

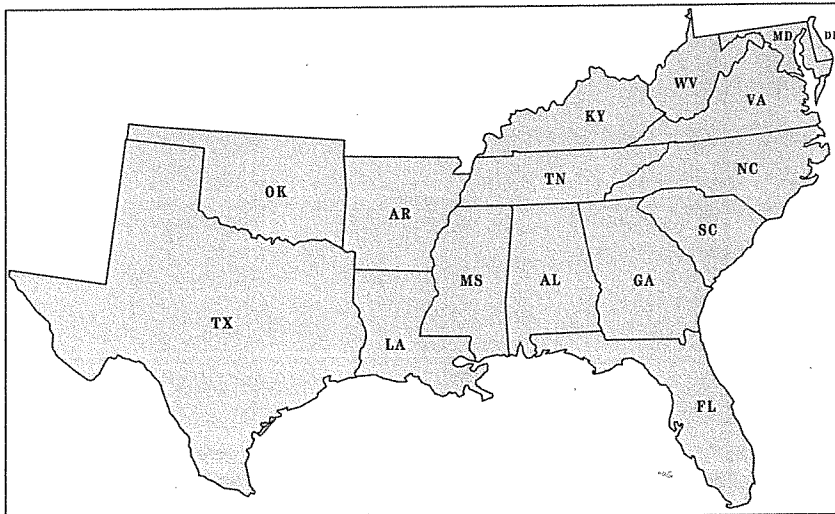
Definitions of the South

IN 1787 CHARLES PINCKNEY said, "When I say Southern, I mean Maryland, and the states to the southward of her." But it's not that simple now, if it ever was. Here are three of the most common definitions, and what's wrong with them.

1. **Below the Mason-Dixon Line** once meant south of the Pennsylvania-Maryland boundary, surveyed in the 1760s by two Englishmen, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon. The line gained significance in the nineteenth century when all of the states north of it had abolished slavery. "Below the Mason-Dixon Line" came to mean "in the South," and it has kept that meaning in innumerable popular and country songs as well as in common speech. But the only recent definition of the South that uses the real Mason-Dixon line as a boundary is—

2. **The Bureau of the Census definition.** The Census Bureau's South includes West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and the District of Columbia, as well as Oklahoma and eleven less questionable states. (But it doesn't simply include all of the 1860 slave states and territories: Missouri's not in it.) Few other definitions of the South are

The Census South.



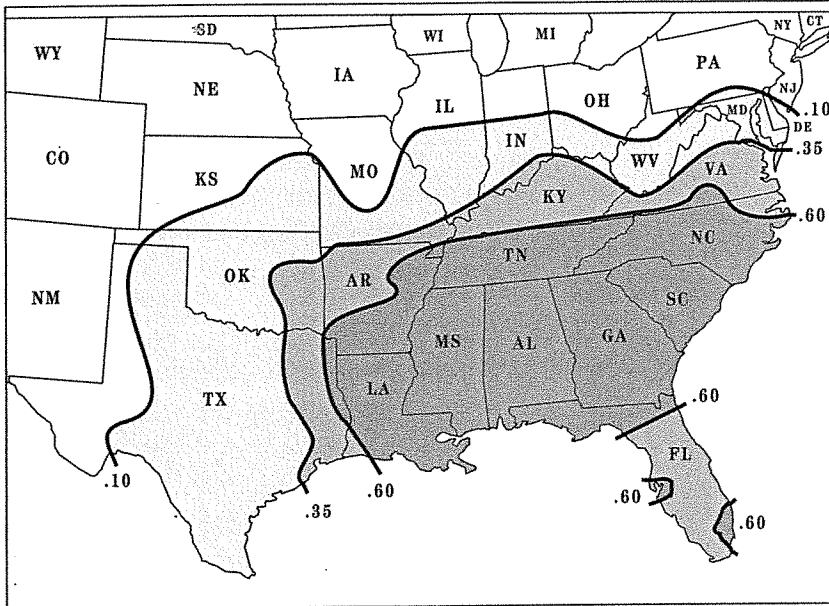
that inclusive. These days most stop at the Potomac, and even the southern suburbs of Washington are known in some circles as "occupied Virginia." Generally speaking, the "Census South" is more urban, richer, and better educated than the actual South. It also has more armed robbery, AIDS, and lawyers.

3. **The Confederate States** sounds like a simple definition, but unfortunately it's not. Kentucky and Missouri both had stars in the Confederate flag and representatives in Richmond as well as in Washington. And the Confederacy never recognized West Virginia's "secession from secession." Oklahoma's Cherokees signed a treaty with the Confederacy and many fought in its army: Oklahoma wasn't a state, but was it Confederate? The Stars and Bars flew briefly over Santa Fe, New Mexico: does that count?

MAYBE THE BEST DEFINITION IS JUST—

4. **Where people think they're in the South.** You want to tell them they're wrong? A study of business and organization names in metropolitan phone books compared the number of

1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South, John Sutton Reed & Dale Volberg Reed, eds. Powhatchery 1996.



Ratio of "Southern" to "American" phone book entries.
Social Forces/University of North Carolina Press

"Southern" entries to the number of "American" entries, and gave a map that makes pretty good sense: a solid core from the Carolinas to Louisiana; some shakiness in Florida, Arkansas, Kentucky, and Virginia; and a sphere of influence along the border from Delaware to Missouri. Texas and Oklahoma are marginal but show an east-to-west gradient that will not surprise natives.

THE SOUTH A/K/A

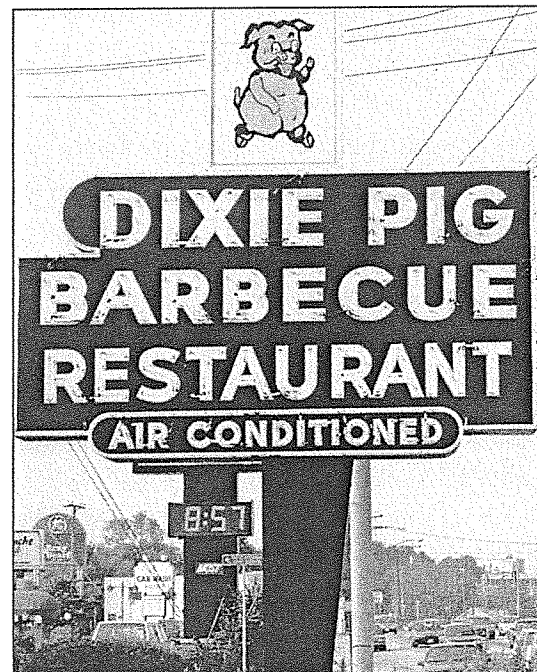
THE SOUTH HAS BEEN called many things, for many reasons.

5. **Dixie's** origins are lost in obscurity (let's not get into it), but it was a song title (325) before it meant the South as a whole. One Confederate wrote in 1861, "We shall be fortunate if [the song] does not impose its very name on our

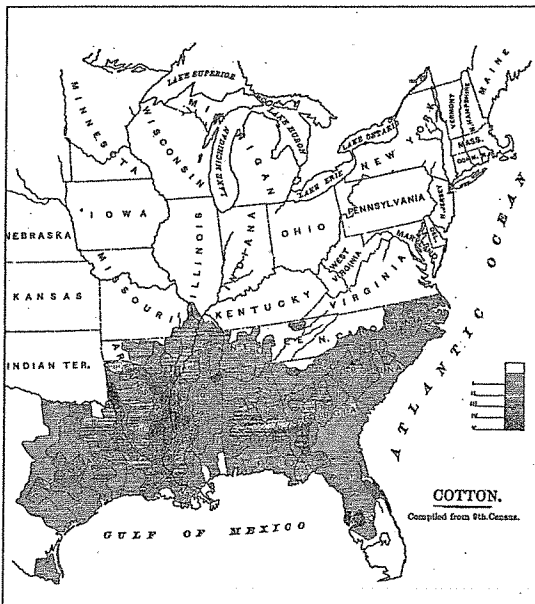
country." It did. But by 1970 the word was used in business names mostly in the Deep South and on the Dixie Highway in Tennessee and Kentucky; now Dixie as a business name persists strongly only in Mississippi and parts of Georgia outside Atlanta. Even in Alabama—still "the Heart of Dixie" on its license plates—the word seems to be going out of style.

6. The Cotton Kingdom

referred essentially to the part of the United States with more than twenty-three inches of rain and two hundred frost-free days a year,



"Dixie" persists in *some* business names. DixiePix



The Cotton Kingdom in 1870. *The Great South* (1875)

which made cotton cultivation possible and, for a time, profitable—in other words, to the *Deep South* (14). By the 1850s Southern cotton was the nation's chief export; Europe's dependence on it led South Carolina's Senator James Hammond to declare that "cotton is king." "No power on earth dares to make war upon it," he boasted. (He was wrong about that.) When the boll weevil (72) appeared in Texas in the 1890s, King Cotton's days were numbered.

7. **The New South**, a phrase popularized by Henry Grady (997) in 1886, referred to an ideal South rebuilt by outside investment and industry, and free of "sectional controversies." (White supremacy and the continuation of planter rule were simply assumed.) The growth and progress of Atlanta, its heart, would be an example for the rest of the region. This ideal still has charms for Southern Chambers of Commerce and Northern investors, but the phrase "New South" long ago lost its precision and is now invariably

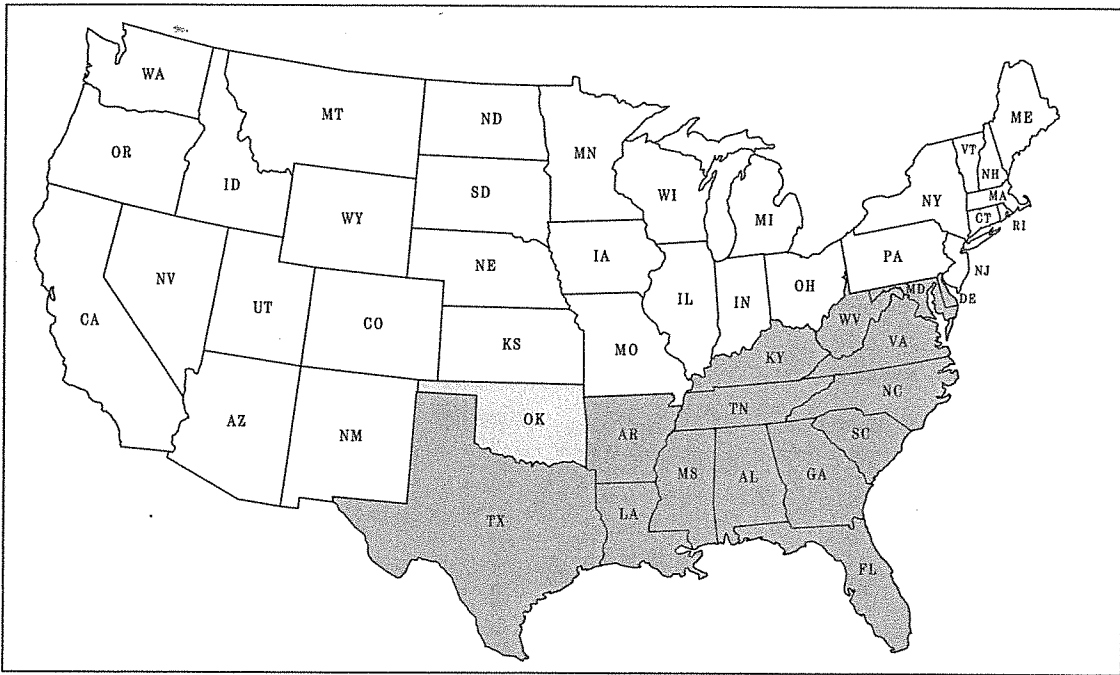
applied to whatever the South seems to be about to become.

8. **The Sahara of the Bozart** (beaux arts) was journalist H. L. Mencken's label for the South in his 1917 essay with that title. It condemned the modern South as "almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert," a fact Mencken attributed to the destruction of the region's aristocracy in the Civil War. That the Southern Renaissance (488) in literature began almost immediately after Mencken's essay may not be accidental.

9. **The Bible Belt** was another of Mencken's contemptuous labels for a region he saw as "a cesspool of Baptists, a miasma of Methodism, snake-charmers, . . . and syphilitic evangelists." Most Southerners, however, would probably accept the designation with pride; most are in fact evangelical Protestants who adhere to Bible-believing churches (794).

10. **Below the Smith and Wesson Line**, a phrase apparently first used in print by sociologist Rupert Vance in 1930, refers to the South's homicide rate, historically twice that of other U.S. regions. The gap has narrowed since 1970 (the South's rate has not decreased, but those of other regions have increased faster), but this regrettable statistic can still be used to map the South.

11. **The Solid South** referred to the South's consistent Democratic voting after Reconstruction. (The phrase appears to date from the election of 1876 [411].) Although there were cracks in the Solid South as early as 1920, it was only after the Dixiecrat revolt in 1948 (413) that the South really began to move to a two-party system in presidential elections, and more recently



The Solid South in 1904: states for Parker (Dem.) over Roosevelt (Rep.).

still that Republicans began to win many state and local offices.

12. **The Sunbelt** was journalist Kevin Phillips's term (in 1969) for the Southern and Western states increasing in population, wealth, and political influence. The 1976 presidential campaign (416) focused media attention on these trends and popularized Phillips's label. Geographers and many Southerners scoffed at the idea of a resemblance between Southern California and the South—Texas and Florida, maybe, but (as one Southern politician put it) there was “a lot of shade in the Sunbelt.” The concept soon went out of fashion, and the word is seldom used these days, except ironically.

13. **The Southeast** can be a useful descriptive term for the part of the South to the east of Greater Texas; it recognizes, for instance, that

the regional economy centered on Atlanta does not include the Texas metropolises and their dependencies. In many respects, however, this increasingly widespread term denotes a geographical gelding, a mere quadrant, with none of the South's rich heritage. No one speaks of Southeastern cooking, religion, music, accents, or history—because “the Southeast” has none of these things. The word should usually be avoided.

Subregions

THE BIG THREE

TEXAS AND FLORIDA ASIDE, the South has three major subregions, and the boundaries of most Southern states have been laid over some combination of the three. Each state's charac-

ter, politics, and economy have been largely determined by what its mix has been.

14. **The Deep South** is roughly coextensive with the old cotton belt, a long arc extending from eastern North Carolina through South Carolina, west into east Texas, with extensions north and south along the Mississippi. This area can still be defined by locating rural counties with populations more than 25 percent black. South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are commonly considered the Deep South states, although parts of these states don't meet the criteria, and parts of adjoining states do. Many things thought of as Southern, from alligators (63) and Spanish moss (74) to peculiar voting in 1948 (413) and 1964 (414), are found in their most concentrated form (sometimes only) here.

15. **Piedmont** means "foothills," and that's what the foothills of the Appalachians are called in the Carolinas and Georgia. They're the Cumberland plateau when they fishhook around to take in middle Tennessee, but they're similar physiographically and economically. Wedged between the Appalachians and the Deep South, this subregion's marginality to the plantation system and abundant water power gave it a leg up on industrialization and made it the heartland of the original New South. Today it includes the Southeast's urban core: Richmond, Charlotte, Greenville-Spartanburg, Atlanta, Birmingham, Nashville.

16. **The Southern highlands** have been the mother lode of such "Southern" things as family feuds, stock car racing (851), moonshine whiskey (660), country music (557), and snake-handling religion (813). In the Appalachians (pronounced *appa-LATCH-ians*, please) and

the Ozarks (24), plantation agriculture didn't pay, and not much of anything else did either. Consequently, these areas were settled by small farmers, nearly all white, who were unreliable Confederates in 1861–65 and have tended to be Republicans to this day. The South's twentieth-century economic development largely bypassed the highlands (except for the coalfields, but most of that money left the region). Ironically, this now makes it an attractive tourist and retirement destination for Floridians (in the Appalachians) and Midwesterners (in the Ozarks).

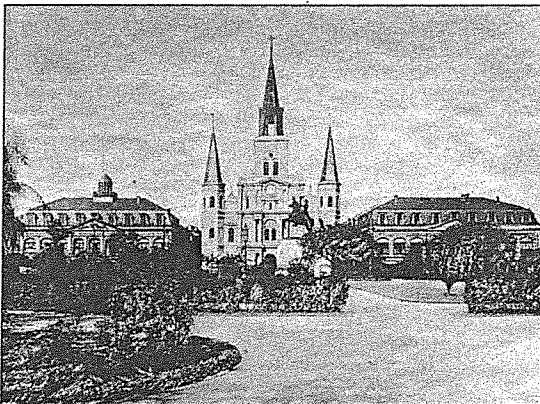
THREE BIG EXCEPTIONS

SOUTHERN FOR SOME PURPOSES but not for others, these three subregions provide the major exceptions to many generalizations about the South.

17. **The (eastern) Southwest.** Most of Texas, parts of Arkansas, and nearly all of Oklahoma long since went their own way economically, and their identification with the South is a sometime thing. But they were settled by Southerners and retain Southern ways in religion, speech, and music. Frank Vandiver, historian and president of Texas A&M: "Look at Southwesterners closely and traces of the South can be glimpsed clearly: a sense of honor, a code of courtesy, a feeling for place, a belief that people are more important than things or ideas." Byron Price, director of the Cowboy Hall of Fame, concurs: "To these may be added an attachment to the soil, a simple way of life, a respect for women, and an unyielding pride." Someone should write a book about the South's influence on the entire West. In fact, someone has: *The Virginian*, America's first western novel, by Owen Wister, grandson of Fanny Kemble (451).

18. **South Florida** begins somewhere south of Daytona Beach, and it's very different—ecologically, economically, ethnically, however you want to look at it—from other parts of the South, including north Florida. It's an urban place, increasingly so, with an economy based on tourism, retirement, and drugs. Well over half of its residents weren't born in the South, much less in Florida, and many were born outside the United States. It would be tempting to exclude it from the South altogether, if there were anywhere else to put it.

19. **South Louisiana** is Southern, sure enough, but with a Gallic twist that has caused us all kinds of headaches in this book. New Orleans is—well, something else. And then there's "Acadiana," twenty-two parishes officially recognized by the state government as the homeland of the Cajuns (101). The center of Cajun cultural life is the town of Lafayette, home of the Ragin' Cajuns of the University of Southwestern Louisiana (Université des Acadiens).



Jackson Square, French Quarter, New Orleans. *Library of Southern Literature* (1907)

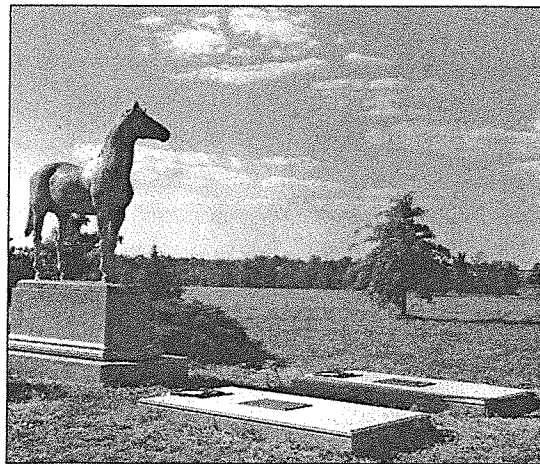
Graves of Kentucky thoroughbreds. Caufield & Shook Collection, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville

SOME MINI- AND MICROREGIONS

GEOGRAPHER TERRY JORDAN HAS identified twenty-nine "vernacular regions" in Texas alone. In every state, piney woods and wire grass and sandhills regions enjoy their distinctiveness; nearly every river valley seems to have not just a name but an identity. What all these tiny subregions are isn't something "everyone should know about the South," but everyone should know that they exist and that they're important to their citizens. Some are important beyond their borders, among them:

20. **The Black Belt** properly refers to a roughly twenty-five-mile-wide band of dark soil extending some three hundred miles through Alabama into Mississippi and Tennessee, a rich cotton region until the coming of the boll weevil. Less precisely, the phrase often refers to African-American population rather than calcareous soil; in that sense, it's roughly equivalent to "Deep South."

21. **The Bluegrass country** of northern Kentucky sits atop a limestone plain that furnishes



the material for its distinctive rock walls. The eponymous grass makes good eating for the great horses this area has produced since antebellum times.

22. **The Mississippi Delta** is the rich bottomland between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers, extending by one well-known reckoning from Vicksburg to the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis. This has been called "the most Southern place on earth," and in some respects—for example, cotton agriculture, black population, rural poverty, oppressive race relations—it has been. The recent importance of catfish farming hasn't made a great deal of difference. Reclaimed from primeval forest relatively late, by 1900 this was the heart of the Cotton Kingdom and the home of the blues.

23. **The Cumberlands** are the mountains of eastern Kentucky, a southwestward extension of the Alleghenies of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Site of John Fox's local-color novels and, latterly, of extensive coal-mining operations, this is the heart of Appalachia. The Cumberland Plateau, an area of valleys and rolling uplands, extends southward through Tennessee into northern Alabama.

24. **The Ozarks** bestride much of northern Arkansas and southern Missouri. In many respects they're a sort of vest-pocket version of the Appalachians: once offering a hardscrabble living for a sparse native population, they now offer caves and lakes and hillbilly villages and folk festivals for tourists and retirees (905). The most notable recent development is the emergence of Branson, Missouri, as a major country-music center.

25. **The Gulf Coast**, from western Florida almost to the Mexican border (interrupted by French Louisiana), has been called, to the distress of its Chambers of Commerce, the Redneck Riviera. Always a popular tourist destination for Southerners, it's increasingly popular with other North Americans, including some drawn by Mississippi's new enthusiasm for casino gambling.

26. **The Delmarva Peninsula** (from *Del*-aware, *Mar*-yland, and *Va.*) includes Delaware and the "eastern shores" of Virginia and Maryland. Settled in the seventeenth century, the peninsula was isolated for many years and even tried to incorporate as a separate state in the early nineteenth century. Improved transportation now links it to Washington, Baltimore, and Philadelphia. It's increasingly a dependency of those metropolises and decreasingly "Southern," but its economy still rests on tourism, chickens, and seafood.

27. **The Outer Banks** are the chain of narrow barrier islands that stretch along the North Carolina coast, separating Albemarle and Pamlico sounds from the Atlantic. Formerly the haunt of pirates, fishermen, and Ohio bicycle mechanics (the Wright brothers), they were always sparsely populated, and remain so: much of the Outer Banks has been preserved in its natural state as parkland.

28. **The Sea Islands** of Georgia and South Carolina were formerly the site of large cotton plantations, but what the Civil War didn't wipe out, hurricanes did. The Gullah (95) population at midtwentieth century lived by fishing and subsistence farming, supplemented by small-scale

vegetable production, mostly for local markets. They're still there, but their future's uncertain. In 1886 rich Yankees bought Jekyll Island for a hunting preserve, and they've been buying ever since. The Sea Islands are increasingly a chain of resorts and vacation-home developments, of which the best known is probably Hilton Head. The U.S. Marines also have a presence, at Parris Island.

29. **Little Dixie** is a phrase applied to a number of border areas, notably in Missouri, Illinois, and Oklahoma. (Former Oklahoma congressman and Speaker of the House Carl Albert was known as the Little Giant from Little Dixie.) These are usually areas settled from the South and retaining at least some Southern cultural traits, especially in food, religion, speech, and politics.

Eponymous Cities and Towns

THE NAMES OF MANY Southern towns have come to stand for something, evoke some image, mean something. One thing, for each.

30. **Appomattox** (Virginia) witnessed the surrender of Robert E. Lee to Ulysses Grant on April 9, 1865. Other Rebel commanders surrendered later, but this marked the effective end of the Confederate cause. Nothing much had happened there before, and nothing much has happened since (the site's now a National Park), but that one event put Appomattox in our vocabulary as a word like "Pearl Harbor": shorthand for the end of an era and the beginning of another.

The Surrender of General Lee to General Grant at Appomattox, April 9, 1865 (1867), by Louis Guillaume. Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, National Park Service

