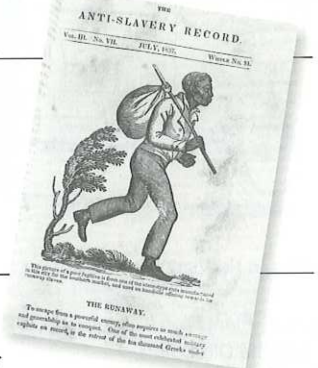
11

SLAVERY AND THE OLD SOUTH
1800–1860

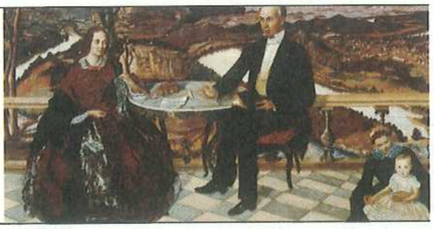
HOW DID the increasing demand for cotton make slavery highly profitable in the Lower South?


THE
ANTI-SLAVERY RECORD.
Vol. III. No. VII.
JULY, 1837.
Whole No. 31.
THE RUNAWAY.

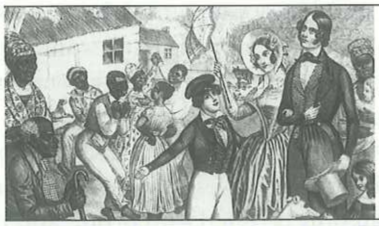
WHAT CAUSED the decline of slavery after 1800 in the Upper South?

SLAVE COLLAR
RICHMOND VIRGINIA
SLAVE MARKET
THIS ANTE-BELLUM SLAVE COLLAR HAS AN OLD TAG ATTACHED FROM AN EARLY HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION. A RARE AND CHOICE RELIC FROM EARLY VIRGINIA.

WHAT WERE the living and working conditions of most slaves?



WHAT WERE the divisions in free white society regarding slavery?



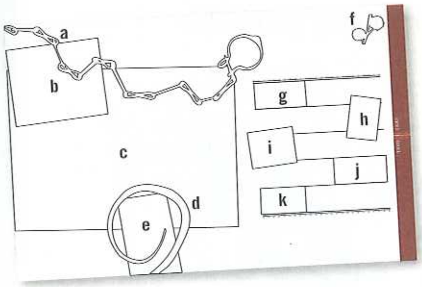
WHAT WERE Southern defenses of slavery?

Credits

- **g.** The New York Historical Society. "Returning from the Cotton Fields in South Carolina," ca.1860, stereograph by Barbard, negative number 47843. Collection of the New York Historical Society.
- **j.** James Cameron (1817-1882), Colonel and Mrs. James A. Whiteside, Son Charles and Servants," Oil on Canvas; c.1858-1859. Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, TN.

IMAGE KEY

for pages 264–265



- **a.** A chain used to tie together gangs of slaves.
- **b.** "The Shadow" Plantation of Louisiana.
- **c.** "Slavery and the Old South, 1800–1860." A Slave auction in Virginia, 1861. English engraving.
- **d.** A whip of coiled rope with a wooden handle; used on slaves.
- **e.** An advertisement promoting the auction of eight black slaves together with miscellaneous inanimate property belonging to a North Carolina gentleman.
- **f.** Fluffy white, mature cotton bolls on the stem of a plant.
- **g.** African American slave / farm workers carry sacks of cotton on their heads while leaving a South Carolina plantation field. "Returning from the Cotton Fields in South Carolina," ca. 1860.
- **h.** A runaway slave is depicted on the frontispiece of the Anti Slavery Record of 1837.
- **i.** A slave collar with an attached tag from the slave market in Richmond, Virginia.
- **j.** Colonel and Mrs. James A. Whiteside, son Charles, and servants by James Cameron. A wealthy colonial family and two servants sit on a posh veranda with a checkered floor overlooking an expansive rugged landscape.
- **k.** Pro slavery cartoon, 1841.

> *Had Mrs. Wheeler condemned me to the severest corporal punishment, or exposed me to be sold in the public slave market in Wilmington [N.C.] I should probably have resigned myself with apparent composure to her cruel behests. But when she sought to force me into a compulsory union with a man whom I could only hate and despise it seemed that rebellion would be a virtue, that duty to myself and my God actually required it, and that whatever accidents or misfortunes might attend my flight nothing could he worse than what threatened my stay.*
>
> *Marriage like many other blessings I considered to be especially designed for the free, and something that all the victims of slavery should avoid as tending essentially to perpetuate that system. Hence to all overtures of that kind from whatever quarter they might come I had invariably turned a deaf ear. I had spurned domestic ties not because my heart was hard, but because it was my unalterable resolution never to entail slavery on any human being. And now when I had voluntarily renounced the society of those I might have learned to love should I be compelled to accept one, whose person, and speech, and manner could not fail to be ever regarded by me with loathing and disgust. Then to be driven in to the fields beneath the eye and lash of the brutal overseer, and those miserable huts, with their promiscuous crowds of dirty, obscene and degraded objects, for my home I could not, I would not bear it.*
>
> *—Hannah Crafts*

Henry Louis Gates, J., ed., *The Bondwoman's Narrative* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), pp. 206–207.

HANNAH CRAFTS was the name adopted by an African-American woman after escaping from slavery in the late 1850s. This passage is from *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, the only known novel written by a female black slave. Crafts was probably a house slave of John Hill Wheeler of North Carolina who fled North in the spring of 1857, and merged into the black middle class of southern New Jersey. As a fugitive slave in the North, Crafts risked recapture at any time prior to the outbreak of the Civil War. Her decision not to publish her autobiographical slave narrative might well have been based on the fear that it would reveal her whereabouts to an owner intent on reclaiming her. Among other details the novels reveals the brutal living conditions that field slaves had to endure.

Knowing that masters frequently violated the sanctity of slave marriages and could keep any resulting children as slaves, she believed that all slaves should remain celibate: "Marriage can only be filled with profit, and honor, and advantage by the free." Triggering her decision to flee was Mrs. Wheeler's demand that she "marry" the field hand Bill—that is, submit to being raped by a man she despised and to living in the squalor of the slave quarter.

Only the system of slavery that Crafts described with revulsion makes it possible to speak of the antebellum South as a single region despite its geographical and cultural diversity. Black slavery created a bond among white Southerners and cast them in a common mold.

Slavery was also the source of the South's immense agricultural wealth, and the means by which white people controlled a large black minority. Slavery also frightened white Southerners with a vision of what might happen to them should they not protect their own personal liberties, including, paradoxically, the liberty to enslave African Americans. Because slavery was so embedded in Southern life and customs, white leadership reacted to mounting attacks on slavery after 1830 with an ever more defiant defense of the institution, which reinforced a growing sense among white Southerners that their values divided them from their fellow citizens in the Union.

The South of 1860 was much larger and more diverse than it had been in 1800, but it was also more uniformly committed to a single cash crop, cotton. King cotton provided the economic basis for Southern sectionalism. During its reign, however, regional differences emerged between the Lower South, where the linkage between cotton and slavery was strong, and the Upper South, where slavery was relatively less important and the economy more diversified.

THE LOWER SOUTH

South and west of South Carolina in 1800 stretched some of the best cotton land in the world. A long growing season, adequate rainfall, navigable rivers, and untapped fertility gave the Lower South—consisting in 1850 of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas—incomparable natural advantages for growing cotton. Ambitious white Southerners exploited these advantages by extending slavery after 1800 to the newer cotton lands that opened up in the Lower South. Cotton production and slavery thus went hand in hand.

HOW DID the increasing demand for cotton make slavery highly profitable in the Lower South?

COTTON AND SLAVES

Once the cotton gin removed the technical barrier to its commercial production, upland, or short-staple, cotton could be planted far inland, and small farmers could grow it profitably because it required no additional costs for machinery. As a result, after the 1790s, the production of short-staple cotton boomed. Moreover, like the South's other cash crops, upland cotton required fairly continuous tending throughout most of the year. Once the harvest was in—a time when Northern agricultural workers were laid off—the slaves cleared land, cut wood, and made repairs. The long workyear maximized the return on capital invested in slave labor.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE W

Cottonlandia Museum, Greenwood, Mississippi
www.gcgv.com/CL.html

The cultivation of cotton left plenty of time for slaves to grow food. The major grain in the Southern diet was corn, which needed little attention while cotton was being harvested and could be planted earlier or later than cotton during the long growing season. Surplus corn could be fed to hogs and converted into pork. Because almost all cotton farms and plantations also raised corn and hogs, the South virtually fed itself.

From its original base in South Carolina and Georgia, the cotton kingdom moved into the Old Southwest and then into Texas and Arkansas. As wasteful agricultural practices exhausted new lands, planters moved to the next cotton frontier farther west. Cotton output exploded from 73,000 bales (each bale weighed close to 500 pounds) in 1800 to over 2 million bales by midcentury, thanks to the fertility of virgin land and technological changes, such as improved seed varieties and steam-powered cotton gins. Slave labor accounted for more than 90 percent of cotton production.

Plantations, large productive units specializing in a cash crop and employing at least twenty slaves, were the leading economic institution in the Lower South. Planters were the most prestigious social group, and, though less than 5 percent of white families were in the planter class, they controlled more than 40 percent of the slaves, cotton output, and total agricultural wealth. Most had inherited

13–1
State v. Boon (1801)

or married into their wealth, but they could stay at the top of the South's class structure only by continuing to profit from slave labor.

Planters had the best land. The ownership of twenty or more slaves enabled planters to use gangs to do both routine and specialized agricultural work. This **gang system**, a cruder version of the division of labor that was being introduced in Northern factories, permitted a regimented pace of work that would have been impossible to impose on free agricultural workers. Teams of field hands, made up of women as well as men, had to work at a steady pace or else feel the lash. They were supervised by white overseers and black drivers, slaves selected for their management skills and agricultural knowledge.

"During two days' sail on the Alabama River from Mobile to Montgomery," noted a traveler in 1860, "I did not see so many houses standing together in any one spot as could be dignified with the appellation of village." The plantation districts of the Lower South stifled the growth of towns and the economic enterprise they fostered. Planters, as well as ordinary farmers, strove to be self-sufficient. The most significant economic exchange—exporting cotton—took place in international markets and was handled by specialized commission merchants in Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans. The Lower South had amassed great wealth, but most outsiders saw no signs of progress there.

THE PROFITS OF SLAVERY

The average rate of return on capital invested in a slave was about 10 percent a year, a rate that at least equaled what was available in alternative investments in the South or the North. The newer regions of the cotton kingdom in the Lower South, with the most productive land and the greatest commitment to plantation agriculture, consistently led the nation in per capita income.

The profitability of slavery ultimately rested on the enormous demand for cotton outside the South. This demand grew at about 5 percent a year in the first half of the nineteenth century. Demand was so strong that prices held steady at around 10 cents a pound in the 1850s even as Southern production of cotton doubled. Textile mills in Britain were always the largest market, but demand in continental Europe and the United States grew even faster after 1840.

QUICK REVIEW

Economy of Slavery

- Prices for average male field hand: $215 in 1815, $900 in 1860.
- Female slaves of childbearing age valued almost as highly as male field hands.
- Large and profitable regional market in slaves.

Prices for a male field hand rose from $250 in 1815 to $900 by 1860. The steady appreciation of prices meant that owners could sell some of their slaves and realize a profit over and above what they had already earned from the slaves' labor. Slave women of childbearing age were therefore valued nearly as much as male field hands. More than 800,000 slaves were moved between regions in the South from 1790 to 1860, and professional slave traders transported at least 60 percent of them. Drawing on lines of credit from banks, the traders paid cash for slaves, most of whom they bought from plantations in the Upper South. By selling these slaves in regional markets where demand had driven up the price, they turned a tidy profit. About half of all slave sales separated family members. Slave children born in the Upper South after 1820 stood a one-in-three chance of being sold during their lifetime.

As long as slaves employed in growing cash staples returned 10 percent a year, slave owners had little economic incentive to shift their capital resources into manufacturing or urban development. The South had one-third of the nation's population in 1860 but produced by value only 10 percent of the nation's manufacturing output. Fewer than one in ten Southerners lived in a city, compared to more than one in three Northeasterners and one in seven Midwesterners.

The Lower South had the smallest urban population and the fewest factories. Planters here were not opposed to economic innovations, but they feared social changes that might undermine the stability of slavery. Urbanization and industrialization both entailed such risks.

Gang system The organization and supervision of slave field hands into working teams on Southern plantations.

CHRONOLOGY

1790s	Large-scale conversions of slaves to Christianity begin.
1793	Eli Whitney patents the cotton gin.
1800	Gabriel Prosser leads a rebellion in Richmond, Virginia.
1808	Congress prohibits the African slave trade.
1811	Slaves rebel in Louisiana.
1816–1819	First cotton boom in the South.
1822	Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy fails in Charleston, South Carolina.
1831	Nat Turner leads a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia.
1831–1832	Virginia legislature debates and rejects gradual emancipation.
1832	Thomas R. Dew publishes the first full-scale defense of slavery.
1837–1845	Slavery issue divides Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists into separate sectional churches.
1845	Florida and Texas, the last two slave states, are admitted to the Union.
1850s	Cotton production doubles.
1857	Hinton R. Helper publishes *The Impending Crisis of the South.*

An editorial in the New Orleans *Crescent* charged that slaves in the city were "demoralized to a deplorable extent, all owing to the indiscriminate license and indulgence extended them by masters, mistresses, and guardians, and to the practice of *forging passes,* which has now become a regular business in New Orleans." Urban slaves, though scarcely free, enjoyed a degree of personal and economic independence that blurred the line between freedom and servitude.

Urban slaves were artisans, semi-skilled laborers, and domestics, and unlike their rural counterparts, they usually lived apart from their owners. They had much more freedom than field hands to move around and interact with white people and other black people. If they had a marketable skill, such as carpentry or tailoring, they could hire out their labor and retain some wages for themselves after reimbursing their owners. In short, the direct authority of the slave owner was less clear-cut in the town than in the country.

QUICK REVIEW

Urban Slavery

- 1820–1860: slaves decreased from 22 percent to 10 percent of urban population.
- Planters had a general ambivalence toward indusrialization.
- Many planters saw factory work as a threat to slave discipline.

From 1820 to 1860 slaves decreased from 22 percent to 10 percent of the urban population. This decline reflected both doubts about the stability of slavery in an urban setting and the large profits that slave labor earned for slave owners in the rural cotton economy.

The ambivalence of planters toward urban slavery also characterized their attitudes toward industrialization itself. Many planters considered free workers potential abolitionists.

But the use of slaves as factory operatives threatened slave discipline because an efficient level of production required special incentives. "Whenever a slave is made a mechanic, he is more than half freed," complained James Hammond, a South Carolina planter. Elaborating on Hammond's fears, a Virginian noted of slaves that he had hired out for industrial work: "They were worked hard, and had too much liberty, and were acquiring bad habits. They earned money by overwork, and spent it for whisky, and got a habit of roaming about and *taking care of themselves*; because, when they were not at work in the furnace, nobody looked out for them."

The anxieties of planters over industrialization and their refusal to shift capital from plantation agriculture to finance it ensured that manufacturing played only a minor economic role in the Lower South. Planters did invest in railroads and factories, but their holdings remained concentrated in land and slaves. They augmented their income by renting slaves to manufacturers and railroad contractors but were quick to recall these slaves to work on the plantations when needed.

THE UPPER SOUTH

WHAT CAUSED the decline of slavery after 1800 in the Upper South?

Climate and geography distinguished the Upper South from the Lower South. The eight slave states of the Upper South lay north of the best growing zones for cotton. The northernmost of these states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—bordered on free states and were known as the Border South. The four states south of them—Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas—constituted a middle zone. Slavery was entrenched in all these states, but it was less dominant than in the cotton South.

The key difference from which others followed was the suitability of the Lower South for growing cotton with gangs of slave labor. For the most part, the Upper South lacked the fertile soil and long growing season necessary for the commercial production of cotton, rice, or sugar (see Map 11–2). Consequently, the demand for slaves was less than in the Lower South. Percentages of slave ownership and of slaves in the overall population were roughly half those in the cotton South.

While the Lower South was undergoing a cotton boom after the War of 1812, the Upper South was mired in a long economic slump from which it did not emerge until the 1850s. The improved economy of the Upper South in the late antebellum period increasingly relied on free labor, a development that many cotton planters feared would splinter Southern unity in defense of slavery.

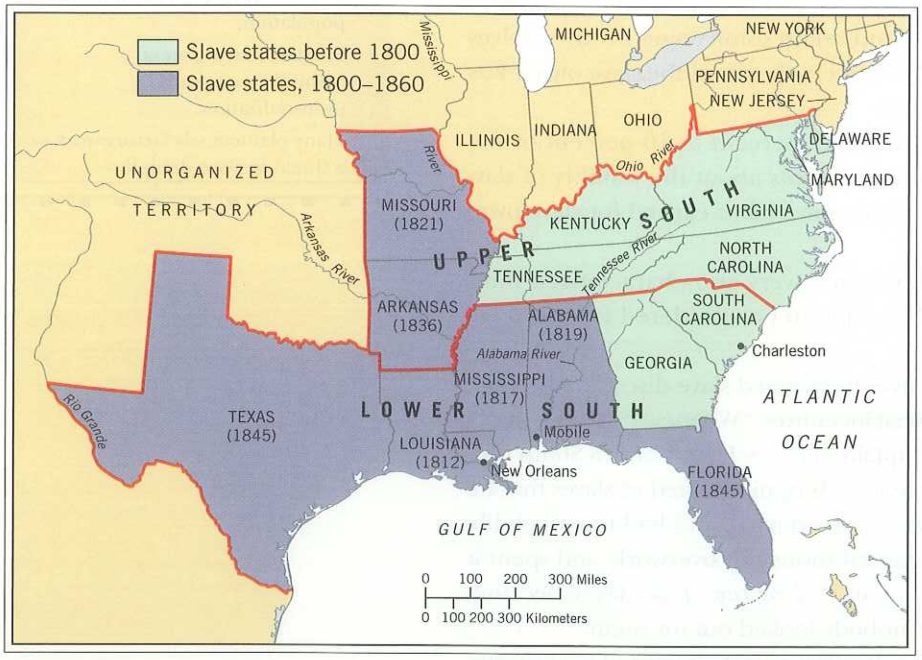
W WHERE TO LEARN MORE

★ Appalachian Museum of Berea College, Berea, Kentucky
www.museum.appstate.edu/exhibits/exhibits.shtml

A PERIOD OF ECONOMIC ADJUSTMENT

Upper South land values fell as farmers dumped their property and headed west. "Emigration is here raging with all the strength of fanaticism," wrote a Virginian in 1837, "and nothing else can be talked of but selling estates, at a great sacrifice, and '*packing off*' for the '*far west.*'"

MAP EXPLORATION
To explore an interactive version of this map, go to
http://www.prenhall.com/goldfield2/map11.1


🟩 Slave states before 1800
🟪 Slave states, 1800–1860
UNORGANIZED TERRITORY
Mississippi River
Arkansas River
Rio Grande
MICHIGAN
NEW YORK
PENNSYLVANIA
NEW JERSEY
ILLINOIS
INDIANA
OHIO
Ohio River
DELAWARE
MARYLAND
VIRGINIA
MISSOURI (1821)
KENTUCKY
UPPER SOUTH
Tennessee River
TENNESSEE
NORTH CAROLINA
ARKANSAS (1836)
ALABAMA (1819)
SOUTH CAROLINA
Alabama River
Charleston
GEORGIA
MISSISSIPPI (1817)
TEXAS (1845)
LOWER SOUTH
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Mobile
LOUISIANA (1812)
New Orleans
FLORIDA (1845)
GULF OF MEXICO
0 100 200 300 Miles
0 100 200 300 Kilometers

MAP 11–1
The Spread of Slavery: New Slave States Entering the Union, 1800–1850 Seven slave states entered the Union after 1800 as cotton production shifted westward.

WHY WAS cotton production especially suited to slave labor?

Agricultural reform emerged in the 1830s as one proposed solution to the economic crisis. Its leading advocate was Edmund Ruffin, a Virginia planter who tirelessly promoted the use of marl (shell deposits) to neutralize the overly acidic and worn-out soils of the Upper South. He also called for deeper plowing, systematic rotation of crops, and upgrading the breeding stock for animal husbandry.

Ruffin's efforts, and reform programs pushed in agricultural societies and fairs, met with some success but only a minority of farmers ever embraced reform. These were generally the well-educated planters who read the agricultural press and could afford to change their farming practices. The landscape of Ruffin's beloved Virginia Tidewater still provoked travelers to remark, as one did in the early 1850s, "I've heard 'em say out West that old Virginny was the mother of statesmen—reckon she must be about done, eh? This 'ere's about the *barrenest* look for a mother ever I see."

Although soil exhaustion and wasteful farming persisted, agriculture in the Upper South had revived by the 1850s. A rebound in the tobacco market accounted for part of this revival, but the growing profitability of general farming was responsible for most of it.

Particularly in the Border South, farmers and planters lessened their dependence on slave labor or on a single cash crop and practiced a thrifty, efficient agriculture geared to producing grain and livestock for urban markets. Western Maryland and the Shenandoah Valley and northern sections of Virginia grew wheat, and in the former tobacco districts of the Virginia and North Carolina Tidewater, wheat, corn, and garden vegetables became major cash crops.

Expanding urban markets and a network of internal improvements facilitated this transition to general farming. Although not far advanced by Northern standards, urbanization and industrialization in the Upper South were considerably greater than in the Lower South. By 1860, the Upper South accounted for three-fourths of the South's manufacturing capital and output and nearly all of its heavy industry. Canals and railroads linked cities and countryside in a denser transportation grid than in the Lower South.

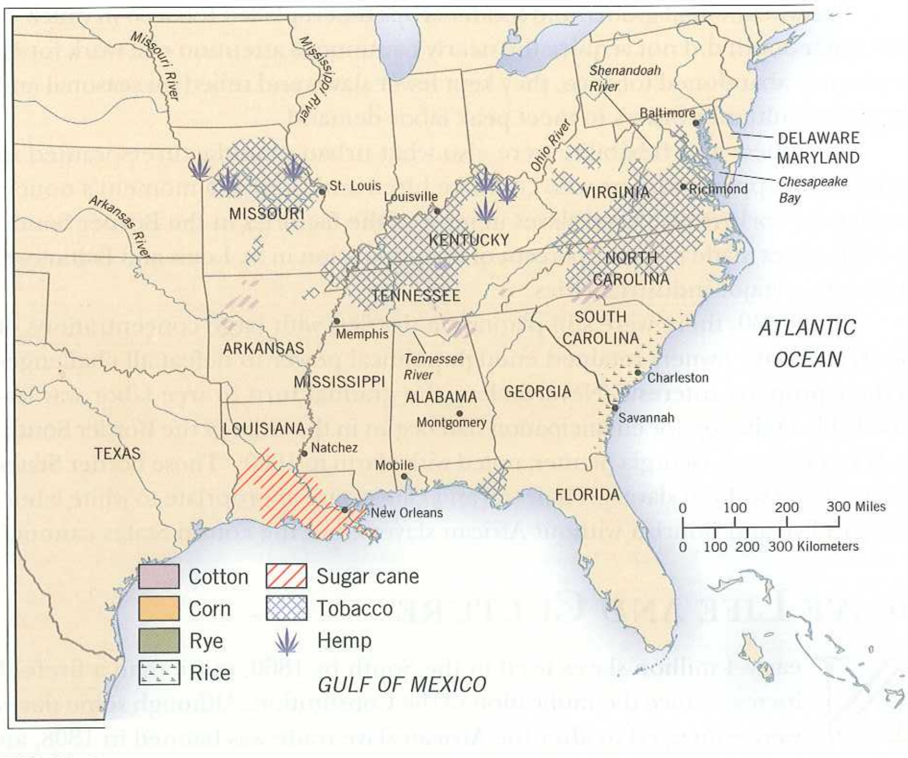
The Upper South at midcentury was gradually becoming less tied to plantation agriculture and slave labor. The rural majority increasingly prospered by growing foodstuffs for city dwellers and factory workers. The labor market for railroad construction

African American field hands return from a South Carolina cotton field in the 1860s. The economy of the prewar South was based on the production of cotton by a large enslaved labor force.

Collection of The New York Historical Society, negative number 47843

MAP EXPLORATION

To explore an interactive version of this map, go to **http://www.prenhall.com/goldfield2/map11.2**



Missouri River
Mississippi River
Shenandoah River
Baltimore
DELAWARE
MARYLAND
Chesapeake Bay
Ohio River
St. Louis
Louisville
VIRGINIA
Richmond
Arkansas River
MISSOURI
KENTUCKY
NORTH CAROLINA
TENNESSEE
SOUTH CAROLINA
Memphis
ATLANTIC OCEAN
ARKANSAS
Tennessee River
Charleston
MISSISSIPPI
ALABAMA
GEORGIA
Savannah
Montgomery
LOUISIANA
Natchez
TEXAS
Mobile
FLORIDA
New Orleans
0 100 200 300 Miles
0 100 200 300 Kilometers
Cotton
Corn
Rye
Rice
Sugar cane
Tobacco
Hemp
GULF OF MEXICO

MAP 11–2

Cotton and Other Crops in the South, 1860 Most of the Upper South was outside the cotton belt where the demand for slave labor was greatest.

and manufacturing work was strong enough to attract Northern immigrants and help reduce the loss of the native-born population that had migrated to other states.

The economic adjustment in the Upper South converted the labor surplus of the 1820s into a labor scarcity by the 1850s. "It is a fact," noted Edmund Ruffin in 1859, "that labor is greatly deficient in all Virginia, and especially in the rich western counties, which, for want of labor, scarcely yet yield in the proportion of one tenth of their capacity." Like many planters in the cotton states, Ruffin feared that free labor was about to replace scarce and expensive slave labor in Virginia and much of the Upper South.

THE DECLINE OF SLAVERY

Slavery was clearly growing weaker in the Upper South by the 1850s. The decline was most evident along the northern tier of the Upper South. By 1860, slaves in the Border South had dropped to 2 percent of the population in Delaware, 13 percent in Maryland, 19 percent in Kentucky, and 10 percent in Missouri. In Virginia from 1830 to 1860, slaves fell from 39 to 31 percent of the population.

Elsewhere in the Upper South, slavery was more or less holding its own by the 1850s. Only in Arkansas, whose alluvial lands along the Mississippi River offered a new frontier for plantation agriculture, was slavery growing rapidly. Still, slaves made up only 25 percent of the population of Arkansas in 1860 and were confined mainly to the southeastern corner of the state.

QUICK REVIEW

Forces Behind Decline

- Agricultural reform.
- Economic diversification.
- Expansion of urban manufacturing.

In every decade after 1820, the internal slave trade drained off about 10 percent of the slaves in the Upper South, virtually the entire natural increase. The sale of surplus slaves was a windfall for planters whose slaves had become an economic burden. This same windfall gave planters the capital to embark on agricultural reform and shift out of tobacco production. Investment capital in the Upper South was not flowing into slave property but into economic diversification that expanded urban manufacturing. Both of these structural changes increasingly put slavery at a competitive disadvantage against free labor.

The wheat, small grains, and fodder crops that replaced tobacco in much of the Upper South did not require the nearly continuous attention of a work force. As planters abandoned tobacco, they kept fewer slaves and relied on seasonal and cheap agricultural workers to meet peak labor demand.

Cheapness and flexibility were also what urban manufacturers wanted in their labor supply—workers who could be hired and fired at a moment's notice. Immigrant workers displaced slaves in most of the factories in the Border South. By 1860, slaves made up just 1 percent of the population in St. Louis and Baltimore, the South's major industrial cities.

After 1830, there were still plantation districts with large concentrations of slaves, and slave owners retained enough political power to defeat all challenges to their property interests. Nevertheless, the gradual turn to free labor was unmistakable. Agitation for emancipation had begun in the cities of the Border South. As Alfred Iveson, a Georgia planter, noted with alarm in 1860: "Those border States can get along without slavery. Their soil and climate are appropriate to white labor; they can live and flourish without African slavery; but the cotton States cannot."

SLAVE LIFE AND CULTURE

WHAT WERE the living and working conditions of most slaves?

Nearly 4 million slaves lived in the South by 1860, more than a fivefold increase since the ratification of the Constitution. Although some slaves were smuggled in after the African slave trade was banned in 1808, an excess of births over deaths accounted for nearly all of this population increase.

Almost all Southern slaves were thus native-born by the mid-nineteenth century. They were not Africans but African Americans, and they shared the common fate of bondage. In their family life and religious beliefs, slaves found the strength to sustain themselves under nearly intolerable circumstances.

WORK ROUTINES AND LIVING CONDITIONS

Each southern state had its own **slave codes**, laws defining the status of slaves and the rights of masters; the codes gave slave owners near-absolute power over their human property.

"The right of personal liberty in the slave is utterly inconsistent with the idea of slavery," wrote Thomas R. R. Cobb of Georgia in a legal treatise on slavery. Slaves could not own property, make contracts, possess guns or alcohol, legally marry (except in Louisiana), leave plantations without the owner's written permission, or testify against their masters or any other white person in a court of law. Many states also prohibited teaching a slave to read or write. The murder of a slave by a master was illegal, but in practice the law and community standards looked the other way if a disobedient slave was killed while being disciplined.

Whippings were the most common authorized punishment for slaves' infractions of plantation rules: twenty lashes on the bare back for leaving a plantation without a pass, one hundred lashes for writing a pass for another slave, and so on. Striking a master, committing arson, or conspiring to rebel were punishable by death.

The owner, as expressed in the Alabama Slave Code of 1852, had "the right to the time, labor and services of the slave." Most masters recognized that it was good business sense to feed, clothe, and house their slaves well enough to ensure productive labor and to encourage a family life that would enable the slave population to reproduce itself. However, planters rarely provided more than the bare necessities. The slaves lived mainly on rations of cornmeal, salt pork, vegetables they grew on small garden plots, and occasional catches of game and fish. This diet was often insufficient in vitamins and nutrients. As a result, diseases such as beriberi and pellagra were common. Slaves also faced frequent outbreaks of dysentery and cholera. According to one study, the life expectancy for slaves at birth was twenty-one to twenty-two years, roughly half that for whites.

WHERE TO LEARN MORE W

The Anacostia Museum Center for African-American History, Washington, D.C.
www.si.edu/anacostia/

Planters furnished slaves with two sets of coarse clothing, one for summer and one for winter. Their housing, typically a 15-by-15-foot one-room cabin for five or six occupants, provided little more than basic shelter against the elements. "They were built of logs," a traveler noted of slave cabins in South Carolina, "with no windows—no opening at all, except the doorway, with a chimney of sticks and mud; with no trees about them, no porches, or shades, of any kind. Except for the chimney . . . I should have conjectured that it had been built for a powder-house, or perhaps an ice-house—never for an animal to sleep in." Large planters placed these cabins in a row, an arrangement that projected precision and undifferentiated order.

The diet and housing of most slaves may have been no worse than that of the poorest whites in both the North and the South, but their workload was undoubtedly heavier. Just over half of the slave population at midcentury was concentrated on plantation units with twenty or more slaves, and most of these slaves worked as field hands in gang labor. Overseers freely admitted that they relied on whippings to make slaves work in these gangs.

The fear of the whip on a bare back set the work pace. At daybreak, recalled Solomon Northrup of his enslavement on a Louisiana plantation, "the fears and labors of another day begin; and until its close there is no such thing as rest. [The slave] fears he will be caught lagging through the day; he fears to approach the gin-house with his basket-load of cotton at night; he fears, when he lies down, that he will over-sleep himself in the morning."

Some 15 to 20 percent of plantation slaves were house servants or skilled artisans who had lighter and less regimented workloads than field hands. Some

Slave codes A series of laws passed mainly in the Southern colonies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries to define the status of slaves and codify the denial of basic civil rights to them.

planters used the prospect of transfer to these relatively privileged positions as an incentive to field hands to work harder. Extra rations, time off on weekends, passes to visit a spouse on a nearby plantation, and the right to have a garden plot were among the other incentives planters used to keep labor productivity high.

Nearly three-fourths of the slaves worked on plantations and medium-sized farms. Most of the remainder—those in units with fewer than ten slaves—worked on small farms in close contact with the master's family. Slave couples in small holdings were more likely to live on separate farms, and the owners of only a few slaves were more vulnerable than planters to market downturns that could force them to sell their slaves and thus further divide families.

Ten percent of slaves were not attached to the land. Instead, they labored at jobs that most white workers shunned. Every Southern industry—but most particularly extractive industries like mining and lumbering—relied heavily on slaves. The Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond, the largest iron foundry in the South, used slaves as its main work force after 1847, partly to curb strikes by its white workers. Racial tensions often flared in Southern industry. When the races worked together, skilled white laborers typically insisted on being placed in supervisory positions over the slaves.

Compared to plantation slaves, industrial slaves had more independence off the job and greater opportunities to earn money of their own. By undertaking extra factory work, known as "overwork," industrial slaves could earn $50 or more a month, money that could be used to buy goods for their families or, in rare cases, to purchase their freedom.

FAMILIES AND RELIGION

The core institution of slave life was the family. Despite all the obstacles arrayed against them, many slave marriages produced enduring commitments and a supportive moral code for family members. Most slave unions remained intact until death or, more likely, the sale of a spouse ended the partnership. Close to one-third of slave marriages were broken up by sales or forced removals. A slave bitterly recalled that "the separation of slaves in this way is little thought of. A few masters regard their union as sacred, but where one does, a hundred care nothing about it."

Both parents were present in about two-thirds of slave families, the same ratio as in contemporary peasant families in Western Europe. Most slave fathers struggled to help feed their families by hunting and fishing, and they risked beating and death to defend their wives from sexual abuse by the overseer or master. Besides their field labor, slave mothers had all the burdens of pregnancy, caring for children, laundering, and preparing meals. After escaping from slavery, Sojourner Truth told how she placed her babies in a basket hanging from a tree while she worked in the field and had older children care for them.

No anguish under slavery was more heartrending than that of a mother whose child was sold away from her. "Oh, my heart was too full!" recalled Charity Bowery on being told that her boy Richard was sold. "[My mistress] had sent me away on an errand, because she didn't want to be troubled with our cries. I hadn't any chance to see my poor boy. I shall never see my poor boy. I shall never see him again in this world. My heart felt as if it was under a great load."

Most parents could only teach their children the skills of survival in a world in which white people had a legal monopoly on violence. The most valuable of these skills was the art of hiding one's true feelings from white people and telling them what they wanted to hear. As a perceptive traveler noted: "When therefore a white man approaches [the slaves] with inquiries concerning their condition, they are at once put upon their guard, and either make indefinite and vague replies, or directly contradict their real sentiments."

QUICK REVIEW

Slave Families

- Both parents present in two-thirds of slave family.
- Most slave fathers did extra work and risked punishment to support and defend their families.
- Parents concentrated on teaching children survival skills.

Extensive kinship ties provided a support network for the vulnerable slave family. These networks included both blood relatives and other significant people. Children were taught to address elders as "Aunt" and "Uncle" and fellow slaves as "sister" and "brother." If separated from a parent, a child could turn to relatives or the larger slave community for care and assistance.

The ancestors of nineteenth-century slaves brought no common religion with them when they were taken to the New World. However, beliefs common to a variety of African religions survived. In keeping with African traditions, the religion of the slaves fused the natural and spiritual worlds, accepted the power of ghosts over the living, and relied on an expressive form of worship in which the participants shouted and swayed in rhythm with the beat of drums and other instruments. Associated with reverence for ancestors, dance was sacred in Africa. Spirituals, the religious songs of the slaves, were sung in a dance known in America as the "ring shout." Moving counterclockwise and stamping their feet to establish a beat for the music, slaves blended dance and song in a religious ceremony that helped them endure oppression and sustain their self-confidence.

Especially on large plantations, slave nursemaids cared for the young children in the white planter's family.

From the Collection of the Louisiana State Museum

By most estimates, no more than 20 percent of the slaves ever converted to Christianity. Those who did convert found in Christianity a message of deliverance rooted in the liberation of Moses's people from bondage in Egypt. The Jesus of the New Testament spoke to them as a compassionate God who had shared their burden of suffering so that all peoples could hope to find the Promised Land of love and justice. By blending biblical imagery into their spirituals, the slaves expressed their yearning for freedom: "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel/Then why not every man?"

QUICK REVIEW

Religion and Slavery

- A variety of African religions survived in America.
- No more than 20 percent of slaves converted to Christianity.
- Most planters favored Christianity among slaves only if the planters had control.

The initial exposure of slaves to Christianity usually came from evangelical revivalists. The evangelical message of universal spiritual equality confirmed the slaves' sense of personal worth. Less formal in both their doctrines and organization than the Presbyterians and Episcopalians, the evangelical sects allowed the slaves more leeway to choose their own preachers and engage in the physical activism and the call-and-response pattern that characterized slave religion. Perhaps because they baptized by total immersion, which evoked the purifying power of water so common in African religions, the Baptists gained the most slave converts.

Most planters favored Christianity among their slaves only if they could control it. Worried that abolitionist propaganda might attract the slaves to Christianity as a religion of secular liberation, some planters invited white ministers to their plantations to preach a gospel of passivity and obedience centered on Paul's call for servants to "obey in all things your Masters."

Slaves often feigned acceptance of the religious wishes of their masters at the special slave chapels on some plantations or in the segregated galleries of white churches on Sunday mornings. But in the evening, out of sight of the master or overseer, they held their own services in the woods and listened to their own preachers. As much as they could, the slaves hid their religious life from white people. Many slaves experienced religion as a rebirth that gave them the inner strength to endure their bondage. As one of them recalled, "I was born a slave and lived through some hard times. If it had not been for *my God*, I don't know what I would have done."

RESISTANCE

Open resistance to slavery was futile. The fate of Richard, Charity Bowery's boy who was sold away from her, typified that of the openly defiant slave. He resisted the efforts of his new owner in Alabama to break his will. When the owner threatened to shoot him if he did not consent to being whipped, Richard replied, "Shoot away, I won't come to be flogged." The master shot and killed him.

After fleeing from slavery in Maryland in 1849, Harriet "Moses" Tubman, standing on left, risked reenslavement by returning to the South on several occasions to assist other slaves in escaping. She is photographed here with some of those she helped free.

Smith College, Sophia Smith Collection, Northampton, MA

Although the odds of succeeding were infinitesimal, four major uprisings occurred in the nineteenth century. The first, **Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion** in 1800, involved about fifty armed slaves around Richmond. State authorities executed Prosser and twenty-five of his followers before the rebellion got under way.

A decade later, in what seems to have been a spontaneous bid for freedom, several hundred slaves in the river parishes (counties) above New Orleans marched on the city. Poorly armed, they were no match for the U.S. Army troops and militiamen who stopped them. More than sixty slaves died, and the heads of the leading rebels were posted on poles along the Mississippi River to warn others of the fate that awaited rebellious slaves.

The most carefully planned slave revolt, **Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy**, like Prosser's, failed before it got started. Vesey, a literate carpenter and lay preacher in Charleston who had purchased his freedom with the money he had won in a lottery, planned the revolt in the summer of 1822. Vesey assigned teams of rebels specific targets, such as the municipal guardhouse and arsenal. Once Charleston was secured, the rebels apparently planned to flee to Haiti. The plot collapsed when two domestic servants betrayed it. White authorities hanged thirty-five conspirators, including Vesey, and banished thirty-seven others. After destroying the African Methodist Episcopal Church where Vesey had preached, they also passed the Negro Seamen's Act, which mandated the imprisonment of black sailors while their ships were berthed in Charleston.

Nat Turner's Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, did erupt before it could be suppressed. Turner was a literate field hand driven by prophetic visions of black vengeance against white oppressors, who led a small band of followers on a murderous rampage in late August 1831. The first white man to be killed was Joseph Travis, Turner's owner. In the next two days, sixty other white people were also killed. An enraged posse, aided by slaves, captured or killed most of Turner's party. Turner hid for two months before being apprehended. He and more than thirty other slaves were executed, and panicky white people killed more than a hundred other slaves.

Slaves well understood that the odds against a successful rebellion were insurmountable. They could see who had all the guns. White people were also more numerous. Mounted patrols of whites were part of the police apparatus of slavery, and their surveillance limited organized rebellion by slaves to small, local affairs that were quickly suppressed.

Nor could many slaves escape to freedom. The **Underground Railroad**, a secret network of stations and safe houses organized by Quakers and other antislavery whites and blacks, provided some assistance. However, out of more than 3 million slaves in the 1850s, only about a thousand a year permanently escaped. (See American Views: "A Letter from an Escaped Slave to His Former Master." p. 278)

The few who made it to the North did so by running at night and hiding during the day. The most ingenious resorted to clever stratagems. Henry "Box" Brown arranged to have himself shipped in a box from Richmond to Philadelphia. Ellen Craft, a light-skinned slave who could pass as white, disguised herself as a male slaveholder accompanied by his dark-skinned servant (her husband, William).

13–3
Nat Turner, Confession (1831)

Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion Slave revolt that failed when Gabriel Prosser, a slave preacher and blacksmith, organized a thousand slaves for an attack on Richmond, Virginia, in 1800.

Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy The most carefully devised slave revolt in which rebels planned to seize control of Charleston in 1822 and escape to freedom in Haiti, a free black republic, but they were betrayed by other slaves, and seventy-five conspirators were executed.

Nat Turner's Rebellion Uprising of slaves in Southampton County, Virginia, in the summer of 1831 led by Nat Turner that resulted in the death of fifty-five white people.

Underground Railroad Support system set up by antislavery groups in the Upper South and the North to assist fugitive slaves in escaping the South.

OVERVIEW

STRUCTURE OF FREE SOCIETY IN THE SOUTH, C. 1860

Group	Size	Characteristics
Large planters	Less than 1 percent of white families	Owned fifty or more slaves and plantations in excess of one thousand acres; the wealthiest class in America
Planters	About 3 percent of white families	Owned twenty to forty-nine slaves and plantations in excess of one hundred acres; controlled bulk of Southern wealth and provided most of the political leaders
Small slaveholders	About 20 percent of white families	Owned fewer than twenty slaves, and most often less than five; primarily farmers, though some were part of a small middle class in towns and cities
Nonslaveholding whites	About 75 percent of white families	Most were yeomen farmers who owned their own land and stressed production for family use; one in five owned neither slaves nor land and squatted on least desirable land where they planted some corn and grazed some livestock; in cities they worked as artisans or, more typically, day laborers
Free black people	About 3 percent of all free families	Concentrated in the Upper South; hemmed in by legal and social restrictions; most were tenants or farm laborers; about one-third lived in cities and were generally limited to lowest paying jobs

What could have been a fatal flaw in their plan as they traveled from Savannah to Philadelphia—their inability to write and hence sign their names or document their assumed identities—was overcome by having Ellen pose as a sickly, rheumatic master whose right hand had to be kept bandaged.

Running away was common, but most runaways fled no farther than to nearby swamps and woods. Most voluntarily returned or were tracked down by bloodhounds within a week.

Slaves resisted complete domination by their masters in less overt ways. They mocked white people in folktales like those about Brer Rabbit, for example, in which weak but wily animals cunningly outsmart their stronger enemies. Slave owners routinely complained of slaves malingering at work, abusing farm animals, losing tools, stealing food, and committing arson. These subversive acts of protest never challenged the system of slavery itself, but they did help slaves maintain a sense of dignity and self-respect.

FREE SOCIETY

Southern cities, though small by Northern standards, provided jobs for a growing class of free workers who increasingly clashed with planters over the use of slave labor. These same cities, notably in the Upper South, were also home to the nation's largest concentration of free blacks. Though restricted in their freedom, these blacks competed with white workers for jobs. Pressure was mounting on

WHAT WERE the divisions in free white society regarding slavery?

• AMERICAN VIEWS •

A Letter from an Escaped Slave to His Former Master

In 1859, Jackson Whitney was one of six thousand fugitive slaves living in Canada beyond the reach of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Like most fugitives, he was male, and he had been forced to leave his family behind in Kentucky. His letter gives us information about slavery that only a slave could provide.

WHAT IS the tone of Whitney's letter?

- How did he express his joy at being a free man?
- Why did Whitney feel that Riley, his former owner, had betrayed him?
- What did Whitney mean by the phrase "a slave talking to 'massa'"? How did he indicate that he had been hiding his true feelings as a slave?
- How did Whitney contrast his religious beliefs and those of Riley? How did he expect Riley to be punished?
- What pained Whitney about his freedom in Canada, and what did he ask of Riley?

March 18, 1859

Mr. Wm. Riley, Springfield, Ky.—Sir:

I take this opportunity to dictate a few lines to you, supposing you might be curious to know my whereabouts. I am happy to inform you that I am in Canada, in good health, and have been here several days. Perhaps, by this time, you have concluded that robbing a woman of her husband, and children of their father does not pay, at least in your case; and I thought, while lying in jail by your direction, that if you had no remorse or conscience that would make you feel for a poor, broken-hearted man, and his worse-than-murdered wife and child, . . . and could not by any entreaty or permission be induced to do as you promised you would, which was to let me go with my family for $800—but contended for $1,000, when you had promised to take the same you gave for me (which was $660,) at the time you bought me, and let me go with my dear wife and children! but instead would render me miserable, and lie to me, and to your neighbors . . . and when you was at Louisville trying to sell me! then I thought it was

them by the 1850s to leave the South or be enslaved. Overriding racism bonded most white people together to defend the prerogatives of white supremacy.

The Slaveholding Minority

The white-columned plantation estate approached from a stately avenue of shade trees and framed by luxuriant gardens remains the most popular image of the slave South. In fact, only the wealthiest planters could live in such splendor, and they comprised less than 1 percent of Southern white families in 1860. Yet displayed in their homes and grounds, their wealth and status were so imposing that they created an idealized image of grace and grandeur that has obscured the cruder realities of the slave regime.

Families of the planter class—defined as those who held a minimum of twenty slaves—constituted only around 3 percent of all Southern families in 1860. Most planters lived in drab log cabins. "The planter's home is generally a rude ungainly structure, made of logs, rough hewn from the forest; rail fences and rickety gates guard its enclosures," complained a speaker to the Alabama horticultural society in 1851. "We murder our soil with wasteful culture because there is plenty of fresh land West—and we live in tents and huts when we might live in rural palaces."

Most planters were acquisitive and restless. The sheer drive and penny-pinching materialism of these planters on the make impressed Tyrone Power, an

W **WHERE TO LEARN MORE**

★ Jarrell Plantation, Juliette, Georgia
www.mylink.net/~jarrell/

time for me to make my feet feel for Canada, and let your conscience feel in your pocket.—Now you cannot say but that I did all that was honorable and right while I was with you, although I was a slave. I pretended all the time that I thought you, or some one else had a better right to me than I had to myself, which you know is rather hard thinking.

—You know, too, that you proved a traitor to me in the time of need, and when in the most bitter distress that the human soul is capable of experiencing; and could you have carried out your purposes there would have been no relief. But I rejoice to say that an unseen, kind spirit appeared for the oppressed, and bade me take up my bed and walk—the result of which is that I am victorious and you are defeated. I am comfortably situated in Canada, working for George Harris [another fugitive slave from Kentucky who had bought a farm in Canada]. . . .

There is only one thing to prevent me being entirely happy here, and that is the want of my dear wife and children, and you to see us enjoying ourselves together here. I wish you could realize the contrast between Freedom and slavery; but it is not likely that we shall ever meet again on this earth.

But if you want to go to the next world and meet a God of love, mercy, and justice, in peace; who says, "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of them my little ones, you did it unto me"—making the professions that you do, pretending to be a follower of Christ, and tormenting me and my little ones as you have done—[you] had better repair the breaches you have made among us in this world, by sending my wife and children to me; thus preparing to meet your God in peace; for, if God don't punish you for inflicting such distress on the poorest of His poor, then there is no use of having any God, or talking about one. . . .

I hope you will consider candidly, and see if the case does not justify every word I have said, and ten times as much. You must not consider that it is a slave talking to 'massa' now, but one as free as yourself.

I subscribe myself one of the abused of America, but one of the justified and honored of Canada.

Jackson Whitney

Source: John W. Blassingame, ed., *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

Irish actor who visited the South in the 1830s. The slaveholders he saw carving plantations out of the wilderness were "hardy, indefatigable, and enterprising to a degree; despising and condemning luxury and refinement, courting labour, and even making a pride of the privations which they, without any necessity, continue to endure with their families."

Besides raising her own children, the plantation mistress managed the household staff, oversaw the cooking and cleaning, gardened, dispensed medicine and clothing to the slaves, and often assisted in their religious instruction. When guests or relatives came for an extended visit, the wife had to make all the special arrangements that this entailed. On the occasions when the master was called off on a business or political trip, she kept the plantation accounts. In many respects, she worked harder than her husband.

Planter wives often complained in their journals and letters of their social isolation from other white women and the physical and mental toil of managing slaves. Still, they only rarely questioned the institution of slavery. Their deepest anger stemmed from their humiliation by husbands who kept slave mistresses or sexually abused slave women. "Sometimes white mistresses will surmise that there is an intimacy between a slave woman & the master," recalled a former slave, "and perhaps she will make a great fuss & have her whipped, & perhaps there will be no peace until she is sold."

QUICK REVIEW

Plantation Mistresses

- Mistresses ran the household staff.
- Mistresses were responsible for arrangements for visitors.
- Planter's wives found the management of slaves a burden.

Generally younger than the planters, small slaveholders were a diverse lot. About 10 percent were women, and another 20 percent or so were merchants, businessmen, artisans, and urban professionals. Most were farmers trying to acquire enough land and slaves to enter the ranks of planters.

Small slaveholders enjoyed scant economic security. A deadly outbreak of disease among their slaves or a single bad crop could destroy their credit and force them to sell their slaves to clear their debts. Owners of fewer than ten slaves stood a fifty-fifty chance within a decade of dropping out of the slaveholding class. In any given area suitable for plantations, small holders were gradually pushed out as planters bought up land to raise livestock or more crops.

Especially in the Lower South, owning slaves was a necessary precondition for upward mobility, but it was hardly a sufficient one. As a Baptist opponent of slavery put it, "Without slaves a man's children stand but poor chance to marry in reputation." Aside from conferring status, owning a few slaves could relieve a white household of much hard domestic labor. "I wish to God every head of a family in the United States had one [slave] to take the drudgery and menial service off his family," proclaimed Andrew Johnson of Tennessee in the U.S. Senate.

THE WHITE MAJORITY

Three-fourths of Southern white families owned no slaves in 1860. Nonslaveholders predominated wherever the soil and climate were not suitable for plantation agriculture. Most of them were yeoman farmers who worked their own land with family labor.

These farmers were quick to move when times were bad and their land was used up, but once settled in an area, they formed intensely localized societies. The community extended 5 to 10 miles around the nearest country store or county courthouse. Networks of kin and friends provided labor services when needed, fellowship in evangelical churches, and staple goods that an individual farm could not produce. The yeomanry aimed to be self-sufficient and limited market involvement to the sale of livestock and an occasional cotton crop that could bring in needed cash.

Yeoman farmers prized their independence. They tried to avoid debt and wanted to limit government authority. Rather than risk financial ruin by buying slaves on credit to grow cotton, they grew food crops and depended on their sons and, when needed, their wives and daughters to work the fields. Far longer than most Northern farmers, they continued to make their own clothes, shoes, soap, and other consumer items.

QUICK REVIEW

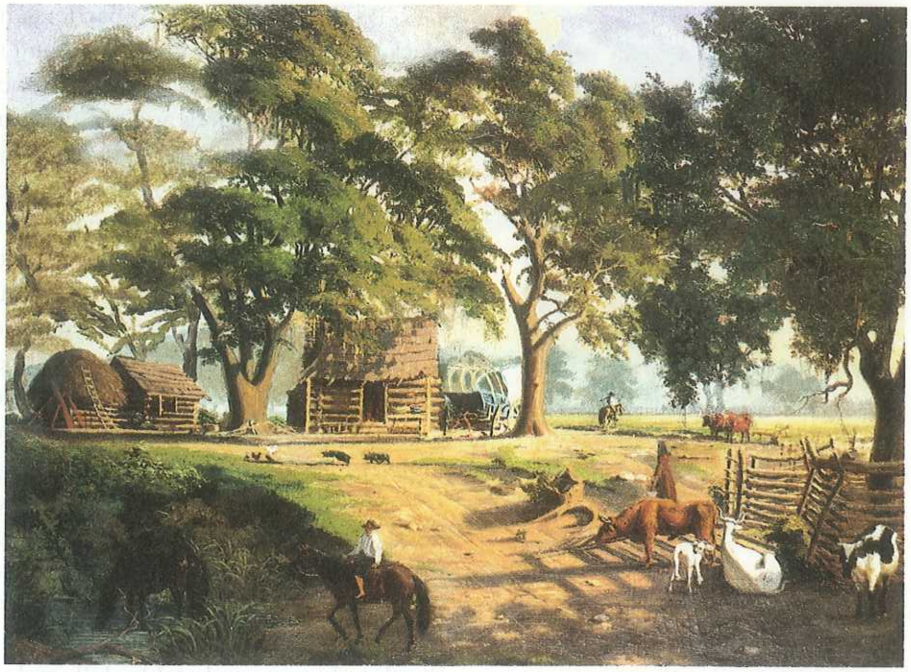
Yeoman Farmers

- Three-fourths of Southern white families owned no slaves.
- Farmes formed tight networks of friends and family.
- Yeoman farmers placed a high value on their independence.
- Interest of yeoman farmers and planters often complementary.

In areas where there were both small farms and scattered plantations, the interests of the yeomen and the planters were often complementary. Planters provided local markets for the surplus grain and livestock of nonslaveholders and, for a small fee, access to grist mills and gins for grinding corn and cleaning cotton. They lent small sums to poorer neighbors in emergencies or to pay taxes. The yeomen staffed the slave patrols and became overseers on the plantations. Both groups sought to protect property rights from outside interference and to maintain a system of racial control in which white liberties rested on black degradation.

When yeomen and planters did clash, it was usually over economic issues. Large slaveholders needing better credit and marketing facilities gravitated toward the Whig party, which called for banks and internal improvements. Nonslaveholding farmers, especially in the Lower South, tended to be Democrats who opposed banks and state-funded economic projects. But as long as planters deferred to the egalitarian sensibilities of the yeomen by courting them at election time and promising to safeguard their liberties, the planters were able to maintain broad support for slavery across class lines.

Around 15 percent of rural white families owned neither land nor slaves. These were the so-called poor whites, stigmatized by both abolitionists and planters as lazy and shiftless. The abolitionists considered them a kind of underclass who proved that slavery so degraded the dignity of labor that it led people to shun work and lapse into wretched poverty. Planters habitually complained that poor whites demoralized the slaves by showing that a person could survive without steady labor.



A yeoman farmstead in New Braumfels, Texas. The yeomanry strove for self-sufficiency by growing food crops and grazing livestock.

Daughters of the Republic of Texas Library. Yanaguana Society Collection

Most landless white people were resourceful and enterprising enough to squat on a few acres of land, put up crude cabins for shelter, plant some corn, and graze livestock in the surrounding woods. Although poor by most standards, they were also defiantly self-reliant.

Nonslaveholders were a growing majority in Southern cities, and their numbers were growing fastest among the working classes. These urban workers shared no agricultural interests or ties with the planters. Nor were most of them, especially in the unskilled ranks, southern-born. Northerners and immigrants dominated the urban work force.

Free workers, especially Irish and German immigrants, increasingly replaced slaves in urban labor markets. These white workers bitterly resented competition from black slaves, and their demands to exclude slaves from the urban workplace reinforced planters' belief that cities bred abolitionism.

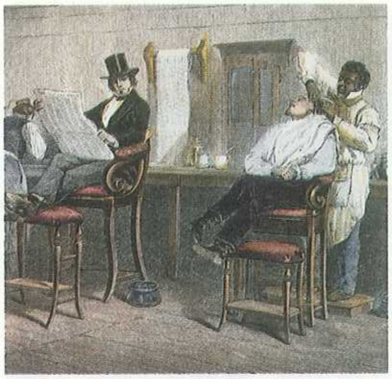
FREE BLACK PEOPLE

A few Southern black people—6 percent of the total in 1860—were "free persons of color" and constituted 3 percent of the free population in the South. White intimidation and special legal provisions known as **black codes** (found throughout the North as well) denied them nearly all the rights of citizenship. Because of the legal presumption in the South that all black people were slaves, they had to carry freedom papers, official certificates of their freedom. Many occupations, especially those involved in the communication of ideas, such as the printing trades, were closed to them.

Every slave state forbade the entry of free black people, and every municipality had its own rules and regulations that forced them to live as an inferior caste. In Charleston, for example, a free black person could not smoke a cigar or carry a cane in public. White people had the right of way, and a free black person who bumped into a white person on the street was likely to be flogged.

More than four-fifths of the Southern free black population lived in the Upper South. Most of them were the offspring of slaves freed by private manumissions between 1780 and 1800 when a slump in tobacco markets and the Revolutionary War creed of natural rights had loosened slavery in the Chesapeake region.

Black codes Laws passed by states and municipalities denying many rights of citizenship to free black people before the Civil War.



Barbering was one of the skilled trades open to black men during the antebellum years. Several wealthy African Americans began their careers as barbers.

The Granger Collection, New York

As in the North, legal barriers and white prejudice generally confined free black people to the poorest paying and most menial work. In rural areas, most were farm laborers or tenants. The best economic opportunities came in the cities, where some found factory jobs and positions in the skilled trades. The percentage of black people in the skilled trades was generally higher in the South than in the North. Talented artisans, such as Thomas Day, widely recognized as the finest cabinet-maker in North Carolina, could command a premium in wages from white employers.

Cities offered free black people not only jobs but also enough social space to found their own churches and mutual-aid associations. Especially after 1840, urban African-American churches proliferated to become the center of black community life. These churches sponsored Sunday schools and day schools that were about the only means of education open to black people. Despite white opposition to black schools, the demand for schooling persisted. A "good education," declared a black schoolmaster in Baltimore, "is the *sine qua non* as regards the elevation of our people."

Less than 2 percent of the black people in the Lower South were free in 1860. Most of them descended from black emigrants who fled the revolutionary unrest in Haiti in the 1790s. Able to secure a solid economic footing, they left their descendants wealthier than any other free black people in the United States. Free black people in the Lower South were more likely than those in the Upper South to have a marketable skill, and two-thirds of them lived in cities.

A light skin also enhanced the social standing of free black people among color-conscious whites in the Lower South. Nearly 70 percent of free black people in 1860 were mulattoes, and from their ranks came nearly all of the very small number of black planters. A mulatto elite emerged in Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans that carefully distanced itself from most black people, slave or free. In New Orleans, where the tradition of racially mixed unions dated back to French and Spanish rule, mulattoes put on lavish "octoroon balls" attended by free women of color and white men. Even here, however, the mulatto elite remained suspended between black and white worlds that never fully accepted them.

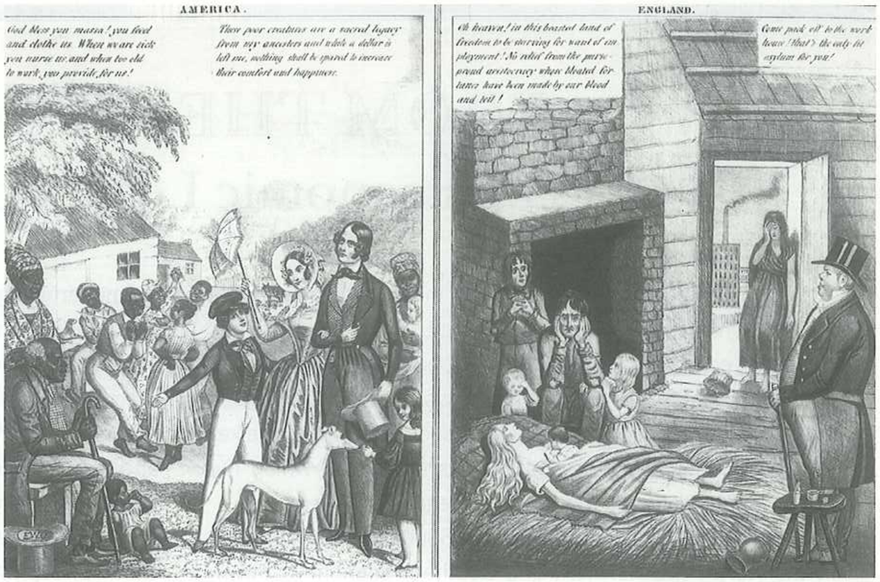
Despite the tendency toward a three-tiered racial hierarchy in the port cities of the Lower South, white people still insisted on making a racial dichotomy between white and black the overriding social division in the South. As the racial defense of slavery intensified in the 1850s, more calls were made for laws to banish or enslave free black people.

Despised and feared by white people as a subversive element in a slave society, free black Southerners were daily reminded that their freedom rested on the whims of the white majority. As white attitudes turned uglier in the late antebellum period, that freedom was less secure than ever.

THE PROSLAVERY ARGUMENT

WHAT WERE Southern defenses of slavery?

In the early nineteenth century, most Southern whites would have called slavery a necessary evil, an unfortunate legacy from earlier generations that was needed to maintain racial peace. The 1830s marked a turning point. After the twin shocks of Nat Turner's Rebellion and the onset of the abolitionist crusade, white mobs emerged to stifle any open criticism of slavery in the Lower South. White Southerners also began to develop a defense of slavery. By the 1850s, politicians, intellectuals, and evangelical ministers were arguing that it was a positive good, an institution ordained by God as the foundation of southern prosperity, white democracy, and Christian instruction for heathen Africans. Slavery, they insisted, was a mild, paternalistic, and even caring institution.


AMERICA.
God bless you massa! you feed and clothe us. When we are sick you nurse us, and when too old to work, you provide for us!
These poor creatures are a sacred legacy from my ancestors and while a dollar is left me, nothing shall be spared to increase their comfort and happiness.
ENGLAND.
Oh heaven! in this boasted land of freedom to be starving for want of employment! No relief from the purse-proud aristocracy whose bloated fortunes have been made by our blood and toil!
Come pack off to the work house! that's the only fit asylum for you!

As this cartoon reflects, a staple of proslavery propaganda was to contrast the allegedly contented and healthy lot of slaves with that of starving factory workers exploited by the system of wage labor.

Courtesy of Library of Congress

Evangelical Protestantism dominated Southern religious expression by the 1830s, and its ministers took the lead in combating abolitionist charges that slavery was a moral and religious abomination. Most of the Southern churches had always supported slavery. This support grew more pronounced and articulate once the abolitionists stepped up their attacks on slavery in the mid-1830s. Through a selective reading of the Bible, the proslavery ideologues found abundant evidence to proclaim slavery fully in accord with God's moral dictates.

Southern evangelicals also turned to the Bible to support their argument that patriarchal authority—the unquestioned power of the father—was the basis of all Christian communities. Slavery thus became a matter of family governance, a domestic institution in which Christian masters of slaves accepted responsibility for caring for their workers in sickness and old age. Slavery was part of God's plan to Christianize an inferior race and teach its people how to produce raw materials that benefited the world's masses.

The growing commitment of Southern evangelicals to slavery clashed with the antislavery position and the generally more liberal theology of Northern evangelicals. In 1837, the Presbyterians split along sectional lines because of differences over slavery. In 1844, and as a direct result of the slavery issue, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the nation's largest, divided into Northern and Southern churches. The Baptists did the same a year later. These religious schisms foreshadowed the sectionalized political divisions of the 1850s; they also severed one of the main emotional bonds between white Northerners and Southerners.

The religious defense of slavery was central to the slaveholding ethic of paternalism that developed after 1830. By the 1850s, planters commonly described slaves as members of an extended family who were treated better than free workers in the North. Led by Charles Colcock Jones, a minister and planter in the Georgia lowcountry, a group of evangelical masters founded religious missions to the slaves and sought reforms, such as legal measures that would prevent the separation of slave families. Such efforts to reform slavery failed largely because most masters would accept no limits on their power to control and work their slaves as they saw fit.

More common than the biblical defense of slavery was the racial argument that black people were unfit for freedom among white people. The racial defense alleged that black people were naturally lazy and inherently inferior to white people. If freed, so went the argument, they would turn to crime and sexually assault white women.

Slavery as a necessary means of racial control was a central theme in Thomas R. Dew's *Review of the Debates in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, the first major justification of slavery by a Southerner. Concerned by the efforts of nonslaveholders in Virginia to enact a program of gradual emancipation, Dew, a tidewater planter tried to unite white people behind slavery by stressing the issue of race.

The racial argument resonated powerfully among white people. The attitude of a Tennessee farmer, as recorded by a northern traveler in the 1850s, was typical: "He said he'd always wished there hadn't been any niggers here . . . , but he wouldn't like to have them free." Most white Southerners could see no middle ground between slavery and the presumed social chaos of emancipation.

13–7
George Fitzhugh, "The Blessings of Slavery" (1857)

FROM THEN TO NOW

The Economic Legacy of Slavery

The South today enjoys one of the highest rates of economic growth in the nation and plays host to business conglomerates, bank mergers, and Olympic games. Yet as late as the 1930s, the South was so impoverished that it was labeled the nation's number-one economic problem. The key to this remarkable transformation was the way in which the South finally overcame the economic legacy of slavery.

Because slavery persisted in the South and was abolished in the North, the Northern and Southern economies developed separately before the Civil War. The key difference was the markedly lower level of Southern investment in manufacturing and transportation compared to the levels in the North. Slaveowners had invested two-thirds of their wealth in slaves and were reluctant to promote changes that would diversify their economy along northern lines through the introduction of manufacturing based on low-wage labor. On the contrary, they had every incentive to keep wages high to protect the value of their investment in human labor.

The end of slavery reversed the basic dynamic shaping the southern economy. Planters now had to derive their wealth primarily from their land, not their slaves. As a result, they encouraged low-wage policies that transformed many former slaves and poor white farmers into impoverished tenant farmers and sharecroppers. When cotton prices began a steady decline in the 1870s, Southern investors turned to manufacturing in an effort to generate economic growth, but the abundance of cheap agricultural labor kept industrial wage rates well below the national level. Consequently, the South attracted little in the way of outside labor. And with investment opportunities more attractive elsewhere, it attracted little capital for modernizing its factories. Education in the South likewise remained behind, because the white southern elite was leery of reforms that would increase workers' skills and encourage them to leave the region in search of better wages. Thus, although southern industry grew, it remained labor-intensive and failed to keep pace with the region's rising population. By the 1930s, when the Great Depression hit, the South was mired in poverty and backwardness.

Sweeping new federal policies initiated in the wake of the Depression began fundamentally to change the Southern economy, raising wages and bringing them more in line with the national average. Farm subsidies encouraged planters to take land out of production, forcing poor tenants and sharecroppers to leave the land and migrate out of the region. Abundant, well-paying jobs in Northern factories during World War II accelerated the outflow of the South's low-skill workers. Meanwhile, federal money poured into the South for new defense plants and war-related projects.

By the 1950s, the formerly insulated, low-wage southern economy had turned the corner. Southern politicians dropped the region's corporate taxes to the lowest in the nation and became adept at attracting new sources of capital and large federal subsidies. After initially opposing the black-led civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, most of the white business elite backed the formal end of racial segregation in an attempt to improve the South's image. Today, well over a century after slavery had placed it on a separate path of economic development, the Southern economy has lost nearly all traces of its distinctiveness and can boast of being in the forefront of national economic trends.

Despite its apparent success in forging white solidarity, the racial argument could be turned on its head and used to weaken slavery. Most white Northerners were about as racist as their Southern counterparts, but they were increasingly willing to end slavery on the grounds that the stronger white race should help black people improve themselves as free persons. Some white Southerners challenged the economic prerogatives of slaveholders. Why, for example, should any white people, as members of the master race, be forced into economic competition against skilled slave artisans? Why should not all nonagricultural jobs be legally reserved for white people? Doctrines of black inferiority could not prevent white unity from cracking when the economic interests of nonslaveholders clashed with those of planters.

CONCLUSION

The spread of plantation agriculture across the Lower South after 1830 deepened the involvement of white Southerners in cotton and slavery. At the same time, an abolitionist movement in the North morally attacked slavery and demanded that it be abolished. As Southern interests became more enmeshed in an institution that outsiders condemned, religious and intellectual leaders portrayed slavery as a Christian institution and a positive good necessary for white democracy and harmonious race relations. Proslavery ideologues stridently described the South as separate from and superior to the rest of the nation.

The proslavery argument depicted a nearly ideal society blessed by class and racial harmony. In reality, social conditions in the slave South were far more contradictory and conflict ridden. Slaves were not content in their bondage. They dreamed of freedom and sustained that dream through their own forms of Christianity and the support of family and kin. Relations between masters and their slaves were antagonistic, not affectionate, and wherever the system of control slackened, slaves resisted their owners. The publication in 1857 of Hinton Rowan Helper's *Impending Crisis of the South,* a scathing indictment by a white North Carolinian of how slavery stunted economic opportunities for average white people, vividly showed that not all were convinced by the proslavery argument.

Planters were not fooled by the public rhetoric of white unity. They knew that slavery was increasingly confined to the Lower South, and that elsewhere in the South white support for it was gradually eroding. They feared the double-edged challenge to their privileged positions from outside interference with slavery and internal white disloyalty. By the 1850s, many of them were concluding that the only way to resolve their dilemma was to make the South a separate nation.

SUMMARY

The Lower South Cotton was king in the Lower South and provided an economic basis for Southern sectionalism. The Lower South had incomparable natural advantages for growing cotton and short-staple cotton expanded westward after the invention of the cotton gin. The plantation system, relying on the labor of slaves, provided cotton to the world's textile mills. While cotton was economically profitable, the Lower South lagged behind in industrialization and urbanization. Slavery was not confined to agriculture; slaves lived in cities and towns with a few more freedoms, including the ability to earn wages.

The Upper South Climate and geography distinguished the Upper South from the Lower South; the eight slave states lay north of the best growing zones for cotton. The Upper South emerged from an economic slump in the 1850s with diversified agriculture, urbanization, and an expansion of manufacturing and trade. The region served as a slave exporter to the Lower South and had an economic stake in slavery although the institution was not as widespread in the Upper South or as profitable.

Slave Life and Culture By the mid-nineteenth century Southern slaves were native-born; their number had increased more than five times. African-American slaves had shaped a culture of their own to deal with the humiliations and difficulties of their lives; in their family life and religious beliefs they found the strength to sustain themselves with hope. In addition to day to day resistance, slave uprisings occurred; the only real opportunity for escape was the Underground Railroad, but only a relatively small number were able to permanently escape northward or to Canada.

Free Society While the planter society of the South was numerically small, their influence was extensive. The majority of Southern white people owned no slaves; they were farmers who worked their own land with family labor. This group sometimes clashed with the planters; however, all white southerners sought to maintain their status through degradation and intimidation. A small number of free blacks lived precariously between slave and white society, their freedoms growing less secure as the 1800s progressed.

The Proslavery Argument By the 1830s, slavery was under attack, and Southerners countered by defending slavery as a positive good and used Biblical examples to support their arguments. Some Protestant churches split between Northern and Southern branches foreshadowing the sectional political divisions that were to come. Even Southern white people opposed to slavery feared emancipation; they could see no middle ground between slavery and freedom.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why did cotton production expand in the South? How was this expansion linked to slavery and westward movement?
2. How was the Upper South different from the Lower South? What role did slavery play in each region after 1815?
3. How would you characterize the life of a plantation slave?
4. How did most nonslaveholding white Southerners live?
5. How did white Southerners defend slavery and reconcile it with Christianity?

KEY TERMS

Black codes	(p. 281)
Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy	(p. 276)
Gabriel Prosser's Rebellion	(p. 276)
Gang system	(p. 268)
Nat Turner's Rebellion	(p. 276)
Slave codes	(p. 273)
Underground Railroad	(p. 276)

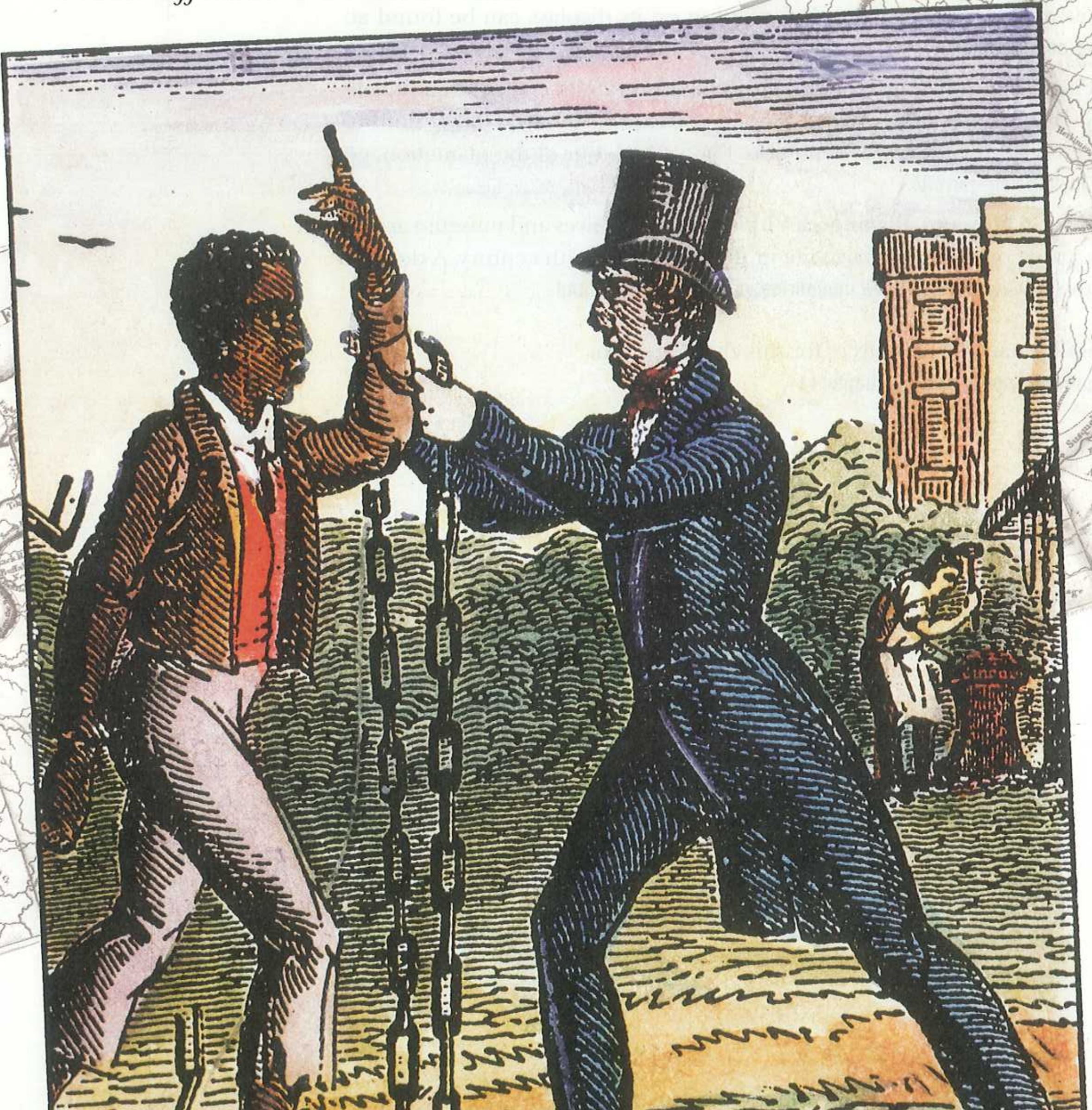
WHERE TO LEARN MORE

- **The Anacostia Museum Center for African-American History.** This museum of the Smithsonian Institution explores American history and cultures from an African-American perspective. Go to **www.si.edu/anacostia/** for information on its exhibits and a calendar of events.
- **Appalachian Museum of Berea College, Berea, Kentucky.** This museum is an excellent source for understanding the lifestyles and material culture of the nonslaveholding farmers in the Appalachian highlands. For an overview of its exhibits, see: **www.museum.appstate.edu/exhibits/exhibits.shtml**

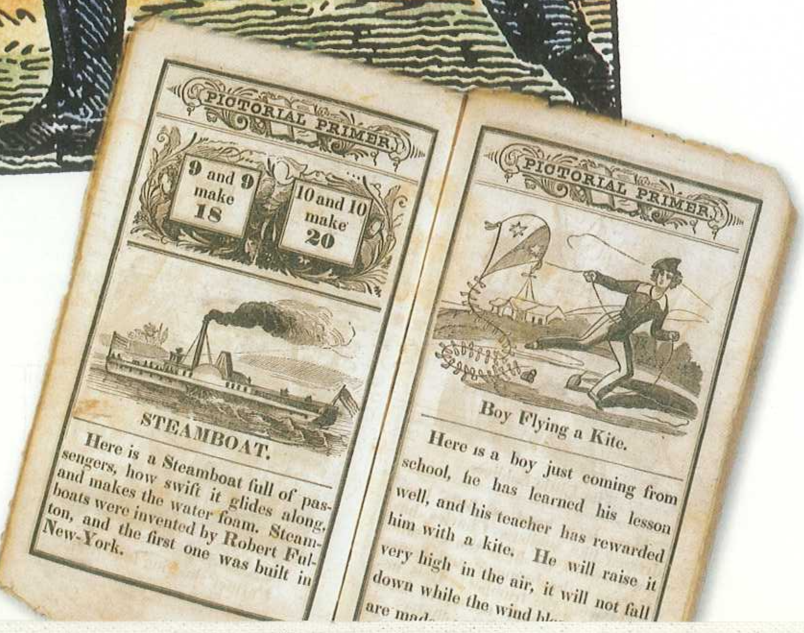
- **Cottonlandia Museum, Greenwood, Mississippi.** The library and museum depict the history of cotton in the Mississippi Delta. Special collections include some Native-American artifacts. Information on its displays can be found at: **www.gcvg.com/CL.html**
- **Jarrell Plantation, Juliette, Georgia.** This state historic site consists of a fifteen-building farm complex that conveys a good sense of the physical dimensions of a nineteenth-century Georgia plantation. For a visual tour of the plantation, go to: **www.mylink.net/~jarrell/**
- **Meadow Farm Museum, Richmond, Virginia.** The archives and museum are especially strong on Southern farm life in the mid-nineteenth century. A description of the museum is at: **www.co.henrico.va.us/rec/kmfarm.html**

For additional study resources for this chapter, go to:
www.prenhall.com/goldfield/chapter11

Our duties originate, not from difference of sex,
but from the diversity of the relations of life,
the various gifts and talents committed to our care,
and the different eras in which we live.



An abolitionist freeing a slave from his shackles: A colored woodcut, c. 1840, from an American anti-slavery almanac.



PICTORIAL PRIMER.

9 and 9 make 18

10 and 10 make 20

STEAMBOAT.

Here is a Steamboat full of passengers, how swift it glides along, and makes the water foam. Steamboats were invented by Robert Fulton, and the first one was built in New-York.

PICTORIAL PRIMER.

Boy Flying a Kite.

Here is a boy just coming from school, he has learned his lesson well, and his teacher has rewarded him with a kite. He will raise it very high in the air, it will not fall down while the wind bl
are mad