Georgia at the Dawn of a New Century

During this period, how people lived in Georgia depended on where they lived. There were two different Georgias in the late 1700s and early 1800s: the adventurous life of the frontier and the settled life of the growing towns. It was a period of social growth. Membership in organized religions increased, and churches and synagogues played major roles in communities. There was more opportunity for formal education for more people.

Life on the Georgia Frontier

Frontier Georgia—the central and western parts of the state—was undeveloped land. Most of this land had been given away through the lottery, but there were few settlers. Some people attracted to the frontier were adventurers from settled towns such as Savannah and Augusta who wanted the excitement of frontier life. Some settlers migrated to the Georgia frontier from other states. They came over rough ground on roads that were little more than trails cut through thick brush and forests. During the early days on the frontier, far-flung trading posts were the only stores. Homesteads were often under the threat of attack from Native Americans, discontented Tories, or British soldiers.

As pioneers moved west in the early 1800s and left their towns behind, their kitchens were usually two iron pots and a memory of recipe rhymes learned during childhood. Clearing land, building cabins, tilling soil, putting up barns, digging wells, and all of the other chores of pioneer life were backbreaking labor leading to the old saying, “Them that works hard, eats hardy.” Breakfast and the midday meal were the largest meals of the day.

Work also led to the major pioneer social activities. “Bean stringin’s and corn shuckin’s” were summer social occasions, while “apple parin’s, cider
makin’s, and hog slaughterin’s” were fall activities. The country store was central to frontier communities, but it carried only essential items such as coffee beans, salt, and flour. Luxury items were for special occasions and might have included cheese, peppermint balls, rice, and eggs for those families without laying hens. And, of course, the general store carried farm implements, seed, cloth, thread, and guns and ammunition.

Thirty years later, the frontier was dotted with farms, trading posts, taverns, and sometimes one-room schools. While everyday life continued to be rather difficult, improvements in agriculture and other aspects of life eased things considerably. Then, too, with the removal of British forces and the Tories, threats to the settlements decreased.

**Life in Georgia’s Towns**

Life in Georgia’s towns was quite different from life on the frontier. Cultural refinements were everywhere. The *Augusta Herald* and Savannah’s *Gazette of the State of Georgia* were the two leading newspapers in the state. Newspapers were also published in Athens, Louisville, Milledgeville, and Sparta. Savannah had a theater where citizens could see plays by Shakespeare and more contemporary writers. People joined debating societies, went to concerts, or became members of a library society. They attended fancy dress balls and more informal gatherings such as barbecues and camp meetings. Horse racing drew large crowds in Augusta.

Food was cooked over an open hearth, and lucky families had an oven built into the chimney for cooking breads. The simpler meals consisted of stews, soups, sausages, roasted game, corn, dried vegetables, and cornbread or spoon bread. Foods served to guests were also simple. Beef, pork, and wild game were popular, and seafood, including shrimp, oysters, and fish, was a
Above: Rainy weather had little effect on Methodist preachers who traveled a circuit which could easily cover 500 miles.

Religion

After the Revolutionary War, many ministers left America for Great Britain. Still, churches in Georgia grew, both in size and in importance to their communities. In addition to the Anglicans, Quakers, and Baptists, Methodist circuit riders (ministers who went from district to district) founded churches in the frontier region. Sometimes these ministers could have only one service a month for each church. However, they stayed in touch with the members and visited them as often as possible.

In 1787, free blacks founded the Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta. It is still located on the original site. The First African Baptist Church in Savannah was founded in 1788 under the leadership of Andrew Bryan. In Savannah, a Jewish synagogue had a small but committed membership. In 1796, Georgia’s first Roman Catholic Church was established in Wilkes County. In 1801, a second parish was formed in Savannah.

During the first decade of the 1800s, towns such as Athens, Jefferson, Madison, Milledgeville, Monroe, and Monticello were established. As in Savannah and Augusta, churches in these new communities were an essential part of town life. There were Sunday and weekday worship services, and church buildings were often used for town meetings and social events.

In 1830, a religious group was formed that would have a major impact on America, and eventually the world. The founder of the Church was a young man named Joseph Smith. Born in Vermont into a large, religious family, Smith was only 14 when he received a vision of a new religion. By age 17,
Smith had had a second vision describing the beliefs of a new church. Smith started his new church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (or Mormons) with only six members, but the faith quickly grew. The Mormons, however, were persecuted and forced to relocate. They began settling in Utah in 1847.

Another important religious figure of the period was Richard Allen. Richard and his family were slaves and belonged to the chief justice of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Chew. Later they were sold to a Mr. Sturgis, who lived near Dover, Delaware. The family was allowed to attend the services of the Methodist Society. In 1777, at age 17, Richard Allen converted and became a member of the Society.

After purchasing his freedom, Richard became a preacher and traveled the Methodist circuit. Later he joined the congregation of St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. In 1784, the church licensed him to preach, but he had to hold his services at 5 a.m. Even that early hour did not deter the “colored people” who began to attend not only Allen’s early services but the Sunday services as well. As membership grew, so did the uneasiness of the white congregation. Allen soon saw the need for a separate church for the “Africans,” as they were called in the church.

In 1787, Richard Allen and two other members of the church, Absalom Jones and William White, led their followers out of the church. They immediately formed the Free African Society, a group dedicated to self-help and self-dependence for Africans. They also set about forming their own church.

Allen located a lot and the group found an old blacksmith building, which they hauled to the new site. In July 1794, the Bethel African Church opened for worship. By 1816, Allen had founded five other churches who wanted to join “Mother Bethel,” as it was called, to form a new denomination. Its name was the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church. Richard Allen was consecrated as its first bishop. The church, then as well as today, adopted the teachings of John Wesley. Although four different buildings have served as the church, the lot that Allen purchased is the oldest piece of real estate owned continuously by African Americans in the United States. From this small group of believers came a worldwide church with over 1.2 million members. The first A.M.E. Church in Georgia was established in Savannah in 1865.

**Education**

Educational growth was slow during the post-Revolutionary War period. Some people received only a few years of elementary education. Often even the best farmers knew little, if anything, about reading or mathematics. Most of Georgia’s citizens had not been to school at all. Governor Lyman Hall recommended that the state set aside land for schools, but few were built. Even though the building of schools was slow, people believed in the value of education. In 1784, the government set aside twenty thousand acres of land for a state college. In 1785, the University of Georgia was chartered as a land grant university (a school for which the federal government donated the land). It is the oldest school of its kind in the nation. The university, which
was to oversee all public schools in the state, opened for classes in 1801. The first building for the all-male, all-white student body was Franklin College, and for many years, the University of Georgia was frequently called Franklin College.

In 1786, the Georgia legislature passed a law requiring each county to open *academies* (schools). But the lawmakers did not set aside money to build them. In 1820, there were only forty academies in the state. In 1822, some members of the legislature tried unsuccessfully to get money for public schools. However, money was placed in a special “state fund” to pay for the education of poor children.

In the early schools, such as the Academy of Richmond County founded in 1783, male students studied Greek, Latin, grammar, and mathematics. Females learned the arts and music. The Georgia Female College, later known as Wesleyan College, opened in Macon in 1836. There the girls had classes in French, literature, and science education. Tuition was $50 a year, and lessons in piano, art, or foreign languages were extra. Room and board was $15 a quarter, and there were extra charges for laundry and candles.

The cost does not seem great by today’s standards, but only wealthier merchants and large landowners had enough money to send their daughters to Wesleyan. Many Georgia citizens saw no value in teaching females academic subjects, no matter what it cost. Instead, many young girls were taught sewing, cooking, child care, and music.

**Did You Know?**

Women were not admitted to the University of Georgia until 1918, 117 years after the college was opened to men.

**It’s Your Turn**

1. In what parts of Georgia was the frontier located?
2. What were the two leading newspapers in Georgia at the turn of the eighteenth century?
3. When was the Springfield Baptist Church founded?
4. What was the University of Georgia frequently called in its early days?