CHAPTER 10

The South and Slavery

1790s–1850s
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he wharfmaster had just opened the public auction of confiscated cargoes in the center of Natchez when a great cry was heard. An angry crowd of flatboatmen, Bowie knives in hand, was storming up the bluffs from the Mississippi shouting, as the local newspaper reported, “threats of violence and death upon all who attempted to sell and buy their property.” It was November 1837, and the town council had just enacted a restrictive tax of $10 per flatboat, a measure designed to rid the wharf district known as Natchez-Under-the-Hill of the most impoverished and disreputable of the flatboatmen. As the boatmen approached, merchants and onlookers shrank back in fear. But the local authorities had called out the militia, who now came marching into the square with their rifles primed and lowered. “The cold and sullen bayonets of the Guards were too hard meat for the Arkansas toothpicks,” reported the local press, and “there was no fight.” The boatmen sullenly turned and went back down the bluffs. It was the first confrontation in the “Flatboat Wars” that erupted as Mississippi ports tried to bring their troublesome riverfronts under regulation.

In the sixteenth century, a member of Hernando de Soto’s expedition was the first European to take notice of this “land abundant in subsistence” that was “thickly peopled” by the Natchez Indians. Europeans did not settle in the area, however, until the French established the port of Fort Rosalie in the 1720s. The French destroyed the highly organized society of the Natchez Indians and the port became a major Mississippi River frontier trading center that brought peoples of different races together, leading to intermarriage and the growth of a mixed-race population.

When the Spanish took control of the territory in 1763, they laid out the new town of Natchez high on the bluffs, safe from Mississippi flooding. Fort Rosalie, rechristened Natchez-Under-the-Hill, continued to flourish as the produce grown by American farmers in Kentucky and Tennessee moved downriver on flatboats. When Americans took possession of Mississippi in 1798, the district surrounding the port became the most important center of settlement in the Old Southwest. Once again, this abundant land of rich, black soil became thickly peopled, but this time with cotton planters and their African American slaves.

Under-the-Hill gained renown as the last stop for boatmen before New Orleans. Minstrel performers sang of their exploits:

_Den dance de boatmen dance,_
_O dance de boatmen dance,_
_O dance all night till broad daylight,_
_An go home wid de gals in de morning._

According to one traveler, “They feel the same inclination to dissipation as sailors who have long been out of port.” There were often as many as 150 boats drawn up at the wharves. The crowds along the riverfront, noted John James Audubon, who visited in the 1820s, “formed a medley which it is beyond my power to describe.” Mingling among American rivermen of all descriptions were trappers and hunters in fur caps, Spanish shopkeepers in bright smocks, French gentlemen from New Orleans in velvet coats, Indians wrapped in their trade blankets, African Americans both free and slave—a pageant of nations and races. Clapboard shacks and flatboats dragged on shore and converted into storefronts served as grog shops, card rooms, dance halls, and hotels. Brothels with women of every age and color abounded.

On the bluffs, meanwhile, the town of Natchez had become the winter home to the southwestern planter elite. They built their mansions with commanding views of the river. A visitor attending a ball at one of these homes was dazzled by the display: “Myriads of wax candles burning in wall sconces, sparkling chandeliers, entrancing music, the scent of jasmine, rose and sweet olive, the sparkle of wine mellowed by age, the flow of wit and brilliant repartee, all were there.” Sustaining this American aristocracy was the labor of thousands of enslaved men and women, who lived in the squalid quarters behind the great house and worked the endless fields of cotton.
The Natchez planters, their wealth and confidence growing with cotton's growing dominance of the local economy, found Under-the-Hill an increasing irritant. “A gentleman may game with a gambler by the hour,” one resident remembered, “and yet despise him and refuse to recognize him afterward.” The Under-the-Hill elite, however—gamblers, saloon keepers, and pimps—disturbed this social boundary when they began staying at hotels and even building town houses in Natchez town. And in the wake of the slave revolt led by Nat Turner in Virginia in 1831, in which fifty-five white people were killed, the planters began to feel increasingly threatened by the racial mingling of the riverfront.

In the late 1830s, rumors that their slaves were conspiring to murder them during Fourth of July celebrations while Under-the-Hill desperadoes looted their mansions reinforced the Natchez elite’s growing conviction that they could no longer tolerate the polyglot community of the riverfront. The measures that ultimately provoked the flatboaters’ threats in November 1837 soon followed.

In response, the planters issued an extralegal order giving all the gamblers, pimps, and women of Under-the-Hill twenty-four hours to evacuate the district. As the Mississippi militia sharpened their bayonets, panic swept the wharves, and that night dozens of flatboats loaded with a motley human cargo headed for the more tolerant community of New Orleans. Other river ports issued similar orders. “The towns on the river,” one resident remembered, “became purified from a moral pestilence which the law could not cure.” Three years later, a great tornado hit Under-the-Hill, leveling the shacks that had served so long as a rendezvous for the rivermen, and gradually the Mississippi reclaimed the old river bottom.

These two communities—Natchez, home to the rich slave-owning elite, and Natchez-Under-the-Hill, the bustling polyglot trading community—epitomize the paradox of the American South in the early nineteenth century. Enslaved African Americans laboring in the cotton fields made possible the greatest accumulations of wealth in early nineteenth-century America and the sumptuous and distinctive lifestyle of aristocratic southern planters.

The boatmen and traders of Natchez-Under-the-Hill were vital to the planters’ prosperity, but their polyglot racial and social mixing threatened the system of control, built on a rigid distinction between free white people and enslaved black people, by which the planters maintained slavery. Because the slave owners could not control the boatmen, they expelled them. This defensive reaction—to seal off the world of slavery from the wider commercial world—exposed the vulnerability of the slave system at the very moment of its greatest commercial success.
The overwhelming economic success of cotton and of the slave system on which it depended created a distinctive regional culture quite different from that developing in the North.

**COTTON AND EXPANSION INTO THE OLD SOUTHWEST**

Short-staple cotton had long been recognized as a crop ideally suited to southern soils and growing conditions. But it had one major drawback: the seeds were so difficult to remove from the lint that it took an entire day to hand-clean a single pound of cotton. The invention in 1793 that made cotton growing profitable was the result of collaboration between a young northerner named Eli Whitney, recently graduated from Yale College, and Catherine Greene, a South Carolina plantation owner and widow of Revolutionary War General Nathanael Greene, who had hired Whitney to tutor her children. Whitney built a prototype cotton engine, dubbed “gin” for short, a simple device consisting of a hand-cranked cylinder with teeth that tore the lint away from the seeds. At Greene’s suggestion, the teeth were made of wire. With the cotton gin, it was possible to clean more than fifty pounds of cotton a day. Soon large and small planters in the inland regions of Georgia and South Carolina had begun to grow cotton. By 1811, this area was producing 60 million pounds of cotton a year, and exporting most of it to England.

Other areas of the South quickly followed South Carolina and Georgia into cotton production. New land was wanted because cotton growing rapidly depleted the soil. The profits to be made from cotton growing drew a rush of southern farmers into the so-called black belt—an area stretching through western Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi that was blessed with exceptionally fertile soil. Following the War of 1812, southerners were seized by “Alabama Fever.” In one of the swiftest migrations in American history, white southerners and their slaves flooded into western Georgia and the areas that would become Alabama and Mississippi (the Old Southwest). On this frontier, African American pioneers (albeit involuntary ones) cleared the forests, drained the swamps, broke the ground, built houses and barns, and planted the first crops (see Map 10-1).

This migration caused the population of Mississippi to double (from 31,306 to 74,448) and that of Alabama to grow sixteenfold (from 9,046 to 144,317) between 1810 and 1820. This and subsequent western land booms dramatically changed the population of the original southern states as well. Nearly half of all white South Carolinians born after 1800 eventually left the state, usually to move west. By 1850, there were more than 50,000 South Carolina natives living in Georgia, almost as many in Alabama, and 26,000 in Mississippi.

Like the simultaneous expansion into the Old Northwest, settlement of the Old Southwest took place at the expense of the region’s Indian population (see Chapter 9). Beginning with the defeat of the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend in 1814 and ending with the Cherokee forced migration along the “Trail of Tears” in 1838, the Five Civilized Tribes—the Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Seminoles—were forced to give up their lands and move to Indian Territory (see Chapter 11).

Following the “Alabama Fever” of 1816–20, several later surges of southern expansion...
(1832–38, and again in the mid-1850s) carried cotton planting over the Mississippi River into Louisiana and deep into Texas. Each surge ignited feverish speculative frenzies, remembered in terms like the “Flush Times” for the heated rush of the 1830s. In the minds of the mobile, enterprising southerners who sought their fortunes in the West, cotton profits and expansion went hand in hand. But the expansion of cotton meant the expansion of slavery.

**Slavery the Mainspring—Again**

The export of cotton from the South was the dynamic force in the developing American economy in the period 1790–1840. Just as the international slave trade had been the dynamic force in the Atlantic economy of the eighteenth century (see Chapter 4), southern slavery financed northern industrial development in the nineteenth century (see Figure 10-1).

The rapid growth of cotton production was an international phenomenon, prompted by events occurring far from the American South. The insatiable demand for cotton was a result of the technological and social changes that we know today as the Industrial Revolution. Beginning early in the eighteenth century, a series of inventions resulted in the mechanized spinning and weaving of cloth in the world’s first factories in the north of England. The ability of these factories to produce unprecedented amounts of cotton cloth revolutionized the world economy. The invention of the cotton gin came at just the right time. British textile manufacturers were eager to buy all

**Map 10-1**

Large cotton producing plantations exhausted the soil and fueled westward expansion to annex new land for cultivation. The expansion of the Old Southwest took place at the expense of the region’s Indian population, beginning with the defeat of the Creeks at Horseshoe Bend in 1814 and ending with the Cherokee forced migration along the “Trail of Tears” in 1838.

**Quick Review**

- The Economics of Slavery
  - Worldwide demand for cotton supported slavery.
  - Export of cotton a dynamic part of American economy.
  - Northern industry directly connected to slavery.

**Industrial Revolution** Revolution in the means and organization of production.
the cotton that the South could produce. The figures for cotton production soared: from 720,000 bales in 1830, to 2.85 million bales in 1850, to nearly 5 million in 1860. By the time of the Civil War, cotton accounted for almost 60 percent of American exports, representing a total value of nearly $200 million a year. Cotton’s central place in the national economy and its international importance led Senator James Henry Hammond of South Carolina to make a famous boast in 1858: Without firing a gun, without drawing a sword, should they make war on us, we could bring the whole world to our feet . . . What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? . . . England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her save the South. No, you dare not to make war on cotton. No power on the earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is King.

The connection between southern slavery and northern industry was very direct. Most mercantile services associated with the cotton trade (insurance, for example) were in northern hands and, significantly, so was shipping. This economic structure was not new. In colonial times, New England ships dominated the African slave trade. Some New England families—like the Browns of Providence who made fortunes in the new technology of textile manufacturing in the 1790s. Other merchants—such as the Boston Associates who financed the cotton textile mills at Lowell—made their money from cotton shipping and brokerage. Thus, as cotton boomed, it provided capital for the new factories of the North.

**A Slave Society in a Changing World**

In the flush of freedom following the American Revolution, all the northern states abolished slavery or passed laws for gradual emancipation, and a number of slave owners in the Upper South freed their slaves (see Chapter 7). Thomas Jefferson, ever the optimist, claimed that “a total emancipation with the consent of the masters” could not be too far in the future. It was clear that national opinion found the international slave trade abhorrent. On January 1, 1808, the earliest date permitted by the Constitution, a bill to abolish the importation of slaves became law. Nevertheless, southern legislatures were unwilling to write steps toward emancipation into law, preferring to depend on the charity of individual slave owners.

But attitudes toward slavery rapidly changed in the South following the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the realization of the riches to be made from cotton. White southerners believed that only African slaves could be forced to work day after day, year after year, at the rapid and brutal pace required in the cotton fields of large plantations in the steamy southern summer. As the production of cotton climbed higher every year in response to a seemingly inexhaustible international demand, so too did the demand for slaves and the conviction of southerners that slavery was an economic necessity.

Although cotton was far from being the only crop (the South actually devoted more acreage to corn than to cotton in 1860), its vast profitability affected all aspects of society. In the first half of the nineteenth century, King Cotton reigned supreme over an expanding domain as southerners increasingly tied their fortunes to the slave system of cotton production. As a British tourist to Mobile wryly noted in the 1850s, the South was a place where “people live in cotton houses and ride in cotton carriages. They buy cotton, sell cotton, think cotton, eat cotton, drink cotton, and dream cotton. They marry cotton wives, and unto them are born cotton children.” The South was truly in thrall to King Cotton.
As had been true since colonial times, the centrality of slavery to the economy and the need to keep slaves under firm control required the South to become a slave society, rather than merely a society with slaves, as was the case in the North. What this meant was that one particular form of social relationship, that of master and slave, (one dominant, the other subordinate) became the model for all relationships, including personal interactions between husband and wife as well as interactions in politics and at work. The profitability of cotton reconfirmed this model and extended it far beyond its original boundaries, thus creating a different kind of society in the South than the one emerging in the North.

At a time when the North was experiencing the greatest spurt of urban growth in the nation’s history (see Chapter 13), most of the South remained rural: less than 5 percent of Mississippi’s population lived in cities of more than 2,500 residents, and only 10 percent of Virginia’s did. There was no question that concentration on plantation agriculture diverted energy and resources from the South’s cities. The agrarian ideal, bolstered by the cotton boom, encouraged the antiurban and anticommercial sentiments of many white southerners.

The South also lagged behind the North in industrialization and in canals and railroads (see Chapter 12). In 1860, only 15 percent of the nation’s factories were located in the South. Similarly, the South was also initially left behind by the transportation revolution. In 1850, only 26 percent of the nation’s railroads were in the South, increasing to still only 35 percent by 1860.

The failure of the South to industrialize at the northern rate was not a matter of ignorance but of choice. Southern capital was tied up in land and slaves, and southerners, buoyed by the world’s insatiable demand for cotton, saw no reason to invest in economically risky railroads, canals, and factories. Nor were they eager to introduce the disruptive factor of free wage labor into the tightly controlled slave system. Cotton was safer. Cotton was King.

Other changes, however, could not be so easily ignored. Nationwide, the slave states were losing their political dominance because their population was not keeping pace with that of the North and the Northwest. The fear of becoming a permanent, outvoted minority was a major cause of the Nullification Crisis provoked by South Carolina in 1830 (see Chapter 11). Equally alarming, outside the South, anti-slavery sentiment was growing rapidly. Southerners felt directly threatened by growing abolitionist sentiment in the North, and by the 1834 action of the British Government eliminating slavery on the sugar plantations of the West Indies. The South felt increasingly hemmed in by northern opposition to the expansion of slavery, which was evident first in the Missouri Compromise of 1820 (see Chapter 9), and later in the Congressional refusal to annex Texas in 1836, and in the battles over expansion that began with the outbreak of the Mexican American War in 1845 and continued until the Civil War in 1861 (see Chapters 14 and 15). Finally, slavery itself was not static. The changes in the system, largely caused by cotton, changed the lives of both white and black southerners.

**TO BE A SLAVE**

Slavery had become distinctively southern: by 1820, as a result of laws passed after the Revolution, all of the northern states had abolished slaveholding. On January 1, 1808, the United States ended its participation in the international slave trade. Although a small number of slaves continued to be smuggled in from Africa, the growth of the slave labor force depended primarily on natural increase—that is, through births within the slave population. The slave population, estimated...
at 700,000 in 1790, grew to more than 4 million in 1860. A distinctive African American slave community, which had first emerged in the eighteenth century (see Chapter 4), expanded dramatically in the early years of the nineteenth century. This community was as much shaped by King Cotton as was the white South.

COTTON AND THE AMERICAN SLAVE SYSTEM

The explosive growth of cotton plantations changed the nature of southern slave labor. In 1850, 55 percent of all slaves were engaged in cotton growing. Another 20 percent labored to produce other crops: tobacco (10 percent), rice, sugar, and hemp. About 15 percent of all slaves were domestic servants, and the remaining 10 percent worked in mining, lumbering, industry, and construction (see Figure 10-2).

Cotton growing concentrated slaves on plantations, in contrast to the more dispersed distribution on smaller farms in earlier generations. Although more than half of all slave owners owned five slaves or fewer, 75 percent of all slaves now lived in groups of ten or more. This disproportionate distribution could have a major impact on a slave’s life, for it was a very different matter to be the single slave of a small farmer than to be a member of a 100-person black community on a large plantation. The size of cotton plantations fostered the growth of African American slave communities. On the other hand, the westward expansion of cotton undermined the stability of those communities. As expansion to the Southwest accelerated, so did the demand for slaves in the newly settled regions, thus fueling the internal slave trade. Slaves were increasingly clustered in the Lower South, as Upper South slave owners sold slaves “down the river” or migrated westward with their entire households. An estimated 1 million slaves migrated involuntarily to the Lower South between 1820 and 1860 (see Map 10-2).

THE INTERNAL SLAVE TRADE

The cotton boom caused a huge increase in the domestic slave trade. Plantation owners in the Upper South (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia, and Tennessee) sold their slaves to meet the demand for labor in the new and expanding cotton-growing regions of the Old Southwest. In every decade after 1820, at least 150,000 slaves were uprooted either by slave trading or planter migration to the new areas, and in the expansions of the 1830s and the 1850s, the number reached a quarter of a million. Cumulatively, between 1820 and 1860, nearly 50 percent of the slave population of the Upper South took part against their will in southern expansion. More slaves—an estimated 1 million—were uprooted by this internal slave trade and enforced migration in the early nineteenth century than were brought to North America during the entire time the international slave trade was legal (see Chapter 4).

Purchased by slave traders from owners in the Upper South, slaves were gathered together in notorious “slave pens” in places like Richmond and Charleston and then moved south by train or boat. In the interior, they were carried as cargo on steamboats on the Mississippi River, hence the dreaded phrase “sold down the river.” Often slaves moved on foot, chained together in groups of fifty or more known as “coffles.” Chained slaves in coffles were a common sight on southern roads, and...
one difficult to reconcile with the notion of slavery as a benevolent institution. Arriving at a central market in the Lower South like Natchez, New Orleans, or Mobile, the slaves, after being carefully inspected by potential buyers, were sold at auction to the highest bidder (see Map 10-3).

Although popular stereotype portrayed slave traders as unscrupulous outsiders who persuaded kind and reluctant masters to sell their slaves, the historical truth is much harsher. Traders, far from being shunned by slave-owning society, were often respected community members. One Charleston trader, Alexander McDonald, served as both an alderman and a bank president and was described as “a man of large means and responsible for all his engagements” who had “the confidence of the public.” Similarly, the sheer scale of the slave trade makes it impossible to believe that slave owners only reluctantly parted with their slaves at times of economic distress. Instead, it is clear that many owners sold slaves and separated slave families not out of necessity but to increase their profits. The sheer size and profitability of the internal slave trade made a mockery of southern claims for the benevolence of the slave system.

Sold “Down the River”

The experience of slaves who were sold or forced by their owners to migrate to the newly opened cotton lands of the Southwest (western Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Texas) sheds light on the dynamics and tensions underlying the South’s cotton-induced prosperity. Although some owners brought existing slave communities with them, the most common experience was that of individual slaves, usually still in their teens or even younger, forcibly separated from family and kin and sent alone with other strangers to a new life far away. Owners had good reason to fear the resentment of slaves who were forced into these new circumstances. For the individual slave, migration to the Southwest was a long ordeal—a Second Middle Passage.

Upper South slaveowners sold slaves to large trading firms, who collected them during the summer in slave pens in Baltimore, Richmond, Nashville, and other northern cities. When the weather cooled, slaves were sent south in chains on foot in coffles, by sailing ship, or by steamboat on the Mississippi to be sold in New Orleans. There, in the streets outside of large slave pens near the French Quarter, thousands of slaves were displayed and sold each year. Dressed in new clothes provided by the traders and exhorted by the traders to walk, run, and otherwise show their stamina, slaves were presented to buyers. For their part, suspicious buyers, unsure that traders and slaves themselves were truthful, poked, prodded, and frequently stripped male and female slaves to be sure they were as healthy as the traders claimed. Aside from obvious signs of illness, buyers often looked for scars on a slave’s back: too many scars were a sign of the frequent whippings that a rebellious or “uppity” slave had provoked. Most slaves were sold as individuals: with their own needs in mind, buyers rarely responded to pleas to buy an “extra” slave to keep a family together.

Once sold, slaves could face a variety of conditions. A number, especially in the early years of settlement in the Old Southwest, found themselves in frontier circumstances. Young male slaves were chosen for the backbreaking work of cutting trees and clearing land for cultivation. Some worked side by side with their owners to clear the land for small farms devoted to raising food for immediate consumption. In these circumstances, slaves were often highly self-reliant and expected by owners to

MAP 10-2
Cotton Production and the Slave Population, 1820–60  In the forty-year period from 1820 to 1860, cotton production grew dramatically in both quantity and extent. Rapid westward expansion meant that by 1860 cotton production was concentrated in the black belt (so called for its rich soils) in the Lower South. As cotton production moved west and south, so did the enslaved African American population that produced it, causing a dramatic rise in the internal slave trade.

hunt and fish to supplement the basic diet. This relatively cooperative and permissive attitude was also evident on larger farms where slaves engaged in the variety of tasks required in mixed farming. But uniformity and strict discipline were the rule on cotton plantations. Owners eager to clear land rapidly so as to make quick profits often drove the clearing crews at an unmerciful pace. And they attempted to impose strict discipline and a rapid pace on the work gangs that planted, hoed, and harvested cotton. Slaves from other parts of the South, used to more individual and less intense work, hated the cotton regime and most of all hated the overseers who enforced it. They also fought to retain their rights to supplement the owner-supplied diet with their own garden produce and by hunting.

Thus, the new land in the Old Southwest that appeared to offer so much opportunity for owners, bred tensions caused by forcible sale and migration, by the organization and pace of cotton cultivation, and by the owners’ efforts to abrogate what slaves saw as traditional rights. Behind the owners’ interest in “scientific management” of cotton must have lurked constant fear of what resentful gangs of slaves might do if freed from watchful supervision.

**Field Work and the Gang System of Labor**

A full 75 percent of all slaves were field workers, and it was these workers who were most directly affected by the gang labor system employed on cotton plantations (as well as in tobacco and sugar). Cotton was a crop that demanded nearly year-round labor: from planting in April, to constant hoeing and cultivation through June, to a picking season that began in August and lasted until December. The work was less skilled than on tobacco or sugar plantations, but more constant. Owners divided their slaves into gangs of twenty to twenty-five, a communal labor pattern reminiscent of parts of Africa, but with a crucial difference—these workers were supervised by overseers...
with whips. Field hands, both men and women, worked from “can see to can’t see” (sunup to sundown) summer and winter, and frequently longer at harvest, when eighteen-hour days were common. On most plantations, the bell sounded an hour before sunup, and slaves were expected to be on their way to the fields as soon as it was light. Work continued till noon, and after an hour or so for lunch and rest, the slaves worked until nearly dark. In the evening, the women prepared dinner at the cabins and everyone snatched a few hours of unsupervised socializing before bedtime. Work days were shorter in the winter, perhaps only ten hours.

Work was tedious in the hot and humid southern fields, and the overseer’s whip was never far away. Cotton growing was hard work: plowing and planting, chopping weeds with a heavy hoe, and picking the ripe cotton from the stiff and scratchy bolls, at the rate of 150 pounds a day. A strong, hardworking slave—a “prime field hand”—was valuable property, worth at least $1,000 to the master. Slaves justifiably took pride in their strength, as observed by a white northerner traveling in Mississippi in 1854, who came across a work gang happy to be going home early because of rain:

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 stride. Behind them came the . . . [plowhands and their mules], thirty strong, mostly men, but a few of them women . . . . A lean and vigilant white overseer, on a brisk pony, brought up the rear.

That, of course, is only one side of the story. Compare former slave Solomon Northup’s memory of cotton picking:

It was rarely that a day passed by without one or more whippings. The delinquent [who had not picked enough cotton] was taken out, stripped, made to lie upon the ground, face downwards, when he received a punishment proportioned to his offence. It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time, on [this] plantation, any day almost during the entire period of the cotton-picking season.
Slaves aged fast in this regime. Poor diet and heavy labor undermined health. When they were too old to work, they took on other tasks within the black community, such as caring for young children. Honored by the slave community, the elderly were tolerated by white owners, who continued to feed and clothe them until their deaths. Few actions show the hypocrisy of southern paternalism more clearly than the speed with which white owners evicted their elderly slaves in the 1860s when the end of the slave system was in sight.

**House Servants**

In the eighteenth century, almost all African slaves worked as field hands, but as profits from slavery grew, slaveowners diverted an increasing proportion of slave labor from the fields to the house service necessary to sustain their rich lifestyles. By one calculation, fully one-third of the female slaves in Virginia worked as house servants by 1800.

At first glance, working in the big house might seem to have been preferable to working in the fields. Physically, it was much less demanding, and house slaves were often better fed and clothed. They also had much more access to information, for white people, accustomed to servants and generally confident of their loyalty, often forgot their presence and spoke among themselves about matters of interest to the slaves: local gossip, changes in laws or attitudes, policies toward disobedient or rebellious slaves. As Benjamin Russel, a former slave in South Carolina, recalled:

> How did we get the news? Many plantations were strict about this, but the greater the precaution, the alertier became the slave, the wider they opened their ears and the more eager they became for outside information. The sources were: girls that waited on the tables, the ladies’ maids and the drivers; they would pick up everything they heard and pass it on to the other slaves.

For many white people, one of the worst surprises of the Civil War was the eagerness of their house slaves to flee. Considered by their masters the best treated and the most loyal, these slaves were commonly the first to leave or to organize mass desertions. Even the Confederacy’s first family, President Jefferson Davis and his wife Varina, were chagrined by the desertion of their house servants in 1864.

From the point of view of the slave, the most unpleasant thing about being a house servant (or the single slave of a small owner) was the constant presence of white people. There was no escape from white supervision. Many slaves who were personal maids and children’s nurses were required to live in the big house and rarely saw their own families. Cooks and other house servants were exposed to the tempers and whims of all members of the white family, including the children, who prepared themselves for lives of mastery by practicing giving orders to slaves many times their own age. And house servants, more than any others, were forced to act grateful and ingratiating. The demeaning images of Uncle Tom and the ever-smiling mammy derive from the roles slaves learned as the price of survival. At the same time, genuine intimacy was possible, especially between black nurses and white children. But these were bonds that the white children were ultimately forced to reject as the price of joining the master class.

**Artisans and Skilled Workers**

A small number of slaves were skilled workers: weavers, seamstresses, carpenters, blacksmiths, mechanics. More slave men than women achieved skilled status (partly because many jobs considered appropriate for women, like cooking, were not
thought of as skilled). Solomon Northup, the northern free African American kidnapped into slavery, had three owners and was hired out repeatedly as a carpenter and as a driver of other slaves in a sugar mill; he had also been hired out to clear land for a new Louisiana plantation and to cut sugar cane. Black people worked as lumberjacks (of the 16,000 lumber workers in the South, almost all were slaves), as miners, as deckhands and stokers on Mississippi riverboats, as stevedores loading cotton on the docks of Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, and sometimes as workers in the handful of southern factories. Because slaves were their masters’ property, the wages of the slave belonged to the owner, not the slave.

The extent to which slaves made up the laboring class was most apparent in cities. A British visitor to Natchez in 1835 noted slave “mechanics, draymen, hostlers, labourers, hucksters and washwomen and the heterogeneous multitude of every other occupation.” In the North, all these jobs were performed by white workers. In part, because the South failed to attract as much immigrant labor as the North, southern cities offered both enslaved and free black people opportunities in skilled occupations such as blacksmithing and carpentering that free African Americans in the North were denied.

**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

Surely no group in American history has faced a harder job of community building than the black people of the antebellum South. Living in intimate, daily contact with their oppressors, African Americans nevertheless created an enduring culture of their own, a culture that had far-reaching and lasting influence on all of southern life and American society as a whole (see Chapter 4). Within their own communities, African American values and attitudes, and especially their own forms of Christianity, played a vital part in shaping a culture of endurance and resistance.

Few African Americans were unfortunate enough to live their lives alone among white people. Over half of all slaves lived on plantations with twenty or more other slaves, and others, on smaller farms, had links with slaves on nearby properties. Urban slaves were able to make and sustain so many secret contacts with other African Americans in cities or towns that slave owners wondered whether slave discipline could be maintained in urban settings. There can be no question that the bonds among African Americans were what sustained them during the years of slavery.

In law, slaves were property, to be bought, sold, rented, worked, and otherwise used (but not abused or killed) as the owner saw fit. But slaves were also human beings, with feelings, needs, and hopes. Even though most white southerners believed black people to be members of an inferior, childish race, all but the most brutal masters acknowledged the humanity of their slaves. White masters learned to live with the two key institutions of African American community life: the family and the African American church, and in their turn slaves learned, however painfully, to survive slavery.
CHAPTER 10  THE SOUTH AND SLAVERY, 1790s–1850s

THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL

Of all the New World slave societies, the one that existed in the American South was the only one that grew by natural increase rather than through the constant importation of captured Africans. This fact alone made the African American community of the South different from the slave societies of Cuba, the Caribbean islands, and Brazil. In order to understand, we must examine the circumstances of survival and growth.

The growth of the African American slave population was not due to better treatment than in other New World slave societies, but to the higher fertility of African American women, who in 1808 (the year the international slave trade ended) had a crude birth rate of 35–40, causing a 2.2% yearly population growth. This was still below the fertility rate of white women, who had a crude birth rate of 55 and a 2.9% annual population growth. But by midcentury, the white rate had dropped to 1.99%, while the black rate remained high. The ending of African importations may have affected black population growth, for while African women usually breastfed for two years, a form of natural birth control that produced fewer births per mother, African American slave women adopted the white practice of only breastfeeding for one year, and on average gave birth to six or eight children at year-and-a-half intervals. But they also suffered from the contradictory demands of slave owners, who wanted them to work hard while still having children, for every slave baby increased the wealth of the owners.

As a result, because pregnant black women were inadequately nourished, worked too hard, or were too frequently pregnant, mortality rates for slave children under five were twice those for their white counterparts. At the time, owners often accused slave women of smothering their infants by rolling over them when asleep. When the British actress Fanny Kemble came to live on her husband’s Georgia plantation in 1837, what shocked her more deeply than any other aspect of the slave system was the treatment of pregnant black women. Sensing her sympathy, pregnant slave women came to Kemble to plead for relief from field work, only to be brusquely ordered back to the fields by the overseer and Kemble’s husband.

Health remained a lifelong issue for slaves. Malaria and infectious diseases such as yellow fever and cholera were endemic in the South. White people as well as black died, as the life expectancy figures for 1850 show: 40–43 years for white people and 30–33 years for African Americans. Slaves were more at risk because of the circumstances of slave life: poor housing, poor diet, and constant, usually heavy work. Sickness was chronic: 20 percent or more of the slave labor force on most plantations were sick at any one time. Many owners believed sick slaves were only “malingering.” Because of the poor medical knowledge of the time, they failed to realize that adequate diet, warm housing, and basic sanitation might have prevented the pneumonia and dysentery that killed or weakened many slaves, and that exacted an especially high toll on very young children.

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE

Slavery was a lifelong labor system, and the constant and inescapable issue between master and slave was how much work the slave would—or could be forced—to do. Southern white slave owners claimed that by housing, feeding, and clothing their slaves from infancy to death they were acting more humanely than northern industrialists who employed people only during their working years. But in spite of occasional instances of manumission—the freeing of a slave—the child born of a slave was destined to remain a slave.

Children lived with their parents (or with their mother if the father was a slave on another farm or plantation) in housing provided by the owner. Husband and wife cooperated in loving and sheltering their children and teaching them survival
skills. From birth to about age seven, slave children played with one another and with white children, observing and learning how to survive. They saw the penalties: black adults, perhaps their own parents, whipped for disobedience; black women, perhaps their own sisters, violated by white men. And they might see one or both parents sold away as punishment or for financial gain. They would also see signs of white benevolence: special treats for children at holidays, appeals to loyalty from the master or mistress, perhaps friendship with a white child. One former slave recalled:

Yessum, when they used to have company in the big house, Miss Ross would bring them to the door to show them us children. And, my blessed, the yard would be black with us children, all string up there next the doorstep looking up in they eyes. Old Missus would say, “Ain't I got a pretty crop of little niggers coming on?”

The children would learn slave ways of getting along: apparent acquiescence in white demands; pilfering; malingering, sabotage, and other methods of slowing the relentless work pace. Fanny Kemble, an accomplished actress, was quick to note the pretense in the “outrageous flattery” she received from her husband’s slaves. But many white southerners genuinely believed that their slaves were both less intelligent and more loyal than they really were. An escaped slave, Jermain Loguen, recalled with some distaste the charade of “servile bows and counterfeit smiles . . . and other false...

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Slave quarters built by slave owners, like these pictured on a Florida plantation, provided more than the basic shelter (a place to sleep and eat) that the owners intended. Slave quarters were the center of the African American community life that developed during slavery.


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Class Discussion Question 10.4
expressions of gladness” with which he placated his master and mistress. Frederick Douglass, whose fearless leadership of the abolitionist movement made him the most famous African American of his time, wryly noted, “As the master studies to keep the slave ignorant, the slave is cunning enough to make the master think he succeeds.”

Most slaves spent their lives as field hands, working in gangs with other slaves under a white overseer, who was usually quick to use his whip to keep up the work pace. But there were other occupations. In the “big house” there were jobs for women as cooks, maids, seamstresses, laundresses, weavers, and nurses. Black men became coachmen, valets, and gardeners, or skilled craftsmen—carpenters, mechanics, and blacksmiths. Some children began learning these occupations at age seven or eight, often in an informal apprentice system. Other children, both boys and girls, were expected to take full care of younger children while the parents were working. Of course, black children had no schooling of any kind: in most of the southern states, it was against the law to teach a slave to read, although indulgent owners often rewarded their “pet” slaves by teaching them in spite of the law. At age twelve, slaves were considered full grown and put to work in the fields or in their designated occupation.

Slave Families

As had been true in the eighteenth century, families remained essential to African American culture (see Chapter 4). No southern state recognized slave marriages in law. Most owners, though, not only recognized but encouraged them, sometimes even performing a kind of wedding ceremony for the couple. Masters encouraged marriage among their slaves, believing it made the men less rebellious, and for economic reasons they were eager for the slave women to have children. Whatever marriages meant to the masters, to slaves they were a haven of love and intimacy in a cruel world, and the basis of the African American community. Husbands and wives had a chance, in their own cabins, to live their own lives among loved ones. The relationship between slave husband and wife was different from that of the white husband and wife. The master-slave system dictated that the white marriage be unequal, for the man had to be dominant and the woman dependent and submissive. Slave marriages were more equal, for husband and wife were both powerless within the slave system. Both knew that neither could protect the other from abuse at the hands of white people.

Family meant continuity. Parents made great efforts to teach their children the family history and to surround them with a supportive and protective kinship network. The strength of these ties is shown by the many husbands, wives, children, and parents who searched for each other after the Civil War when slavery came to an end. Observing African Americans’ postwar migrations, a Freedmen’s Bureau agent commented that “every mother’s son among them seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children.” As the ads in black newspapers indicate, some family searches went on into the 1870s and 1880s, and many ended in failure.

Given the vast size of the internal slave trade, fear of separation was constant—and real. Far from being rare events prompted only by financial necessity, separations of slave families were common. One in every five slave marriages was broken, and one in every three children sold away from their families. These figures clearly show that slave owners’ support for slave marriages was secondary to their desire for profits. The scale of the trade was a strong indication of the economic reality that underlay their protestations of paternalism.

In the face of constant separation, slave communities attempted to act like larger families. Following practices developed early in slavery, children were taught to respect and learn from all the elders, to call all adults of a certain age “aunt” or “uncle,” and to call children of their own age “brother” or “sister” (see Chapter 4).
Thus, in the absence of their own family, separated children could quickly find a place and a source of comfort in the slave community to which they had been sold.

This emphasis on family and on kinship networks had an even more fundamental purpose. The kinship of the entire community, where old people were respected and young ones cared for, represented a conscious rejection of white paternalism. The slaves’ ability, in the most difficult of situations, to structure a community that expressed their values, not those of their masters, was extraordinary. Equally remarkable was the way in which African Americans reshaped Christianity to serve their needs.

**African American Religion**

African religions managed to survive from the earliest days of slavery in forms that white people considered as “superstition” or “folk belief,” such as the medicinal use of roots by conjurers. Religious ceremonies survived, too, in late-night gatherings deep in the woods where the sound of drumming, singing, and dancing could not reach white ears (see Chapter 4). In the nineteenth century, these African traditions allowed African Americans to reshape white Christianity into their own distinctive faith that expressed their deep resistance to slavery.

The Great Awakening, which swept the South after the 1760s, introduced many slaves to Christianity, often in mixed congregations with white people (see Chapter 5). The transformation was completed by the Second Great Awakening, which took root among black and white southerners in the 1790s. The number of African American converts, preachers, and lay teachers grew rapidly, and a distinctive form of Christianity took shape. Free African Americans founded their own independent churches and denominations. The first African American Baptist and Methodist churches were founded in Philadelphia in 1794 by the Reverend Absalom Jones and the Reverend

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African cultural patterns persisted in the preference for night funerals and for solemn pageantry and song, as depicted in British artist John Antrobus’s *Plantation Burial*, ca. 1860. Like other African American customs, the community care of the dead contained an implied rebuke to the masters’ care of the living slaves.

Richard Allen. In 1816, the Reverend Allen joined with African American ministers from other cities to form the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) denomination. By the 1830s, free African American ministers like Andrew Marshall of Savannah and many more enslaved black preachers and lay ministers preached, sometimes secretly, to slaves. Their message was one of faith and love, of deliverance, of the coming of the promised land.

African Americans found in Christianity a powerful vehicle to express their longings for freedom and justice. But why did their white masters allow it? Some white people, themselves converted by the revivals, doubtless believed that they should not deny their slaves the same religious experience. But many southern slave owners expected Christianity to make their slaves obedient and peaceful. Forbidding their slaves to hold their own religious gatherings, owners insisted that their slaves attend white church services. Slaves were quick to realize the owners’ purpose. As a former Texas slave recalled: “We went to church on the place and you ought to heard that preachin’. Obey your massa and missy, don’t steal chickens and eggs and meat, but nary a word ‘bout havin’ a soul to save.” On many plantations, slaves attended religious services with their masters every Sunday, sitting quietly in the back of the church or in the balcony, as the minister preached messages justifying slavery and urging obedience. But at night, away from white eyes, they held their own prayer meetings.

In churches and in spontaneous religious expressions, the black community made Christianity its own. Fusing Christian texts with African elements of group activity, such as the circle dance, the call-and-response pattern, and, above all, group singing, black people created a unique community religion full of emotion, enthusiasm, and protest. Nowhere is this spirit more compelling than in the famous spirituals: “Go Down Moses,” with its mournful refrain “Let my people go”; the rousing “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel...and why not every man”; the haunting “Steal Away.” Some of these spirituals became as well known to white people as to black people, but only African Americans seem to have appreciated the full meaning of their subversive messages.

Nevertheless, this was not a religion of rebellion, for that was unrealistic for most slaves. Black Christianity was an enabling religion: it helped slaves to survive, not as passive victims of white tyranny but as active opponents of an oppressive system that they daily protested in small but meaningful ways. In their faith, African Americans expressed a spiritual freedom that white people could not destroy.

**Freedom and Resistance**

The rapid geographical spread of cotton itself introduced a new source of tension and resistance into the slave-master relationship. Whatever their dreams, most slaves knew they would never escape. Freedom was too far away. Almost all successful escapes in the nineteenth century (approximately 1,000 a year) were from the Upper South (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri). A slave in the Lower South or the Southwest simply had too far to go to reach freedom. In addition, white southerners were determined to prevent escapes. Slave patrols were a common sight on southern roads. Any black person without a pass from his or her master was captured (usually roughly) and returned home to certain punishment. But despite almost certain recapture, slaves continued to flee and to help others do so. Escaped slave Harriet Tubman of Maryland, who made twelve rescue missions freeing 60–70 slaves in all...

Harriet Tubman was 40 years old when this photograph (later hand-tinted) was taken. Already famous for her daring rescues, she gained further fame by serving as a scout, spy, and nurse during the Civil War.

The Granger Collection.
(later inflated to 300 as Tubman’s rescues became legendary), had extraordinary determination and skill. As a female runaway, she was unusual, too: most escapees were young men, for women often had small children they were unable to take and unwilling to leave behind.

Much more common was the practice of “running away nearby.” Slaves who knew they could not reach freedom still frequently demonstrated their desire for liberty or their discontent over mistreatment by taking unauthorized leave from their plantation. Hidden in nearby forests or swamps, provided with food smuggled by other slaves from the plantation, the runaway might return home after a week or so, often to rather mild punishment. Although in reality, most slaves could have little hope of gaining freedom, even failed attempts at rebellion shook the foundations of the slave system, and thus temporary flight by any slave was a warning sign of discontent that a wise master did not ignore.

**Slave Revolts**

The ultimate resistance, however, was the slave revolt. Southern history was dotted with stories of former slave conspiracies and rumors of current plots (see Chapter 4). Every white southerner knew about the last-minute failure of Gabriel Prosser’s insurrection in Richmond in 1800 and the chance discovery of Denmark Vesey’s plot in Charleston in 1822. But when in 1831, Nat Turner actually started a rebellion in which a number of white people were killed, southern fears were greatly magnified.

A literate man, Nat Turner was a lay preacher, but he was also a slave. It was Turner’s intelligence and strong religious commitment that made him a leader in the slave community and, interestingly, these very same qualities led his master, Joseph Travis, to treat him with kindness, even though Turner had once run away for a month after being mistreated by an overseer. Turner began plotting his revolt after a religious vision in which he saw “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle”; “the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams.” Turner and five other slaves struck on the night of August 20, 1831, first killing Travis, who, Turner said, “was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment of me.”

Moving from plantation to plantation and killing a total of fifty-five white people, the rebels numbered sixty by the next morning, when they fled from a group of armed white men. More than forty blacks were executed after the revolt, including Turner, who was captured accidentally after he had hidden for two months in the woods. Thomas R. Gray, a white lawyer to whom Turner dictated a lengthy confession before his death, was impressed by Turner’s composure. “I looked on him,” Gray said, “and my blood curdled in my veins.” If intelligent, well-treated slaves such as Turner could plot revolts, how could white southerners ever feel safe?

**Gabriel’s Rebellion**, the Denmark Vesey plot, and **Nat Turner’s Revolt** were the most prominent examples of organized slave resistance, but they were far from the only ones. Conspiracies and actual or rumored slave resistance began in colonial times (see Chapter 4) and never ceased. These plots exposed the truth white southerners preferred to ignore: Only force kept Africans and African Americans enslaved, and because no system of control could ever be total, white southerners could never be completely safe from the possibility of revolt. Nat Turner brought white southerners’ fears to the surface. After 1831, the possibility of slave insurrection was never far from their minds.
CHAPTER 10
THE SOUTH AND SLAVERY, 1790s–1850s

Free African Americans

Another source of white disquiet was the growing number of free African Americans. By 1860, nearly 250,000 free black people lived in the South. For most, freedom dated from before 1800, when antislavery feeling among slave owners in the Upper South was widespread and cotton cultivation had yet to boom. In Virginia, for example, the number of manumitted (freed) slaves jumped tenfold in twenty years (see Chapter 7). But a new mood became apparent in 1806, when Virginia tightened its lenient manumission law: now the freed person was required to leave the state within a year or be sold back into slavery. After 1830, manumission was virtually impossible throughout the South.

Most free black people lived in the countryside of the Upper South, where they worked as tenant farmers or farm laborers. Urban African Americans were much more visible. Life was especially difficult for female-headed families, because only the most menial work—street peddling and laundry work, for example—was available to free black women. The situation for African American males was somewhat better. Although they were discriminated against in employment and in social life, there were opportunities for skilled black craftsmen in trades such as blacksmithing and carpentry. Cities such as Charleston, Savannah, and Natchez were home to flourishing free African American communities that formed their own churches and fraternal orders.

Throughout the South in the 1830s, state legislatures tightened black codes—laws concerning free black people. Free African Americans could not carry firearms, could not purchase slaves (unless they were members of their own family), and were liable to the criminal penalties meted out to slaves (that is, whippings and summary judgments without a jury trial). They could not testify against whites, hold office, vote, or serve in the militia. In other words, except for the right to own property, free blacks had no civil rights. White people increasingly feared the influence free black people might have on slaves, for free African Americans were a living challenge to the slave system. Their very existence disproved the basic southern equations of white equals free, and black equals slave. No one believed more fervently in those equations than the South’s largest population group, white people who did not own slaves.

The White Majority

The pervasive influence of the slave system in the South is reflected in the startling contrast of two facts: two-thirds of all southerners did not own slaves, yet slave owners dominated the social and political life of the region. Who were the two-thirds of white southerners who did not own slaves, and how did they live? Throughout the South, slave owners occupied the most productive land: tobacco-producing areas in Virginia and Tennessee, coastal areas of South Carolina and Georgia where rice and cotton grew, sugar lands in Louisiana, and large sections of the cotton-producing black belt, which stretched westward from South Carolina to Texas. Small farmers, usually without slaves, occupied the rest of the rural land, and a small middle class lived in the cities of the South.

The Middle Class

In the predominantly rural South, cities provided a home for a commercial middle class of merchants, bankers, factors (agents), and lawyers on whom the agricultural economy depended to sell its produce to a world market. Urban growth lagged far
behind the North. The cities that grew were major shipping centers for agricultural goods: the river cities of Louisville, St. Louis, Memphis, and New Orleans, and the cotton ports of Mobile and Savannah. Formal educational institutions, libraries, and cultural activities were located in cities, and so were the beginnings of the same kind of entrepreneurial and commercial spirit so evident in the North. As in the North, small industrial cities often including textile mills and heavier industry clustered along the fall line, where the rivers dropped down from the highlands to the coastal plains. Columbus, Georgia, located at the falls of the Chattahoochee River, was an example of such a small city.

The effort of William Gregg of South Carolina to establish the cotton textile industry illustrates some of the problems facing southern entrepreneurs. Gregg, a successful jeweler from Columbia, South Carolina, became convinced that textile factories were a good way to diversify the southern economy and to provide a living for poor whites who could not find work in the slave-dominated employment system. He enthusiastically publicized the findings of his tour of northern textile mills, but found a cool reception. His request to the planter-dominated South Carolina legislature for a charter of incorporation for a textile mill passed by only one vote. In 1846, he built a model mill and a company town in Graniteville, South Carolina, that attracted poor white families as employees. Gregg adapted southern paternalism to industry, providing a school and churches and prohibiting alcohol and dancing, yet paying his workers twenty percent less than northern wages. His experience in the competitive textile industry led him to favor the protective tariff, thus putting him at odds with the general attitude in South Carolina that had solidified at the time of the Nullification Crisis (see Chapter 11).

Another noteworthy exception was the Tredegar Iron Works, near Richmond, which by 1837 was the third largest foundry in the nation. Joseph Anderson, who became its manager (and later owner) in 1841 broke southern precedent by using slave labor in the mills, thus proving that enslaved workers were capable of factory work (a fact that many southerners disputed).

Many southern planters scorned members of the commercial middle class like Joseph Anderson because they had to please their suppliers and customers, and thus lacked, in planter’s eyes, true independence. This was an attitude strikingly different from that in the North, where the commercial acumen of the middle class was increasingly valued (see Chapter 12).

**Poor White People**

From 30 to 50 percent of all southern white people were landless, a proportion similar to that in the North. But the existence of slavery limited the opportunities for southern poor white people. Slaves made up the permanent, stable workforce in agriculture and in many skilled trades. Many poor white people led highly transient lives in search of work, such as farm labor at harvest time, which was only temporary. Others were tenant farmers working under share-tenancy arrangements that kept them in debt to the landowner. Although they farmed poorer land with less equipment than landowning farmers, most tenant farmers grew enough food to sustain their families. Like their landowning neighbors, tenant farmers aspired to independence.

Relationships between poor whites and black slaves were complex. White men and women often worked side by side with black slaves in the fields and were socially and sexually intimate with enslaved and free African Americans. White people engaged in clandestine trade to supply slaves with items like liquor that slave owners prohibited, helped slaves to escape, and even (in an 1835 Mississippi case) were executed for their participation in planning a slave revolt. At the same time, the majority of poor
white people insisted, sometimes violently, on their racial superiority over blacks. For their part, many African American slaves, better dressed, better nourished, and healthier, dismissed them as “poor white trash.” But the fact was that the difficult lives of poor whites, whom one contemporary described as “a third class of white people,” served to blur the crucial racial distinction between independent whites and supposedly inferior, dependent black people on which the system of slavery rested. Like the boatmen whom the Natchez slave owners viewed with such alarm, poor white people posed a potential threat to the slave system.

**Yeoman Values**

The word “yeoman,” originally a British term for a farmer who works his own land, is often applied to independent farmers of the South, most of whom lived on family-sized farms. Although yeoman farmers sometimes owned a few slaves, in general they and their families worked their land by themselves. This land ranged from adequate to poor, from depleted, once-rich regions in Virginia to the Carolina hill country and the pine barrens of Mississippi. Typical of the yeoman-farmer community was northwestern Georgia, once home to the Creeks and Cherokees, but now populated by communities of small farmers who grew enough vegetables to feed their families, including corn, which they either ate themselves or fed to hogs. In addition, these farmers raised enough cotton every year (usually no more than one or two bales) to bring in a little cash. At least 60 percent owned their own farms.

For these yeomen, the local community was paramount. Farm men and women depended on their relatives and neighbors for assistance in large farm tasks such as planting, harvesting, and construction. Projects requiring lots of hands, like logrollings, corn shuckings, and quilting bees were community events. Farmers repaid this help, and obtained needed goods, through complex systems of barter with other members of the community. In their organization, southern farm communities were no different from northern ones, with one major exception—slavery. In the South, one of the key items in the community barter system was the labor of slaves, who were frequently loaned out to neighbors by small slave owners to fulfill an obligation to another farmer.

Where yeomen and large slave owners lived side by side, as in the Georgia black belt where cotton was the major crop, slavery again provided a link between the rich and middle class. Large plantation owners often bought food for their slaves from small local farmers, ground the latter’s corn in the plantation mill, ginned their cotton, and transported and marketed it as well. But although planters and much smaller yeomen were part of a larger community network, in the black belt the large slave owners were clearly dominant. Only in their own up-country communities did yeomen feel truly independent.

In 1828 and 1832, southern yeomen and poor white men voted overwhelmingly for Andrew Jackson. They were drawn variously to his outspoken policy of ruthless expansionism, his appeals to the common man, and his rags-to-riches ascent from poor boy to rich slave owner. It was a career many hoped to emulate. The dominance
of the large planters was due at least in part to the ambition of many yeomen, especially those with two or three slaves, to expand their holdings and become rich. These farmers, enthusiastic members of the lively democratic politics of the South, supported the leaders they hoped to join.

But for a larger group of yeomen, independence and not wealth was most important. Many southern yeomen lived apart from large slaveholders, in the up-country regions where plantation agriculture was unsuitable. The very high value southern yeomen placed on freedom grew directly from their own experience as self-sufficient property-owning farmers in small, family-based communities, and from the absolute, patriarchal control they exercised over their own wives and children. This was a way of life that southern “plain folk” were determined to preserve. It made them resistant to the economic opportunities and challenges that capitalism and industrialization posed for northern farmers, which southern yeomen perceived as encroachments on their freedom.

The irony was that the freedom yeomen so prized rested on slavery. White people could count on slaves to perform the hardest and worst labor, and the degradation of slave life was a daily reminder of the freedom they enjoyed in comparison. Slavery meant that all white people, rich and poor, were equal in the sense that they were all free. This belief in white skin privilege had begun in the eighteenth century as slavery became the answer to the South’s labor problem (see Chapter 4). The democratization of politics in the early nineteenth century and the enactment of nearly universal white manhood suffrage perpetuated the belief in white skin privilege, even though the gap between rich and poor white people was widening.

**PLANTERS**

Remarkably few slave owners fit the popular stereotype of the rich and leisured plantation owner with hundreds of acres of land and hundreds of slaves. Only 36 percent of southern white people owned slaves in 1830, and only 2.5 percent owned fifty slaves or more. Just as yeomen and poor whites were diverse, so, too, were southern slave owners (See Figure 10-3).

**SMALL SLAVE OWNERS**

The largest group of slave owners were small yeomen taking the step from subsistence agriculture to commercial production. To do this in the South’s agricultural economy, they had to own slaves. But upward mobility was difficult. Owning one or two slaves increased farm production only slightly, and it was hard to accumulate the capital to buy more. One common pattern was for a slave owner to leave one or two slaves to farm while he worked another job (this arrangement usually meant that his wife had assumed responsibility for their supervision). In other cases, small farmers worked side by side with their slaves in the fields. In still other cases, owners hired out their slaves to larger slave owners.

In every case, the owner was economically vulnerable: a poor crop or a downturn in cotton prices could wipe out his gains and force him to sell his slaves. When times improved, he might buy a new slave or two and try again, but getting a secure footing on the bottom rung of the slave-owner ladder was very difficult. The rollercoaster economy of the early nineteenth century did not help matters, and the Panic of 1837 was a serious setback to many small farmers.

For a smaller group of slave owners, the economic struggle was not so hard. Middle-class professional men—lawyers, doctors, and merchants—frequently managed
to become large slave owners because they already had capital (the pay from their professions) to invest in land and slaves. Sometimes they received payment for their services, not in money, but in slaves. These owners were the most likely to own skilled slaves—carpenters, blacksmiths, and other artisans—and to rent them out for profit. By steady accumulation, the most successful members of this middle class were able to buy their way into the slave-owning elite and to confirm that position by marrying their sons or daughters into the aristocracy.

The Planter Elite

The slave-owning elite, those 2.5 percent who owned fifty slaves or more, enjoyed the prestige, the political leadership, and the lifestyle to which many white southerners aspired. Almost all great slave owners inherited their wealth. They were rarely self-made men, although most tried to add to the land and slaves they had inherited. Men of wealth and property had led southern politics since colonial times. Increasingly after 1820, as universal manhood suffrage spread, planters had to learn how to appeal to the popular vote, but most never acquired “the common touch.” The smaller slave owners, not the great planters, formed a clear majority in every southern state legislature.

The eastern seaboard had first given rise to a class of rich planters in the colonial period, as attested by the plantations of William Byrd and Robert “King” Carter of Virginia and the cultured life of the planter elite, centered in Charleston, that had established itself in the South Carolina low country and Sea Islands. In the nineteenth century, these planters ranged from land rich but labor poor Thomas Chaplin of Tombee Plantation who grew sea-island cotton, to rice planter Nathaniel Heyward, who through wealthy marriages and land purchases amassed 45,000 acres of land and over 2,000 slaves.

As southerners and slave owning spread westward, membership in the elite broadened to include the new wealth of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The rich planters of the Natchez community were popularly called “nabobs” (from a Hindi word for Europeans who had amassed fabulous wealth in India). One great Natchez family, the Surgets, of French origin, traced their wealth farther back, to a Spanish land grant of 2,500 acres to Pierre Surget. In the 1850s, his grandsons Frank and James Surget controlled some 93,000 acres in Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana (half of it plantation land and half bought on speculation, for resale). Each brother sold 4,000 bales of cotton a year, and between them they owned upwards of 1,000 slaves. Each also owned palatial mansions in Natchez—Cherry Hill and Clifton.

The extraordinary concentration of wealth in Natchez—in 1850, it was the richest county in the nation—fostered a self-consciously elite lifestyle that derived not from long tradition but from suddenly acquired riches. Fastidious northerners such as Thomas Taylor, a Pennsylvania Quaker who visited Natchez in 1847, noted: “Many of the chivalric gentry whom I have been permitted to see dashing about here on highbred horses, seem to find their greatest enjoyment in recounting their bear hunts, ‘great fights,’ and occasional exploits with revolvers and Bowie knives—swearing ‘terribly’ and sucking mint juleps & cherry cobbler with straws.”

Plantation Life

The urban life of the Natchez planters was unusual. Many wealthy planters, especially those on new lands in the Old Southwest, lived in isolation on their plantations with their families and slaves. Through family networks, common boarding school experience, political activity, and frequent visiting, the small new planter elite consciously
worked to create and maintain a distinctive lifestyle that was modeled on that of the English aristocracy, as southerners understood it. This entailed a large estate, a spacious, elegant mansion, and lavish hospitality. For men, the gentlemanly lifestyle meant immersion in masculine activities such as hunting, soldiering, or politics, and a touchy concern with “honor” that could lead to duels and other acts of bravado. Women of the slave-owning elite, in contrast, were expected to be gentle, charming, and always welcoming of relatives, friends, and other guests.

But this gracious image was at odds with the economic reality. Large numbers of black slaves had to be forced to work to produce the wealth that supported the planters’ gracious lifestyle. Each plantation, like the yeoman farm but on a larger scale, aimed to be self-sufficient, producing not only the cash crop but most of the food and clothing for both slaves and family. There were stables full of horses for plowing, transportation, and show. There were livestock and vegetable gardens to be tended, and carpentry, blacksmithing, weaving, and sewing to be done. A large plantation was an enterprise that required many hands, many skills, and a lot of management. Large plantation owners might have overseers or black drivers to supervise field work, but frequently they themselves had direct financial control of daily operations. Even if they were absentee landlords (like, for example, Thomas Chaplin in South Carolina, and the richest of the Natchez elite), planters usually required careful accounts from their overseers and often exercised the right to overrule their decisions.

The planter elite developed a paternalistic ideology to justify their rigorous insistence on the master-slave relationship. According to this ideology, each plantation was a family composed of both black and white. The master, as head of the plantation, was head of the family, and the mistress was his “helpmate.” The master was obligated to provide for all of his family, both black and white, and to treat them with humanity. In return, slaves were to work properly and do as they were told, as children would. Most elite slave owners spoke of their position of privilege as a duty and a burden. (Their wives were even more outspoken about the burdensome aspects of supervising slave labor, which they bore more directly than their husbands.) John C. Calhoun spoke for many slave owners when he described the plantation as “a little community” in which the master directed all operations so that the abilities and needs of every member, black and white, were “perfectly harmonized.” Convinced of their own benevolence, slave owners expected not only obedience, but gratitude from all members of their great “families.”

**THE PLANTATION MISTRESS**

The paternalistic model locked plantation mistresses into positions that bore heavy responsibility but carried no real authority. The difficulties experienced by these in some ways quite privileged women illustrate the way the master-slave relationship of a slave society affected every aspect of the personal life of slave owners.

Plantation mistresses spent most of their lives tending “family” members—including slaves—in illness and in childbirth, and supervising their slaves’ performance of such daily tasks as cooking, housecleaning, weaving, and sewing. In addition, the plantation mistress often had to spend hours, even days, of behind-the-scenes preparation for the crowds of guests she was expected to welcome in her role as elegant and gracious hostess.

Despite the reality of the plantation mistress’s daily supervision of an often extensive household, she did not rule it; her husband did. The plantation master
was the source of authority to whom wife, children, and slaves were expected to look for both rewards and punishments. A wife who challenged her husband or sought more independence from him threatened the entire paternalistic system of control. After all, if she were not dependent and obedient, why should slaves be?

In addition to their strictly defined family roles, many southern women also suffered deeply from their isolation from friends and kin. Sometimes the isolation of life on rural plantations could be overcome by long visits, but women with many small children and extensive responsibilities found it difficult to leave. Plantation masters, on the other hand, often traveled widely for political and business reasons. John C. Calhoun, for example, who spoke so earnestly about the plantation community, spent much less time than his wife on the family plantation, Fort Hill. He spent years in Washington as a politician, while Floride Calhoun, who had accompanied him in his early career, remained at Fort Hill after the first five of their ten children were born.

Although on every plantation, black women served as nursemaids to young white children and as lifelong maids to white women, usually accompanying them when they moved as brides into their own homes, there are few historical examples of genuine sympathy and understanding of black women by white women of the slave-owning class. Few of the latter seemed to understand the sadness, frustration, and despair often experienced by their lifelong maids, who were forced to leave their own husbands and children to serve in their mistresses’ new homes. A number of southern women did rail against “the curse of slavery,” but few meant the inhumanity of the system; most were actually complaining about the extra work entailed by housekeeping with slaves. As one plantation mistress explained, “Slaves are a continual source of more trouble to housekeepers than all other things, vexing them, and causing much sin. We are compelled to keep them in ignorance and much responsibility rests on us.” Years later, many former slaves remembered their mistresses as being kinder than their masters, but fully a third of such accounts mention cruel whippings and other punishments by white women.

**Coercion and Violence**

There were generous and benevolent masters, but most large slave owners believed that constant discipline and coercion were necessary to make slaves work hard. Some slave owners used their slaves with great brutality. Owners who killed slaves were occasionally brought to trial (and usually acquitted), but no legal action was taken in the much more frequent cases of excessive punishment, general abuse, and rape. All southern slave owners, not just those who experienced the special tensions of new and isolated plantations in the Old Southwest, were engaged in a constant battle of wills with their slaves that owners frequently resolved by violence.

One of the most common violations of the paternalistic code of behavior (and of southern law) was the sexual abuse of female slaves by their masters. Usually, masters forcibly raped their women slaves at will, and slave women had little hope of defending themselves from these attacks. Sometimes, however, long-term intimate relationships between masters and slaves developed, such as the one that apparently existed between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings.

It was rare for slave owners to publicly acknowledge fathering slave children or to free these children, and black women and their families were helpless to protest their treatment. Equally silenced was the master’s
wife, who for reasons of modesty as well as her subordinate position was not supposed to notice either her husband’s infidelity or his flagrant crossing of the color lines. As Mary Boykin Chestnut, wife of a South Carolina slave owner, vehemently confided to her diary: “God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system. . . . Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines, and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.”

An owner could do what he chose on his plantation, and his sons grew up expecting to do likewise. Unchecked power is always dangerous, and it is not surprising that it was sometimes misused. Perhaps the most surprising thing about the southern slave system is how much humanity survived despite the intolerable conditions. For that, most of the credit goes not to white paternalism, but to African Americans and the communities they created under slavery.

THE DEFENSE OF SLAVERY

“S
lavery informs all our modes of life, all our habits of thought, lies at the basis of our social existence, and of our political faith,” announced South Carolina planter William Henry Trescot in 1850, explaining why the South would secede from the Union before giving up slavery. Slavery bound white and black southerners together in tortuous ways that eventually led, as Trescot had warned, to the Civil War. Population figures tell much of the story of the complex relationship between whites and blacks: of the 12 million people who lived in the South in 1860, 4 million were slaves. Indeed, in the richest agricultural regions, such as the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia and parts of the black belt, black people outnumbered whites. These sheer numbers of African Americans reinforced white people’s perpetual fears of black retaliation for the violence exercised by the slave master. Every rumor of slave revolts, real or imagined, kept those fears alive. The basic question was this: What might slaves do if they were not controlled? Thomas Jefferson summed up this dilemma: “We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.”

DEVELOPING PROSLAVERY ARGUMENTS

Once the cotton boom began in the 1790s, southerners increasingly sought to justify slavery. They found justifications for slavery in the Bible and in the histories of Greece and Rome, both slave-owning societies. The strongest defense was a legal one: the Constitution allowed slavery. Though never specifically mentioned in the final document, slavery had been a major issue between North and South at the Constitutional Convention in 1787. In the end, the delegates agreed that seats in the House of Representatives would be apportioned by counting all of the white population and three-fifths of the black people (Article I, Section 2, Paragraph 3); they included a clause requiring the return of runaway slaves who had crossed state lines (Article IV, Section 2, Paragraph 3); and they agreed that Congress could not abolish the international slave trade for twenty years (Article I, Section 9, Paragraph 1). There was absolutely no question: the Constitution did recognize slavery.

The Missouri Crisis of 1819–20 alarmed most southerners, who were shocked by the evidence of widespread antislavery feeling in the North. South Carolinians viewed Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy, occurring only two years after the Missouri...
debate, as an example of the harm that irresponsible northern antislavery talk could cause. In the wake of the Vesey conspiracy, Charlestonians turned their fear and anger outward by attempting to seal off the city from dangerous outside influences. In December 1822, the South Carolina legislature passed a bill requiring that all black seamen be seized and jailed while their ships were in Charleston harbor. Initially most alarmed about free black people from Haiti, Charlestonians soon came to believe that northern free black seamen were spreading antislavery ideas among their slaves.

After Nat Turner’s revolt in 1831, Governor John Floyd of Virginia blamed the uprising on “Yankee peddlers and traders” who supposedly told slaves that “all men were born free and equal.” Thus northern antislavery opinion and the fear of slave uprisings were firmly linked in southern minds. This extreme reaction, which northerners viewed as paranoid, stemmed from the basic nature of a slave society: anything that challenged the master-slave relationship was viewed as a basic threat to the entire system.

**After Nat Turner**

In 1831, the South began to close ranks in defense of slavery. Several factors contributed to this regional solidarity. Nat Turner’s revolt was important, linked as it was in the minds of many southerners with antislavery agitation from the North. Militant abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison began publishing the *Liberator*, the newspaper that was to become the leading antislavery organ, in 1831. The British gave notice that they would soon abolish slavery on the sugar plantations of the West Indies, an action that seemed to many southerners much too close to home. Emancipation for West Indian slaves came in 1834. Finally, 1831 was the year before the Nullification Crisis (see Chapter 11) was resolved. Although the other southern states did not support the hotheaded South Carolinians who called for secession, they did sympathize with the argument that the federal government had no right to interfere with a state’s special interest (namely, slavery). Following the crisis, other southern states joined with South Carolina in the belief that the only effective way to prevent other federal encroachment was through the militant and vehement defense of slavery.

In 1830s, southern states began to barricade themselves against “outside” antislavery propaganda. In 1835, a crowd broke into a Charleston post office, made off with bundles of antislavery literature, and set an enormous bonfire, to fervent state and regional acclaim. By 1835, every southern legislature had tightened its laws concerning control of slaves. For example, they tried to blunt the effect of abolitionist literature by passing laws forbidding slaves to learn to read. In only three border states—Kentucky, Tennessee, and Maryland—did slave literacy remain legal. By 1860, it is estimated, only 5 percent of all slaves could read. Slaves were forbidden to gather for dances, religious services, or any kind of organized social activity without a white person present. They were forbidden to have whiskey because it might encourage them toward revolt. The penalty for plotting insurrection was death. Other laws made manumission illegal and placed even more restrictions on the lives of free black people. In
many areas, slave patrols were augmented and became more vigilant in restricting African American movement and communication between plantations.

In 1836, southerners introduced a “gag rule” in Washington to prevent congressional consideration of abolitionist petitions. Attempts were made to stifle all open debate about slavery within the South; dissenters were pressured to remain silent or to leave. A few, such as James G. Birney and Sarah and Angelina Grimké of South Carolina, left for the North to act on their antislavery convictions, but most chose silence. Among those under the greatest pressure to conform were Christian ministers, many of whom professed to believe that preaching obedience to slaves was a vital part of making slavery a humane system.

In addition to fueling fears of slave rebellions, the growing abolitionist sentiment of the 1830s raised the worry that southern opportunities for expansion would be cut off. Southern politicians painted melodramatic pictures of a beleaguered white South hemmed in on all sides by “fanatic” antislavery states, while at home, southerners were forced to contemplate what might happen when they had “to let loose among them, freed from the wholesome restraints of patriarchal authority . . . an idle, worthless, profligate set of free negroes” whom they feared would “prowl the . . . streets at night and [haunt] the woods during the day armed with whatever weapons they could lay their hands on.”

Finally, southern apologists moved beyond defensiveness to develop proslavery arguments. One of the first to do this was James Henry Hammond, elected a South Carolina congressman in 1834. In 1836, Hammond delivered a major address to Congress in which he denied that slavery was evil. Rather, he claimed, it had produced “the highest toned, the purest, best organization of society that has ever existed on the face of the earth.” Later, in his most famous speech, Hammond claimed that a slave class—a “mudsill,” he called it—was a social necessity.

In 1854, another southern spokesman, George Fitzhugh, asserted that “the negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and, in some sense, the freest people in the world” because all the responsibility for their care was borne by concerned white masters. Fitzhugh contrasted southern paternalism with the heartless individualism that ruled the lives of northern “wage slaves.” Northern employers did not take care of their workers, Fitzhugh claimed, because “selfishness is almost the only motive of human conduct in free society, where every man is taught that it is his first duty to change and better his pecuniary situation.” In contrast, Fitzhugh argued, southern masters and their slaves were bound together by a “community of interests.”

**Changes in the South**

In spite of these defensive and repressive proslavery measures, which made the South seem monolithic in northern eyes, there were some surprising indicators of dissent. One protest occurred in the Virginia state legislature in 1832, when nonslave-holding delegates, alarmed by the Nat Turner rebellion, forced a two-week debate on the merits of gradual abolition. In the final vote, abolition was defeated 73 to 58. Although the subject was never raised again, this debate was a startling indicator of frequently unvoiced doubts about slavery that existed in the South.

But slavery was not a static system. From the 1830s on, financial changes increasingly underlined class differences among southern whites. It was much harder to become a slaveholder: from 1830 to 1860, slave owners declined from 36 to 25 percent of the population. In 1860, the average slaveholder was ten times as wealthy as the average nonslaveholder. A major reason for the shrinking number of slave owners and their increased wealth was the rapidly increasing price of slaves: a “prime field hand” was worth more than $1,500 in 1855. Such prices caused the internal
slave trade to flourish: during the 1850s, slave owners from the Upper South sold some 250,000 slaves to the Lower South for handsome profits. By 1850, in the Chesapeake (Virginia, Maryland and Delaware), where American slavery had its origins, the percentage of slave owners had fallen to 28 percent, while the comparable figures for Louisiana and Mississippi were 45 percent. Agriculture was diversifying in the Upper South, while the plantation system flourished in the Lower South, as the fact that 85 percent of the great planters with more than 100 slaves lived there indicated. Such differences in the extent of slaveholding between Upper and Lower South threatened regional political unity (see Map 10-4).

Another alarming trend was the disintegration of the slave system in southern cities. The number of urban slaves was greatly decreased because plantation owners deeply distrusted the effect of cities on the institution of slavery. Urban slaves led much more informed lives than rural ones and were often in daily contact with free blacks and urban poor whites. Many slaves were hired out and a number even hired out their own time, making them nearly indistinguishable from northern “free labor.” Other urban slaves worked in commercial and industrial enterprises in jobs that were nearly indistinguishable from those of whites. Planters viewed all of these changes with suspicion, yet they also had to acknowledge that southern cities were successful and bustling centers of commerce.

Economic changes adversely affected poor whites and yeomen as well. Increased commercialization of agriculture (other than cotton) led to higher land prices that made it harder for poor whites to buy or rent land. Extensive railroad building in

![Map 10-4 Population Patterns in the South, 1850](image)

In South Carolina and Mississippi, the enslaved African American population outnumbered the white population; in four other Lower South states, the percentage was above 40 percent. These ratios frightened many white southerners. White people also feared the free black population, though only three states in the Upper South and Louisiana had free black populations of over 3 percent. Six states had free black populations that were so small (less than 1 percent) as to be statistically insignificant.
This horrifying image of the badly scarred back of a former slave named Gordon appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in July 1863. He was an escaped slave who entered Union lines in Baton Rouge in March 1863, arriving in the bedraggled condition shown on the left. Under medical examination, he revealed the scars from a whipping three months earlier. As the third picture shows, he promptly joined the Union Army.

Although abolitionist literature frequently described brutal whippings endured by slaves, few people in the North can have seen such graphic examples before the publication of this article in 1863. Since that time, the picture of Gordon’s back has frequently been used to illustrate the violence of the slave system. There is no question that whipping was a frequent punishment in the slaveholding South and that masters, mistresses, and overseers, in fits of temper, whipped harshly. Although we do not know if Gordon’s scars were representative, the image makes it impossible to deny the reality of brutality in the slave system.

*AFTER VIEWING* this image, how seriously would you consider claims that southern slavery was a benign, paternalistic system?

up-country regions during the boom of the 1850s ended the isolation of many yeomen, exposing them for the first time to the temptations and dangers of the market economy. While slave owners grew increasingly worried about threats from the abolitionist and capitalist North, yeomen worried about local threats to their independence from banks, railroads, and activist state governments. In North Carolina, disputes between slave owners and nonslaveholders erupted in print in 1857, when Hinton Helper published an attack on slavery in a book titled *The Impending Crisis*. His protest was an indicator of the growing tensions between the haves and the have-nots in the South. Equally significant, though, Helper’s book was published in New York, where he was forced to move once his views became known.

In spite of these signs of tension and dissent, the main lines of the southern argument were drawn in the 1830s and remained fixed thereafter. The defense of slavery stifled debate within the South, prevented a search for alternative labor systems, and narrowed the possibility of cooperation in national politics. In time, it made compromise impossible.

**CONCLUSION**

The amazing growth of cotton production after 1793 transformed the South and the nation. Physically, the South expanded explosively westward: in all, seven southern states were admitted to the Union between 1800 and 1845. Cotton production fastened the slave system of labor upon the region. Although the international slave trade was abolished in 1808, the internal slave trade flourished, with devastating effects on African American families. Nationally, the profitable cotton trade fueled economic development and provided much of the original capital for the infant factory system of the North. Cotton production was based on the labor
of African American slaves, who built strong communities under extremely difficult circumstances. The cohesion of African American families and the powerful faith of African American Christianity were the key community elements that bred a spirit of endurance and resistance. White southerners, two-thirds of whom did not own slaves, denied their real dependence on slave labor by claiming equality in white skin privilege, while slave owners boasted of their own paternalism. But the extreme fear generated by a handful of slave revolts, the exaggerated reaction to the race mixing of Natchez-Under-the-Hill, and the growing number of free African Americans in many areas gave the lie to white claims of benevolence. In the 1830s, the South defensively closed ranks against real and perceived threats to the slave system. In this sense, the white South was nearly as trapped as the African American slaves they claimed to control. And in its growing concern for the defense of the slave system, the South’s role in national politics began to change, as we shall see in the next chapter.

AP* DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Directions: This exercise requires you to construct a valid essay that directly addresses the central issues of the following question. You will have to use facts from the documents provided and from the chapter to prove the position you take in your thesis statement.

Devise an essay that explains how the institution of slavery affected the individual lives of two of the following groups. Make certain that you deal as much as possible with the impact upon both genders and where applicable, upon children.

(1) White plantation gentry
(2) African Americans, both slave and free
(3) Free whites, both yeomen farmers and poor whites

Document A

Read the description of slave life given by Fanny Kemble below, the description by the former slave of children on page 323, and remember the description of slave cunningness given by Jermain Loguen and Frederick Douglass (pages 323–324).

These cabins consist of one room, about twelve feet by fifteen, with a couple of closets smaller and closer than the state-rooms of a ship, divided off from the main room and each other by rough wooden partitions, in which the inhabitants sleep. They have almost all of them a rude bedstead, with the gray moss of the forests for mattress, and filthy, pestilential-looking blankets for covering. Two families (sometimes eight and ten in number) reside in one of these huts, which are mere wooden frames pinned, as it were, to the earth by a brick chimney outside.

- What lessons would a slave child immediately learn in such an environment?
- What was required for a slave child, a slave mother or father to survive in this environment?

Look at the painting on page 325 of a secret slave gathering in the forest and on the same page the account of a Texas slave of secret slave prayer meetings in the “hollow.”

- What would motivate slaves to hold such secret meetings?
- Did slaves develop an independent social culture in the slave quarters and in such secret meetings?

Suggested Answer:
Successful essays should note:
- The description of slave cunningness given by Jermain Loguen and Frederick Douglass (p. 323–324)
- The circumstances of slave life given by Fanny Kemble and the description of children by the former slave (p. 323 and Document A)
- Techniques for survival by men, women, and children within slave society (p. 322–325 and Document A)
- The gatherings for funerals of secret slave societies, often in forests, to illustrate the “implied rebuke to the masters’ care of living slaves” (Image and description p. 325)
- The role of prayer and Black Christianity as an “enabling religion” to help slaves to survive, allowing spiritual freedom that white people could not destroy (p. 325–326 and Document A)
- Nat Turner’s revolt (p. 327 and Document A)
- Differences between urban and rural slaves (Document A)
- The kind of society free blacks developed, the dangers free blacks in the South faced, and how they threatened the very existence of slavery in the South (Document A)
- The distribution of slave ownership in the South in 1830 (p. 332 and Document B)
CHAPTER 10  THE SOUTH AND SLAVERY, 1790s–1850s

• The dependence of yeoman farmers upon the plantation system (p. 330–331 and Document B)
• How the crops of yeoman farmers affected the independence of yeoman farm families (p. 330 and Document B)
• The population distribution of the black population and the opportunity for an African American culture to emerge separate, and perhaps secret, from whites (Map 10-4 and Document B)
• Comparisons in the treatment of African Americans as depicted in Asa A. Stone's letter; the drawing of the coffle of slaves being marched to the Lower South; and the photography of the former Louisiana slave, Gordon (p. 316, 334, and Document C)
• Solomon Northrup's memory of slavery (p. 319)
• Arguments for and against slavery as depicted in the southern justification for the treatment of slaves compared with the lives of the northern "wage slaves" (p. 336 and Document C)
• Role of the plantation mistress (Image and description p. 333 and Document C)
• How the possession of such total power affects the attitudes and lives of the masters, mistresses, and overseers within the plantation system (Document C)
• How slaves coped with their environments and remained together (p. 572 and Document C)

Look at the Nat Turner drawing on page 327.

• What role did the African American church play in the lives of both free blacks and African American slaves?
• How did the lives of urban and rural slaves differ?
• Where did Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey plot their revolts so feared by southern whites?
• What kind of society did freed blacks develop in Charleston, Savannah, and Natchez?
• What dangers faced free blacks in the South?
• Although they were free, how were they threatened by the very existence of slavery in the South?

DOCUMENT B

Look at the chart on slave ownership in the South in 1830 (page 332).

• What percentage of whites owned slaves in the South?
• Although most white yeoman farmers did not own slaves, how were they dependent upon the plantation as in the case of those in Georgia?

Look at the painting of a yeoman farm in Texas on page 330.

• Did the yeoman farmer raise cotton or other crops?
• How did this affect the independence of yeoman farm families?

Look at the map of white/black populations by state on page 338.

• Where the black population is in the majority as in Mississippi or South Carolina, or very large as in Louisiana, Georgia, and Florida, what are the opportunities for an African American culture to emerge separate and perhaps secret from whites?

DOCUMENT C

An overseer from Louisiana. . . plumes himself on being able to manage negroes with but little whipping. He had twenty-two hands, and he says he did not whip more than twelve or fifteen times during picking season. He told me of whipping "one resolute fellow" at the commencement of picking. It was for stealing a few pounds of cotton to put in his daily mess. He first paddled him with a handsaw till he blistered him thoroughly, then whipped him, he thought, about one hundred and fifty lashes, and wound up by rubbing him with salt. Rubbing with salt and red pepper is very common after a severe whipping. The object, they say, is primarily to make it smart, but add, that it is the best thing that can be done to prevent mortification and make the gashes heal. . .

Last summer, the nurse of a family with whom I am very well acquainted, was, for some misdemeanor, put into the stocks and kept there all night. The next morning feeling more sulky than subdued, she took occasion to throw a large dish of water on one of the children. The master was enraged—sent for four hands from the quarters—had her tied down, and the master's daughter, who gave me the information, says she counted two hundred and fifty lashes. A few days ago the mistress, who is a respectable member of the Presbyterian church in Natchez, fancied that this same nurse made too free in correcting the children. She flew into a passion—seized the broomstick—struck her three times over the head and broke it. She then snatched up a pine stick, about an inch square and three feet long—struck her three times over the head with that and broke it. Such occurrences as these are abundant. Northern free house-servants would hardly be willing to exchange their present treatment for such usage. . .

—Asa A. Stone to the Rev. Joshua Leavitt, editor of the N.Y. Evangelist, May 24, 1835
Stone was a northerner who traveled south to teach. He was shocked by what he saw on the plantations of the Lower South, especially Mississippi and Louisiana. The New York branch of the American Anti-Slavery Society reprinted his letter in 1836. Compare this account to the drawing on page 316 of the coffle of slaves being marched to the Lower South. Compare the drawing and the narrative to the photo of the former slave shown on page 334. Read the description of slavery in 1854 (page 319) and Solomon Northrup's memory on page 319. Now look at the 1841 southern version of the treatment of slaves compared to the lives of northern "wage slaves" (page 336). In his letters, Stone referred to the constant pro-slavery argument in the South that their slaves were better off than northern workers. Look at the painting of the woman on horseback at the Nitta Yuma plantation in 1842 (page 333) and compare it with the description of plantation life on the same page.

- How would the possession of such total power affect the attitudes and lives of the masters, mistresses, and overseers of these plantations?
- How would slaves come to deal with such an environment?
- How would witnessing their mother or father whipped in the manner that Stone describes affect slave children?
- If wealth and status are determined by the ownership of land and slaves, how would this affect the status of the yeoman farmers or the landless poor white in this society?

Look at the photo of an African American family on page 572.

- How did five generations of African Americans survive slavery and remain together as this one did?

AP* PREP TEST

Select the response that best answers the question or best completes the sentence.

1. In the years following the American Revolution:
   a. southerners began to use enslaved Africans to grow the agricultural products that created tremendous wealth in the region.
   b. the slave system declined until the Louisiana Purchase provided the nation with the area that became the Cotton Kingdom.
   c. large-scale cotton production and the slave system on which it depended made the South quite different than the North.
   d. northerners opposed slavery and begin to insist that the government take steps to end the system in the new nation.
   e. wealthy southern plantation owners were resented for their dominating wealth and power, fellow southerners called for an end to slavery.

2. A crucial element in the rapid growth of cotton production between 1790 and 1840:
   a. was the large number of textile mills being built in the southern United States.
   b. was the development of mechanical reapers to harvest the valuable crop.
   c. was the expansion of the United States into the huge state of Texas.
   d. was the production output due to new farming techniques and temperate weather.
   e. was the technological innovation that occurred in Great Britain.

3. As a result of large-scale cotton production in the South:
   a. capital in the region was concentrated in land and slaves.
   b. most southerners came to own large numbers of slaves.

Answer Key

1-C 4-E 7-D 10-B 13-A
2-E 5-B 8-C 11-B 14-C
3-A 6-D 9-E 12-D
c. a sophisticated infrastructure emerged to help market the crop.
d. the region was so wealthy that there were no poor white southerners.
e. mass transportation and industry was required and built in the South.

4. In the cotton-producing South:
a. most slaves lived among small groups of slaves on small farms.
b. the majority of slaves lived on plantations located near the Ohio River.
c. the majority of southerners owned at least fifty slaves per family.
d. demand for labor led to the establishment of an international slave trade.
e. a viable but often vulnerable African-American community developed.

5. The organization of slave labor on large plantations came to be known as:
a. the three-field system.
b. the gang system.
c. the task system.
d. the American system.
e. the feudal system.

6. Within the slaves’ world:
a. everybody was always treated in exactly the same way.
b. all the men grew cotton and all of the women cooked.
c. the only white person they had contact with was the master.
d. a diversity of occupations and circumstances developed.
e. pregnant slaves were granted their freedom after childbirth.

7. One result of the slaves’ existence was:
a. that they never really developed a sense of family or kinship.
b. small families that resulted from malnutrition and poor health.
c. the emergence of families based solely on African traditions.
d. the development of strong familial and non-kinship relationships.
e. legalized marriages encouraged slaves to have increased birthrates.

8. Black Christianity was a religion that:
a. didn’t really develop until the Civil War and the emancipation of the slaves.
b. differed very little from Christianity as practiced by white Americans.
c. provided a sense of spiritual freedom that profoundly shaped slave culture.
d. emphasized the Biblical teachings of honoring and obeying those in authority.
e. promoted a black rebellion and advocated militancy against whites.

9. In the South during the years prior to 1850:
a. free African Americans gained equality only by relocating to the Western territories.
b. all the African Americans were held as either slaves or indentured servants.
c. free African Americans enjoyed social equality but did not have the right to vote.
d. the only economic opportunities available to free African Americans were as farmers.
e. free African Americans experienced tremendous social and racial discrimination.

10. From 1790 until the 1840s:
a. most southerners owned either a large or small plantation, and the planter class was the largest to own slaves.
b. the largest group of slave owners were small independent farmers hoping to improve their economic circumstances.
c. although few southerners owned large numbers of slaves, almost all white males owned at least one bondsman.
d. most slaves lived on small farms that operated with just a few slaves, who usually worked alongside their owners.
e. most large slave owners rented out their slaves to small farmers to assist land cultivation and increase production.

11. The ideology that southerners developed to rationalize their treatment of slaves was:
a. nihilism.
b. paternalism.
c. rationalism.
d. utilitarianism.
e. absolutism.
12. One of the most striking things about the southern slave system is:
   a. just how compassionate most white people really were to slaves.
   b. that there has never been a more brutal example of human behavior.
   c. the slaves never expressed any anger toward or resistance to slavery.
   d. how much humanity survived despite the awful brutality of slavery.
   e. the open and public information regarding slave family genealogy.

13. Beginning in the 1830s:
   a. the defense of slavery became the overwhelming current in southern society.
   b. more and more southerners came to see slavery as morally reprehensible.
   c. an open debate over slavery became the defining characteristic of southern politics.
   d. an increasing number of southerners sought ways to resolve their differences with the North.
   e. southern slave owners began emancipating their slaves to appease social pressures from the North.

14. As the United States approached the 1850s:
   a. most southerners had lost faith in the Union and were ready to secede from the nation.
   b. the South regained the political influence it had enjoyed earlier in the nation’s history.
   c. because of its commitment to slavery the South’s role in national politics began to change.
   d. most southerners realized that the slave system was antiquated and would soon end.
   e. the South began a defense system to protect itself from northern hostility to slavery.