a large estate, including a claim for £16,000 his father had loaned the King. In 1681, King Charles II settled the claim with Penn by granting him proprietary rights to a region north of Maryland and west of the Delaware River. The King named the land Pennsylvania, meaning Penn’s Woods, in honor of Penn’s father. Penn was eager to establish a refuge for fellow Quakers in Pennsylvania.

When he assumed control of the area there were already several thousand Dutch, Swedish, and English “squatters” on the land, making it easier to populate the area. However, Penn energetically marketed the new colony so he could attract a heavy flow of immigrants. He published glowing descriptions of the colony in various languages and encouraged forward-looking individuals to come with him. Penn promised substantial land holdings and by the end of 1681 he had encouraged about 1,000 immigrants to settle in Pennsylvania, and in October he arrived himself with 100 more. Pennsylvania grew rapidly because it was the best advertised of all the colonies and no restrictions were placed on immigration to the colony.

The relationship between the Quakers and the Indians was amiable because of the Quakers’ friendliness and Penn’s policy of purchasing land from the Indians. Penn tried to protect the Indians in their dealings with settlers and traders. The relationship was so peaceful that the Quakers often used the Indians as babysitters. Penn even went so far as to learn the language of the Delaware Indians, and for nearly fifty years the two groups lived in relative harmony. However, Penn’s acceptance of all people was a double-edged sword for the Indians, because as many non-Quaker settlers came to the colony they undermined Penn’s benevolent policy.

Philadelphia, meaning the City of Brotherly Love, grew up at the junction of the Schuylkill and Delaware Rivers. It was a carefully planned city, organized on a strict grid pattern with wide tree-shaded streets, substantial brick and stone houses, and busy docks. Soon after the settlement of Philadelphia, the first migration of Germans to North America took place, creating the city of Germantown. These were the Pennsylvania “Dutch,” from the word “Deutsch,” which means “German” in the German language.

Penn’s new colony was decidedly liberal and included a representative assembly elected by the freemen, or all of the landowners of the colony. Penn guaranteed freedom of worship to all residents and there was no tax-supported church in Pennsylvania. Penn hoped to show that a government could run in harmony with Quaker principles and still maintain peace and order and that freedom of religion could thrive without an established church. Because of the Quaker’s pacifist beliefs, Penn’s government made no provisions for military defense.

A few key factors contributed to Pennsylvania’s prosperous beginnings. Penn’s combination of good salesmanship, firmness, and tolerance helped the colony succeed. The Quakers’ business skills and the rich soil enabled the colony to export grain and other foodstuffs after just a sort time. Cottage industries such as weaving, shoemaking, and cabinetmaking also helped the colony thrive. Within just a few years the colony had over 2,500 people. By 1700, only the well established colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts were larger.

In 1682, the Duke of York granted Penn the colony of Delaware, which was the area between Maryland and the Delaware River. The colony was named after Lord De La Warr, a harsh military governor who came to Virginia in 1610. Delaware was closely associated with Pennsylvania for many years, and in 1703 it was granted its own assembly. From then until the American Revolution it had its own assembly but remained under the governor of Pennsylvania.

The English middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware shared several common features. The middle colonies tended to be urban and were linked by trade and commerce early on. Unlike Puritan New England or the Anglican South, there was no dominant religious group, resulting in relative tolerance among groups from Quakers to Lutherans, to Dutch Reformed and Catholics. The area became a refuge for a variety of dissenters and religious misfits. The English authorities were willing to tolerate the religious dissention in return for the development of profitable trading centers. The cities along the coast of the middle colonies were maritime centers with ships that brought supplies from Europe and returned to Europe filled with grains, furs, and lumber for shipbuilding.

Culturally, the settlers in the middle colonies thought of themselves as Europeans and tried as much as possible to replicate the lifestyles, social relations, and cultural traditions of their homeland. Like many first-generation migrants, they saw themselves as “expatriates” who happened to live outside of their mother country, rather than immigrants who were intent on making something different.

Colonists experienced many benefits living in the middle colonies. A great deal of social and economic democracy prevailed, desirable land was easily acquired, and there was a large degree of religious and ethnic tolerance in the middle colonies.

Maryland, Carolina, and Georgia

The British colonies in the American south were divided into two regions: the Chesapeake colonies, which included Maryland and Virginia, and the Southern colonies, which included Georgia and the Carolinas.

One of the first proprietary colonies, or colonies owned by an individual instead of a joint-stock company, was the Chesapeake colony of Maryland, granted by Charles I to Sir George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. Upon his death, the land was left to his son Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, who actually founded the colony. Lord Baltimore’s purpose for founding Maryland was similar to the religious motives that drove the Puritans and Quakers to settle in the New World. He sought the colony as a refuge for English Catholics who were subjected to discrimination in England.

In 1634, Baltimore planted the first settlement at St. Mary’s, just north of the Potomac on Chesapeake Bay. The charter empowered Baltimore with almost regal authority. He was able to grant huge feudal manors, hold people in serfdom, make laws, and develop his own courts.

In the beginning, the estate owners were primarily Catholic gentlemen, with Protestants working as the servants. Baltimore soon discovered that to draw more settlers he also had to offer small farms and give the colonists a say in the government. In 1635, the first legislative assembly met, and in 1650 it divided into two houses with the governor and his council sitting separately from the lower house.

In contrast to the northern and middle colonies, the southern and Chesapeake colonies, including Maryland, were predominantly rural settlements. Maryland quickly prospered because, like its neighbor, Virginia, its economy was based on tobacco.

Lord Baltimore would have preferred an exclusively Catholic colony. However, from the outset there was a mixture of Catholic and Protestant settlers in Maryland. As the colony grew the Protestant settlers began to outnumber the Catholic colonists, and the Protestant majority threatened to restrict the rights of Catholics. In 1649, Lord Baltimore agreed to the Act of Toleration, which guaranteed freedom of religion to anyone “professing to believe in Jesus Christ.” This act helped to ensure Catholic safety in Maryland. When the colonial era ended, Maryland sheltered more Roman Catholics than any other English-speaking colony.

In 1642, the English Civil War between the Calvinists and Anglican royalists broke out when the English Parliament, led by a Puritan named Oliver Cromwell, rebelled against King Charles I. They ultimately executed Charles, and Cromwell assumed control of the government until his death in 1660. After years of civil war, royalists restored the monarchy and Charles II became King. These events had major consequences for the colonies. Colonization had been interrupted during this unrest and during the reign of Charles II, called the Restoration period, the government sought to bring the colonies under tighter royal control.

Unlike the investors in the joint-stock companies who established Virginia and New England, Charles II preferred using individual “proprietors,” such as the Duke of York and Lord Calvert to establish and run colonies. These settlements eventually became Royal Colonies functioning under official governors appointed by the crown. For example, Charles II granted Carolina to eight of his allies who became Lord Proprietors of the region. The proprietors set out from London with about 100 English settlers. On their way to Carolina they stopped at the English colonies of Bermuda and Barbados to pick up more experienced settlers.

British settlements in the Caribbean, called the "West Indies," included island colonies such as Barbados, Antigua, and Jamaica that dated back to the early 1600s. The settlers’ background caused the Carolinas to develop strong economic and cultural ties to the Caribbean until the time of the American Revolution. By the 1640s, 20,000 people lived on plantations in the British Caribbean colonies, where they initially produced tobacco and later raised sugar cane.

The first settlers arrived in Carolina in 1670 with hopes of growing sugarcane and exporting non-English products like wine, silk, and olive oil. None of these plans were successful, and it was two decades before the settlers found a staple crop. Rice emerged as the principle export crop for the colony in the 1690s. Carolinian colonists began paying a premium price for West African slaves who had experience in rice cultivation. By 1710, the Africans made up a large majority of the population in Carolina.

Dense forests also brought revenue with the lumber, tar, and resin from the pine trees providing some of the best shipbuilding materials in the world. North and South Carolina also produced and exported indigo, a blue dye obtained from native plants, which was used in coloring fabric.

Charles Town, now Charleston, was founded in 1680 and became the leading port and trading center of the south. The city had a diverse cosmopolitan feel with various cultures settling there including French Protestant refugees, called Huguenots, and sons of English aristocrats.

The northern region of Carolina was neglected from the outset because the English Aristocrat proprietors tolerated the region as a refuge for the outcasts of Virginia. The Virginians created a remote center called the Albemarle district just south of the Virginia border. In contrast to the sophistication of Charleston, with its English propriety and ties to Caribbean plantations, North Carolina developed distinctive traits such as a strong resistance to authority, being hospitable to pirates, and impious behavior. Due to friction between the governors, North and South Carolina were officially separated into two colonies in 1712. Subsequently, each settlement became a royal colony.

Just south of the Carolinas, Georgia was founded in 1733 by a group of London philanthropists. This was 126 years after the first colony, Virginia, was founded and 52 years after the twelfth colony, Pennsylvania, was founded.

Georgia was set up for two primary reasons: as a military buffer against the Spaniards in Florida and as a social experiment. A group of London philanthropists were concerned with the plight of honest persons who were imprisoned for debt. Their leader, James Oglethorpe, became interested in prison reform after a friend died in debtors’ jail.

Oglethorpe had a military background and was able to successfully repel Spanish attacks. As a buffer against Florida, the colony was considered a success. However, as a philanthropic endeavor, the colony was not as successful. The founders’ goal was to populate the colony with upstanding, industrious farmers. To perpetuate this goal, land grants were limited to small plots, rum and other spirits were banned, and slavery was prohibited. However, the settlers quickly found ways to circumvent these restrictions, and Georgia developed an economy much like South Carolina’s. In 1752, the philanthropists, disillusioned, abandoned their responsibilities and the settlement became a royal colony. Georgia continued to grow very slowly and at the end of the colonial era was the least populous of the colonies.

The British southern colonies of Georgia and the Carolinas, and the Chesapeake colonies of Maryland and Virginia, shared several distinct features that also tied them to the developing British colonies of the Caribbean. The plantation lifestyle they created, in which wealthy planters owned large amounts of land with slaves or servants as labor, helped the colonies survive in the New World. The colonists developed large estates and exported agricultural products, primarily tobacco and rice. Slaves could be found throughout all of the southern colonies during this time. In contrast to the small towns of New England and the cities of the middle-Atlantic, the character of the South was rural from the outset. Outside of Charleston and a few cities on the coast, there were few urban settlements. Official business, worship, and trade often took place at isolated courthouses or churches located at the intersection of roads.

The plantation economy was the south’s greatest asset and greatest weakness. Disparities of wealth and intolerance occurred in all of the southern colonies. In the south, the plantation system created a society divided by class and race. The decentralized rural pattern allowed individual landowners to have great autonomy and influence but also hampered the region’s ability to come together in times of crisis. The agricultural crops brought great wealth but at the expense of being dependent on international markets and reliant on the import of manufactured goods. Additionally, the settlers’ over planting of tobacco resulted in a need for more land. As the colonies expanded, the settlers had to confront Native Americans, the settlements of other nations, and each other