IV. United States Geography

The islands have a generally warm and sunny climate. Most of the islands fall within the tropics and would be very hot if not for the breezes that move inland from the sea and keep the temperature around 80°F. Many of the islands are prime vacation spots because of their warm weather and sandy beaches.

Starting with the voyages of Christopher Columbus in 1492, Europeans began to colonize and then fight over possession of the islands. Some islands changed hands several times. Today, the Spanish heritage in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic is very evident, as are African influences, especially in music. Haiti’s predominant cultural influences are French and African. The British stamp is apparent in many of the island nations, such as Trinidad and Tobago, the Bahamas, and Barbados. The Netherlands Antilles were colonized by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and remain a part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Gulf of Mexico

The Gulf of Mexico, like the Caribbean, is known for its warm waters. The Gulf is bordered by the southeast coast of North America, from the tip of Florida to the Yucatán Peninsula. Its eastern boundary is the island of Cuba. The Strait of Yucatan links the Gulf to the Caribbean, and the Strait of Florida links it to the Atlantic.

The Gulf Stream and Climate

The Gulf Stream is a warm ocean current that originates off the coast of South America and flows to the Gulf of Mexico and up the coast of North America. The water temperature of the Gulf Stream is around 80°F. As it moves north, away from the Equator, the water cools.

The Gulf Stream passes from the Gulf of Mexico through the Strait of Florida and moves northeast until it meets the North Atlantic Drift off Newfoundland, Canada. The merged ocean current then flows toward Western Europe. As the North Atlantic Drift flows past the coasts of northwest Europe, the warm water of the ocean current moderates the climate. Considering the northern latitudes of countries like Ireland and England, one would expect much colder winters than the 40°F days they typically enjoy. The difference is the presence of the North Atlantic Drift. The southwestern coast of England is warm enough in a few places for palm trees to grow.

Regions and Their Characteristics

We sometimes talk about the United States in terms of regions, such as New England and the Southwest. These categories are determined by cultural characteristics as well as physical location. As a result, and depending on the context, one state may appear in more than one region.

New England

States: Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island
Climate: in the northernmost states, cold winters and warm summers; in the more southerly areas, milder winters and warmer summers
Economy: industry, trade, commercial fishing, commercial farming

Teaching Idea

Use a globe to demonstrate the flow of the Gulf Stream as it merges with the North Atlantic Drift at 40° N latitude and 60° W longitude off the coast of Newfoundland. From there, the combined ocean current moves in an easterly direction toward Western Europe. As it reaches the British Isles, the current divides around them, part flowing north and part moving south.

Teaching Idea

As you study the regions of the United States, keep a chart of key characteristics discussed: the region’s name, states included, climate, economy, and other characteristics to remember. Alternately, students can keep individual charts and add pictures downloaded from the Internet.
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- Pilgrims and Puritans, the first Thanksgiving.
- Boston, Lexington, Concord, and the beginning of the American Revolution.
- Lobsters, maple syrup, and village squares.

Other: The term New England was used by the English colonists to refer to what they thought they were creating in their colonies—a “new” England.

**Mid-Atlantic**
States: New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland
Climate: relatively mild winters and warm summers, often with high humidity
Economy: industry, trade, commercial farming, some commercial fishing
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- New York City, the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island.
- Philadelphia, the Liberty Bell and the Mummers Parade.
- the first state to ratify the Constitution (Delaware).
- crab cakes.

Other: With the exception of Pennsylvania, these states border the Atlantic Ocean, hence the name. Historically, Maryland and Delaware are also considered Southern states because they had slave economies.

**South**
States: Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas
Climate: humid subtropical; hot summers and mild winters; for much of the area precipitation is in the form of rain rather than snow, especially the more southerly parts of the region
Economy: commercial farming, areas of industry, oil drilling
Cultural literacy characteristics: The region is associated with
- Delmarva Peninsula: Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.
- slavery and a plantation economy. Most states seceded and joined the Confederate States of America.
- Nashville and country music.
- Disney World.
- birthplace of the blues and jazz.
- Mardi Gras.

Other: During the Civil War, Maryland and Delaware were border states. They did not join the Confederacy, but remained slave states until the end of the war.

**The Midwest**
States: Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri
Climate: cold winters and warm summers; precipitation may vary from year to year and from area to area; much of the winter precipitation is in the form of snow
Economy: major commercial farming with manufacturing