A Farming Life
Most early settlers in North Carolina earned a living by farming. They grew tobacco, wheat, and corn. Corn became a staple in colonial times. People ate corn on the cob, and made grits and cornbread from corn. They also fed corn to the animals.

Some of the colonists owned plantations. Enslaved Africans did most of the work on plantations. By 1775, there were about 66,000 enslaved Africans in North Carolina. They had to clear the land, plant and pick crops, and prepare crops for market. Some of these crops became exports, when farmers would ship them to other colonies.

The Coastal Plain was home to the largest farms and plantations. This was because the Coastal Plain had the richest soil in the state. The land of the western backcountry was not as fertile. Backcountry farms were smaller than coastal farms. Backcountry farmers earned less money than the plantation owners. Most of them did not use enslaved Africans as farm workers.

Using Forests and Water
Farming wasn’t the only way to earn a living in colonial North Carolina. Some people fished along the coast and rivers. They caught trout, catfish, and bass. They also collected shellfish from shallow waters. They sold their fish or ate it themselves.

Other settlers made money by working in the forests. They cut down pine trees to produce naval stores, such as tar and turpentine. To make tar, they burned wood in very hot ovens. It was dangerous work. Enslaved people were often forced to do it. The English navy used tar to fix leaking ships. They used turpentine to make sails waterproof. Turpentine comes from the sap of pine trees. By 1768, more than half of the naval stores produced in the thirteen colonies came from North Carolina. This helped the economy grow.

Colonists who lived in towns had jobs in various trades. Some made clothes, ropes, or horseshoes. Others built wagons and barrels. There were doctors and lawyers, too. Some people worked for the colonial government.