
Compare And Contrast New England, The Middle Colonies, And The Southern Colonies

In contemporary society, America is metaphorically branded a “melting pot” to describe the amalgamation of different cultures and ethnicities. The diversification of society is now commonplace in the United States, as people can live anywhere and still have access to the same resources. However, this phenomenon was nowhere to be seen during the settlement of the thirteen founding colonies, in which certain areas became strongholds for different modes of society. In historical hindsight, the colonies have been categorized into three distinct regions based on their location and customs: New England, the middle and southern colonies. Because of their close geographical location but fascinating array of characteristics, the middle and southern colonies make for the most engrossing comparison. Though collectively laying the foundations for modern America, these regions consisted of significantly more differences than similarities.

In order to compare and contrast the two colonial regions, one must begin at the root of their disparity by considering their founders’ motivations. The rationale for the establishment of the middle colonies was primarily religiously-driven; members of minority faiths wished to escape the jurisdiction of the Church of England. A principal figure in this migration was William Penn, an aristocratic Englishman who remained adamantly loyal to the Religious Society of Friends, otherwise referred to as the Quakers. Penn recognized the religious persecution inflicted upon his peers in England, and founded Pennsylvania as a means of providing them asylum. He later assumed governmental control over Delaware, while a group of Quakers purchased the nearby colony of New Jersey. The founding of the southern colonies was mainly tied to the economic ambitions of the English aristocracy, greatly contrasting with the religious pilgrimages completed by the Quakers. In the Carolinas, eight proprietary founders planned to develop an agricultural colony that would supply the English sugar plantation in the Barbados and export other foreign products. Georgia, on the other hand, was founded on the premise of being a buffer state to shelter the Carolinas from the aggressive Spaniards inhabiting Florida. Because of the prospering tobacco industry due in part to John Rolfe, Virginia became a financial haven for aspiring Europeans. Although Maryland was not supposed to follow in these agricultural footsteps, its abundance of tobacco led to immeasurable economic gains for landowners. Not only did the motives of the colonies’ founders highlight the incongruity between the two regions, but they also prefigured their respective religious tendencies.

Emerging from their foundational motivations, the religious orientations in the two colonial regions were visibly dissimilar. The middle colonies generally developed into a Quaker

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sanctuary, with the notable exception of New York. Led by William Penn, the harmonious group presided over Pennsylvania and New Jersey while simultaneously exerting a strong influence in Delaware. Meanwhile, British and Dutch conflicts in New York rendered religious uniformity an impossibility, forcing many colonists to reluctantly adopt the local forms of Protestantism. Contrasting with the religious emphasis in the middle region, the southern colonies opted to mostly neglect addressing the issue. Because of the agriculturally-based societies present in this area, the Church of England faced little competition in establishing itself as the sole religious force. The royal statutes of Georgia, Virginia, and the Carolinas ensured that Anglicanism was predominant in the south. Maryland originally proved to be an outlier; it was founded by a well-known Catholic proprietor named Lord Baltimore seeking to provide refuge for those being persecuted in England. However, tensions flared between the settlers and nearby Protestants, discouraging the idea of a strictly Catholic settlement. Since religion was a nonessential facet of southern life, the colonists living in these areas were afforded religious toleration. The lack of religious uniformity in the southern colonies underscores how significantly they deviate from their middle counterparts, further highlighting the other macro differences between the regions. The respective attitudes toward religion separating the sets of colonies hint at the widespread variations in their cultures, particularly the modes of their economies.

The differentiation between the middle and southern colonies can be furthered by the drastically varying means in which they pursued financial success. In the former region, the land was characterized as much more fertile and broad than in other areas. Bread exports from the middle colonies soared, causing them to be consequentially deemed the “bread colonies.” Industry played a surprisingly prominent role in the economy, with lumber and seaports thriving due to a favorable physical environment. Because their fortunes were not dependent on plantations and slave labor, the northern colonies were arguably left in a more sustainable economic situation than those in the south. The growth of products like tobacco and rice became a staple of the southern economy, leading to an imbalanced distribution of land in which plantations became the societal norm. Alongside expansive farms, they contributed to the popularization of slavery and stunted the growth of developing cities around them. They also fostered the beginnings of class inequality, as the profiting aristocracy began to separate themselves from the rest by advancing further up the social pecking order.

For all the notable differences between the middle and southern colonies, they were both responsible for political advancements that changed the course of our nation. In reference to the former, William Penn notably took several political measures to instill a peaceful, cooperative attitude into the Pennsylvania colony. He bought land from local Native Americans and attempted to partly integrate them into his society, a foreshadowing of our modern efforts to ensure equality for racial and ethnic minorities. Penn’s famous Frame of Government served as the first constitution for the colony, but most importantly expressed his vehement resentment of an autocratic government. To prevent the formulation of absolutism, he implemented a checks

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and balances system vaguely reminiscent of that in the United States Constitution. Delaware also were subject to this system, while New Jersey devised a similar set of laws. The southern colonies were generally in accordance with this blueprint, prioritizing the best decisions for the greater good of the people. Essential strides toward our modern governmental system were taken in Virginia with the establishment of the House of Burgesses in 1619. It was the first of many miniature legislatures formed by the colonists, setting the precedent for the American valuation of democracy. During a period of religious angst between Catholics and Protestants in Maryland, the representative assembly opted to end the conflict by passing the Act of Toleration in 1649. This attitude toward serving the people was one of the few characteristics prevalent in both discussed colonial regions, which reflects how American ideals back our success as a country.

As can be seen from the compare and contrast essay, the middle colonies shared little with the southern colonies before their joint unification into the early United States. The religiously-motivated founders of the former can best be encapsulated by William Penn, who designed a colony with the sole purpose of implementing religious freedom. Conversely, the southern colonies were primarily established to enhance English profits in commercial agriculture exportation. The areas greatly differed in their overall religious orientations, with Quakers dominating the middle colonies while the Church of England blossomed in the south. Both regions discovered efficient ways of attaining wealth and success, though their strategies largely depended on the physical environment given to them. The middle colonies mainly prospered because of their extensive exportation of bread and intense focus on industry, while the southern colonies heavily emphasized an agricultural economy. Yet in an ironic manner, the regions' shared disposition toward political progress has overcome their differences and surely influenced the foundations of the United States that exist today.

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