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Prologue: Images and boundaries

For most Americans the term "South" or "southern states" immediately calls to mind certain environmental images. A palmetto tree graces South Carolina's state flag. Moonlight and pine trees are recurring themes in Georgia's official state song. Literature, too, reflects similar images. Who can imagine Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara apart from cotton fields and magnolias? And in the first pages of Robert Penn Warren's All the King's Men, the reader meets not only hard-boiled southern politicians, but also a hapless "possum" which wanders from the "blackness of the cypresses" to meet its fate under the wheels of a speeding Cadillac. Such typical (scholars prefer "stereotypical") images are largely products of the more recent southern past, drawn from the Civil War and Reconstruction or, to use Warren's phrase, a time when "the smell of gasoline and burning brake bands and red eye [was] sweeter than myrrh." 1

There was, however, an earlier southern landscape, occupied first by Cherokees, Creeks, and Westos and later by planters and slaves. Its writers were not novelists, but naturalists, travelers, and traders such as John Banister, John Lawson, and James Adair. That landscape, too, had moonlight and magnolias, pines, palmettos, and possums. And then, as in later times, plants and animals figured prominently in the daily lives of the human inhabitants.

What of this earlier landscape, the so-called colonial South? Anyone seeking to unravel the changing relationships between its humans, plants, and animals runs headlong into a problem: where to begin. For if the nineteenth- and twentieth-century South was a land whose people exhibited some cohesiveness and regional character, the colonial South was remarkable for its diversity. Unlike New England, where religion and politics allowed for something of a common bond between colonists, the huge area south of Pennsylvania and east of Texas was a kaleidoscope of dissimilar peoples. Depending on when and where he journeyed, an eighteenth-century traveler in the South might hear European settlers speaking Spanish, French, English, German, or several other languages. Southern Indians also spoke a variety of dialects drawn from at least four major language groups. Black slaves accompanied some of the earliest Spanish expeditions and as English colonists began to use slave labor in their

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Robert Penn Warren, All the King's Men (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 49, 2.



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fields, Africans, with their own wide range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds unwillingly, became part of the human population.²

One way to begin to understand the relationships of these various peoples to the natural environment is to focus on one part of this huge multicultural area: the portion of the Atlantic seaboard first settled permanently by English colonists. Although this area of English influence was only one piece of a larger landscape, it does have certain boundaries that can be used to delineate it from the rest of the South. Those boundaries are both natural and man made, evident in the physical features of the land and in the settlement patterns of those who occupied it.³

Using man-made political boundaries, it is easy to identify the region of the principal British colonies, the southern half of that Atlantic strip so familiar to schoolchildren: Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, and Georgia. Florida became a British possession in 1763, but for much of the colonial period and again after the American Revolution, it officially belonged to Spain, whose goals for the New World differed from those of her antagonist to the north. If imperial borders were not sufficient reason to exclude Florida, environmental boundaries might be. Its warmer climate and longer growing season make Florida substantially different from the rest of the Atlantic seaboard. The natural vegetational border (like most ecological divisions) is indistinct. Trees and plants common to Florida do not suddenly stop growing at the Georgia line. But as Georgia colonists who tried unsuccessfully to export oranges found out, the northern reaches of Florida do mark an agricultural boundary of sorts. A better southern boundary is the Okefenokee Swamp, a tract of wetland spanning more than six hundred square miles. Indeed, the Okefenokee gives rise to the St. Mary's River, which now forms the northeastern section of the political boundary between Florida and Georgia.4

- 2. Two of the more recent works that point up the difficulty of defining the colonial South as a region are Aubrey C. Land, "The American South: First Epiphanies," Journal of Southern History 50 (1984), 3-14; and Thad W. Tate, "Defining the Colonial South," in Winthrop D. Jordan and Sheila L. Skemp, eds., Race and Family in the Colonial South (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 3-19. See also Clarence L. Ver Steeg, Origins of a Southern Mosaic: Studies of Early Carolina and Georgia (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975), xi-xiii.
- 3. Setting boundaries is one of the most difficult tasks confronting the environmental historian. See William Cronon, Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 14-15. I have relied primarily on cultural and political boundaries, electing to study one region in which one group of European colonists carried out their subsistence activities. But as will become clear, the region can also be delineated on the basis of climate and topography.
- 4. Ann Sutton and Myron Sutton, Eastern Forests, The Audubon Society Nature Guides (New York: Knopf, 1986), 123; Stetson Kennedy, Palmetto Country, American Folkways, gen. ed. Erskine Caldwell (New York: Duell, Sloane, & Pearce, 1942), 18.



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The Okefenokee is significant for another reason. It also marks the southern limits of what – for want of a better term – can be called colonial "plantation agriculture." Even if they found it difficult to grow tropical fruit, colonists north of the Okefenokee were able to cultivate other crops not grown in Europe. Settlers cashed in on that opportunity by developing a system of export agriculture that eventually came to be based on African slave labor. For the northern boundary of that agricultural system, scholars look to Maryland, which was part of the slave-based tobacco economy, and also a transitional colony "between southern plantations and middle colony farms." A suitable northern natural boundary can probably be pinpointed at the confluence of the Susquehanna River and the Chesapeake Bay. Settlers north of that point held slaves, and the specific nature of southern slavery varied widely from Maryland to Georgia. But the general practice of using African labor to produce exotic commodities was perhaps the most distinguishing factor of the region between the lower Susquehanna and the Okefenokee Swamp.

To the west, a hard and fast boundary is more difficult to discern. The Appalachian Mountains are the most obvious natural feature, and the English government believed their peaks made a suitable boundary. Once Britain laid claim to all of eastern North America in 1763, the Crown's Proclamation Line theoretically curtailed settlement beyond the mountains' eastern slopes. But as George III and Parliament discovered, certain boundaries are destined to be ignored. Indeed by 1763 colonists had been traversing the mountains for about a hundred years. In the second half of the seventeenth century, traders and explorers from Virginia and South Carolina went into, around, and beyond the Appalachians to survey the land and to seek commercial contacts with Indians. Despite the Crown's directive, bands of settlers took up residence west of the Proclamation Line in the years before the American Revolution, eventually forcing royal officials to adjust and extend their man-made border. The Appalachians, then, can serve only as a flexible western boundary. Much of

- 5. The Okefenokee marks the southern limits of rice culture in colonial America and can be considered the southern boundary of those parts of North and South Carolina collectively known as "Lowcountry." See Duncan Clinch Heyward, Seed From Madagascar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 5; and St. Julian Ravenel Childs, Malaria and Colonization in the Carolina Low Country, 1526-1696, The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, series 58, no. 1 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1940), 32.
- Carville V. Earle, The Evolution of a Tidewater Settlement System: All Hallow's Parish, Maryland, 1650-1783 (University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper no. 170, 1975), 3.
- 7. For a brief discussion of differences, see Tate, "Defining the Colonial South," in Jordan and Skemp, Race and Family, 11-14.

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white settlement was confined east of the mountains, but colonial influence extended farther and continued to spread west in the decades after 1750.8

Is it any easier to find an eastern boundary? Maybe. All the colonies bordered the Atlantic; the shoreline is the obvious easternmost feature. Or is it? All the American colonies – Spanish, English, French – might be said to lie on the "periphery" of European settlement, tiny outposts on the Atlantic's western shore. On the other side of the ocean, Europe stood as the core of occupation and influence. Not only did colonists come from Europe, but the European market frequently dictated how colonists used the land and resources of America. The needs of Caribbean settlements, other outposts with which England's southern colonies developed commercial ties, also helped define which products colonists took from American fields and forests. And then there is Africa. As a significant (in some areas the most significant) component of the human population, slaves did much of the actual work on the land. If it is essential to look across the Appalachians, it is equally crucial to see beyond the east coast, to take some account of what historian K. G. Davies has labeled the "North Atlantic World."

Historical boundaries must be temporal as well as spatial. English colonization of the southern coast began in 1584 with reconnaissance of northern North Carolina and Virginia. But given the heterogeneous character of the South as a whole, that date cannot serve as a point of departure. Spanish and French explorers arrived north of Florida much earlier, sailing along the coast and establishing small short-lived settlements. Roughly a half century before the English arrived, Spanish explorers ventured farther north to pass between the mountains and the coast, overland probes that had important implications for the natural environment. Looking into the past from the present and knowing that England eventually came to dominate the region, it is easy to see that takeover as inevitable. But the English were relative latecomers to the southern coast and their mastery of the region (despite what the Crown might

- 8. D. W. Meinig, The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, vol. 1, Atlantic America, 1492-1800 (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 284-8. In setting this flexible western boundary, I have relied on Meinig's definition of the southern English colonies. Meinig identifies two major subregions, Greater Virginia and Greater Carolina, both of which extended their influence into the interior (Meinig, Atlantic America, 153-160, 172-90).
- Immanuel Wallerstein, The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the Sixteenth Century (New York: Academic Press, 1964), see especially 101-3; Tate, "Defining the Colonial South," in Jordan and Skemp, Race and Family, 18; Cronon, Changes in the Land, 14.
- K. G. Davies, The North Atlantic World in the Seventeenth Century (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974).



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have thought) was by no means guaranteed. 11

Moreover, the land Europeans saw was actually the product of much earlier settlement, of human migrations that began when the ancestors of the southern Indians walked into America from Asia.¹² For several millennia before Europeans thought about staking imperial claims, Indians had lived and traveled widely along the Atlantic seaboard, more concerned with boundaries of villages, fields, and hunting territories than with prominent rivers, swamps, and mountains. Like Indians elsewhere in North America, southern natives had altered the landscape to suit their needs, adapting techniques and technology known across the continent to the peculiarities of local climates and topography.¹³ Because this initial human occupation transformed the landscape, it must be taken into account when establishing a beginning date. It may not be necessary to retreat all the way to the first human migrations, but it will be important to focus on those environmental changes wrought by Indians before European colonization. Perhaps an arbitrary date of A.D. 1,500 will suffice for a beginning.

Politically speaking, the colonial period ended either in 1776, 1783, or 1789, depending on whether one accepts a declaration, victory in war, or a new government as irrefutable proof of independence. Those dates mean little within an environmental context. A better specific date, one connected to southern land use, is 1793, the year Eli Whitney invented a gin for cleaning the seeds from short-staple cotton fibers. Growing cotton for export was a longstanding dream in the South. Jamestown colonists experimented with the crop as did the French in Louisiana. In the 1780s planters along the Georgia and South Carolina coasts also began to grow "sea-island" cotton, a variety with long fibers that are relatively easy to separate from the seeds. But it took Whitney's gin to make large-scale cultivation of short-staple cotton a reality, first in central South Carolina and Georgia and later (after displacement of the Indians) in the "black belt" of Alabama and Mississippi. 14

The Cotton Kingdom did not emerge overnight, nor did it dominate the entire South. Wheat and tobacco, important colonial staples, remained prominent from Maryland to North Carolina. And the most common crop throughout the first half of the nineteenth century was still corn, that grain of

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^{11.} The notion that historians sometimes "must imaginatively ignore our knowledge of the denouement" is neatly expressed in James Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5.

^{12.} Brian M. Fagan, The Great Journey: The Peopling of Ancient America (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 106-7.

^{13.} Cronon, Changes in the Land, 12.

^{14.} Lewis Cecil Gray, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States to 1860, 2 vols. (1932; reprint, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), vol. 2; 691-720.



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American origin so crucial to the subsistence of both Indians and colonists. ¹⁵ Nonetheless, the shift to cotton in the lower South stands as a significant watershed, a point after which some southern farmers faced new problems and challenges. Allowing for the significance of Whitney's gin and its implications for the nineteenth-century South, perhaps 1800 can serve as a convenient date to mark the end of colonial agriculture and the beginning of antebellum agriculture.

These inevitably fluid and somewhat arbitrary boundaries in space and time suggest another problem. What should this region be called? Before colonization, it might be useful to label it the "South Atlantic region." That name can serve to distinguish it from the larger "South," or "Southeast," and from Florida, which, although it borders the Atlantic, also has a "Gulf coast" and a southern tip pointing toward the Caribbean. After permanent settlement, "southern colonies," "English colonies," or "English South" will do. Such terms are not perfect. As one slice of a larger landscape with a variegated population, this strip of land inevitably became home to many white settlers whose ethnic heritage was non-English. In addition to Indians and Africans, many immigrants from other parts of Europe eventually took up residence along the South Atlantic.

But the various peoples who lived between the lower Susquehanna and the Okefenokee, the Atlantic and the Appalachians shared one important trait. Whether male or female, Indian, African, or European, each person came into contact with the natural world every day. Colonists who wrote about that world usually took note of such encounters: an outbreak of smallpox or "fever," the difficulty of clearing new fields, a hunt for deer or other game. However, for Indians, colonists, and slaves — as for humans everywhere — such occurrences were only small manifestations of larger and more complex relationships with nature. What were those relationships? How did these humans alter their environment? How did their environment change them? How did they change each other? For answers to those questions it is first necessary to turn to the land itself.

15. Ibid., chs. 31-5.



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Perspectives on the land

If somehow we (I the writer and you the reader) could be transported back in time to view the South Atlantic region before European colonization, what would we see? The answer would depend on a number of variables: where we happened to touch down, how and in which direction we traveled, and which particulars attracted our attention. A team of a hundred observers, each set down in a different locale, could probably describe a hundred different landscapes. To a large extent we would be sharing the perspectives of the earliest European explorers: Giovanni da Verrazzano, who reconnoitered the Atlantic coast for France in 1524; Lucas Vásquez de Ayllon, a Spaniard who explored the eastern Carolinas in 1526 and founded a comparatively shortlived colony in the South Carolina sea islands; or Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo, both of whom led sixteenth-century expeditions through the southeastern interior. Each of these explorers provided descriptions of the land they saw: Verrazzano, the coastline and what his party observed while foraging for provisions inland; Ayllon, the flat terrain of the eastern Carolinas inhabited by a wide variety of fish, birds, and mammals; de Soto and Pardo, rolling hills and mountains that rose several thousand feet above the surrounding terrain. Like those Europeans who witnessed it first hand, our imaginary team of observers would be able to describe only random fragments of a large and topographically diverse land.2

Suppose, however, we had at our disposal a bit of space-age technology in the form of a satellite capable of producing large-scale land photographs. If, instead of immediately trekking off at random, we carefully calibrated the camera and then positioned the satellite some miles up and just off the east coast

 This noneditorial use of "we" is drawn from Alfred Crosby, Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21.

^{2.} Lawrence C. Worth, ed., The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano, 1524-1528 (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), 134-5; David B. Quinn, ed., New American World: A Documentary History of North America to 1612, 5 vols. (New York: Arno Press and Hector Bye, Inc., 1979), vol. 1, 263-8; A Fidalgo of Elvas, "True Relation of the Vicissitudes that Attended the Governor Don Hernando de Soto," in Edward Gaylord Bourne, ed., Narratives of the Career of Hernando de Soto, 2 vols. (New York: Barnes, 1904), see, for example, vol. 1, 223. On the limited experience of European explorers, see William Cronon, Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983), 20-5.



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(on a clear day, of course), it would offer a sweeping overview of the region, a perspective that would allow us to note much more than the European explorers were able to see. Such a photograph would not resemble a modern road map, for it would show no highways, cities, county lines, or state boundaries; one could not tell where North Carolina ended and Virginia or South Carolina began. Instead the view would be more akin to standing over a relief map, with the various landforms and physical features thrown into sharp focus. It could tell us much about the region that Verrazzano, Ayllon, de Soto, and Pardo could not know.³

The South Atlantic coastline would look familiar - jutting eastward in its northern reaches near the top right of the photograph and curving progressively southwest in the lower portion of the picture.⁴ It was and is a ragged coastline. punctuated throughout with numerous offshore islands, inlets, sounds, and bays. To the north, the largest of the bays, the one colonists would know by the Indian term "Chesapeake," would be easily recognizable as a long finger of water stretching north and slightly west into the interior. About 195 miles long and 10 to 20 miles wide, the bay has approximately forty-eight principal tributaries that now bear a hodgepodge of Indian and European names. Looking north to south on the western side of the bay, we can recognize the narrow slip of the Susquehanna River entering the northern end of the bay, the wider Potomac near the bay's midpoint, and the Rappahannock, York, and James rivers at the broad, southern end of the Chesapeake. On the bay's eastern side, the tributaries are smaller and less well defined, a labyrinth of rivers and creeks creating myriad small peninsulas or "necks" of land, islands, and estuaries. All these tributaries feel the effects of the Atlantic tides so that even as far as two hundred miles inland water levels rise and recede with every flux of the ocean.5

Immediately south of Chesapeake Bay, the character of the coast changes. One distinctive feature is the line of wave-built sand reefs easily recognizable as the Carolina Outer Banks. West of this long, sandy spit are two large sounds; to the east, lies the open Atlantic. Protected somewhat from the tides by the Outer Banks, the rivers that feed the sounds tend to expand at their mouths into shallow estuaries. Albemarle, the northernmost sound, receives the Pasquo-

This is a variation of a technique employed in Graeme Caughley, The Deer Wars: The Story of Deer in New Zealand (Auckland: Heinemann, 1983), 15-21.

^{4.} Donald W. Meinig, The Shaping of America, vol. 1, Atlantic America, 1492–1800 (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 172–3.

^{5.} Arthur Pierce Middleton, Tobacco Coast: A Maritime History of Chesapeake Bay in the Colonial Era (1953; reprint Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 38-43; Carville V. Earle, The Evolution of a Tidewater Settlement System: All Hallows Parish, Maryland, 1650-1783 (The University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper no. 170, 1975), 19-20.



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tank, Chowan, and Roanoke rivers. Farther south, flowing into Pamlico Sound, are the Tar, Neuse, and Trent.⁶

From the southern end of Pamlico Sound, the coast begins a more dramatic swing to the southwest. Although no large bays or sounds command attention, the coast is still irregular, dotted with small inlets and numerous offshore islands. Here we know the primary Atlantic tributaries by Indian, African, and European names. From north to south, we identify the Cape Fear, Waccamaw, Pee Dee, Santee, Edisto, Combahee, Savannah, Ogeechee, Altamaha, and Satilla rivers. Like the streams immediately north, these rivers tend to widen as they approach the sea. Here, too, streams feel the effects of the tides, as water backs up the rivers and then flows out again at regular intervals.⁷

A "camera's eye" view of the region would also reveal another general characteristic of these southeastern rivers and streams. With a few exceptions (notably the tributaries on the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay) the rivers tend to flow roughly west to east, a trend that provides an important clue to the area's overall topography. Much of the South Atlantic region can be described as a giant slope, rising east to west out of the sea. This general seaward incline results from the combined effects of three smaller natural regions well known to geologists and physiographers.

Easternmost of these geographic provinces is the Atlantic coastal plain, actually a broad, exposed, inland extension of the submerged continental shelf. The width of the coastal plain varies throughout the region, but it is generally narrower toward the north, expanding farther inland to the south. The eastern or "outer" coastal plain is relatively level or slightly rolling, resembling the undulating floor of the sea. Farther west, the "inner" coastal plain is a bit more irregular, characterized by slightly sloping uplands. Elevations across the coastal plain range from zero at sea level to seven hundred feet at its western limits. This generally smooth, even monotonous, topography helps account for the sluggish, meandering nature of the major Atlantic tributaries. 9

At its western boundary, the inner coastal plain meets the Piedmont Plateau, a belt of rolling hilly uplands which, like the coastal plain, broadens in its

^{6.} H. Roy Merrens, Colonial North Carolina in the Eighteenth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 20 (map); Meinig, Atlantic America, 147; Isaiah Bowman, Forest Physiography of the United States and Principles of Soils in Relation to Forestry (1911; reprint, New York: Arno, 1970), 518.

Meinig, Atlantic America, 179; Duncan Clinch Heyward, Seed from Madagascar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 41.

^{8.} Bowman, Forest Physiography, 516-18.

Charles B. Hunt, Natural Regions of the United States and Canada (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1974), 5; David Sutton Phelps, "Archaeology of the North Carolina Coast and Coastal Plain: Problems and Hypotheses," in Mark A. Mathis and Jeffrey J. Crow, eds., The Prehistory of North Carolina (Raleigh: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1983), 4.



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southern reaches. These uplands, too, can be subdivided into an eastern or "lower piedmont," where elevations may be as low as two hundred feet and a western or "upper piedmont" where the hills and ridges approach two thousand feet. One of the larger coastal plain streams are still distinct in the piedmont. The Potomac, Rappahannock, James, and Roanoke drain the narrower northern section of the plateau. Farther south, where the piedmont is broader, important river systems include: the Dan, which joins the Roanoke; the Haw and Deep rivers, which feed the Cape Fear; and the Yadkin and Catawba, which help form the Pee Dee and Santee, respectively. Still farther south, the Savannah, as well as the Oconee and Ocmulgee (headwaters of the Altamaha) dissect the plateau. Due to increased elevations, piedmont streams sometimes move rapidly, finally tumbling onto the Atlantic coastal plain in a series of shoals and rapids along an indistinct boundary known as the fall line.

On the west, the piedmont meets the third important landform of the South Atlantic region: the Appalachian Highlands. At the left of our photograph, this region shows up as a series of mountain ridges where altitudes generally range from a thousand to more than six thousand feet above sea level. Some taller peaks lie in the Blue Ridge province, a narrow band of mountains that stretch north to south along the western edge of the piedmont. West across the Blue Ridge (on the backside of the southeastern slope) lies the Ridge and Valley province typified by lower, more rounded mountains and long stretches of relatively flat valleys. Many of the major river systems of the piedmont and coastal plain head in the eastern Blue Ridge Mountains, fed by groundwater and runoff from rain and snow. From the western slope of the Blue Ridge to the Ridge and Valley province, most of the major streams flow roughly west and south (The New River is an exception) toward the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and the Gulf of Mexico. 14

What our camera cannot reveal (at least to the untrained eye) is that some of these landforms are incredibly old, even by geologic standards. The origins of the Appalachians can be traced to a point 750 million years ago when a huge, single "megacontinent" split into two large land masses and several smaller

- 10. Stanley Wayne Trimble, Man-Induced Soil Erosion on the Southern Piedmont, 1700-1970 (Ankeny, Iowa: The Soil Conservation Society of America, 1974), 8-9.
- 11. Meinig, Atlantic America, 147, 179; Hunt, Natural Regions, 257; H. Trawick Ward, "A Review of Archaeology in the North Carolina Piedmont," in Mathis and Crow, Prehistory of North Carolina, 54.
- 12. Bowman, Forest Physiography, 623-4.
- Steven M. Stanley, Earth and Life Through Time (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1986), 219-20;
 Charles M. Hudson, The Southeastern Indians (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 18-19.
- Burton L. Purrington, "Ancient Mountaineers: An Overview of Prehistoric Archaeology of North Carolina's Western Mountain Region," in Mathis and Crow, Prehistory of North Carolina, 89.