Guiding Question: What factors influenced the development of economic variation (economic differences) among the original 13 colonies of the United States of America?

Introduction: Colonists settling in the British colonies of North America were essentially developing economies from scratch. They harvested the natural resources of the environment, and then created economic output from those natural resources.

Document 1: The following graphs indicate the exports of the 13 colonies from 1768 – 1777. The three graphs represent the three distinct colonial regions: the northern colonies (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island), the middle colonies (New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey), and the southern colonies (Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia).

Fig 1a: The Northern Colonies / New England had a short growing season and rocky soil; this was not ideal for growing and exporting cash crops. Colonists took advantage of other opportunities in the region, especially fishing and whaling in the bays, inlets, rivers and oceans that dominated their lands. To support that industry, the building and manufacturing of ships became a prosperous economic activity for Northern colonists; as well as factories that would support the processing and manufacturing of fish and whale oil. Also, many northern colonies turned to the manufacturing of sugar from the Caribbean into rum, as well as fur / leathers goods from the natural wildlife of the Northern Colonies or Canadian traders; all of which could be exported to Europe for a profit.

Fig 1b (see pg. 1): The longer growing season of the Middle Colonies and milder winters (as compared to the Northern colonies) allowed farmers to grow and cultivate fields of various grains. Grains were the cash crop that earned the Middle Colonies the nickname of the “breadbasket colonies”, as among the three colonial regions, they grew the highest percentage of grains. Further supporting the economy of the middle colonies was the manufacturing of goods in industrial centers such as New York City and Philadelphia.
Fig 1c: The South had a nearly year-round growing season as a result of warmer winters and humid summers – allowing them to grow tobacco and rice, both of which thrive in warmer, more humid, climates. Tobacco and rice were the most profitable exports of all the cash crops grown in the 13 colonies between 1768 and 1777. Of their sum total of exports, nearly 88% of all Southern colonies exports were agricultural (tobacco, rice, grains, and indigo).


1) According to document 1, how does the environment and geography impact the ability of colonies to produce cash crops?

2) Which region had the highest percentage of economic activity devoted to ship building? How did the geography & environment of this region contribute to or support the ability of this region to develop economic practices around shipbuilding?

3) Which colonial region’s exports were mostly made up of grains? What percentage of their exports were grains? Why was their environment suitable for growing grains in comparison to the other two regions?
4) Which region was able to export the two most profitable cash crops? Why was the environment of that region suitable for exporting those cash crops?

5) Which region had the highest percentage of exports that were agricultural (having to do with farming)? Keeping in mind that this region has a high percentage of agricultural exports, which word do you think would best describe this region: rural (in the countryside) or urban (in the city)? Why?

6) Which region had the highest percentage of exports that were supported by factories? Cite evidence from at least one specific figure to support your claims.

Analysis Task: Economies of the Colonies: Geography and the Environment

Directions: On the back, write a short response to the task below using information from the documents about Colonial Economies in America.

Task: Using the information from the documents above, and your knowledge of US History complete the following writing prompt:

- Compare and contrast the impact of geography & environment on the economic activity of the 13 colonies & 3 distinct colonial regions.
  - Use evidence from the text to support your claims

In developing your answer be sure to keep these general definitions in mind:
- compare and contrast means “to express similarities and differences”