

## 11 Jan 2024—The Prehistory of “the South,” 1492-1607

### Introduction: European Background

Today, I want to walk us through the origins of the place that *becomes* the South—not the stories of the indeneous peoples of the area, interesting as they are, but the origins of European interactions with the place in the 16th century. These European interactions with the world the Native Americans knew creates the South. How?

- Europeans inaugurate economic patterns foriegn to this place and to the Native peoples in this place.
- These new economic patterns produce exigencies of labor that, ultimately, result in the introduction of chattel slavery into this place.
- Economics and labor realities thus create in this place a transatlantic orientation, an engagment with Europe and *European politics and economics* as an inescapable part of how we must understand this place.

**Thus, long before “the South” even begins to be something conceived of, the place that becomes “the South” is always deeply embedded in a larger, globalized context.** This is something we will be exploring this semester and will see over and again; it belies the too-often-promulgated narrative and idea of the South as a provincial place lacking in sophistication and intellectualism. If there is one thing that I can disabuse you of this semester, it is that canard. Rather, from its outset, the South has existed as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan region deeply intertwined with an always-already globalized world, reacting to and participating in global concerns, *not* a backwards, inward-looking place. Perhaps it becomes that—though that is a debatable contention—but up until at least 1865, nothing could be further from the reality!

If we are going to make sense of the three things I sketched out above, we need to first consider the broader geopolitical contexts after Columbus’s 1492 voyage.

### Europe in the 16th Century: What hath Columbus wrought? What did Luther Nail to the Door?

- 1492 was not only the year of Columbus’s voyage, where he “discovered” the Americas; just as important, it was the year of the culmination of the Reconquista, the centuries-long campaign by Christians to win back Iberia (Spain and Portugal) from the Muslims that had conquered it some 800 years before. While Muslims never made it across the Pyrenees, the threat of Muslim conquest had haunted European monarchs for the better part of nine centuries; while the expulsion of the Moors from Iberia did not totally eliminate the perceived Muslim threat (central and eastern Europeans would continue to contend with this threat until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century), it did free up western

European powers from having to worry about this. With that threat out of the way, Columbus's voyage opened up the Western European powers—Britain, Spain, Portugal, and France in particular—to an outwardly-focused race for imperial power and prestige.

- The first few centuries of the second millenium (i.e., 1000s-1400s) had seen the early birth of a commercial economy. The New World promised substantial materials and resources that could fuel that this economy and Columbus's voyage suggested more useful surprises including, perhaps, the greatest prize of them all: a passage to Asia, and all of its resources and markets, that was more efficient than the long sail around Africa or the treacherous overland route.
- A race to produce substantial maritime, commerical empires was on!
- Within a generation of Columbus's voyage, the Protestant Reformation had shattered the 1,000 unity of religious belief and power in Western Europe. **NOTE** For the sake of simplicity, I am intentionally ignoring the Great Schism of 1054 (the break between Western and Eastern Christianity) and the various heretical movements that had popped up periodically during this time. The Reformation's shattering of this unity created a desire amongst many Europeans for a "New Jerusalem"; this motif recurs over and again in the subsequent centuries as it relates to how we understand America.
- Finally, European expansion into the Americas during the 16th century produces a massive literary output that sees this "New World" as a great fantasy and romantic ideal, inaugurating an intellectual and artistic tradition that will have significant consequences for the South in particular

## Spain and France in the 16th Century "South"

Though it will be centuries before we can talk about "the South" as a coherent idea, I will use the term here for the sake of simplicity. How did France and Spain understand and engage with the region in the 1500s?

- In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas established the division of the New World between Spain and Portugal, giving Portugal Brazil and Spain the rest of the New World. While Brazil would become a wealthy and significant part of the New World (and by far the largest slaveholding part of the New World), this treaty made Spain the winner of the early colonial push into the Americas. Importantly, with what are now Mexico, Central America, and Peru, Spain found itself in possession of places that had been long populated by highly-developed cultures—the Aztec, Maya, and Inca, respectively—with infrastructure and bureaucratic administrations that rivaled much of Europe and had large amounts of wealth. This would shape the trajectory of Spanish power projection, which initially focused on this part of the New World.

- Spain creates outposts around Tampa Bay beginning in the late 1520s. However, the investigation of the interior of the South begins in 1539 when Hernando de Soto leads an expedition from Tampa Bay through what are now Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Arkansas; de Soto dies in 1542 (is buried somewhere in Arkansas) and his successor, Luis de Moscoso, leads the remainder of the party down the Mississippi River into what is now New Orleans. From there, they return to Mexico. This voyage results in multiple significant travelogues that feature reports of natives who are willing to trade and presentations of natural wonders and beauty, all of which inspire European imaginations.
- Later, when the French and English started to move into what is now North America and the Caribbean, they were cognizant of the massive projection of Spanish power and the great wealth Spain had gained in the New World, as well as the wonders de Soto's expedition had suggested. They recognized how this wealth could reshape power dynamics back in Europe, and thus lead the English and French to a need to counteract Spanish influence through colonial projects of their own. For reasons we'll explore in a bit, England is later to the game than France.
- Spanish and French competition in the New World comes to its head in the South, first in South Carolina and later in Florida. Let's focus on South Carolina, particularly what is now Beaufort County.

#### **France and Spain in Early SC and FL: "Carolana" and "Santa Elena," Fort Caroline and St. Augustine**

- In 1562, sailing under the authority of the French Admiral Chatillon, French explorer Jean Ribault comes to what is now Port Royal Sound in Beaufort County and establishes an outpost he calls "Charlesfort." He also names the surrounding area "Carolana," after the French King, Charles IX. Outbreak of religiously-motivated civil war in France (worth noting that both Ribault and Admiral Chatillon were French Protestants; these "Huguenots" would form a significant portion of Lowcountry South Carolina in the years to come) doomed Charlesfort, as resupply became impossible.
- When chaos in France leads Ribault to seek English support for Carolana, where he finds himself imprisoned in the Tower of London under charges of espionage. With Ribault in prison, the French establish another outpost near current-day Jacksonville, FL, which they call Fort Caroline (1563). Meanwhile, Spanish spies gain knowledge of the French attempts at colonization.
- In 1565, the Spanish, out to crush French attempts at colonization, send Pedro Menendez de Aviles to destroy Fort Caroline. After establishing St. Augustine nearby, Aviles leads a massacre of French Colonists at Fort Caroline, essentially destroying French possessions in the South until the establishment of Louisiana in the early 18th century.

- In 1566, Aviles moves up the coast to near the abandoned French outpost of Charlesfort, establishing a new settlement, Santa Elena, on what is now Parris Island. Santa Elena was to be the capital of “La Florida” and served as the source of subsequent Spanish expeditions through the Carolinas and Tennessee, as well as a home base for Spanish attempts to both evangelize and enslave Indians. Santa Elena managed to thrive over the next twenty years despite constant threats from the French and various Indian groups. When increasingly conflict with England threatened St. Augustine in 1586, the king of Spain ordered Santa Elena to be abandoned and, also under royal orders, the settlement was destroyed in 1587.

## Slavery in a Global Context

I just noted that one of the uses of Santa Elena for the Spanish were attempts at enslaving Indians. We should thus pause here and consider the background of slavery, as it will be an inescapable part of our story.

- Why did the Spanish attempt to enslave Indians? Simply put, they recognized their need for labor and the efficiencies allowed by slavery. Slavery, of course, was not new or novel to the Spaniards or any other European power. Spanish attempts at enslaving Indians must be understood in this context.
- Forced labor is as old as human civilization itself; the first written system of laws, the Code of Hammurabi, was written in ancient Babylon and is over 3,700 years old. It contains laws regulating slavery. The Torah (sometimes called the Books of Moses, which Christians think of as the first five books of the Old Testament) of course narrates the experience of the Israelites’s enslavement in Egypt, but also describes the patriarch Abraham as a great slaveholder and has laws governing slavery (see Exodus 21 and Deuteronomy 15). Slavery was widely practiced in the Greek and Roman worlds, as well as in the Muslim world and Africa—importantly, black slaves sold to Europeans had been initially enslaved by Arabs or, more commonly, by *other Africans*. *Slavery was also widely practiced throughout the Americas before Columbus. Of course, not all forms of slavery are equivalent; while Roman slavery was not race-based, it was arguably more cruel and sadistic than anything eventually practiced in the US and many scholars have noted that the slave codes prescribed in the Old Testament often seem to be in regard to enslavement entered into voluntarily\** for economic reasons and also prescribe how and when emancipation must occur.
- In attempting to enslave Indians, the Spanish are thus merely participating in a labor system already practiced in the Americas. But they are also extending the larger Mediterranean world of which they were a part to this side of the Atlantic. According David Brion Davis, the leading historian of slavery in the English-speaking world, beginning in the early 1200s, Italian merchants had been instrumental in trading slaves throughout the

Mediterranean basin, largely to supply sugar plantations on Mediterranean islands. However, these slaves were not Africans, but were rather Slavic peoples from eastern Europe and Central Asia (our English word “slave” comes from “Slav,” as in “Slavic”). Muslim conquest of what is now Turkey in 1453 cut off Western Europeans’ access to these white slaves (who would now become the sole possession of Muslim enslavers). Portugal eventually took over the slave trading from the Italians and, by the 1470s, was buying black slaves from West Africa—people who had, importantly, been enslaved by other Africans and various Arab slave traders.

—By the late 1490s, the Portuguese were bringing large numbers of enslaved Africans to Brazil; it is also possible that small numbers of black slaves had been brought to SC and FL by French and Spanish colonists, though that is impossible to prove. Problems with enslaving Indians would lead, partially, to the Spanish inability to develop an economic infrastructure in North America (in Mexico and Central America, they simply inherited the existing infrastructure of the conquered Aztec, Maya, and Inca, including those people’s practices of slavery), as well as the Spanish leaning on African slaves in their Caribbean possessions.

## **The English and Virginia**

With all of that about France and Spain out of the way, how do the English (who are most important to our story), figure here? Details about the establishment of “Virginia” will come next time, but for now, let us consider how why colonial efforts in the New World and resistance to Spanish power was so important to England.

### **The New World and the Birth of “Englishness”**

- The mid 1400s saw England emerge from a conflict with France called the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). The war was the result of complex interactions between France and England that began with the French Normans conquering England in 1066; for the next three centuries, England would be ruled by French-speaking kings who also held lands across the Channel in France. Though England lost the Hundred Years’ War, they gained a sense of national identity that fully separated them from the continent. England thus disengaged from the politics of the European continent and, with the rise of the House of Tudor in 1485, the English became increasingly proud of their own nationhood.
- The second Tudor king, Henry VIII, made the break with the Pope in 1534. While Henry thus broke England away from the Roman Catholic Church, he despised Protestants (and especially Martin Luther) and the theology of the English church was largely unchanged. Authentic conversion to Protestantism was effected by English church leaders during the reign of Henry’s son and heir, Edward VI. When Edward’s sister Mary ascends to

the throne in 1553, she briefly returns England to loyalty to Catholicism, though her younger sister Elizabeth, who becomes queen in 1558, England becomes firmly and unshakably Protestant.

Under Elizabeth's reign, English national identity flourishes; to this day, much of the national mythology of England derives from her 45 years on the throne. But under Elizabeth, two interrelated problems present themselves, both of which having consequences for "the South":

1. England's geography made it reliant on the western European Mediterrean powers—particularly Spain—for foodstuffs and goods considered necessary by the English elite and the rapidly-increasing English merchant/middle class: wine, linen, citrus fruits, oils, spices, and so forth. These things could not be grown in England or Ireland (where England had been practicing various forms of colonial rule for over 400 years), but they could be grown in Iberia, the various island possessions of Spain, Portugal, and France, North Africa, and the Middle East.
2. Elizabethan England's Protestantism created political tensions, especially with Spain. English Queen Mary I (Elizabeth's older sister) married the Spanish King Phillip II, and enforced Catholic doctrine and practice with an iron thumb that led to her being hated by the English people. Mary dies childless and her younger sister Elizabeth becomes queen. Elizabeth is a firm Protestant. Catholics both in England and Europe attempt to overthrow Elizabeth and put her cousin, also named Mary, on the throne. This tension between Catholic Europe and Protestant England comes to a head in the late 1580s, when Spain's Phillip II launches naval war against England.

Into this context comes a man named Richard Hakluyt (1553-1616), who should not be confused with his cousin of the same name. While great adventurers like Sir Walter Raleigh, Francis Drake, and Captain John Smith may have been the engines to drive English colonial enterprises, it was the arguments of Hakluyt that made Queen Elizabeth and others in the English government see attempts at establishing colonies in America not only possible, but necessary for the survival of the English nation.

### **Hakluyt's Vision**

Hakluyt was concerned with the limits of English commerical power in the Old World, particularly because of the tensions with the Catholic kingdoms of Western Europe. The Protestant nations of Northern Europe—Denmark, the Netherlands, and parts of what become Germany—are in their own fierce competition to control the waters of the North Sea and the Arctic Ocean. He also saw the continued problems of relying on the Spanish and French to fulfill English demands for things like wine, citrus, spices, etc. An ardent reader of Spanish, Portuguese, and French travelogues of the New World, Hakluyt intuitively recognized the similarities in climate between the South and Iberia

and West Africa. Thus, Hakluyt presumed that English colonization of the South could result in English self-sufficiency, as they could produce the very commodities they were so dependent on and that they got from the increasingly hostile Catholic nations of southern Europe.

Further, Spanish and French explorers of the South noted that, unlike Mexico, Central and South America, native Americans in the South were not highly-developed empires, but rather lived in smaller, often semi-nomadic groups. Beyond that, they were willing to trade with Europeans and had not expressed consistent hostility toward Europeans. As such, Hakluyt surmised that coexistence alongside and shared profits with the South's Indians was the likely outcome. Hakluyt thus developed plans for English investment in America and was a passionate promoter of this idea, consistently arguing that colonization would be profitable and beneficial for England, enhancing its commercial capability, national prestige, national security, and—especially if the hypothetical Northwest Passage to Asia could be found somewhere in the North American landmass—England could come to dominate East Asian trade by avoiding the long and treacherous sail around Africa.

While such plans were attractive to many in London, including Queen Elizabeth herself, England had more pressing needs in the late 1500s: religious-derived political unrest continued throughout the country, and England's attempts to move itself from a 2nd to a 1st rate power took most of its resources, particularly in the building of a navy. While prioritizing the development of the British Navy would prove to be wise, this made governmental funds largely unavailable for colonization. As such, attempts at settling what came to be called "Virginia" would largely be funded by private corporations; more on that next week.

## Virginia

Before we close, let us consider a few things about the early English vision of the South, of "Virginia":

- Virginia was originally everything from Florida to what is now eastern Canada, but the English focus was always on southern part of this—what we now think of as Virginia and the Carolinas.
- As noted, Virginia was so important to the Hakluytian vision because of its climate; thus, before there is even a South, climate is its inescapable feature.
- The Hakluytian vision suggests that agriculture and commerce are never seen antithetical in South, but from the beginning are tightly interwoven ideas of what this place will eventually be. The South's economic identity will remain for centuries after this a blending of agriculture and commerce as economically intertwined.
- Fantasy projection is a major part of the late 16th century looking at Virginia; Hakluyt and others have a will for what the South *could* be, but lack the understanding of the geographic difficulties and the consequent

labor needs. In other words, even for someone like Hakluyt, the South is understood through a fantasy of economic development and how that will redound benefits to England, rather than a place in which multiple, complexly overlapping populations will enter into contention and conflict.

**How do such ideas about the South continue, even to our day?**