

The Cultural Beginnings of the Anglo-American South, written by Nicole Williams

### The Anglo-South

The conception of the American South began with the settlement of Virginia in 1607 by English colonists with the establishment of the Jamestown colony, located on the James River. From this initial settlement sprang forth a well of Anglo, Scottish and Ulster Protestant culture which has come to define much of the English speaking southern American states. These cultural folkways differed in certain ways from one another given the cultural folkways in which they originated. From music, food, conceptions of honor, religious faith and liberty, our antecedents gave rise to the cultures in which we live today. In contrast, our northern cousins gave birth to a different set of cultural traditions that would place them on a direct path of confrontation with the unique blending of Anglo and Ulster-Scottish traditions in the South.

The Jamestown colony in Virginia persisted through a series of near disasters in its early years yet found its cultural trajectory in 1641 with the arrival of Sir William Berkeley as itself as a destination for second and third sons of the English aristocracy, drawing largely from southwestern England. The colony's population, in fact, would increase fivefold during Berkeley's tenure as governor, establishing itself culturally as part of the British Empire in the seventeenth century.

The Virginia cavaliers, as they became known, fled England in the wake of a Puritan takeover in the mid-seventeenth century. As the cavaliers established their ascendancy in Virginia, they recruited their servant class, drawn not from the lowest but the "bottom of the middle ranks" of English society. These servants were, like their employers, drawn often from rural and agrarian areas of England. It is also notable that many of these servants were young men and boys, often kidnapped by unscrupulous traders in England and sent onward to Virginia. The cavaliers and their servants who came to define early American southern culture.

Religion in eastern Virginia, and later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, within coastal Carolina region was characterized by the traditions of the Church of England, later the Episcopal Church in America. These services were 'ceremonial, liturgical, hierarchical, and ritualist', yet brief in practice. This is not to say that other Christian sects did not have a place within this widening society, but the Anglican tradition came to dominate the establishment society on the southeastern region. By 1724, it was reported that Anglican services were well-attended and those who held dissenting faiths inclusive of Presbyterians, Quakers, Puritans, and the nascent Baptist sect were few. This pattern changed by the end of the eighteenth-century with the blossoming of new religious practices after the dissolution of the Church of England in the newly independent United States. However, these changes in religious practices did not indicate a change in the fundamental conservative character of the Southern region.

The Virginia colony drew upon its cultural linkages with agrarian England. The name by which Virginia is often referred, the "Old Dominion" harkened back to an earlier social order characterized by deference to hierarchy and opposition to social change. Historian David

Hackett Fischer notes that Virginians “perceived the culture of England as a precious inheritance to be protected from change, and passed intact from one generation to the next.” This ideal would be disseminated throughout the coastal region of the southeastern colonies, and later, the Southern American states for generations.

The tendency for Anglo-Virginians and later, the Anglo-South to hold onto patterns of the “Old World” is exemplified in the ways of speaking that many Southerners are still familiar with today. The use of terms such as “ain’t” and even, “hain’t”, often derided today as the speech of the uneducated were in common vernacular use by Anglo-Southerners and Englishmen in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Other terms that many are familiar with today include, whopper for something of a large size, chittlins for entrails, and ha’af for half. These are but a sampling of the linguistic traditions that persist in Southern American speech today.

As with language, agrarianism, a culture of hunting, and cooking was of vital importance in Anglo-Southern culture. Game, caught by hunters, was of particular importance to all classes of people in the southeastern colonies, and states. Roast beef, venison, rabbit and lamb were all common dishes in southern cuisine in the region, as they were in England. In addition, fried chicken, a dish imported from the British Isles, became a favorite of many of the landed elites in the South. Likewise, vegetables and fruits, grown locally and sometimes traded in markets, including strawberries and asparagus were consumed widely. It is also notable that the lower classes of Anglo-Southerners often consumed food akin to today’s “soul food” inclusive of grits, greens and salt-pork, or “fatback”. These staples of Southern cuisine were influenced greatly by the culture of African people who had been forcibly taken to the Americas, yet contributed greatly to the ascendancy of Southern culture.

The music of the South is also greatly influenced by the melding of African and Anglo cultural traditions. Social gatherings of individuals, from the elites, to the landless, to the slaves often centered around the playing of music and dancing. The earliest written mention of a musical instrument was the violin, or fiddle, in 1624. Although little to no written music survives from this period, it is easy to extrapolate what was performed during the early colonial period. There are a multitude of written music from the seventeenth century in England. In addition, it is highly likely that the rhythms and melody of indigenous tribes, as well as African influence found their way into what developed into a Southern American sound. In fact, many of the skilled fiddlers called upon to play at social events of the coastal gentry were, in fact, of African heritage. The melding of African and English heritage was a mainstay of Southern American culture. However, there was another cultural force at play in the southeastern American colonies.

### The Scotch-Irish, and Northern Britons

As early as 1718, the first of what would be many thousands arrived in the northern American colonies from Ireland. These colonists were wholly unlike others who had arrived from central and southern England. They carried with them their own traditions, culture, dissenting religious faith, and other folkways. In fact, their speech was fundamentally different from other

Americans of English heritage. These people described as appearing poor, and having 'lean, hard' faces spoke with a particular cadence unfamiliar to other colonial Americans. Many of these people had arrived from ports in the northeast of Ireland. However, they differed in fundamental ways from later migrations in the nineteenth century from Ireland. Many were of Scottish heritage, or in some cases, northern England. They also often adhered either in ethnic loyalty or in religious practice to the faith of the Presbyterian church. Although many of these settlers arrived in northern ports, they or their progeny would settle in what is now present-day upstate South Carolina or central and western North Carolina. Much of this migration would occur in waves between 1718 through 1775.

These settlers, many having origins in lowland Scotland, some even having belonged to the families who engaged in cattle thievery, feuds, and blackmail although the dangerous border between Scotland and England had been once offered land in Ireland by King James I of England in an effort to pacify Ireland. This plan known as the Plantation of Ulster would result in close to 400 years of sectarian violence between Protestants and the native Catholic population of Ireland. Due to violence, religious persecution, and famine many of those Scottish-Irish Protestants would elect to take up migration to the American colonies in an effort to begin anew.

The Scotch-Irish, as they became to be popularly known in the nineteenth century brought with them their love of music, their Calvinist religion, and their clannish family traditions. In fact, it was said of one Scotch-Irishman that, "his looks spoke out that he would not fear the devil, should he meet him face to face." These men and women were described as prideful, yet hard-working and would never shun the opportunity to challenge someone who crossed them.

The religious faith, as previously stated, as predominantly Presbyterian, yet not exclusively so. Even before the nineteenth and twentieth century, revival tradition emerged in America, many of these Presbyterians regularly attended "holy fairs" in Scotland and in Ireland, characterized by open air sermons often attended by multitudes of Christian adherents. Many of the Presbyterian adherents were often openly hostile to the then established Anglican church, and would demonstrate that hostility in Scotland, Ireland, and in the sparsely populated Carolina backcountry. It was said that, "military metaphors abounded in backcountry sermons and hymns. Prayers were invoked for vengeance and the destruction of enemies." It was this sort of the religious practice that mixed freely with clannish folkways that had been freely established in the British Isles.

The Scotch-Irish would eventually settle throughout the interior of the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia, and later Tennessee and Kentucky. Their influence can be felt today in towns and cities including Hillsborough, Charlotte, Greenville, Boone, Knoxville, Spartanburg and into remote areas of the Piedmont and southern Appalachian region. Likewise, their descendants would make their mark on American history through names such as James Polk, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, and the Rev. Billy Graham.

As previously stated, Scotch-Irish and northern Britons spoke differently from those older old-stock Anglo Southerners. Pronunciations of commonly used words in this dialect included, critter for creature, hard instead of hired, far for fire, winder for window, and fixin' for getting ready to do something. This manner of speech would have a profound impact on the development patterns of Southern speech, not only on the Scotch-Irish but throughout other ethnicities in the Southern states well into the modern age.

In terms of food, here the Scotch-Irish differed in fundamental ways from their coastal Anglo and African cousins. Visitors to the Southern backcountry were often horrified to find families dining on "clabber, butter, fat mushy bacon, and cornbread" with ale and whiskey freely consumed by not only adults but even children. In fact, corn, a North American crop, was adapted to use by backcountry inhabitants inspired by the food often eaten in the British Isles. Oatcakes became cornbread and griddle cakes; oatmeal to grits, and whisky became bourbon, and corn whiskey or "moonshine" as it was later known. Vegetables were also staples of the backcountry diet. Poke salad, pumpkin, beans and squash, all native to the continent were adapted into highland Southern American foodways. Native Southerners today are often well versed in staples of the old backcountry fare.

Music folkways, like food, differed from those in the Anglo-South. Balladry, often sung without instrumentation, made the migration from mainland Britain to Ireland and onto America. These songs, often about love, murder, family and the land changed over the generations. Standards of American bluegrass and folk music today, songs such as "Pretty Polly" "Black is the Color", and "Rose Connelly" also known as "Down in the Willow Garden" reflected the experiences and locales of these Southern Americans. Likewise, religion had an impact on the evolution of the lyrics of many ballads. Many songs once held supernatural elements or tales of sexual violence, frowned upon by the Baptist, Methodist, and other Protestant denominations. This can be seen in popular songs such as "Matty Groves", later altered into 'Shady Grove". The use of musical instruments and dance, however, was popular with settlers in the backcountry. The fiddle, also a mainstay of the Anglo and African South remained popular with the Scotch-Irish and northern Britons. Bagpipes, once popular in Scotland and Ireland, did not; however, the German scheithol was adopted by colonists into the Appalachian dulcimer. Likewise, the banjo, a staple in Southern folk music was adopted from an instrument of African origin in the nineteenth century. These secular songs and instruments were extremely popular and yet do not impart the importance of how religious faith and music shaped the Southern countryside.

Prior to the American Revolution, dissenting churches, in particular, the Presbyterian church, often sang psalms at Sunday services. These songs, were sung without musical accompaniment, and led by an individual known as a preceptor who would "line-out" the start of each verse before it was performed by the congregation. In the late eighteenth-century, the Rev. Isaac Watt's English hymnal were introduced in many Carolinian Presbyterian churches, sometimes resulting in near riots within the churches. These hymns inspired by Christian theology did not come directly from the Bible. However, the songs, over time became particularly popular with backcountry inhabitants and were used with the intent of teaching doctrine. Later in the 1830s, a form of hymnody called, shape-note and Sacred Harp singing,

originally from New England emerged as particularly popular in the southeast due to the labor of native South Carolinian, "Singing" Billy Walker. Walker, author of *The Southern Harmony, and Musical Companion* (1835) was a leading proponent of a singing style which would come to dominate religious song throughout Christian services of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, these brief looks into the cultural practices of the Anglo, Scotch-Irish and African influences on the early South are by no means comprehensive. There were a multitude of influences and factors into the development of Southern culture including a wider range of beliefs and folkways, also heavily influenced by French speaking Creoles, Acadians, German speaking Palatines, and African peoples. This overview of our English-speaking ancestors, particularly in the southeastern American states will hopefully galvanize you to learn more about who our people are, why we believe what we do, and who we are as Southern people.

### Recommended Reading:

CARUTHERS, E. W. 1842. *A Sketch of the Life and Character of the Rev. David Caldwell, D.D. Near Sixty Years Pastor of the Churches of Buffalo and Alamance*, Greensborough, North Carolina, Swaim and Sherwood.

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HOOKER, R. J. (ed.) 1953. *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution: The Journal and Other Writings of Charles Woodmason, Anglican Itinerant*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

JAMISON, P. 2015. *Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance*, Urbana, Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois.

PATTERSON, D. W. 2012. *The True Image: Gravestone Art and the Culture of Scotch Irish Settlers in the Pennsylvania and Carolina Backcountry*, Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press.

SCOGGINS, M. C. 2013. *The Scotch Irish influence on country music in the Carolinas: border ballads, fiddle tunes & sacred songs*, Charleston, SC, History Press.