



# 4 The Backcountry

## TERMS & NAMES

Appalachian  
Mountains  
fall line  
piedmont  
clan

### MAIN IDEA

Settlers moved to the Backcountry because land was cheap and plentiful.

### WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Backcountry settlers established a rural way of life that still exists in certain parts of the country.

## 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.

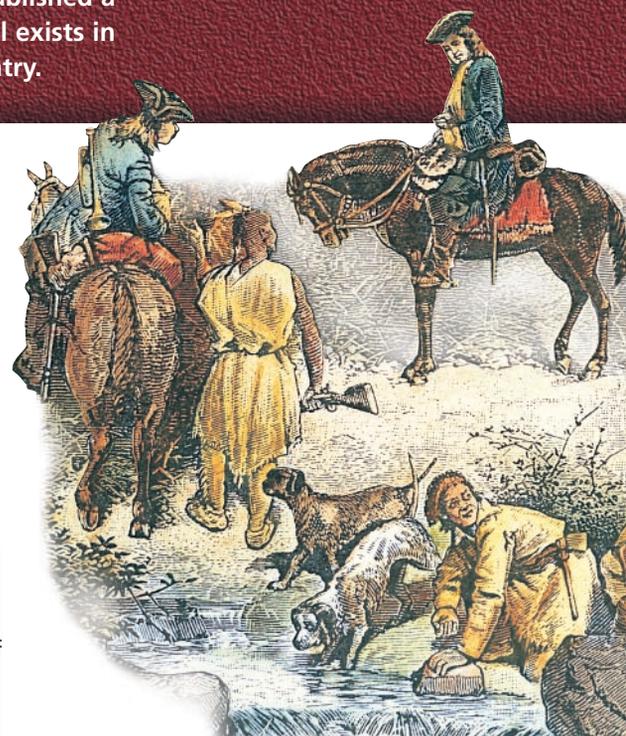
During the 400-mile journey, adventurers braved dense thickets, muddy streams, and rattlesnakes. At night, they feasted on the deer, wild turkeys, and bear they had shot. John Fontaine, who accompanied Spotswood, kept a diary of the trip.

### 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.



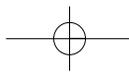
Alexander Spotswood meets Native Americans in the Blue Ridge Mountains—a segment of the Appalachians Mountains.

## 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.”

### Vocabulary

**buck:** an adult male deer; the adult female is called a doe

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 peevis, 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.

### ReadingHistory

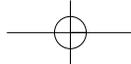
#### A. Analyzing

**Points of View**  
What was William Byrd's attitude toward Backcountry settlers?

### Vocabulary

**clan:** comes from an Old Irish word that means offspring, or descendants





## Now and then

### BACKCOUNTRY SPORTS TODAY

Three centuries ago, crowds in the Backcountry were thrilled by some of the same games that are now part of track and field competitions.

One of these games is the hammer throw. In this event, an athlete swings around a 16-pound metal ball on a wire-roped handle. After whirling around several times, the athlete lets go of the hammer, hoping it will travel the farthest distance.

The Scots-Irish brought other games to America, including the shotput, high jump, and long jump.



## Backcountry Life

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, yett 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.

### ReadingHistory

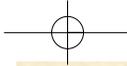
#### B. Making

**Inferences** How would you describe the way people in the Backcountry lived?

### ReadingHistory

#### C. Summarizing

As England's colonies expanded westward, what groups did they encounter?



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.



This painting shows Native Americans catching wild horses. Many would later use the horses to hunt buffalo on the Great Plains.

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.”

**Vocabulary**  
shears: scissors

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.

Section **4** Assessment

**1. Terms & Names**

**Explain the significance of:**

- Appalachian Mountains
- fall line
- piedmont
- clan

**2. Taking Notes**

Use a chart like the one shown to list some of the geographic characteristics of the Backcountry.

Backcountry Geography
1.
2.
3.
4.

**3. Main Ideas**

- a. Which settlers migrated to the Backcountry?
- b. How did clans help the Scots-Irish survive?
- c. What economic activities did women carry out in the region?

**4. Critical Thinking**

**Identifying Problems** As England’s colonies expanded farther west, what problems would they face?

**THINK ABOUT**

- other inhabitants of the Americas
- the resources desired by the colonists

**ACTIVITY OPTIONS**

**LANGUAGE ARTS**  
**ART**

Read an account of the Backcountry written in the 1700s. Write a newspaper article or draw a series of cartoons that describe what you have read.