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The Old South and Slavery, 1830–1860





NAT TURNER (Granger Collection)

IN THE EARLY morning hours of August 22, 1831, **Nat Turner** and six other slaves slipped into the house of Joseph Travis in Southampton County, Virginia. Nat had been preparing for this moment since February, when he had interpreted a Nat Turner solar eclipse as a long-awaited sign from God that the time had come for him to lead his people against slavery by killing slaveholders. Employing hatchets and axes, Nat and his band quickly

slaughtered Travis, his wife Sally (the widow of a former owner of Nat), and two other whites in the house. Later, two of Nat's band returned to murder the Travis infant in its cradle. The Turner band then moved through the countryside, picking up muskets, horses, and recruits and shooting, clubbing, and hacking whites to death. Soon "General" Nat had more than forty followers. His hopes ran high. He knew that blacks outnumbered whites in Southampton, and his deeply religious strain, which had led the slaves to acknowledge him as a preacher and prophet, convinced him that God was his greatest ally.

By noon Turner's army, now grown to sixty or seventy followers, had murdered about sixty whites. As word of trouble spread, militia and vigilantes, thousands strong, poured into Southampton from across the border in North Carolina and from other counties in Virginia. Following the path of destruction was easy. One farmstead after another revealed dismembered bodies and fresh blood.

Now it was the whites' turn for vengeance. Scores of blacks who had no part in the rebellion were killed. Turner's band was overpowered, and those not shot on sight were jailed, to be tried and hanged in due course. Turner himself slipped away and hid in the woods until his capture on October 30. After a trial, he too was hanged.

Revenge was one thing, understanding another. In his subsequently published "Confessions" (recorded by his court-appointed lawyer), Turner did not claim that he had been mistreated by his owners. What they did reveal was an intelligent and deeply religious man who had somehow learned to read and write as a boy, and who claimed to have seen heavenly visions of white and black spirits fighting each other. Turner's

FAMILY GROUP The African American woman shown here probably was a slave mammy who substituted for the absent mother of the children. That she was included in the family photo indicates her role as caregiver. But the children incline toward their father. (Collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, CA.)

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mystical streak, well known in the neighborhood, had never before seemed dangerous. White Baptist and Methodist preachers had converted innumerable slaves to Christianity at the turn of the century. Christianity was supposed to make slaves more docile, but Nat Turner's ability to read had enabled him to find passages in the Bible that threatened death to him who "stealeth" a man, a fair description of slavery. Asked by his lawyer if he now found himself mistaken, Turner replied, "Was not Christ crucified?" Small wonder that a niece of George Washington concluded that she and all other white Virginians were now living on a "smothered volcano."

Before Turner, white Virginians had worried little about a slave rebellion. There had been a brief scare in 1800 when a plot led by a slave named Gabriel Prosser was discovered and nipped in the bud. Overall, slavery in Virginia seemed mild to whites living there, a far cry from the harsh regimen of the new cotton-growing areas in Alabama and Mississippi. On hearing of trouble in Southside, many whites had jumped to the conclusion that the British were invading and only gradually absorbed the more menacing thought that the slaves were rebelling.

"What is to be done?" an editorial writer moaned in the *Richmond Enquirer*. "Oh my God, I don't know, but something must be done." In the wake of Turner's insurrection, many Virginians, especially nonslaveholding whites in the western part of the state, urged that Virginia follow the lead of northern states and emancipate its slaves. During the winter of 1831–1832, the Virginia legislature wrangled over emancipation proposals. The narrow defeat of these proposals marked a turning point; thereafter, opposition to slavery steadily weakened not only in Virginia but throughout the region known to history as the Old South.

As late as the Revolution, *south* referred more to a direction than to a place. In 1775, slavery

had known no sectional boundaries in America. But as one northern state after another embraced emancipation, slavery became the "peculiar institution" that distinguished the Old South from other sections.

A rift of sorts split the Old South into the **Upper South** (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas) and the **Lower**, or **Deep, South** (South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas). With its diversified economy based on raising wheat, tobacco, hemp, vegetables, and livestock, the Upper South relied far less than the Lower South on slavery and cotton, and in 1861 it approached secession more reluctantly than its sister states. Yet in the final analysis, slavery forged the Upper South and Lower South into a single **Old South** where it scarred all social relationships: between blacks and whites, among whites, and even among blacks. Without slavery, there never would have been an Old South.

King Cotton

In 1790, the South was essentially stagnant. Tobacco, its primary cash crop, had lost economic vitality even as it had depleted the once-rich southern soils. The growing of alternative cash crops, such as rice and cotton, was confined to coastal areas. Three out of four southerners still lived along the Atlantic seaboard, specifically in the Chesapeake and the Carolinas. One of three resided in Virginia alone.

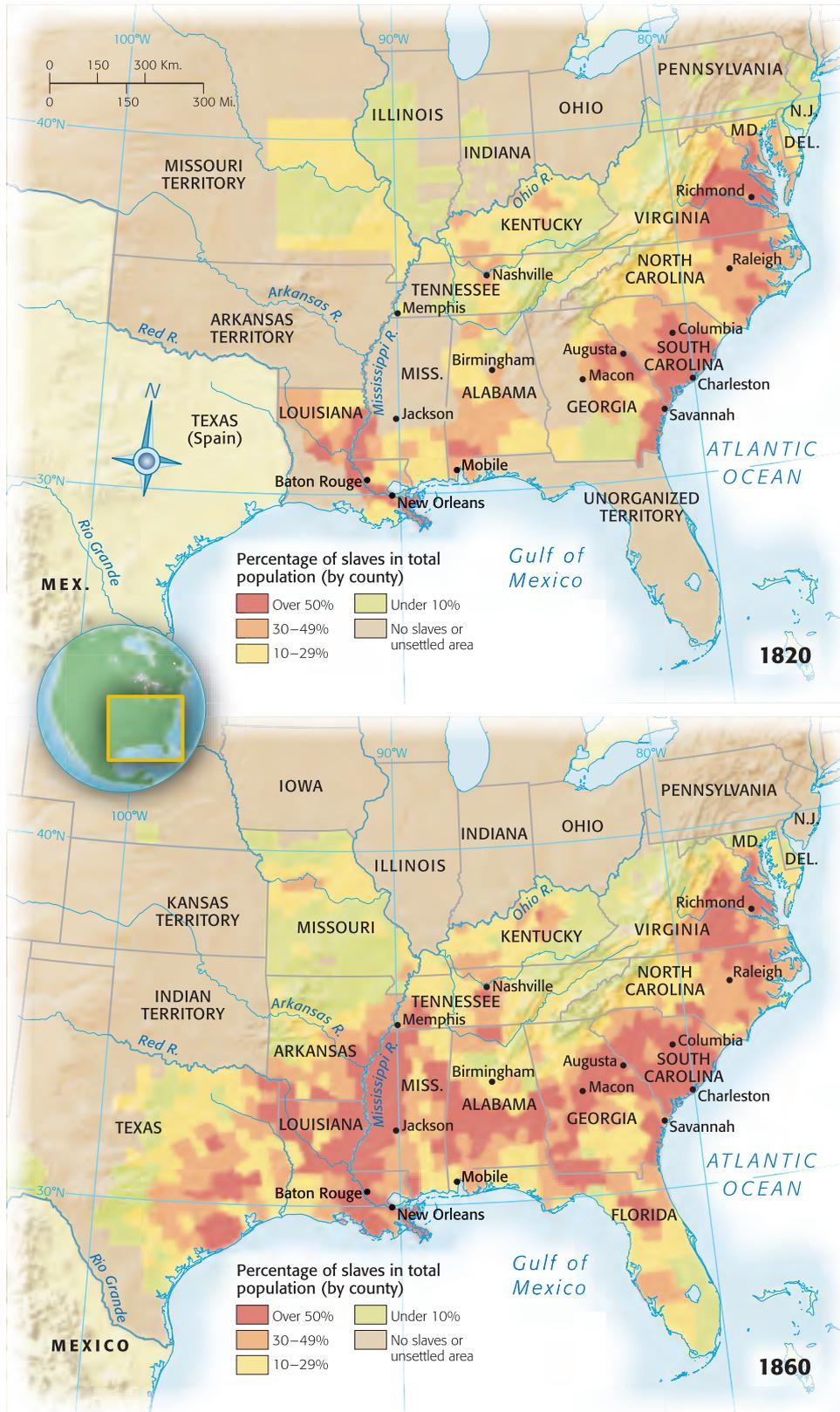
The contrast between that South and the dynamic South of 1850 was stunning. By 1850, southerners had moved south and west. Now, only one of every seven southerners lived in Virginia, and cotton reigned as king, shaping this new South. The growth of the British textile industry had created a huge demand for cotton, while Indian removal (see Chapter 9) had made way for southern expansion into the "**Cotton Kingdom**," a broad swath of territory that stretched from South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida in the east through Alabama, Mississippi, central and western Tennessee, and Louisiana, and from there on to Arkansas and Texas (see Map 12.1).

The Lure of Cotton

To a British traveler, it seemed that all southerners could talk about was cotton. "Every flow of wind from the shore wafted off the smell of that useful plant; at every dock or wharf we encountered it in huge piles or pyramids of bales, and our decks were soon choked with it. All day, and almost all night long, the captain, pilot, crew, and passengers were talking of nothing else."

FOCUS Questions

- How did the rise of cotton cultivation affect the society and economy of the Old South?
- What major social divisions segmented the white South?
- Why did nonslaveholding whites feel their futures were tied to the survival of slavery?
- What were the distinctive features of African-American society and culture in the South?



MAP 12.1 DISTRIBUTION OF SLAVES, 1820 AND 1860 In 1820, the majority of slaves resided along the southeastern seaboard. By 1860, however, slavery had spread throughout the South, and slaves were most heavily concentrated in the Deep South states.

Source: Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction by James M. McPherson. Copyright 1982 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

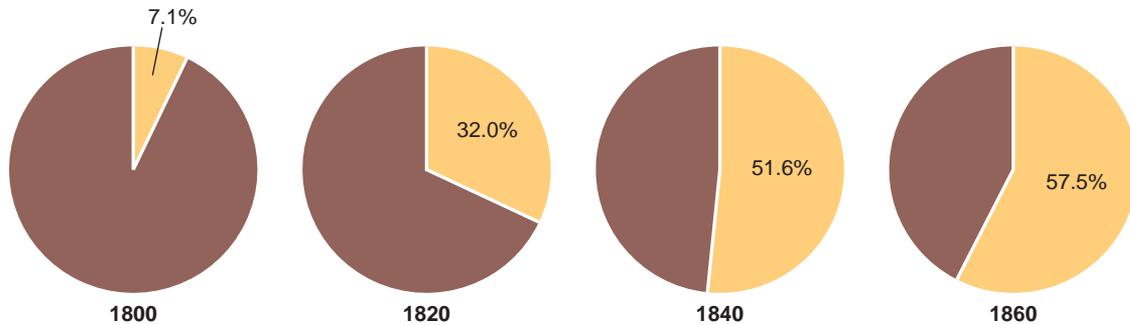


FIGURE 12.1 VALUE OF COTTON EXPORTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF ALL U.S. EXPORTS, 1800–1860 By 1840, cotton accounted for more than half of all U.S. exports.

A warm climate, wet springs and summers, and relatively dry autumns made the Lower South ideal for cultivating cotton. A cotton farmer needed neither slaves nor cotton gins nor the capital required for sugar cultivation. Perhaps fifty percent of the farmers in the “Cotton Belt” owned no slaves, and to process their harvest they could turn to widely available commercial gins. Cotton promised to make poor men prosperous and rich men kings (see Figure 12.1).

Yet large-scale cotton growing and slavery grew together as the southern slave population nearly doubled between 1810 and 1830 (see Figure 12.2). Three-fourths of all slaves worked in the cotton economy in 1830. Owning slaves made it possible to harvest vast tracts of cotton speedily, a crucial advantage because a sudden rainstorm at harvest time could pelt cotton to the ground and soil it.

Slaveholding planters could increase their cotton acreage and hence their profits.

Cotton was also compatible with corn production. Corn could be planted earlier or later than cotton and harvested before or after. Since the cost of owning a slave was the same whether or not he or she was working, corn production enabled slaveholders to shift slave labor between corn and cotton. By 1860, the acreage devoted to corn in the Old South *exceeded* that devoted to cotton. Economically, corn and cotton gave the South the best of two worlds. Intense demand in Britain and New England kept cotton prices high and money flowed into the South. Because of southern self-sufficiency in growing corn and raising hogs that thrived on the corn (in 1860 the region had two-thirds of the nation’s hogs), money did not drain away to pay for food. In 1860, the twelve wealthiest counties in the United States were all in the South.

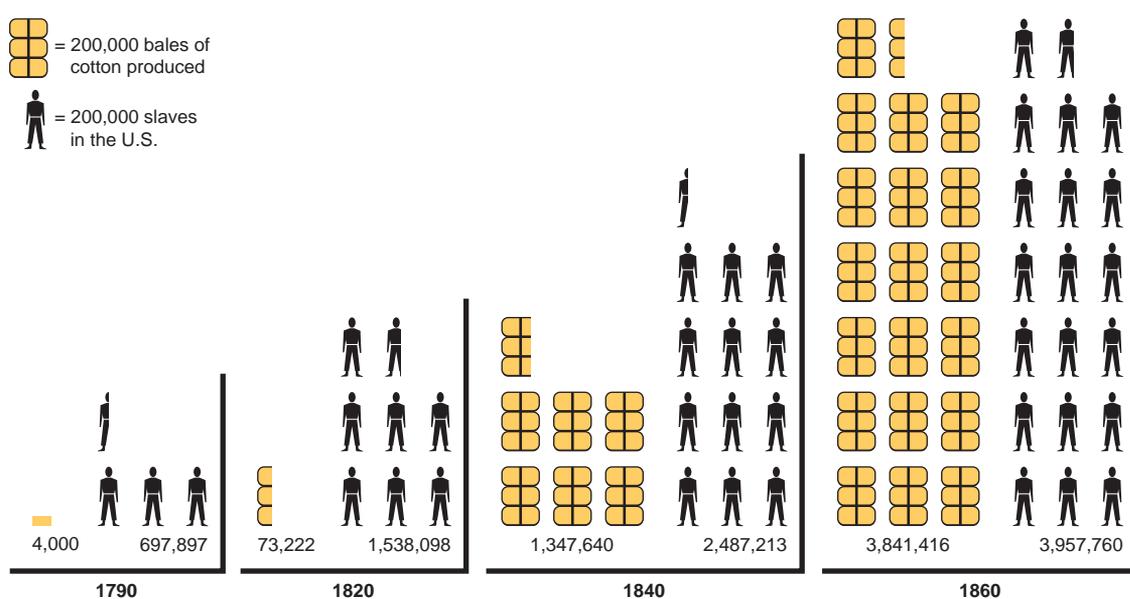


FIGURE 12.2 GROWTH OF COTTON PRODUCTION AND THE SLAVE POPULATION, 1790–1860 Cotton and slavery rose together in the Old South.

Ties Between the Lower and Upper South

Two giant cash crops, sugar and cotton, dominated agriculture in the Lower South. The Upper South, a region of tobacco, vegetable, hemp, and wheat growers, depended far less on the great cash crops. Yet the Upper South identified with the Lower South rather than with the agricultural regions of the free states.

A range of social, political, and economic factors promoted this unity. First, many settlers in the Lower South had come from the Upper South. Second, all white southerners benefited from the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, which enabled them to count slaves as a basis for congressional representation. Third, all southerners were stung by abolitionist criticisms of slavery, which drew no distinction between the Upper and Lower South. Economic ties also linked the South. The profitability of cotton and sugar increased the value of slaves throughout the entire region and encouraged the **internal slave trade** from the Upper to the Lower South. Without

the sale of its slaves to the Lower South, an observer wrote, “Virginia will be a desert” (see Map 12.2).

The North and South Diverge

The changes responsible for the dynamic growth of the South widened the distance between it and the North. The South remained predominantly rural at a time when the North became more and more urban. In 1860, the proportion of the South’s population living in urban areas was only one-third that of New England and the mid-Atlantic states, down from one-half in 1820.

Lack of industry kept the South rural; by 1860, it had one-third of the U.S. population but accounted for only one-tenth of the nation’s manufacturing. The industrial output of the entire South in 1850 was less than one-third that of Massachusetts alone.

Without the sale of its slaves to the Lower South, an observer wrote, “Virginia will be a desert.”



CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA Merchants and planters erected mansions along Charleston’s waterfront, but the majority of the city’s people were black. Below its placid surface, Charleston seethed with rage at northern interference with slavery. In 1860 South Carolina would become the first state to secede from the United States. (*The Gibbes Museum of Art, Carolina Art Association, Gift of Victor A. Morawetz*)



MAP 12.2 THE INTERNAL SLAVE TRADE, 1810–1860 An internal slave trade developed after the slave trade with Africa ended in 1808. With the growth of cotton production, farmers in the Upper South found it profitable to sell their slaves to planters in the Lower South.

A few southerners advocated industrialization to reduce the South's dependency on northern manufactured products. After touring northern textile mills, South Carolina's William Gregg established a company town for textiles at Graniteville in 1845. By 1860, Richmond boasted the nation's fourth-largest producer of iron products, the **Tredegar Iron Works**. But these were exceptions.

Compared to factories in the North, most southern factories were small, produced for nearby markets, and were closely tied to agriculture. The leading northern factories turned hides into tanned leather and leather into shoes, or cotton into threads and threads into suits. In contrast, southern factories, only a step removed from agriculture, turned grain into flour, corn into meal, and logs into lumber.

Slavery posed a major obstacle to southern industrialization, but not because slaves were unfit for factories. The Tredegar Iron Works employed slaves in skilled positions. But industrial slavery troubled southerners. Away from the strict supervision of plantations, slaves sometimes behaved as if they were free, shifting jobs, working overtime,

and even negotiating better working conditions. A Virginia planter who rented slaves to an iron manufacturer complained that they "got the habit of roaming about and *taking care of themselves*." But the chief brake on southern industrialization was money, not labor. To raise the capital needed to build factories, southerners would have to sell slaves. They had little incentive to do so. Cash crops like cotton and sugar were proven winners, whereas the benefits of industrialization were remote and doubtful. As long as southerners believed that an economy founded on cash crops would remain profitable, they had little reason to leap into the uncertainties of industrialization.

In education as in industry, the South also lagged behind the North. White southerners rejected compulsory education and were reluctant to tax property to support schools. They abhorred the thought of educating slaves, so much so that southern lawmakers made it a crime to teach slaves to read. Some public aid flowed to state universities, but for most whites the only available schools were private. White illiteracy remained high in the South even as it declined in the North. For example,

nearly 60 percent of the North Carolinians who enlisted in the U.S. army before the Civil War were illiterate, compared to 30 percent for northern enlistees.

Agricultural, self-sufficient, and independent, the middling and poor whites of the South remained unconvinced of the need for public education. They had little dependency on the printed word, few complex economic transactions, and infrequent dealings with urban people. Planters did not need an educated white work force; they already had a black one that they were determined to keep illiterate lest it acquire ideas of freedom.

Because the South diverged so sharply from the North, outsiders often dismissed it as backward. Increasingly, northerners associated the spread of cities and factories with progress. Finding few cities and factories in the South, they concluded that the region was a stranger to progress as well. A northern journalist wrote of white southerners in the 1850s that “[t]hey work little, and that little, badly; they earn little, they sell little; they buy little, and they have little—very little—of the common comforts and consolations of civilized life.” Visitors to the South sometimes thought that they were traveling backward in time. “It seems as if everything had stopped growing, and was growing backwards,” novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote of the region.

Yet the white South did not lack progressive features. In 1840, per capita income in the white South was only slightly below the national average, and by 1860 it exceeded the national average. Like northerners, white southerners were restless, eager to make money, skillful at managing complex commercial enterprises, and, when they chose, capable of becoming successful industrialists. Thus the white South was not economically backward—it was merely different. Cotton was a wonderful crop, and southerners could hardly be blamed for making it their ruler. As a southern senator wrote in 1858, “You dare not make war upon cotton; no power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.”

The Social Groups of the White South

Considerable diversity existed within and between the South’s slaveholding and nonslaveholding classes. Some slaveholders owned hundreds of slaves, and lived lavishly, but most lived more modestly. In 1860, one-quarter of all white families in the South owned slaves (see Figure 12.3). Of these, nearly half owned fewer than five slaves, and

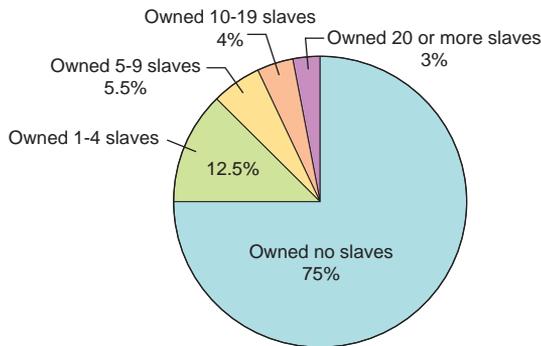


FIGURE 12.3 SLAVE OWNERSHIP IN THE SOUTH, 1860

In combination with the impact of Hinton R. Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South* (1857), which called on nonslaveholders to abolish the institution of slavery in their own interest, the large number who owned no slaves left slaveholders worried about the loyalty of nonslaveholders to slavery.

nearly three-quarters had fewer than ten slaves. Only 12 percent owned twenty or more slaves, and only 1 percent had a hundred or more. Large slaveholders clearly were a minority within a minority. Nonslaveholders also formed a diverse group.

Most owned farms and drew on the labor of family members, but others squatted on land in the so-called pine barrens or piney woods and scratched out livelihoods by raising livestock, hunting and fishing, and planting a few acres of corn, oats, or sweet potatoes.

Planters (those owning twenty or more slaves), small slaveholders, yeomen (family farmers), and pine barrens folk composed the South’s four main white groups. Lawyers, physicians, merchants, and artisans did not fall into any of these groups, but they tended to identify their interests with one or another of the agricultural groups. Rural artisans and merchants had extensive dealings with yeomen. Urban merchants and lawyers depended on the planters and adopted their viewpoint on most issues. Similarly, slave traders relied on the plantation economy for their livelihood. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the uneducated son of a humble Tennessee blacksmith, made a fortune as a slave trader in Natchez, Mississippi. When the Civil War broke out, Forrest enlisted in the Confederate army as a private and rose swiftly to become the South’s greatest cavalry general. Plantation slavery directed Forrest’s allegiances as surely as it did those of planters like Jefferson Davis, the Confederacy’s president.

“You dare not make war upon cotton; no power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.”

Planters and Plantation Mistresses

With porticoed mansion and fields teeming with slaves, the plantation still stands at the center of the popular image of the Old South. This romanticized view is not entirely misleading, for the South contained plantations that travelers found “superb beyond description.” Whether devoted to cotton, tobacco, rice, or sugar, **plantation agriculture** was characterized by a high degree of division of labor. In the 1850s, Bellmead, a tobacco plantation on Virginia’s James River, was virtually an agricultural equivalent of a factory village. Its more than one hundred slaves were classified into the domestic staff (butlers, waiters, seamstresses, laundresses, maids, and gardeners), the pasture staff (shepherds, cowherds, and hog drivers), outdoor artisans (stonemasons

and carpenters), indoor artisans (blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, spinners, and weavers), and field hands. Such a division of labor was inconceivable without abundant slaves and land. With such resources, it is not surprising that large plantations could generate incomes that contemporaries viewed as immense (twenty to thirty thousand dollars a year).

During the first flush of settlement in the Piedmont and trans-Appalachian South in the eighteenth century, most well-off planters had been content to live in simple log cabins. In contrast, between 1810 and 1860, elite planters often vied with one another to build stately mansions. Some, like Lyman Hardy of Mississippi, hired architects. Hardy’s Auburn, built in 1812 near Natchez, featured Ionic columns and a portico thirty-one feet long and twelve feet deep. But the wealth of most planters, especially in states like Alabama and Mississippi, consisted primarily in the value of their slaves rather than in expensive furniture or silver plate. A field hand was worth as much as \$1700 in the 1850s. Planters could convert their wealth into cash for purchasing luxuries only by selling slaves. A planter who sold his slaves ceased to be a planter and relinquished the South’s most prestigious social status. Not surprisingly, most planters clung to large-scale slaveholding, even if it meant scrimping on their lifestyles. A northern journalist observed that in the Southwest, men worth millions lived as if they were not worth hundreds.

In their constant worry about profit, planters enjoyed neither repose nor security. High fixed costs—housing and feeding slaves, maintaining cotton gins, hiring overseers—led them to search for more and better land, higher efficiency, and greater self-sufficiency. Because cotton prices fluctuated seasonally, planters often assigned their cotton to commercial agents in cities, who held the cotton until the price was right. The agents extended credit so that planters could pay their bills until the cotton was sold. Indebtedness became part of the plantation economy and intensified the planters’ quest for profitability. Psychological strains compounded economic worries. Frequent moves disrupted circles of friends and relatives, especially as migration to the Old Southwest (Alabama, Mississippi, and eastern Texas), which carried families into progressively less settled, more desolate areas. Until 1850, this area was still the frontier.

Migration to the Southwest often deeply unsettled plantation women. They found themselves in frontier regions, surrounded by slaves and bereft of the companionship of white social peers. “I am



CHARLOTTE HELEN AND HER NURSE LYDIA, 1857

Ten days after Charlotte’s birth, which occurred when the family sought refuge on Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina, during a yellow fever epidemic, a terrible storm swamped the beaches. Lydia refused the aid of a soldier, trusting no one but herself, and waded through the swirling waters to carry the newborn Charlotte Helen to safety. (*The Gibbes Museum of Art, Carolina Art Association, Gift of Alicia Hopton Middleton*)



COLONEL AND MRS. JAMES A. WHITESIDE, SON CHARLES, AND SERVANTS, BY JAMES A. CAMERON, CA. 1858–1859 This portrait captures the patriarchy as well as the graciousness that whites associated with the ideal plantation. Not only the slave waiter and nurse but the planter’s wife appear overshadowed by the master’s presence. (Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga, TN, Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Thomas B. Whiteside)

sad tonight, sickness preys on my frame,” wrote a bride who moved to Mississippi in 1833. “I am alone and more than 150 miles from any near relative in the wild woods of an Indian nation.” At times, wives lacked even their husbands’ companionship. Plantation agriculture kept men on the road, scouting new land for purchase, supervising outlying holdings, and transacting business in New Orleans or Memphis.

Planters and their wives found various ways to cope with their isolation. Hiring overseers to supervise their plantations, many spent long periods in cities. In 1850, fully one-half the planters in the Mississippi Delta were absentees living in or near Natchez or New Orleans rather than on their plantations. Most planters acted as their own overseers, however, and dealt with harsh living conditions by opening their homes to visitors. The responsibility for such hospitality fell heavily on wives, who might have to entertain as many as fifteen people for breakfast and attend to the needs of visitors who stayed for days. Plantation wives bore the burdens of raising their children, supervising house slaves, making clothes and

carpets, looking after smokehouses and dairies, planting gardens, and keeping accounts. On the frequent occasions when their husbands were away on business or holding political office, their wives, along with their overseers, ran their plantations.

Among the greatest sorrows of some plantation mistresses was the presence of mulatto children, who stood as daily reminders of their husbands’ infidelities. Mary Boykin Chesnut, an astute Charleston woman and famous diarist, commented, “Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household but her own. These, she seems to think, drop from clouds.” Insisting on sexual purity for white women, southern men followed a looser standard for themselves. After the death of his wife, the brother of the abolitionist sisters Sarah

“I am sad tonight, sickness preys on my frame. I am alone and more than 150 miles from any near relative in the wild woods of an Indian nation.”

and Angelina Grimké fathered three mulatto children. The gentlemanly code usually tolerated such transgressions as long as they were not paraded in public—and, at times, even if they were. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, the man who allegedly killed Tecumseh during the War of 1812, was elected vice president of the United States in 1836 despite having lived openly for years with his black mistress.

The isolation, drudgery, and humiliation that planters' wives experienced turned very few against the system. When the Civil War came, they supported the Confederacy as enthusiastically as any group. However much they might hate living as white islands in a sea of slaves, they recognized no less than their husbands that their wealth and position depended on slavery.

The Small Slaveholders

In 1860, 88 percent of all slaveholders owned fewer than twenty slaves, and most of these possessed fewer than ten. One out of every five slaveholders was employed outside of agriculture, as a lawyer, physician, merchant, or artisan.

Small slaveholders experienced conflicting loyalties and ambitions. In the upland regions, where yeomen (nonslaveholding family farmers) were the dominant group, small slaveholders rarely aspired to become large planters. In contrast, in the low country and delta regions, where planters formed the dominant group, small slaveholders often aspired to planter status. In these planter-dominated areas, someone with ten slaves could realistically look forward to owning thirty. The deltas were thus filled with ambitious and acquisitive individuals who linked success to owning more slaves. Whether one owned ten slaves or fifty, the logic of slaveholding was much the same. The investment in slaves could be justified only by setting them to work on profitable crops. Profitable crops demanded, in turn, more and better land. Much like the planters, the small slaveholders of the low country and delta areas were restless and footloose.

The social structure of the deltas was fluid. In the early antebellum period, large planters had been reluctant to risk transporting their hundreds of valuable slaves into a still-turbulent region. It was the small slaveholders who led the initial westward push into the Cotton Belt in the 1810s and 1820s. Gradually, large planters moved westward, buying up the land that the small slave owners had developed and turning the region from Vicksburg to Natchez into large plantations. Small slaveholders took the profits from selling their land, bought more

slaves, and moved on. They gradually transformed the region from Vicksburg to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, into a belt of medium-sized farms with a dozen or so slaves on each.

The Yeomen

Nonslaveholding family farmers, or yeomen, comprised the largest single group of southern whites. Most were landowners. Landholding yeomen, because they owned no slaves of their own, frequently hired slaves at harvest time to help in the fields. Where the land was poor, as in eastern Tennessee, the landowning yeomen were typically subsistence farmers, but most grew some crops for the market. Whether they engaged in subsistence or commercial agriculture, they controlled landholdings far more modest than those of the planters—more likely in the range of fifty to two hundred acres than five hundred or more acres.

Yeomen could be found anywhere in the South, but they tended to congregate in the upland regions. In the seaboard South, they populated the Piedmont region of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia; in the Southwest, they usually lived in the hilly upcountry, far from the rich alluvial soil of the deltas. A minority of yeomen did not own land. Typically young, these men resided with and worked for landowners to whom they were related.

The leading characteristic of the yeomen was the value that they attached to self-sufficiency. As nonslaveholders, they were not carried along by the logic that impelled slaveholders to acquire more land and plant more cash crops. Although most yeomen raised cash crops, they devoted much of their acreage to subsistence crops like corn, sweet potatoes, and oats. The ideal of the planters was profit with modest self-sufficiency; that of the yeomen, self-sufficiency with modest profit.

Yeomen dwelling in the low country and delta regions dominated by planters often were dismissed as “poor white trash.” But in the upland areas that they dominated, yeomen were highly respected. Upland slaveholders tended to own only a few slaves; like the yeomen, they were essentially family farmers.

In contrast to the far-flung commercial transactions of the planters, who depended on distant commercial agents to market their crops, the economic transactions of yeomen usually occurred within the neighborhood of their farms. Yeomen often exchanged their cotton, wheat, or tobacco for goods and services from local artisans and merchants. In some areas, they sold their surplus

corn to the herdsmen and drovers who made a living in the South's upland regions by specializing in raising hogs. Along the French Broad River in eastern Tennessee, some twenty to thirty thousand hogs were fattened for market each year; at peak season, a traveler would see a thousand hogs a mile. When driven to market, the hogs were quartered at night in huge stock stands, veritable hog "hotels," and fed with corn supplied by the local yeomen.

The People of the Pine Barrens

One of the most controversial groups in the Old South was the independent whites of the wooded pine barrens. Making up about 10 percent of southern whites, they usually squatted on the land, put up crude cabins, cleared some acreage on which they planted corn between tree stumps, and grazed hogs and cattle in the woods. They neither raised cash crops nor engaged in the daily routine of orderly work that characterized family farmers. With their ramshackle houses and handful of stump-strewn acres, they appeared lazy and shiftless.

Antislavery northerners cited the **pine barrens people** as proof that slavery degraded poor whites, but southerners shot back that while the pine barrens people were poor, they could at least feed themselves, unlike the paupers of northern cities. In general, the people of the pine barrens were self-reliant and fiercely independent. Pine barrens men were reluctant to hire themselves out as laborers to do "slave" tasks, and the women refused to become servants.

Neither victimized nor oppressed, these people generally lived in the pine barrens by choice. The grandson of a farmer who had migrated from Emanuel County, Georgia, to the Mississippi pine barrens explained his grandfather's decision: "The turpentine smell, the moan of the winds through the pine trees, and nobody within fifty miles of him, [were] too captivating... to be resisted, and he rested there."

Social Relations in the White South

Northerners often charged that slavery twisted the entire social structure of the South out of shape. The enslavement of blacks, they alleged, robbed lower-class whites of the incentive to work, reduced them to shiftless misery, and rendered the South a throwback in an otherwise progressive age. The behavior of individual southerners also struck northerners as running to extremes. One minute, southerners

were hospitable and gracious; the next, savagely violent. "The Americans of the South," Alexis de Tocqueville asserted, "are brave, comparatively ignorant, hospitable, generous, easy to irritate, violent in their resentments, without industry or the spirit of enterprise." The practice of dueling intensified in the Old South at a time when it was dying in the North.

In reality, a curious mix of aristocratic and democratic, premodern and modern features marked social relations in the white South. Although it contained considerable class inequality, property ownership was widespread. Rich planters occupied seats in state legislatures out of proportion to their numbers in the population, but they did not necessarily get their way, nor did their political agenda always differ from that of other whites.

Conflict and Consensus in the White South

Planters tangled with yeomen on several issues in the Old South. With their extensive economic dealings and need for credit, planters and their urban commercial allies inclined toward the Whig party, which generally was more sympathetic to banking and economic development. Cherishing their self-sufficiency and economically independent, the yeomen tended to be Democrats.

The occasions for conflict between these groups were minimal, however, and an underlying political unity reigned. Especially in the Lower South, each of the four main social groups—planters, small slaveholders, yeomen, and pine barrens people—tended to cluster in different regions. The delta areas that planters dominated contained relatively small numbers of yeomen. In other regions, small slave-owning families with ten to fifteen slaves predominated. In the upland areas far from the deltas, the yeomen congregated. The people of the pine barrens lived in a world of their own. There was more geographical intermingling of groups in the Upper South than in the Lower, but throughout the South each group attained a degree of independence from the others. With widespread land-ownership and relatively few factories, the Old South was not a place where whites worked for other whites, and this tended to minimize friction.

"The turpentine smell, the moan of the winds through the pine trees, and nobody within fifty miles of him, [were] too captivating... to be resisted, and he rested there."

In addition, the white South's political structure was sufficiently democratic to prevent any one social group from gaining exclusive control over politics. In both the Upper and the Lower South, the majority of state legislators were planters. Yet these same planters owed their election to the popular vote. The white South was affected by the same democratic currents that swept northern politics between 1815 and 1860, and the newer states of the South had usually entered the Union with democratic constitutions that included universal white manhood suffrage—the right of all adult white males to vote.

Although yeomen often voted for planters, the nonslaveholders did not issue their elected representatives a blank check to govern as they pleased. During the 1830s and 1840s, Whig planters who favored banks faced intense and often successful opposition from Democratic yeomen. These yeomen blamed banks for the Panic of 1837 and pressured southern legislatures to restrict bank operations. On banking issues, nonslaveholders got their way often enough to nurture their belief that they ultimately controlled politics and that slaveholders could not block their goals.

Conflict over Slavery

Nevertheless, considerable potential for conflict existed between the slaveholders and nonslaveholders. The white carpenter who complained in 1849 that “unjust, oppressive, and degrading” competition from slave labor depressed his wages surely

had a point. Between 1830 and 1860, slaveholders gained an increasing proportion of the South's wealth while declining as a proportion of its white population. The size of the slaveholding class shrank from 36 percent of the white population in 1831 to 31 percent in 1850 and to 25 percent in 1860. A Louisiana editor warned in 1858 that “the present tendency of supply and demand is to concentrate all the slaves in the hands of the few, and thus excite the envy rather than

cultivate the sympathy of the people.” Some southerners began to support the idea of Congress's reopening the African slave trade to increase the supply of slaves, bring down their price, and give more whites a stake in the institution.

As the proposed **Virginia emancipation legislation** in 1831–1832 (see this chapter's introduction) attests, slaveholders had good reasons

for uncertainty over the allegiance of nonslaveholders to the “peculiar institution” of slavery. The publication in 1857 of Hinton R. Helper's *The Impending Crisis of the South*, which called on nonslaveholders to abolish slavery in their own interest, revealed the persistence of a degree of white opposition to slavery. On balance, however, slavery did not create profound and lasting divisions between the South's slaveholders and nonslaveholders. Although antagonism to slavery flourished in parts of Virginia up to 1860, proposals for emancipation dropped from the state's political agenda after 1832. In Kentucky, calls for emancipation were revived in 1849 in a popular referendum. But the pro-emancipation forces went down to crushing defeat. Thereafter, the continuation of slavery ceased to be a political issue in Kentucky and elsewhere in the South.

The rise and fall of pro-emancipation sentiment in the South raises a key question. Since the majority of white southerners were not slaveholders, why did they not attack the institution more consistently? To look ahead, why did so many of them fight ferociously during the Civil War in defense of an institution in which they appeared not to have had any real stake?

There are various answers to these questions. First, some nonslaveholders hoped to become slaveholders. Second, most simply accepted the racial assumptions upon which slavery rested. Whether slaveholders or nonslaveholders, white southerners dreaded the likelihood that emancipation might encourage “impudent” blacks to entertain ideas of social equality with whites. Blacks might demand the right to sit next to whites in railroad cars and even make advances to white women. “Now suppose they [the slaves] was free,” a white southerner told a northern journalist in the 1850s; “you see they'd all think themselves just as good as we; of course they would if they was free. Now just suppose you had a family of children, how would you like to hev a nigger steppin' up to your darter?” Slavery, in short, appealed to whites as a legal, time-honored, and foolproof way to enforce the social subordination of blacks.

Finally, no one knew where the slaves, if freed, would go or what they would do. Colonizing freed blacks in Africa was unrealistic, southerners concluded, but they also believed that without colonization emancipation would lead to a race war. In 1860, Georgia's governor sent a blunt message to his constituents, many of them nonslaveholders: “So soon as the slaves were at liberty thousands of them would leave the cotton and rice fields...and make their way to the healthier climate of the mountain region [where] we should

“The present tendency of supply and demand is to concentrate all the slaves in the hands of the few, and thus excite the envy rather than cultivate the sympathy of the people.”

have them plundering and stealing, robbing and killing.” There was no mistaking the conclusion. Emancipation would not merely deprive slaveholders of their property; it would also jeopardize the lives of nonslaveholders.

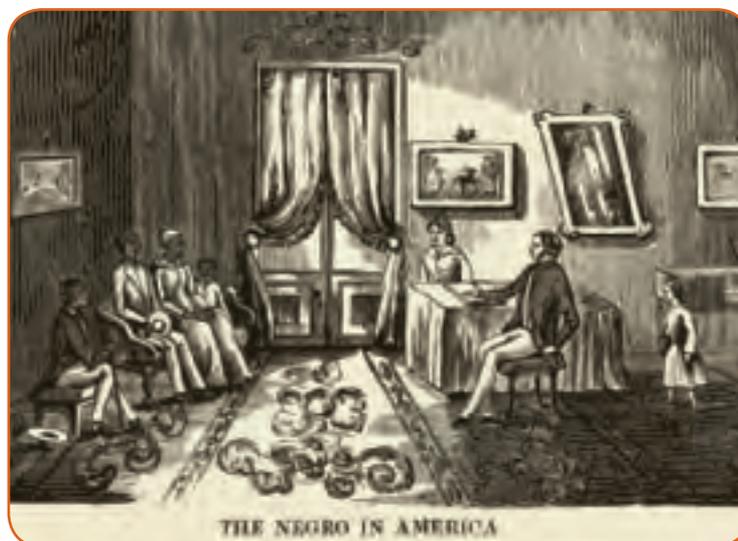
The Proslavery Argument

Between 1830 and 1860, southern writers constructed a defense of slavery as a positive good rather than a necessary evil (see *Going to the Source*). Southerners answered northern attacks on slavery as a backward institution by pointing out that the slave society of ancient Athens had produced Plato and Aristotle and that Roman slaveholders had laid the basis of Western civilization (see *Beyond America*). A Virginian, **George Fitzhugh**, launched another line of attack by contrasting the plight of northern factory workers, “wage slaves” who were callously discarded by their bosses when they were too old or too sick to work, with the southern slaves, who were fed and clothed even when old and ill because they were the property of conscientious masters.

Many proslavery treatises were aimed less at northerners than at skeptics among the South’s non-slaveholding yeomanry. Southern clergymen, who wrote roughly half of all proslavery tracts, invoked the Bible, especially St. Paul’s order that slaves obey their masters. Too, proslavery writers warned southerners that the real intention of abolitionists, many of whom advocated equal rights for women, was to destroy the family as much as slavery by undermining the “natural” submission of children to parents, wives to husbands, and slaves to masters.

As southerners closed ranks behind slavery, they increasingly suppressed open discussion of the institution within the South. In the 1830s, southerners seized and burned abolitionist literature mailed to the South. In Kentucky, abolitionist editor Cassius Marcellus Clay positioned two cannons and a powder keg to protect his press, but in 1845 a mob dismantled it anyway. By 1860, any southerner found with a copy of *The Impending Crisis* had reason to fear for his life.

The rise of the proslavery argument coincided with a shift in the position of the southern churches on slavery. During the 1790s and early 1800s, some Protestant ministers had assailed slavery as immoral. By the 1830s, however, most members of the southern clergy had convinced themselves that slavery was not only compatible with Christianity but also necessary for the proper exercise of the Christian religion. Slavery, they proclaimed, provided the opportunity to display Christian responsibility toward one’s inferiors, and it helped blacks develop Christian virtues like humility and self-



THE NEGRO IN HIS OWN COUNTRY AND THE NEGRO IN AMERICA

Proslavery propagandists contrasted what they believed to be the black’s African savagery with the blessings of civilization on an American plantation. (*Chicago Historical Society*)

control. Southerners increasingly attacked anti-slavery evangelicals in the North for disrupting the “superior” social arrangement of the South. In 1837, southerners and conservative northerners had combined to drive the antislavery New School Presbyterians out of that denomination’s main body. In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church split into northern and southern wings. In 1845, Baptists formed a separate Southern Convention. In effect, southern evangelicals seceded from national church denominations long before the South seceded from the Union.

Daniel R. Hundley Defends the South

Daniel R. Hundley (1832–1899) was a well-educated Alabama lawyer who had spent time in the North on business and who

in 1860 defended the South’s civilization, including slavery, against the attacks by northerners.

No matter what be the Southern Gentleman’s avocation, his dearest affections usually centre in the country. He longs to live as his fathers lived before him, in both the Old World and the New, and he ever turns with unfeigned delight from the bustle of cities, the hollow ceremonies of courts, the turmoil of politics, the glories and dangers of the battle-field, or the wearisome treadmill of professional routine, to the quiet and peaceful scenes of country life. . . . Indeed, with all classes in the South the home feeling is much stronger than it is in the North; for the bane of hotel life and the curse of boarding-houses have not as yet extended their pernicious influences to our Southern States, or at best in a very small degree. Nearly every citizen is a landowner, and therefore feels an interest in the permanency of his country’s institutions. This is one reason why the South has ever been the ready advocate of war, whenever the rights of the nation have been trampled upon, or the national flag insulted. But if the patriotic feeling is strongest in the breast of even the poorest citizen, whose home is a log-cabin and whose sole patrimony consists of less than a dozen acres of land, how must it be intensified in the bosoms of those whose plantations spread out into all magnificence of old-country manors. . . .

Certainly, in some portions of the South the Southern Gentleman does not live in very grand style—his house is not always showy, nor his furniture elegant, nor his pleasure-grounds in the best keeping—but he is always hospitable, gentlemanly, courteous, and more anxious to please than to be pleased. . . .

And tell us honestly; have you ever witnessed in the miserable tenant-houses of your own toiling poor after the day’s weary

labors are done, such evidences of light-heartedness and physical comfort? And do you suppose, O noble champion of Equal Rights; you, sir, who turn aside with a curse from the ragged starveling on your own doorsteps to clamor that the poor slave shall be freed, but afterward refuse to sit with the freedman in the house of God, or in the theatres, or in public conveyances. . . . do you suppose that your love for the sooty African equals that of his vilified master. If you do so delude yourself, the more’s the pity; for despite what you or any other person may think to the contrary, the Southern Gentleman entertains more real love for his “human chattel” than all hare-brained abolitionists the world ever saw. His love is not theoretical but practical. . . .

Hence, the ceaseless clamor of the so-called civilized world—of those peoples whose bread comes through the sweat of the African’s brow, and whose commercial prosperity is due to the products of slave-labor—passes by the Southern Gentleman as the ideal wind which he heeds not. Yea, let them clamor, let them denounce, let them misrepresent and vilify to their heart’s content, . . . still never will one single Southern Gentleman be influenced by the very disinterested outcry. He knows that this is not the first time a successful burglar has joined in the general shout, “Stop thief!” “Stop thief!”

Source: D.R. Hundley, *Social Relation in Our Southern States* (New York, 1860), 55–62.

QUESTIONS

1. Hundley was writing to persuade the majority of northerners, who were neither abolitionists nor even necessarily convinced that slavery was a moral evil, that their criticisms of the slave South were wrong. Judging from what he said, what sort of negative views about the South did these people hold?
2. Were Hundley’s arguments likely to change northern minds? Explain your answer.



Go to the website at www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e for additional primary sources on this period.

Violence, Honor, and Dueling in the Old South

Throughout the colonial and antebellum periods, violence deeply colored the daily lives of white southerners. In the 1760s, a minister described backcountry Virginians “biting one anothers Lips and Noses off, and gowging one another—that is, thrusting out anothers Eyes, and kicking one another on the Cods [genitals], to the Great damage of many a Poor Woman.” In the 1840s, a New York newspaper described a fight between two raftsmen on the Mississippi that started when one accidentally bumped the other into shallow water. When it was over, one raftsman was dead. The other gloated, “I can lick a steamboat. My fingernails is related to a sawmill on my mother’s side . . . and the brass buttons on my coat have all been boiled in poison.”

Gouging out eyes became a specialty of sorts among poor whites. On one occasion, a South Carolina judge entered his court to find a plaintiff, a juror, and two witnesses all missing one eye. Stories of eye gouging and ear biting lost nothing in the telling and became part of the folklore of the Old South. Mike Fink, a legendary southern fighter and hunter, boasted that he was so mean that, in infancy, he refused his mother’s milk and cried out for a bottle of whiskey. Yet beneath the folklore lay the reality of violence that gave the South a murder rate as much as ten times higher than that of the North.

At the root of most violence in the white South lay intensified feelings of personal pride that reflected the inescapable presence of slaves. Every day of their lives, white southerners saw slaves degraded, insulted, and powerless to resist. This experience had a searing impact on whites, for it encouraged them to react violently to even trivial insults to demonstrate that they had nothing in common with the slaves.

Among gentlemen, this exaggerated pride took the form of a distinctive **southern code of honor**, with honor defined as an extraordinary sensitivity to one’s reputation, a belief that one’s self-esteem depends on the judgment of others. In the antebellum North, moralists celebrated a rival ideal, character—the quality that enabled an individual to behave in a steady fashion regardless of how others acted toward him or her. A person possessed of character acted out of the prompting of conscience. In contrast, in the honor culture of the Old South, the slightest insult, as long as it was perceived as intentional, could become the basis for a duel.

Formalized by British and French officers during the Revolutionary War, dueling gained a secure niche in the Old South as a means by which gentlemen dealt with affronts to their honor. To outsiders, the incidents that sparked duels seemed trivial: a casual remark accidentally overheard, a harmless brushing against someone at a public event, even a hostile glance. Yet dueling did not necessarily terminate in violence. Gentlemen viewed dueling as a refined alternative to the random violence of lower-class life. The code of dueling did not dictate that the insulted party leap at his antagonist’s throat or draw his pistol at the perceived moment of insult. Rather, he was to remain cool, bide his time, settle on a choice of weapons, and agree to a meeting place. In the interval, negotiations between friends of the parties sought to clear up the “misunderstanding” that had evoked the challenge. In this way, most confrontations ended peaceably rather than on the field of honor at dawn.

Although dueling was as much a way of settling disputes peaceably as of ending them violently, the ritual could easily terminate in a death or maiming. Dueling did not allow the resolution of grievances by the courts, a form of redress that would have guaranteed a peaceful outcome. As a way of settling personal disputes that involved honor, recourse to the law struck many southerners as cowardly and shameless. Andrew Jackson’s mother told the future president, “The law affords no remedy that can satisfy the feelings of a true man.”

In addition, dueling rested on the assumption that a gentleman could recognize another gentleman and hence would know when to respond to a challenge. Nothing in the code of dueling compelled a gentleman to duel someone beneath his status because such a person’s opinion of a gentleman hardly mattered. An insolent porter who insulted a gentleman might get a whipping but did not merit a challenge to a duel. Yet it was often difficult to determine who was a gentleman. The Old South teemed with pretentious would-be gentlemen. A clerk in a country store in Arkansas in the 1850s found it remarkable that ordinary farmers who hung around the store talked of their honor and that the store’s proprietor, a German Jew, kept a dueling pistol.

A minister described backcountry Virginians “biting one anothers Lips and Noses off, and gowging . . . out anothers Eyes, and kicking one another on the Cods [genitals].”



Beyond America

GLOBAL INTERACTIONS

Slavery as a Global Institution



Defenders of slavery in the Old South, who often pointed to the antiquity and universality of slavery as justifications for keeping what northerners called the “peculiar institution,” were right about one thing: slavery was ancient in origin and as late as 1800 it was a global institution, stretching from China and Japan to the Americas. Set within a broad historical context, slavery ranks among the most widespread institutions in history. Few groups today have ancestors who at one time or another were not slaves.

All of the great civilizations in history had sanctioned slavery, and so had the major religions. Slaves built the magnificent stone monuments of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. According to the Hebrew Bible, the Lord told Moses on Mount Sinai that the Hebrews could hold slaves as long as they bought them from other nations. In the New Testament, St. Paul commanded slaves to obey their masters. The early Christians viewed enslavement as a just punishment for sin. Slavery persisted in Europe after the collapse of the Roman empire, though on a smaller scale. The bubonic plague that killed about one-third of the population of Europe in the 1340s intensified European demand for slaves. Because the popes of the Catholic church condemned taking Christians as slaves, slave traders increasingly sought slaves from the non-Christian people of Russia and eastern Europe.

No less than Judaism and Christianity, Islam sanctioned slavery. The prophet Muhammad described an idealized master-slave relationship as the basis of social order. Although Muslims were forbidden to enslave Christians and Jews (Christians thought nothing of enslaving Muslims), nonmonotheists were fair game. In the centuries of Islamic expansion following Muhammad’s death in 632, Muslim warriors surged across the Arabian peninsula, into the Persian and Byzantine empires, into east Africa, across North Africa and the Mediterranean, and into France, taking slaves from the peoples conquered. In the ninth century, Muslims transported African slaves to Basra in southern Iraq to prepare wetlands for agriculture. From the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries, the Muslim rulers of Asia Minor and Egypt



OTTOMAN DEVSHIRME, SIXTEENTH CENTURY To supply their empire with soldiers and administrators the Ottoman Turks developed a system of recruitment called *devshirme*, which bore many characteristics of slavery. Boys were chosen, here by a Janissary officer, from the sultan’s Christian subjects, primarily in the Balkans. Once converted to Islam, these youths were sent to Istanbul for training. (Bridgeman Art Library Ltd.)

brought slaves from the Balkans and the Caucasus to serve them.

After Muslims captured Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1453, they diverted the flow of slaves from east Europe exclusively to Muslim rulers. Christian rulers turned to sub-Saharan Africa for slaves. European traders did not have to conquer Africa to take slaves, for Africans routinely enslaved

other Africans, usually captives taken in war, and sold them to the traders.

The maritime expansion of Portugal and Spain from 1450 to 1660 led to their settling African slaves first on islands in the Atlantic and then in the Caribbean, northeast Brazil, Mexico, and the Andes. The Portuguese also carried slaves to Asia during this period. In the century and a half after 1660, British, Dutch, French, and Brazilian merchants supplanted the Portuguese and the Spanish as the major players in the slave trade. The French carried slaves from Mozambique in Africa to islands in the Indian Ocean; the Dutch settled slaves in what is now Indonesia and in South Africa; and the British used slaves as labor in their valuable sugar colonies in the West Indies and began to ship a significant number of slaves to North America (see Chapter 2, Technology and Culture).

Slavery always involved the ownership of one person by another, and in all societies enslavement carried a taint. No one would make a free choice to become a slave. But slavery was not the same everywhere. Slavery in the Americas typically involved back-breaking labor on the sugar plantations of Barbados and Jamaica or in the cotton fields of the Lower South. In contrast, before the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries slaves had played only a limited role in agriculture. For example, the Romans employed slaves as domestic servants, gladiators, teachers, doctors, pharmacists, and administrators. Muslims turned captured boys and young men into slave soldiers, called Mamluks. Mamluks first appeared in Egypt in the ninth century; in the thirteenth century Mamluk officers assassinated the claimant to the Egyptian throne and became the effective rulers of Egypt until the sixteenth century. The crack infantry of the Muslim Ottoman empire, which was founded around 1300 in Asia Minor and which controlled most of southeast Europe by 1520, consisted of military slaves called “janissaries.” Sub-Saharan African societies put slaves to work as domestics, soldiers, and officials. Africans also valued slaves as wives and children. By increasing the extent and influence of an African man’s lineage, the offspring of slave mothers, although never fully escaping the taint of their slave origins, merged into local tribes and clans and added to the status of their father.

Gaining freedom was also a real possibility in most societies. In ancient Rome, the manumission of slaves was a frequent occurrence. A Roman who freed his slaves, who likely would then become loyal retainers of their former master, would earn the slaves’ lasting gratitude without blemishing his own social status. In addition, both Christianity and Islam encouraged the emancipation of converted slaves. Islam required slaveholders to make efforts to convert their slaves, and conversion very often led to freedom. Under Islam, concubinage also provided a route to freedom. Although a Muslim was allowed only four wives, there was no limit on the number of concubines (slave mistresses) he could acquire. A concubine who bore her master’s children rose in status and had to be freed upon her master’s death. By the mid-fourteenth century, Ottoman rulers had come to prefer concubinage over legal marriage, partly to avoid the political alliances that accompanied the latter. A sultan’s concubine became a member of the royal family when she bore him a child. If her son ascended to the throne, she became the queen mother.

By these measures, slavery in the Americas, including the Old South, was extremely harsh, a fact that explains the greater frequency of slave rebellions in the New World than elsewhere. The vast majority of slaves in the Americas worked under disagreeable conditions as members of a despised race.

By 1700, it had become an established legal principle in the American South that conversion to Christianity was no basis for emancipation, and by 1860 manumissions had become rare. Southern defenders of slavery were correct in stating that slavery was an ancient institution and sanctioned by many world religions. But the form of slavery they were defending differed from the type of slavery that had prevailed throughout much of history.

QUESTION FOR ANALYSIS

- In what basic ways did slavery in the New World differ from slavery in Europe, Africa, and the Islamic world?

The Southern Evangelicals and White Values

With its emphasis on the personal redress of grievances and its inclination toward violence, the ideal of honor potentially conflicted with the values preached by the southern evangelical churches, notably the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. These evangelical denominations were on the rise even before the Great Kentucky Revival of 1800–1801 (see Chapter 10) and continued to grow in the wake of the revival. For example, the Methodists grew from forty-eight thousand southern members in 1801 to eighty thousand by 1807. All of the evangelical denominations stressed humility and self-restraint, virtues sharply contrasting with the entire culture of show and display that buttressed the extravagance and violence of the Old South.

Evangelical values were changing by the 1830s. Methodists and Baptists increasingly attracted well-to-do converts, and they began to open colleges such as Randolph Macon (Methodist, 1830), and Wake Forest (Baptist, 1830). As evangelicals became more respectable, they no longer allowed white women to exhort in churches. They encouraged urban blacks to form their own churches rather than to exhort in racially mixed churches. With these developments, some members of the gentry embraced evangelical virtues. By the 1860s, the South contained many Christian gentlemen like the Bible-quoting Presbyterian general Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, fierce in a righteous war but a sworn opponent of strong drink, the gaming table, and the duel.

Life Under Slavery

As they fashioned the proslavery argument, southern clergymen emphasized the Christian responsibility of masters toward their slaves. “Give your servants that which is just and equal,” a Baptist minister advised in 1854, “knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.” Some masters were benevolent, and many more liked to think they were benevolent. But masters bought slaves to make a profit on their labor, not to practice charity toward them. Kind masters might complain about cruel overseers, but the masters hired and paid the overseers to get as much work as possible out of blacks. When the master of one plantation chastised his overseer for “barbarity,” the latter replied, “Do you not remember what you told me the time you employed me that [if] I failed to make you good crops I would have

to leave?” Indeed, kindness was a double-edged sword, for the benevolent master came to expect grateful affection from his slaves and then interpreted that affection as loyalty to the institution of slavery. In fact, blacks felt little, if any, loyalty to slavery. When northern troops descended upon plantations during the Civil War, masters were dismayed to find many of their most trusted slaves deserting to Union lines.

The kindness or cruelty of masters was important, but three other factors primarily determined slaves’ experience: the kind of agriculture in which they worked, whether they resided in rural or urban areas, and what century they lived in. The experiences of slaves working on cotton plantations in the 1830s differed drastically from those of slaves in 1700, for reasons unrelated to the kindness or brutality of masters.

The Maturing of the Plantation System

Slavery changed significantly between 1700 and 1830. In 1700, the typical slave was a young man in his twenties who had recently arrived aboard a slave ship from Africa or the Caribbean and worked in the company of other recent arrivals on isolated small farms. Drawn from different African regions and cultures, few such slaves spoke the same language. Because slave ships contained twice as many men as women, and because slaves were widely scattered, blacks had difficulty finding partners and creating a semblance of family life. Furthermore, as a result of severe malnutrition, black women who had been brought to North America on slave ships bore relatively few children. Without importation, the number of slaves in North America would have declined between 1710 and 1730.

In contrast, by 1830 the typical North American slave was as likely to be female as male, had been born in America, spoke English, and worked in the company of numerous other slaves on a plantation. The key to the change lay in the rise of plantation agriculture in the Chesapeake and South Carolina during the eighteenth century. Plantation slaves had an easier time finding mates than those on the remote farms of the early 1700s. As the ratio between slave men and women fell into balance, marriages occurred with increasing frequency between slaves on the same or nearby plantations. The native-born slave population rose after 1730 and soared after 1750. Importation of African slaves gradually declined after 1760, and in 1808 Congress banned it.



THE LAND OF THE FREE AND THE HOME OF THE BRAVE, BY HENRY BYAM MARTIN, 1833 White southerners could not escape the fact that much of the Western world loathed their “peculiar institution.” In 1833, when a Canadian sketched this Charleston slave auction, Britain was about to abolish slavery in the West Indies. (*National Archives of Canada*)

Work and Discipline of Plantation Slaves

In 1850, the typical slave worked on a large farm or plantation with at least ten fellow bond servants. Almost three-quarters of all slaves that year were owned by masters with ten or more slaves, and slightly over one-half lived in units of twenty or more slaves. In smaller units, slaves usually worked under the **task system**. Each slave had a daily or weekly quota of tasks to complete. On large cotton and sugar plantations, slaves would occasionally work under the task system, but more closely supervised and regimented **gang labor** prevailed.

The day of antebellum plantation slaves usually began an hour before sunrise with the sounding of a horn or bell. After a sparse breakfast, slaves marched to the fields. A traveler in Mississippi described a procession of slaves on their way to work. “First came, led by an old driver carrying a whip, forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of bluish check stuff, the skirts reaching little below the knee; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing.” Then came the plow hands, “thirty strong, mostly men,

but few of them women. . . . A lean and vigilant white overseer, on a brisk pony, brought up the rear.”

As this account indicates, slave men and women worked side by side in the fields. Female slaves who did not labor in the fields toiled at other tasks. A former slave, John Curry, described how his mother milked cows, cared for the children whose mothers worked in the fields, cooked for field hands, did the ironing and washing for her master’s household, and took care of her own seven children. Plantations never lacked tasks for slaves of either gender. As former slave Solomon Northup noted, “ploughing, planting, picking cotton, gathering the corn, and pulling and burning stalks, occupies the whole of the four seasons of the year. Drawing and cutting wood, pressing cotton, fattening and killing hogs, are but incidental labors.”

Regardless of the season, the slave’s day stretched from dawn to dusk. Touring the South in the 1850s, Frederick Law

“First came, led by an old driver carrying a whip, forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; . . . they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing.”



BLACK WOMEN AND MEN ON A TREK HOME, SOUTH CAROLINA Much like northern factories, large plantations made it possible to impose discipline and order on their work force. Here black women loaded down with cotton join their men on the march home after a day in the fields. (© *Collection of the New-York Historical Society*)

Olmsted prided himself on rising early and riding late but added, “I always found the negroes in the field when I first looked out, and generally had to wait for the negroes to come from the field to have my horse fed when I stopped for the night.” When darkness made fieldwork impossible, slaves transported cotton bales to the gin house, gathered up wood for supper fires, and fed the mules. When the day’s labor finally ended, they slept in log cabins on wooden planks.

Although virtually all antebellum Americans worked long hours, no others experienced the same combination of long hours and harsh discipline that slave field hands endured. Northern factory workers did not have to put up with drivers who,

like one described by Olmsted, walked among the slaves with a whip, “which he often cracked at them, sometimes allowing the lash to fall lightly upon their shoulders.” The lash did not always fall lightly. The annals of American slavery contain stories of repulsive brutality. Drivers sometimes forced pregnant slave women to lie in depressions in the ground while enduring the whip on their backs, a practice that supposedly protected the fetus while abusing the mother.

The disciplining and punishment of slaves were often left to white overseers and black drivers rather than to masters. “Dat was de meanest devil dat ever lived on the Lord’s green earth,” a former Mississippi slave said of his driver. The barbaric

discipline meted out by their subordinates twinged the conscience of many masters, but most justified it as their Christian duty to ensure the slaves' proper "submissiveness." The black abolitionist **Frederick Douglass**, once a slave, recalled that his worst master had been converted at a Methodist camp meeting. "If religion had any effect on his character at all," Douglass related, "it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways."

Despite the relentless, often vicious discipline, some slaves advanced—not to freedom but to semiskilled or skilled indoor work. Some became blacksmiths, carpenters, or gin operators, and others served as cooks, butlers, and dining room attendants. These house slaves became legendary for their arrogant disdain of field hands and poor whites. The legend often distorted the reality, for house slaves were as subject to discipline as field slaves. "I liked the field work better than I did the house work," a female slave recalled. "We could talk and do anything we wanted to, just so we picked the cotton." Such sentiments were typical, but skilled slave artisans and house servants were greatly valued and treated accordingly; they occupied higher rungs than field hands on the social ladder of slavery.

The Slave Family

Masters thought of slaves as naturally promiscuous and flattered themselves into thinking that they alone held slave marriages together. Slaveowners had powerful incentives to encourage slave marriages: to bring new slaves into the world and to discourage slaves from running away. Some masters baked wedding cakes for slaves and even arbitrated marital disputes. Still, the keenest challenge to the slave family came not from the slaves themselves but from slavery. The law did not recognize or protect slave families. Although some slaveholders were reluctant to break slave marriages by sale, economic hardships might force their hand. The reality, one historian has calculated, was that in a lifetime, on average, a slave would witness the sale of eleven family members.

Naturally, the commonplace buying and selling severely disrupted slaves' attempts to create a stable family life. Poignant testimony to the effects of sale on slave families, and to the desire of slaves to remain near their families, was provided by an advertisement for a runaway in North Carolina in 1851. The advertisement described the fugitive as presumed to be "lurking in the neighborhood of E.D. Walker's, at Moore's Creek, who owns most of his relatives, or Nathan Bonham's who owns his mother; or, perhaps, near Fletcher Bell's, at

Long Creek, who owns his father." Small wonder that a slave preacher pronounced a slave couple married "until death or *distance* do you part."

Aside from disruption by sale, slave families experienced separations and degradations from other sources. The marriage of a slave woman gave her no protection against the

sexual demands of a master nor, indeed, of any white. The slave children of white masters became targets of the wrath of white mistresses at times. Sarah Wilson, the daughter of a slave and her white master, remembered that as a child, she was "picked on" by her mistress until the master ordered his wife to let Sarah alone because she "got big, big blood in her." Slave women who worked in the fields were usually separated from their children by day; young sons and daughters often were cared for by the aged or by the mothers of other children. When slave women took husbands from nearby (rather than their own) plantations, the children usually stayed with the mother. Hannah Chapman remembered that her father tried to visit his family under cover of darkness "because he missed us and us longed for him." But if his master found him, "us would track him the nex' day by de blood stains."

Despite enormous obstacles, the relationships within slave families often were intimate and, where possible, long-lasting. In the absence of legal protection, slaves developed their own standards of family morality. A southern white woman observed that slaves "did not consider it wrong for a girl to have a child before she married, but afterwards were extremely severe upon anything like infidelity on her part." When given the opportunity, slaves sought to solemnize their marriages before clergymen. White clergymen who accompanied the Union army into Mississippi and Louisiana in the closing years of the Civil War conducted thousands of marriage rites for slaves who had long viewed themselves as married and desired a formal ceremony and registration.

On balance, slave families differed profoundly from white families. Even on large plantations where roughly equal numbers of black men and women made marriage a theoretical possibility, planters, including George Washington, often divided their holdings into several dispersed farms and distributed their slaves among them without regard to marriage ties. Conditions on small farms and new

Hannah Chapman's father tried to visit his family under cover of darkness "because he missed us and us longed for him." But if his master found him, "us would track him the nex' day by de blood stains."

plantations discouraged the formation of families, and everywhere spouses were vulnerable to being sold as payment for the master's debts. Slave adults were more likely than whites never to marry or to marry late, and slave children were more likely to live with a single parent (usually the mother) or with neither parent.

In white families, the parent-child bond overrode all others; slaves, in contrast, emphasized ties between children and their grandparents, uncles, and aunts as well as their parents. Such broad kinship ties marked the West African cultures from which many slaves had originally been brought to America, and they were reinforced by the separations between children and one or both parents that routinely occurred under slavery. Frederick Douglass never knew his father and saw his mother infrequently, but he vividly remembered his grandmother, "a good nurse, and a capital hand at making nets for catching shad and herring."

In addition, slaves often created "fictive" kin networks; in the absence of uncles and aunts, they simply called friends their uncles, aunts, brothers, or sisters. In effect, slaves invested non-kin relations with symbolic kin functions. In this way, they helped protect themselves against the involuntary disruption of family ties by forced sale and established a broader community of obligation. When plantation slaves greeted each other as "brudder," they were not making a statement about actual kinship but about kindred obligations they felt for each other. Apologists for slavery liked to argue that a "community of interests" bound masters and slaves together. In truth, the real community of interests was the one that slaves developed among themselves to survive.

The Longevity, Diet, and Health of Slaves

Of the 10 to 12 million Africans imported to the New World between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, only some 550,000 (about 5 percent) had come to North America, whereas 3.5 million (nearly 33 percent) had been taken to Brazil. Yet by 1825, 36 percent of all slaves in the Western Hemisphere lived in the United States, and only 31 percent in Brazil. The reason for this difference is that slaves in the United States reproduced faster and lived longer than those in Brazil and elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere.

Several factors account for this difference. First, the gender ratio among slaves equalized more rapidly in North America, encouraging earlier

and longer marriages and more children. Second, because growing corn and raising livestock were compatible with cotton cultivation, the Old South produced plenty of food. The normal ration for a slave was a peck of cornmeal and three to four pounds of fatty pork a week. Slaves often supplemented this nutritionally unbalanced diet with vegetables grown in small plots that masters allowed them to farm and with fish and game. In the barren winter months, slaves ate less than in the summer; in this respect, however, they did not differ much from most whites.

As for disease, slaves had greater immunities to both malaria and yellow fever than did whites, but they suffered more from cholera, dysentery, and diarrhea. In the absence of privies, slaves usually relieved themselves behind bushes; urine and feces washed into the sources of drinking water and caused many diseases. Yet slaves developed some remedies that, though commonly ridiculed by whites, were effective against stomach ailments. For example, slaves ate white clay to relieve dysentery and diarrhea; we know now that kaolin, an ingredient of white clay, is a remedy for these ailments.

Although slave remedies often were more effective than those of white physicians, slaves experienced higher mortality rates than whites. The very young suffered most; infant mortality among slaves was double that of whites, and one in three African American children died before the age of ten. Plantations in the disease-ridden lowlands had the worst mortality rates, but overworked field hands often miscarried or gave birth to weakened infants even in healthier regions. Masters allowed pregnant women to rest, but rarely enough. "Labor is conducive to health," a Mississippi planter told a northern journalist; "a healthy woman will rear [the] most children."

Away from the Plantation: Slaves in Town and Free Blacks

Greater freedom from supervision and greater opportunities awaited slaves who worked off plantations and farms. In towns and cities slaves were in steady demand to drive wagons, to work as stevedores on the docks, to man river barges, and to toil in mining and lumbering. In 1860, lumbering employed sixteen thousand workers, most of them slaves who cut trees, hauled them to sawmills, and fashioned them into useful lumber. In sawmills, black engineers fired and fixed the steam engines that provided power. In iron-ore ranges and ironworks, slaves not only served as laborers but occasionally supervised less-skilled

white workers. Black women and children constituted the main labor force in the South's fledgling textile mills.

Slave or free, blacks found it easier to pursue skilled occupations in southern cities than in northern ones, partly because southern cities attracted few immigrants to compete for work, and partly because the profitability of southern cash crops long had pulled white laborers out of towns and cities, and left behind opportunities for blacks, slave or free, to acquire craft skills. Slaves who worked in factories, mining, or lumbering usually were hired from their owners rather than owned by their employers. If working conditions threatened to harm their slaves, masters would refuse to provide employers with more. Consequently, working conditions for slaves off plantations usually stayed at a tolerable level. Watching workers load cotton onto a steamboat, Frederick Law Olmsted was amazed to see slaves sent to the top of the bank to roll the bales down to Irishmen who stowed them on the ship. Asking the reason for this arrangement, Olmsted was told, "The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies [Irish] are knocked overboard, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything."

Even more likely than southern blacks in general to live in cities were **free blacks**. In 1860, one-third of the free blacks in the Upper South and more than half in the Lower South were urban. The relatively specialized economies of the cities provided free people of color with opportunities to become carpenters, barrel makers, barbers, and even small traders. A visitor to an antebellum southern market would find that most of the meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit had been prepared for sale by free blacks. Urban free blacks formed their own fraternal orders and churches; a church run by free blacks often was the largest house of worship in a southern city. In New Orleans, free blacks had their own literary journals and opera. In Natchez, a free black barber, William Tiler Johnson, invested the profits of his shop in real estate, acquired stores that he rented out, purchased slaves and a plantation, and even hired a white overseer.

"The niggers are worth too much to be risked here; if the Paddies [Irish] are knocked overboard, or get their backs broke, nobody loses anything."



A BARBER'S SHOP AT RICHMOND, VIRGINIA, 1861 Free blacks dominated the barber's trade in Richmond on the eve of the Civil War. As meeting places for men, barber shops supplied newspapers and political discussion. Black barbers were politically informed and prosperous. As was the custom at the time, barbers also performed medical procedures like drawing blood. (Valentine Museum, Cook Collection)

As Johnson's career suggests, some free blacks were highly successful. But free blacks were always vulnerable in southern society and became more so as the antebellum period wore on. Until 1820, masters with doubts about the rightness of slavery frequently manumitted (freed) their black mistresses and mulatto children, and some freed their entire work forces. After 1810, however, fewer and fewer southern whites set slaves free. Although free blacks continued to increase in absolute numbers (a little more than a quarter-million free people of color dwelled in the South in 1860), the rate of growth of the free-black population slowed radically. In the wake of the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831, laws restricting the liberties of free blacks were tightened. During the mid-1830s, for example, most southern states made it a felony to teach blacks to read and write. Every southern state forbade free blacks to enter, and in 1859 Arkansas ordered all free blacks to leave.

So although a free-black culture flowered in cities like New Orleans and Natchez, that culture did not reflect the conditions under which most free blacks lived. Free blacks were tolerated in New Orleans, in part because there were not too many of them. A much higher percentage of blacks were free in the Upper South than in the Lower South. Furthermore, although a disproportionate number of free blacks lived in cities, the majority lived in rural areas, where whites lumped them together with slaves. Even a successful free black like William Tiler Johnson could never dine or drink with whites. When Johnson attended the theater, he sat in the colored gallery.

The position of free blacks in the Old South held many contradictions. So did their minds. As the offspring, or the descendants of offspring, of mixed liaisons, a disproportionate number of free blacks had light brown skin. Some of them were as color-conscious as whites and looked down on "darky" field hands and coal-black laborers. Yet as whites' discrimination against free people of color intensified during the late antebellum period, many free blacks realized that whatever future they had was as blacks, not as whites. Feelings of racial solidarity increased in the 1850s, and after the Civil War, the leaders of the freed slaves were usually blacks who had been free before the war.

Slave Resistance

Ever-present fears of slave insurrections haunted the Old South. In the delta areas of the Lower South where blacks outnumbered whites, slaves

experienced continuous forced labor on plantations and communicated their bitterness to each other in the slave quarters. Free blacks in the cities could have provided leadership for rebellions. Rumors of slave conspiracies flew around the southern white community, and all whites shuddered at the memory of the massive black insurrection that had destroyed French rule in Saint Domingue in the 1790s.

Yet Nat Turner's 1831 insurrection in Virginia was the only slave rebellion that resulted in the deaths of whites. A larger but more obscure uprising occurred in Louisiana in 1811 when some two hundred slaves sought to march on New Orleans. Other, better known, slave insurrections were merely conspiracies that never materialized. In 1800, Virginia slave Gabriel Prosser's planned uprising was betrayed by other slaves, and Gabriel and his followers were executed. That same year, a South Carolina slave, **Denmark Vesey**, won fifteen hundred dollars in a lottery and bought his freedom. Purchasing a carpentry shop in Charleston and becoming a preacher at that city's African Methodist Episcopal Church, Vesey built a cadre of black followers, including a slave of the governor of South Carolina and a black conjurer named Gullah Jack. In 1822, they devised a plan to attack Charleston and seize all the city's arms and ammunition, but other slaves informed authorities, and the conspirators were executed.

For several reasons, the Old South experienced far fewer rebellions than the Caribbean region or South America. Although slaves formed a majority in South Carolina and a few other states, they did not constitute a large majority in any state. In contrast to the Caribbean, an area of absentee landlords and sparse white population, the white presence in the Old South was formidable, and the whites had all the guns and soldiers. The rumors of slave conspiracies that periodically swept the white South demonstrated to blacks the promptness with which whites could muster forces and mount slave patrols. The development of family ties among slaves made them reluctant to risk death and leave their children parentless. Finally, blacks who ran away or plotted rebellions had no allies. By the 1820s, southern Indians routinely captured runaway slaves and exchanged them for rewards; some Indians even owned slaves.

Short of rebellion, slaves could try to escape to freedom in the North. Perhaps the most ingenious, Henry Brown, induced a friend to ship him from Richmond to Philadelphia in a box and won



FUGITIVES IN FLIGHT, BY ROMAN THOMAS NOBLE Growing up in Kentucky, artist Thomas Noble was probably familiar with scenes of slaves fleeing across the Ohio River to freedom. Although he served in the Confederate army during the Civil War, Noble began to paint antislavery themes after the war. (Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, SC Museum purchase with funds from the 1994 Museum Antiques Show and the Arthur and Holly Magill Purchase Fund)

immediate fame as “Box” Brown. Some light mulattos passed as whites on the journey north. More often, fugitive slaves borrowed, stole, or forged passes from plantations or obtained papers describing themselves as free. Frederick Douglass borrowed a sailor’s papers in making his escape from Baltimore to New York City in 1838. Some former slaves, among them **Harriet Tubman** and Josiah Henson, made repeated trips back to the South to help other slaves escape. These sundry methods of escape fed the legend of the “**Underground Railroad**,” supposedly an organized network of safe houses owned by white abolitionists who spirited

blacks to freedom in the North and Canada. In reality, fugitive slaves owed little to abolitionists. Some white sympathizers in border states offered refuge, but these houses were better known to watchful slave catchers than to most blacks.

Escape to freedom was a dream rather than an alternative for most blacks. Out of millions of slaves, probably fewer than a thousand escaped to the North. Often, slaves ran away from masters not to escape to freedom but to visit spouses or avoid punishment. Most runaways remained in the South; some sought only to return to kinder former masters. During the eighteenth century,

African slaves had often run away in groups to the interior and sought to create self-sufficient colonies or villages of the sort they had known in Africa. But by the time the United States acquired Florida, long a haven for runaways, few uninhabited places remained in the South to which slaves could flee.

Despite poor prospects for permanent escape, slaves could disappear for prolonged periods into the free-black communities of southern cities. Slaves enjoyed a fair degree of practical freedom to drive wagons to market and to come and go when they were off plantations. Slaves who were hired out or sent to a city might overstay their leave and even pass themselves off as free. This kind of practical freedom did not change slavery's underlying oppressiveness, but it did give slaves a sense of having certain rights, and it helped deflect slave resistance into forms that were essentially furtive rather than open and violent. Theft was so common that planters learned to keep their tools, smokehouses, closets, and trunks under lock and key. Overworked field hands might leave valuable tools out to rust, or feign illness, or simply refuse to work. As an institution, slavery was vulnerable to such tactics; unlike free laborers, slaves could not be fired for negligence or malingering. Frederick Law Olmsted found slaveholders in the 1850s afraid to inflict punishment on slaves "lest the slave should abscond, or take a sulky fit and not work, or poison some of the family, or set fire to the dwelling, or have recourse to any other mode of avenging himself."

Olmsted's reference to arson and poisoning reminds us that not all furtive resistance was peaceful. Arson and poisoning, both common in African culture as forms of vengeance, were widespread in the Old South, and the fear of each was even more so. Masters afflicted by dysentery and similar ailments never knew for sure that they had not been poisoned.

Arson, poisoning, work stoppages, and negligence were alternatives to violent rebellion. Yet these furtive forms of resistance differed from rebellion. The goal of rebellion was freedom from slavery. The goal of furtive resistance was to make slavery bearable. The kind of resistance slaves usually practiced sought to establish customs and rules that would govern the conduct of masters as well as that of slaves without challenging the institution of slavery as such.

Most slaves would have preferred freedom but settled for less. "White folks do as they please," an ex-slave said, "and the darkies do as they can."

"White folks do as they please, and the darkies do as they can."

The Emergence of African-American Culture

A distinctive culture emerged among blacks in the slave quarters of antebellum plantations. This culture drew on both African and American sources, but it was more than a mixture of the two. Enslaved blacks gave a distinctive twist to the American as well as African components of their culture.

The Language of Slaves

Before slaves could develop a common culture, they needed a common language. During the colonial period, African-born slaves, speaking a variety of languages, had developed a "pidgin"—that is, a language with no native speakers but in which people with different native languages can communicate. Many African-born slaves spoke English pidgin poorly, but their American-born descendants used it as their primary language.

Like all pidgins, English pidgin was a simplified language. Slaves usually dropped the verb *to be* (which had no equivalent in African tongues) and either ignored or confused genders. Instead of saying "Mary is in the cabin," they said, "Mary, he in cabin." To negate, they substituted *no* for *not*, saying, "He no wicked." Pidgin English contained several African words. Some, like *banjo*, became part of standard English; others, like *goober* (peanut), became part of southern white slang. Although many whites ridiculed pidgin and black house servants struggled to speak standard English, pidgin proved indispensable for communication among slaves.

African-American Religion

Religion played an equally important part in forging African-American culture. The majority of slaves transported from Africa worshiped in one of many native African religions. Most of these religions drew little distinction between the spiritual and material worlds—storms, illnesses, and earthquakes were all assumed to stem from supernatural forces. But Africans differed from each other in their specific beliefs, and the majority of slaves brought to America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were young men who may not have absorbed much of this religious heritage before their enslavement.

For these reasons, African religions did not unify blacks in America. Yet remnants of African religion remained, in part because whites undertook

few efforts before the 1790s to convert slaves to Christianity. Dimly remembered African beliefs such as the reverence for water may have predisposed slaves to accept Christianity when they were finally urged to do so, because water has a symbolic significance for Christians, too, in the sacrament of baptism. The Christianity preached to slaves by Methodist and Baptist revivalists during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moreover, resembled African religions in that it also drew few distinctions between the sacred and the secular. Just as Africans believed that a crop-destroying drought or a plague resulted from supernatural forces, the early revivalists knew in their hearts that every drunkard who fell off his horse and every Sabbath-breaker struck by lightning had experienced a deliberate and direct punishment from God.

By the 1790s, blacks formed about a quarter of the membership of the Methodist and Baptist denominations. That converted slaves played major roles in the slave rebellions led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner actually stimulated Protestant missionaries to intensify their efforts to convert slaves. Missionaries pointed to the self-taught Turner to prove that slaves would hear about Christianity in any event and that organized efforts to convert blacks were the only way to ensure that slaves learned correct versions of Christianity, which emphasized obedience rather than insurgence. Georgia missionary and slaveholder Charles Colcock Jones reassuringly told white planters of the venerable black preacher who, upon receiving some abolitionist tracts in the mail, promptly turned them over to the white authorities for destruction. A Christian slave, the argument ran, would be a better slave. For whites, the clincher was the split of the Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians into northern and southern wings by the mid-1840s. Now, they argued, it had finally become safe to convert slaves, for the churches had rid themselves of their antislavery wings. Between 1845 and 1860, the number of black Baptists doubled.

The experiences of Christianized blacks in the Old South illustrate the contradictions of life under slavery. Urban blacks often had their own churches, but in the rural South, slaves worshiped in the same churches as whites. Although the slaves sat in segregated sections, they heard the same sermons and sang the same hymns as whites. Some black preachers actually developed followings among whites, and Christian masters were sometimes rebuked by biracial churches for abusing Christian slaves in the same congregation. The churches were, in fact,

the most interracial institutions in the Old South. Yet none of this meant that Christianity was an acceptable route to black liberation. Ministers went out of their way to remind slaves that spiritual equality was not the same as civil equality. The effort to convert slaves gained momentum only to the extent that it was certain that Christianity would not change the basic inequality of southern society.

Although they listened to the same sermons as whites, slaves did not necessarily draw the same conclusions. It was impossible to Christianize the slaves without telling them about the Chosen People, the ancient Jews whom Moses led from captivity in

“Gwine to write to Massa
Jesus, / To send some
Valiant Soldier / To turn back
Pharaoh’s army, / Hallelu!”



MARY EDMONIA LEWIS Named Wildfire by her Chippewa mother and black father, Mary Edmonia Lewis adopted a Christian name upon entering Oberlin College. Later she studied sculpture in Boston and Rome. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY)



FOREVER FREE SCULPTURE BY MARY EDMONIA LEWIS Mary Edmonia Lewis's *Forever Free* (1867) commemorated the abolition of slavery. (Howard University Museum Archives, Washington, D.C.)

Pharaoh's Egypt into the Promised Land of Israel. Inevitably, slaves drew parallels between their own condition and the Jews' captivity. Like the Jews, blacks concluded, they themselves were "de people of de Lord." If they kept the faith, then, like the Jews, they too would reach the Promised Land. The themes of the Chosen People and the Promised Land ran through the sacred songs, or "spirituals," that blacks sang, to the point where Moses and Jesus almost merged:

*Gwine to write to Massa Jesus,
To send some Valiant Soldier
To turn back Pharaoh's army,
Hallelu!*

A listener could interpret a phrase like "the Promised Land" in several ways; it could refer to Israel, to heaven, or to freedom. From the perspective of whites, the only permissible interpretations were Israel and heaven, but some blacks, like Denmark Vesey, thought of freedom as well. The ease with which slaves constructed alternative interpretations of the Bible also reflected that many plantations contained black preachers, slaves trained by white ministers to spread Christianity among blacks. When in the presence of masters or white ministers, these black preachers usually just repeated the familiar biblical command, "Obey your master." Often, however, slaves met for services apart from whites, usually on Sunday evenings but during the week as well. Then the message changed. A black preacher in Texas related how his master would say, "tell them niggers iffen they obeys the master they goes to Heaven." The minister quickly added, "I knowed there's something better for them, but I daren't tell them 'cept on the sly. That I done lots. I tells 'em iffen they keep praying, the Lord will set 'em free."

Some slaves privately interpreted Christianity as a religion of liberation, but most recognized that their prospects for freedom were slight. Generally, Christianity neither turned slaves into revolutionaries nor made them model slaves. It did, however, provide slaves with a view of slavery different from their masters' outlook. Masters argued that slavery was a divinely ordained institution, but Christianity told slaves that it was really an affliction, a terrible and unjust institution that God had allowed to test their faith. For having endured slavery, he would reward blacks. For having created it, he would punish masters.

Black Music and Dance

Compared to the prevailing cultural patterns among elite whites, the culture of blacks in the Old South was extremely expressive. In religious services, blacks shouted "Amen" and let their bodily movements reflect their feelings long after white religious observances, some of which had once been similarly expressive, had grown sober and sedate. Frederick Law Olmsted recorded how, during a slave service in New Orleans during the 1850s, parishioners "in indescribable expression of ecstasy" exclaimed every few moments: "Glory! oh yes! yes!—sweet Lord! sweet Lord!"

Slaves also expressed their feelings in music and dance. Drawing on their African musical heritage, which used hand clapping to mark rhythm, American slaves made rhythmical hand clapping—called patting juba—an indispensable

accompaniment to dancing because southern law forbade them to own “drums, horns, or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and intentions.” Slaves also played an African instrument, the banjo, and beat tin buckets as a substitute for drums. Whatever instrument they played, their music was tied to bodily movement. Sometimes, slaves imitated white dances like the minuet, but in a way that ridiculed the high manners of their masters. More often, they expressed themselves in a dance African in origin, emphasizing shuffling steps and bodily contortions rather than the erect precision of whites’ dances.

Whether at work or at prayer, slaves liked to sing. Work songs describing slave experiences usually consisted of a leader’s chant and a choral response:

*I love old Virginny
So ho! boys! so ho! I love to shuck corn
So ho! boys! so ho!
Now’s picking cotton time
So ho! boys! so ho!*

Masters encouraged such songs, believing that singing induced the slaves to work harder and that the innocent content of most work songs proved the slaves were happy. Recalling his own past, Frederick Douglass came closer to the truth when he observed that “slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.”

Blacks also sang religious songs, later known as **spirituals**. By 1820, blacks at camp meetings had improvised what one white described as “short scraps of disjointed affirmations, pledges, or prayers lengthened out with long repetition choruses.” Whites usually took a dim view of spirituals and tried to make slaves sing traditional hymns instead of the “hallelujah songs of their own composing.” But slaves clung to their spirituals, which promised,

“We will soon be free, when the Lord will call us home,” and they sang,

*In that morning, true believers,
In that morning,
We will sit aside of Jesus
In that morning,
If you should go fore I go,
In that morning,
You will sit aside of Jesus
In that morning,
True believers, where your tickets
In that morning,
Master Jesus got your tickets
In that morning.*



SLAVE HANDICRAFT These two musical instruments, a banjo and a gourd fiddle, were made by slaves in Virginia. (Collection of the Blue Ridge Institute & Museums/Ferrum College)

CHRONOLOGY

1830–1860

| | | | |
|------------------|--|------------------|---|
| 1790s | Methodists and Baptists start to make major strides in converting slaves to Christianity. | 1832 | Virginia legislature narrowly defeats a proposal for gradual emancipation. Virginia's Thomas R. Dew writes an influential defense of slavery. |
| 1793 | Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin. | 1835 | Arkansas admitted to the Union. |
| 1800 | Gabriel Prosser leads a slave rebellion in Virginia. | 1837 | Economic panic begins, lowering cotton prices. |
| 1808 | Congress prohibits external slave trade. | 1844–1845 | Methodist Episcopal and Baptist Churches split into northern and southern wings over slavery. |
| 1812 | Louisiana, the first state formed out of the Louisiana Purchase, is admitted to the Union. | 1845 | Florida and Texas admitted to the Union. |
| 1816–1819 | Boom in cotton prices stimulates settlement of the Old Southwest. | 1849 | Sugar production in Louisiana reaches its peak. |
| 1819–1820 | Missouri Compromise. | 1849–1860 | Period of high cotton prices. |
| 1822 | Denmark Vesey's conspiracy uncovered in South Carolina. | 1857 | Hinton R. Helper, <i>The Impending Crisis of the South</i> . |
| 1831 | William Lloyd Garrison starts <i>The Liberator</i> . Nat Turner rebellion in Virginia. | 1859 | John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. |
| | | 1860 | South Carolina secedes from the Union. |

CONCLUSION

The cotton gin revitalized southern agriculture and spurred a redistribution of the South's population, slave and free, from Virginia and other southeastern states to southwestern states like Alabama and Mississippi. As the Old South became more dependent on cotton, it also became more reliant on slave labor.

Slavery left a deep imprint on social relations among the Old South's major white social groups: the planters, the small slaveholders, the yeomen, and the people of the pine barrens. The presence of slaves fed the exaggerated notions of personal honor that made white southerners so violent. Although there was always potential for conflict between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, slavery gave a distinctive unity to the Old South. Most whites did not own any slaves, but the vast majority concluded that their region's prosperity, their ascendancy over blacks, and perhaps even their safety depended on perpetuating slavery. Slavery also shaped the North's perception of the South. Whether northerners believed that the federal government should tamper with slavery or not, they grew convinced that slavery had cut the South off from progress and had turned it into a region of "sterile lands and bankrupt estates."

In contrast, to most white southerners the North, and especially the industrial Northeast, appeared to be the region that deviated from the march of progress. In their eyes, most Americans—indeed, most people throughout the world—practiced agriculture, and agriculture rendered the South a more comfortable place than factories rendered the North. In reaction to northern assaults on slavery, southerners portrayed the institution as a time-honored and benevolent response to the natural inequality of the black and white races. Southerners pointed to the slaves' adequate nutrition, their embrace of Christianity, the affection of some slaves for their masters, and even their work songs as evidence of their contentment.

These white perceptions of the culture that developed in the slave quarters with the maturing of plantation agriculture were misguided. In reality, few if any slaves accepted slavery. Although slaves rebelled infrequently and had little chance for permanent escape, they often engaged in covert resistance to their bondage. They embraced Christianity, but they understood it differently from whites. Whereas whites heard in the Christian gospel the need to make slaves submissive, slaves learned of the gross injustice of human bondage and the promise of eventual deliverance.

KEY TERMS

| | | |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Nat Turner (p. 337) | pine barrens people (p. 347) | gang labor (p. 355) |
| Upper South (p. 338) | Virginia emancipation | Frederick Douglass (p. 357) |
| Lower (Deep) South (p. 338) | legislation (p. 348) | free blacks (p. 359) |
| Old South (p. 338) | <i>The Impending Crisis of the</i> | Denmark Vesey (p. 360) |
| Cotton Kingdom (p. 338) | <i>South</i> (p. 348) | Harriet Tubman (p. 361) |
| internal slave trade (p. 341) | George Fitzhugh (p. 349) | Underground Railroad (p. 361) |
| Tredegar Iron Works (p. 342) | southern code of honor (p. 351) | spirituals (p. 365) |
| plantation agriculture (p. 344) | task system (p. 355) | |

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- Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (1996). An analysis of the role of the Old South's honor culture in male fighting, gambling, sports, and drinking.
- Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (1997). An intriguing account of southern religious culture.
- Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (1999). An excellent study of the domestic slave trade.
- Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds* (1995). An illuminating and influential account of race, class, and gender relations in the South Carolina low country.
- Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800–1861* (2004). Stresses the compatibility between slavery and modernization in the eyes of southerners.
- Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (2004). Good description of cross-plantation unions among slaves who sought to create a private world.



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