

BEYOND THE EXHIBITS

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North Carolina Geography

Why is geography important? How did the unique geography of what was to become the Tar Heel state affect the peoples here and how did these people change the land? To understand the settlement of North Carolina requires us to travel back to when this land did not have this name and was inhabited for centuries by people whose names for it are unknown. Naturally, the geography of a land helps determine the history that occurs there. What resources exist? What is the climate? What features contribute to its uniqueness? Naturally bounded by the Atlantic Ocean on the east, the mountains on the west, and in recent times by the created boundaries of south and north, this land has three distinct geographic regions: the Mountains, the Piedmont, and the Coastal Plain. Each of these has distinct landforms, soils, and habitats.

In this educational packet:

- Read “Where to Begin? Geography!” information excerpt from the Colonial and American Revolution History-In-a-Box kit.
- Think you know North Carolina’s regions? Map it!
- Next, match which landforms belong in what region.

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Where to Begin? Geography!

The Coastal Plain: It's just the beach, right?

Well, it is much more than sand and water. The Coastal Plain can be thought of in two sections—Inner and Outer. The Coastal Plain is in the eastern part of the state, bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, of course, and going inland almost to Raleigh and Fayetteville. The Outer Coastal Plain consists of the barrier islands and the land near the coast, close to sea—the tidewater area. The larger barrier islands are Core Banks, Portsmouth, Ocracoke, Hatteras, and Bodie. Three capes—Cape Fear, Cape Lookout, and Cape Hatteras—are part of this region. In the Outer Coastal Plain, large streams and rivers empty into the ocean or sounds—seven sounds: Bogue, Core, Roanoke, Croatan, Currituck, Albemarle and Pamlico. The Inner Coastal Plain has lots of sandy good soil and includes the Sandhills region. Years ago the sea was higher, and parts of the Coastal Plain were underwater. When the sea receded, the former shorelines remained. These shorelines formed ridges. The greatest of these is called the fall line, and it is a main character in North Carolina's history. East of the fall line, the Coastal Plain consists of rich soil—great for farming. Today, crops of cotton, tobacco, soybeans, and melons, to name a few, grow well there. The major rivers of this region are the usually slow-moving Cape Fear, Neuse, Pamlico, and Tar.

Why are they called “barrier” islands, anyway?

These narrow islands are natural hurdles that keep things in and out. Created by sand deposits from rising seas, these narrow islands are a first line of defense for the coast against storms. Yet these same sands make for shallow waters nearby, and the actions of wind and water make these islands shift and change shape, all of which create havoc for ships and boats trying to sail nearby. “Parking” your ship near these islands has always been a hazardous activity. The barrier islands also help create two landlocked sounds: Albemarle Sound in the north and Pamlico Sound in the south.

Anything else in the Coastal Plain besides sand and water?

As a matter of fact, there are wetlands and estuaries. There are many kinds of wetlands—areas of land that are filled with moisture and covered with water at some point every year. Every wetland has an abundance of plants and animals. Estuaries—areas where freshwater mixes with saltwater from the ocean—also form unique ecosystems at the coast.

The Piedmont—what's that?

That's “foot of the mountain” to you; from the French words *pied* and *montagne*, meaning “foot” and “mountain.” The Piedmont, the region from the fall line to the mountains, is a plateau that rises upward from the Coastal Plain and is known for its rolling hills. Remember we said that the fall line is a major character in our history? For many years, the fall line was a natural boundary for

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explorers, settlers, and tradespeople seeking to go east to west, or west to east in this region. Why? When water reaches the fall line—it falls. Travel from the coast up a river was doable for early explorers and settlers, but once they reached these falls, they stopped. They could go no farther without another form of transportation. The difficulty of traveling around the fall line encouraged settlers to create settlements at the point where travel became difficult. The fall line also played a big part in the economies (or lack thereof) in the lands beyond that region.

Traveling north toward Virginia, Pennsylvania, and even New York, and south, toward South Carolina and Georgia, was relatively easy, by walking or in wagons, as the valleys of the Piedmont align that way. Due to the difficulty in navigating east-west streams and rivers, not to mention waterfalls and extensive floodplains, heading east from the Piedmont was, for centuries, a very arduous task and contributed to the economic and political isolation of the “backcountry.”

What else is there in this rolling land, anyway?

Pottery-making materials, rocks, and GOLD! Clay is the predominant soil of the Piedmont; because it makes farming difficult, historically, farms tended to be small in this region. This same clay was, and is, useful for pottery—something American Indians in the region knew for centuries, and which settlers learned, too. Other things found in the clay and rock are minerals—gold was discovered in Cabarrus County in 1799 by Conrad Reed, initiating America’s first gold rush. The fast-flowing rivers, while hazardous for early travelers, eventually became conduits to growth in industry and manufacturing.

Hey, I just saw a big mountain in the Piedmont!

Yes, you saw a monadnock (or inselberg). Some of the rock of the Piedmont is harder than surrounding rock, and hence, slower to erode. These harder rocks make up the Brushy Mountains, Crowder’s Mountain, King’s Pinnacle, Pilot Mountain, Sauratown Mountain, and the Uwharrie Mountains—all monadnocks. These higher-elevated places provide unique habitats in the region. The Piedmont’s major rivers, the Catawba and Yadkin, are usually fast-flowing and shallow bodies of water.

What’s Smoky about the Mountains? Fire?

No, they are not on fire, but you might think so in autumn when the magnificent colors of the leaves—reds, golds, yellows—look like flames of color on the mountainsides. The Great Smoky Mountains are one of the subranges of mountains in North Carolina that are part of the Appalachian Mountain Range of the eastern part of the continent. They are “smoky” because of the fog that frequently shrouds them and that can appear as plumes of smoke. Other subranges of the Appalachians in this land include the Black Mountains, the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the Great Balsam Mountains. Mount Mitchell, in the Black Mountains, has the highest elevation in the eastern United States, at 6,684 feet. For many years the challenging terrain of the Mountains made farming difficult and isolated communities.

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The Mountains are like a taller Piedmont, right?

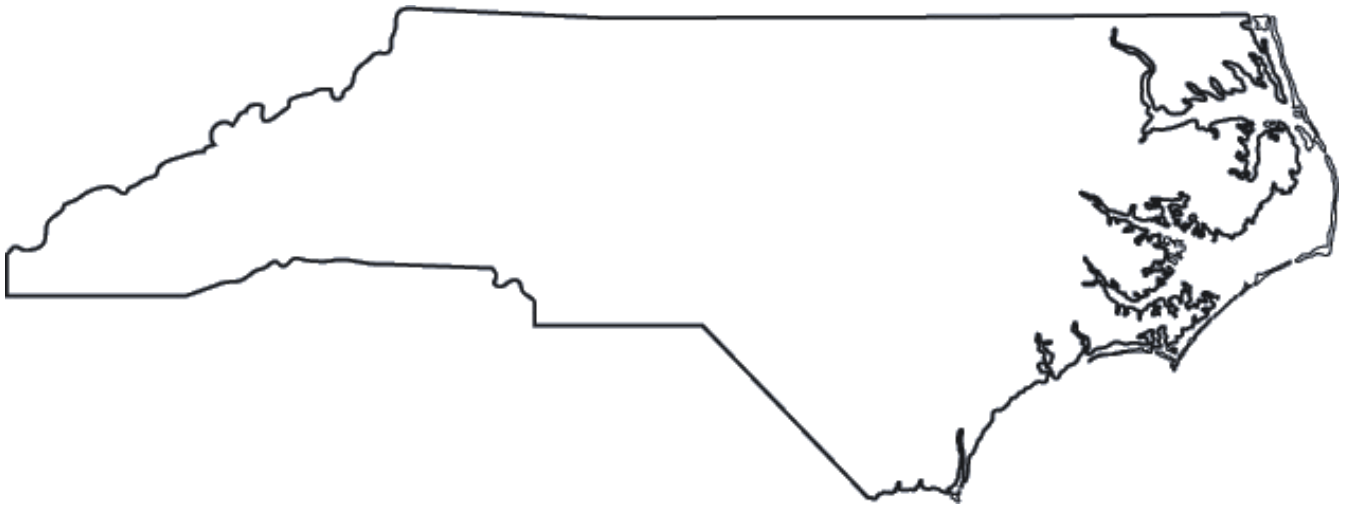
Wrong! Because the elevations are so much higher than the Piedmont and because the Mountain region varies a lot from range to range, the Mountains are home to a great diversity of plants and habitats. While the Piedmont rises about 1,500 feet above sea level (where the Coastal Plain meets the ocean), the Mountains go up to that highest point of 6,684 feet! Average temperatures drop as you go higher, and this change in temperature provides for different growing climates. On the other extreme, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, near South Carolina, the Jocassee Gorges hosts a temperate rain forest; to find similar plants, you would have to travel to Central and South America.

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Where to Begin? Geography! Map Activity

Shade in the three regions of North Carolina. Make the Coastal Plain area yellow; the Piedmont region green; and the Mountain region red. Mark the fall line in black.





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Where to Begin? Geography! Matching Activity

Match each landform with the region in which it belongs. Do some landforms belong in more than one region?

1. mountain
2. ocean
3. hill
4. plateau
5. barrier island
6. wetland
7. estuary
8. sound
9. fall line
10. monadnock
11. river
12. temperate rain forest

Mountain	Piedmont	Coastal Plain