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0521343747 - A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in South
Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800 - Timothy Silver

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STUDIES IN ENVIRONMENT AND HISTORY

A new face on the countryside

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South Atlantic forests, 1500–1800

TIMOTHY SILVER

Appalachian State University



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For Sharon

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Preface

I suppose forests have always held a certain fascination for me. From the time I first went camping in the summer before my second birthday until I wore ecology T-shirts and celebrated Earth Day with fellow high-school students, I spent much of my early life either in or thinking about the woodlands. For a time I considered a career in forestry. When I finally got to graduate school as a student of American history, I was captivated by the accounts of the earliest explorers and their descriptions of the New World environment.

Even so, I might not have guessed what could be done with such sources had I not read two important books. Alfred W. Crosby's *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*¹ convinced me that human history is inevitably intertwined with the history of plants, animals, and microorganisms. Later, I read William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*.² Like many others, I found his interdisciplinary treatment of human impact on New England's landscape compelling. Since I am a Southerner by birth and student of the colonial South by choice, Cronon's book also started me thinking about settlement and environmental change in the warm climes of North America. When my mentors agreed that the peculiarities of southern ecology might justify a similar volume, I set out to write it, taking Cronon's work as my structural and methodological model. From that point, my study evolved into a doctoral dissertation at the College of William and Mary and finally this book.

One of the many things I learned over that period is that those who write history sometimes need to make compromises. Early on I made a big one. Originally, I thought my book would survey the colonial South. Then I discovered that historians disagree about the historical boundaries of the South and that any study, which claimed to cover all of it, should include, at a minimum, all the land east of Texas and south of Pennsylvania. An environmental historian trying to examine such a huge chunk of territory confronts

1. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972. 2. New York: Hill & Wang, 1983.

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special problems. Environmental change is frequently a local phenomenon; its scope and scale vary with topography, climate and settlement patterns. Indeed, it might be argued that those who seek accuracy should stick to describing human impact on tiny parcels of land, perhaps a single field.

Unwilling to write a history of a southern field, but believing that tackling the entire colonial South in a short volume would not allow for much detail about anything, I elected to narrow my focus to the principal area of English settlement. In so doing, I went against my training, for I have been taught to ignore political boundaries and think of colonial North America as a single geographic entity, where various groups of people interacted with each other and their environment. To atone for my sin, I have tried throughout to remain conscious of important changes that preceded English colonization. And I have tried to be aware of developments in other parts of North America and to show how they affected the environment of the English South. The payoff for my compromise, I trust, is a book that measures human impact on a large area, allows for significant detail, and seeks to avoid overgeneralizing about environmental change.

When one compromise is made, others come more easily. Like most historians who venture into other disciplines, I have become painfully aware that one cannot become an instant expert in disciplines as diverse as medicine, plant and animal ecology, geography, geology, and anthropology. I and the reader will have to be content with my textbook treatment of those fields. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen, whenever possible, to avoid specialized terminology. I usually refer to plants, animals, and microorganisms by their common names, except when a scientific term is necessary to illustrate important distinctions, as in the case of mosquito-borne diseases and the insects that carry them. Likewise, when describing soils, I focus on common traits, such as color and consistency, instead of mineral and organic content.

The same general rules apply when I write of more familiar subjects. Most readers will know that Columbus made a mistake when he described American natives as Indians. But the name has been used for so long by scholars and by natives themselves that it is no longer so ethnically loaded. I sense no overwhelming need to avoid it. For similar reasons, I refer to Europeans simply as “colonists,” “settlers,” or “whites,” and I use “Africans,” “blacks,” or “slaves” to describe those who came involuntarily to England’s southern colonies. When quoting my human subjects, I have attempted to keep the historical record intact, including haphazard and obsolete spellings and capitalization. I have, however, ignored random italics that did not alter or add to an author’s meaning. One other note to clear up possible confusion: Until about 1783, most colonists knew the South Carolina city of Charleston as “Charles Town.” In the interest of authenticity, I use Charles Town to describe the city before 1783 and Charleston thereafter. At least on this final and somewhat picky point, there will be no compromise.

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Acknowledgments

I often hear that writing a book is a lonely task. I think “solitary” might be a better way to describe it. For although I have been alone – in libraries, at microfilm readers, over legal pads and computer keyboards – during the past few years, I have seldom felt lonely. Many people have freely given their time and wisdom to help smooth the road for a first-time author.

Two teachers started me down that road. When I was a college senior, Judith Pulley made me take my work seriously and convinced me that one could make a career of history. Later, James Axtell introduced me to the techniques of ethnohistory and directed the dissertation that became this book. He gave me the freedom to pursue my ideas and constantly reminded me that history should be written with clarity and style. I am pleased to call him both mentor and friend.

A number of other intellectual companions guided my forays into South Atlantic forests. William Cronon provided inspiration and a how-to manual. Anyone familiar with his book will recognize its impact on my work. Peter H. Wood generously shared information on the population of the colonial South; Jack Temple Kirby did the same with his ideas about soil exhaustion. Stewart Ware tutored me in ecology, proving in the process that a scientist can also be a humanist. Throughout the course of the work I was blessed with toughminded critics who read parts or all of the manuscript at various stages. For their interest, time, and many helpful suggestions, I thank James Merrell, Thad Tate, James Whittenburg, Richard White, Peter Petschauer, Michael Moore, Alfred Crosby, Thomas Dunlap, and Donald Worster.

Along with intellectual guidance, I received invaluable assistance with the practical problems of research. During the initial phase of my study, I relied on the staff and resources of Swem Library at the College of William and Mary. John Ingram, James Garrett, and Susan Berg of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s Research Library were also helpful, both during my early research and when I returned later to look for illustrations. At Appalachian State University’s Belk Library, Martha Kreszock knew me for two years as her best interlibrary loan customer; she, Dianna Moody, and Lisa Rhodes labored

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tirelessly to process my endless requests for books and articles. In addition, Gregory Reck and Appalachian State's Office of Graduate Studies and Research found funds for a trip to the Library of Congress.

When it was time to write, others helped ease the way. George Antone did what he could to lighten my teaching load. When I needed to use a computer, Raymond Pulley, Patricia Wellborn, and Nancy Hopper showed me how. Most important, when I grew tired and discouraged, I had friends to lift my spirits. All my colleagues in the history department at Appalachian State heard more than they wanted to about this book. I particularly appreciate the moral support I received from David White and Mike Wade, who always seemed to know when I needed to talk about writing and when my sanity would be better served by watching a ballgame. About a dozen or so colleagues from other departments insisted that I put my work aside every Wednesday and Friday at noon so that I could join them on the basketball court. More than once the distraction of this friendly competition helped renew my creative energy, sending me back to the desk with my body tired, but my mind refreshed.

I also found plenty of encouragement at Cambridge University Press. My editor, Frank Smith, offered constant reassurance and exhibited infinite patience when certain revisions took longer than expected. Herbert Gilbert's meticulous work as copy editor saved me from numerous mistakes.

Finally, I thank my family. My parents and in-laws have been unwavering in their support of my work. But I owe the largest debt to my wife, Sharon. She has endured my absence when I stole away to write; she has endured my presence on those occasions when I returned frustrated and disillusioned. She has made me laugh at my subject matter. And she has at least feigned interest when I droned on for the thousandth time about rice birds, pine trees, or ginseng. Above all, her unflinching belief in the book and my ability to complete it gave me the courage to stay at the task. For these and other reasons, her investment in the following pages truly equals my own.