ONE AMERICAN’S STORY

Alexander Spotswood governed Virginia from 1710 to 1722. He believed that the future of English colonists lay to the west. To prove his point, he led a month-long expedition over the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains in August 1716.

During the 400-mile journey, adventurers braved dense thickets, muddy streams, and rattlesnakes. At night, they feasted on the deer, wild turkeys, and bear they had shot. John Fontaine, who accompanied Spotswood, kept a diary of the trip.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

We had a rugged way; we passed over a great many small runs of water, some of which were very deep, and others very miry. Several of our company were dismounted, some were down with their horses, others under their horses, and some thrown off.

John Fontaine, quoted in Colonial Virginia

After the expedition, Spotswood gave each of his companions a golden horseshoe. His journey with the “Knights of the Golden Horseshoe” is considered a symbol of Virginia’s westward expansion.

Geography of the Backcountry

Just as Spotswood predicted, settlers soon began to move into the Backcountry. This was a region of dense forests and rushing streams in or near the Appalachian Mountains. The Appalachians stretch from eastern Canada south to Alabama.

In the South, the Backcountry began at the fall line. The fall line is where waterfalls prevent large boats from moving farther upriver. Beyond the fall line is the piedmont. Piedmont means “foot of the mountains.” It is the broad plateau that leads to the Blue Ridge Mountains of the Appalachian range.

The Backcountry’s resources made it relatively easy for a family to start a small farm. The region’s many springs and streams provided water, and forests furnished wood that settlers could use for log cabins and fences.
Backcountry Settlers

The first Europeans in the Backcountry made a living by trading with the Native Americans. Backcountry settlers paid for goods with deerskins. A unit of value was one buckskin or, for short, a “buck.”

Farmers soon followed the traders into the region, but they had to be cautious. As the number of settlements grew, the farmers often clashed with the Native Americans whose land they were taking.

Farmers sheltered their families in log cabins. They filled holes between the logs with mud, moss, and clay. Then they sawed out doors and windows. Lacking glass, settlers used paper smeared with animal fat to cover their windows.

William Byrd—on his expedition to establish the southern border of Virginia—described a long night that he spent in one such cabin. He complained that he and at least ten other people were “forct to pig together in a Room . . . troubled with the Squalling of peevish, dirty children into the Bargain.”

Backcountry life may have been harsh, but by the late 1600s many families had chosen to move there. Some of them went to escape the plantation system, which had crowded out many small farmers closer to the seacoast. Then, in the 1700s, a new group of emigrants—the Scots-Irish—began to move into the Backcountry.

The Scots-Irish

The Scots-Irish came from the borderland between Scotland and England. Most of them had lived for a time in northern Ireland. In 1707, England and Scotland merged and formed Great Britain. The merger caused many hardships for the Scots-Irish. Poverty and crop failures made this bad situation even worse.

As a result, Scots-Irish headed to America by the thousands. After they arrived, they quickly moved into the Backcountry. The Scots-Irish brought their clan system with them to the Backcountry. Clans are large groups of families—sometimes in the thousands—that claim a common ancestor. Clan members were suspicious of outsiders and banded together when danger threatened. These clans helped families to deal with the dangers and problems of the Backcountry.
Life in the Backcountry was very different from life along the seaboard. Settlers along the coast carried on a lively trade with England. But in the Backcountry, rough roads and rivers made it almost impossible to move goods.

As a result, Backcountry farmers learned quickly to depend on themselves. They built log cabins and furnished them with cornhusk mattresses and homemade benches and tables. They fed their families with the hogs and cattle they raised and with the fish and game they killed. They grew yellow corn to feed their livestock and white corn to eat. Popcorn was probably their only snack food. To protect their precious corn from pests, daytime patrols of women, children, and the elderly served as human scarecrows.

Women in the Backcountry worked in the cabin and fields, but they also learned to use guns and axes. An explorer who traveled in the region described one of these hardy Backcountry women.

**A VOICE FROM THE PAST**

She is a very civil woman and shows nothing of ruggedness or Immodesty in her carriage, yet she will carry a gunn in the woods and kill deer, turkeys, etc., shoot down wild cattle, catch and tye hoggs, knock down [cattle] with an ax and perform the most manfull Exercises.

**A visitor to the Backcountry**, quoted in *A History of American Life*

Settlers in the Backcountry often acted as if there were no other people in the region, but this was not so. In the woods and meadows that surrounded their cabins, settlers often encountered Native Americans and other groups that had made America their home.

**Other Peoples in North America**

The Backcountry settlers started a westward movement that would play a critical role in American history. Most settlers’ motivation to move west was simple—the desire for land.

Yet the push to the west brought settlers into contact with other peoples of North America. Native Americans had made their homes there for thousands of years. In addition, France and Spain claimed considerable territory in North America.

Sometimes this contact led to changes in people’s cultures. For instance, North America had no horses until the Spanish colonists brought them into Mexico in the 1500s. Horses migrated north, and Native Americans caught them and made them an important part of their culture.
Contact also led to conflict. As English settlers pushed into the Backcountry, they put pressure on Native American tribes. Some tribes reacted by raiding isolated homesteads and small settlements. White settlers struck back, leading to more bloodshed.

The English colonists also came into conflict with the French. The French had colonized eastern Canada and had moved into the territories, rich with fur, along the Mississippi River. French fur traders wanted to prevent English settlers from moving west and taking away part of the trade. One Native American told an Englishman, “You and the French are like two edges of a pair of shears, and we are the cloth that is cut to pieces between them.”

Spain also controlled large areas of North America—including territories that today form part or all of the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. Spanish settlers were farmers, ranchers, and priests. Priests, who established missions to convert Native Americans, built forts near the missions for protection. In 1718, Spaniards built Fort San Antonio de Bexar to guard the mission of San Antonio de Valero, later renamed the Alamo.

These different groups continued to compete—and sometimes fight— with one another. Frequently, England’s colonies had to unite against these other groups. As a result, a common American identity began to take shape, as you will read in Chapter 5.