

## The Old South, 1790–1850

In the 18th century, the southern plantation colonies had been Britain's most valuable mainland possessions. In 1790, the great planters of Virginia and South Carolina remained among the richest and most powerful men in the new republic, but world markets for their tobacco and rice were in a long-term decline, and their long-term future was uncertain.

Their position improved after the 1790s, when international markets and technological innovation encouraged them to grow short-staple cotton. Cotton became the great southern cash crop, and the planters spread cotton culture across an expanding deep south. The planters sent mountains of cotton to Great Britain, made a lot of money, and bought a lot of nice things. Other southerners, however, were not as fortunate. Enslaved workers experienced longer hours and tighter discipline than in the past. They lost their families and friends to a burgeoning interstate slave trade, and they watched their masters' commitment to slavery harden into an unmovable political axiom. In addition, most white farmers moved to the edges of the cotton economy. They continued in the old-style mixed agriculture, and traded relatively little beyond their neighborhoods. In the North, country people became the great consumer market that drove much of regional economic development. In the South, slaves and most whites bought little, and what they bought was manufactured outside of the region.

The South experienced stupendous economic growth between 1790 and 1850, but most southern investment and entrepreneurial talent went into producing cotton for export, an activity that produced wealth for the planters, but that strengthened the South's neocolonial dependence upon Great Britain and, increasingly, the northeastern United States. In addition, it gave the South a labor system, a leadership class, and an economic and political culture that set the region apart from the burgeoning capitalist democracy of the North and from dominant ideological trends in the North Atlantic world.

### Old Farms: The Southeast

#### *The Chesapeake, 1790–1820*

In 1790, the future of plantation agriculture in the Chesapeake (the states of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware, where slavery first took root in North America) was precarious. The market for tobacco, their principal crop, had been falling since before the Revolution, and it continued to decline after 1790. Tobacco also depleted the soil, and by the late 18th century, tidewater farms and plantations were giving out. As lands west of the Appalachians

## C H R O N O L O G Y

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|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1792 | Kentucky enters the union as the 15th state                                                          |
| 1793 | Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin                                                                   |
| 1796 | Tennessee enters the union as the 16th state                                                         |
| 1799 | Successful slave revolution in Haiti                                                                 |
| 1800 | Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia                                                                      |
| 1808 | International slave trade ends                                                                       |
| 1803 | Jefferson purchases the Louisiana Territory from France                                              |
| 1812 | Second war with Britain begins                                                                       |
| 1817 | Mississippi enters the union                                                                         |
| 1819 | Alabama enters the union • Adams-Onís Treaty conveys Florida and the Gulf Coast to the United States |
| 1822 | Denmark Vesey's slave conspiracy in South Carolina                                                   |
| 1831 | Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia                                                                   |

opened to settlement, white tenants, laborers, and small farmers left the Chesapeake in droves. Many of them moved to Kentucky, Tennessee, or the western reaches of Virginia. Many others found new homes in nonslave states north of the Ohio River. Faced with declining opportunities within the slave societies of the Chesapeake, thousands of the poorer whites had voted with their feet.

With tobacco profits falling, many Chesapeake planters were switching to wheat, corn, and livestock. They did it on a large scale. In many parts of the region, the old tobacco lands gave way to grain fields and pastures, and by 1830, Richmond rivaled Rochester, New York, as the nation's leading flour milling center. It was a sensible move, but it left the Chesapeake with a huge investment in slaves who were less and less necessary. Grazing animals and raising wheat required less labor than tobacco. Enslaved workers planted individual tobacco plants and pruned and weeded them and picked worms off of them by hand. At harvest time they picked the leaves one at a time, then hung them to cure, packed them, and shipped them off to market. In sharp contrast, grain and livestock took care of themselves through most of the year. Planters with large numbers of slaves had to think up new uses for them. Some divided their land into small plots and rented both the plots and their slaves to white tenant farmers. Others, particularly in Maryland, recruited tenants from the growing ranks of free blacks. Still others hired out their slaves as artisans and urban laborers.

### ***Race, Gender, and Chesapeake Labor***

The increasing diversification of the Chesapeake economy involved assigning new chores to slave women and men. Wheat cultivation, for example, meant a switch from the hoes used for tobacco to the plow and grain cradle, both of which called for the upper-body



Collection of the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore.

**An Overseer Doing His Duty** In 1798, the architect and engineer Benjamin Latrobe sketched a white overseer smoking a cigar and supervising slave women as they hoed newly cleared farmland near Fredericksburg, Virginia. A critic of slavery, Latrobe sarcastically entitled the sketch *An Overseer Doing His Duty*.

strength of adult men. The grain economy also required carts, wagons, mills, and good roads, and thus created a need for greater numbers of slave artisans, nearly all of whom were men. Many of these artisans were hired out to urban employers, and lived as a semi-free caste in cities and towns. In the new economy of the Chesapeake, male slaves did the plowing, mowing, sowing, ditching, and carting and performed most of the tasks requiring artisanal skills. All of this work demanded high levels of training and could be performed by someone working either by himself or in a small group with little need for supervision.

Slave women were left with the lesser tasks. Contrary to legend, few slave women in the Chesapeake worked as domestic servants in the planter's houses. Some were assigned to such chores as cloth manufacture, sewing, candle molding, and the preparation of salt meat, but most female slaves still did farm work—hoeing, weeding, spreading manure, cleaning stables—that was monotonous, called for little skill, and was closely supervised. This new division of labor was clearly evident during the wheat harvest. On George Washington's farm, for example, male slaves, often working beside temporary white laborers, moved in a broad line as they mowed the grain. Following them came a gang of children and women bent over and moving along on their hands and knees as they bound wheat into shocks. Thomas Jefferson, who had been shocked to see French women working in the fields, abandoned his concern for female delicacy when his own slaves were involved. At the grain harvest, he instructed his overseers to organize "gangs of half men and half women."

### ***Flirting with Emancipation***

Neither new crops nor new employments, however, erased the growing fact that Chesapeake proprietors needed less slave labor than they had in the past—or the parallel fact that their slaves reproduced at a higher rate than almost any other Americans. Nothing, it seemed, could employ the great mass of enslaved people or repay the planters' huge investment in slaves. In this situation, some Chesapeake planters (who had, after all, fought a revolution in the name of natural rights) began to manumit their slaves. The farmers of Maryland and Delaware in particular set their slaves free. By 1810, 76 percent of Delaware blacks and 23 percent of Maryland blacks were free. (In 1790, these figures had stood at 31 percent and 7 percent, respectively.) Virginia's economic and cultural commitment to the plantation was stronger, but even in the Old Dominion there was a movement to manumit slaves. George Washington stated that he wished "to liberate a certain species of property," and manumitted his slaves by will. (The manumissions were to take place at the death of his widow, thus, as one wag declared, surrounding Mrs. Washington with 100 people who wanted her dead.) Robert Carter, reputedly the largest slaveholder in Virginia, also freed his slaves, as did many others. The free black population of Virginia stood at 3,000 in 1782, when the state passed a law permitting manumission. The number of free blacks rose to 12,766 in 1790, to 20,124 in 1800, and to 30,570 in 1810. These were impressive numbers, but the birthrate of Virginia slaves erased them. Between 1780 and 1810, the slave population of the state rose, despite the manumissions, from 250,000 to 400,000.

Emancipation moved slowly in Virginia for several reasons. First, few Virginia planters could afford to free their slaves without compensation. Second, white Virginians feared the social consequences of black freedom. Thomas Jefferson, for instance, owned 175 slaves when he penned the phrase that "all men are created equal." He lived off their labor, sold them to pay his debts, gave them away as gifts, sold them away from their families as a punishment, and kept one of them as a mistress. Through it all he insisted that slavery was wrong. He could not imagine emancipation, however, without the colonization of freed slaves far from Virginia. A society of free blacks and whites, Jefferson insisted, would end in disaster: "Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made . . . [will] produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race." Jefferson went on to a virulently racist argument for black inferiority and to the insistence that "When freed, [blacks are] to be removed beyond the reach of mixture." Near the end of an adult lifetime of condemning slavery but doing nothing to end it, Jefferson cried out that white Virginians held "a wolf by the ears": they could not hold onto slavery forever, and they could never let it go.

### ***The Lowcountry, 1790–1820***

The other region that had been a center of plantation slavery during the 18th century—lowcountry South Carolina and Georgia—made a massive recommitment to slave labor in the years after the Revolution. Here the principal crop was rice, which, along with other

American foodstuffs, enjoyed a rise in international demand during the European wars between 1793 and 1815. But lowcountry planters faced increasing competition from rice farmers in India, Java, Burma, and Europe. The rice coast—one of the great sources of American wealth in the 18th century—remained profitable, but it was losing relative position to faster-growing regions. The planters of the lowcountry, like those in Virginia, remained wealthy men. Their long-term future, however, was in doubt.

Thousands of slaves in this region had either run away or had been carried off by the British in the Revolution, and planters knew that the African slave trade was scheduled to end in 1808. Lowcountry planters, unlike their Chesapeake counterparts, could not imagine emancipating their slaves. They rushed to import as many Africans as they could in the time remaining. Between 1788 and 1808, 250,000 captive people were brought directly from Africa to the United States, nearly all of them to Charleston and Savannah. That figure equaled the number of Africans who had been brought to North America during the whole colonial period.

### ***The Task System***

In the plantation counties of coastal South Carolina and Georgia, slaves made up 80 percent of the population, and more than 90 percent in many parishes. Farms and slave labor forces were big, and rice cultivation demanded intensive labor, often performed by workers who stood knee-deep in water. The work and the hot, sticky climate encouraged deadly summer diseases and kept white owners and overseers out of the fields. Many of the wealthiest planters built homes in Charleston and Savannah and hired others to manage their plantations. Both they and planters who stayed on their farms organized enslaved workers according to the so-called task system. Each morning the owner or manager assigned a specific task to each slave. When the task was done, the rest of the day belonged to the slave. Slaves who did not finish their task were punished, and when too many slaves finished early, the owners assigned heavier tasks. In the 18th century, each slave had been expected to tend three to four acres of rice each day. In the early 19th century, with the growth of a competitive rice market, the assignment was raised to five acres.

The task system encouraged slaves to work hard without supervision, and slaves turned the system to their own uses. Often several slaves would work together until all of their tasks were completed, and strong young slaves often helped older and weaker slaves after they had finished their own tasks. Once the day's work was done, the slaves shared their hard-earned leisure out of sight of the owner. A Jamaican visitor remarked that South Carolina and Georgia planters were "very particular in employing a negro, without his consent, after his task is finished, and agreeing with him for the payment which he is to receive."

Slaves under the task system won the right to cultivate land as "**private fields**," not the little garden plots common in the Chesapeake but farms of up to five acres on which they grew produce and raised livestock for market. There was a lively trade in slave-produced goods, and eventually slaves in the low country not only produced and exchanged property

but also passed it on to their children. The owners tolerated such activity because slaves on the task system worked hard, required minimal supervision, produced much of their own subsistence, and made money for their owners. The rice planters in South Carolina and Georgia were among the richest men in the United States.

### **New Farms: The Rise of the Deep South**

While the old centers of slavery and southern power stagnated or declined, planters discovered a new and promising cash crop. British textile factories had been buying raw cotton since the mid-18th century. Southern planters knew they could sell all of the cotton they could grow. But long-staple cotton, the only variety that could be profitably grown, was a delicate plant that thrived only on the Sea Islands off the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina. The short-staple variety was hardier, but its sticky seeds had to be removed by hand before the cotton could be milled. It took a full day for an adult slave to clean a single pound of short-staple cotton—an expenditure of labor that took the profit out of cotton. In 1790, the United States produced only 3,000 bales of cotton, nearly all of it on the long-staple plantations of the Sea Islands.

In 1793, **Eli Whitney**, a Connecticut Yankee who had come south to work as a tutor, set his mind to the problem of cleaning short-staple cotton. Within a few days he had made a model of a cotton “gin” (a southern contraction of “engine”) that combed the seeds from the fiber with metal pins fitted into rollers. Working with Whitney’s machine, a slave could clean 50 pounds of short-staple cotton in a day. Within a very few years, cotton became the great southern cash crop, and slavery and plantation agriculture had a new lease on life.

### ***The Rise of the Cotton Belt***

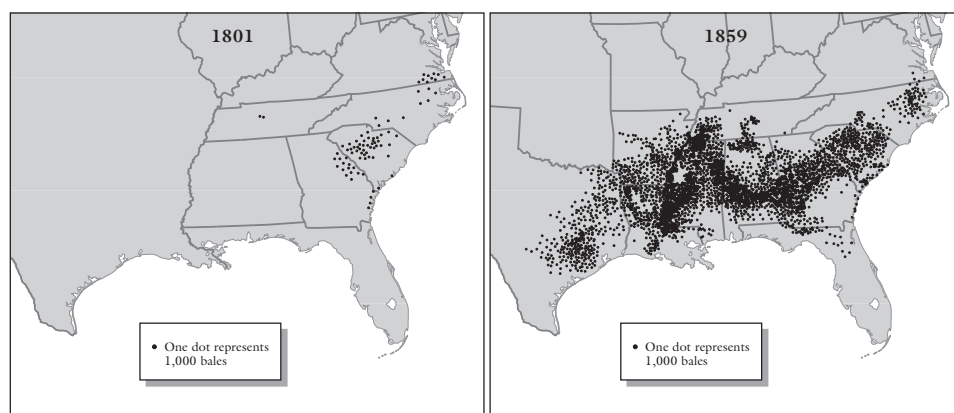
Beginning in the late 1790s, planters and their slaves moved into upland South Carolina and Georgia, transforming a sparsely settled farm country into the first great short-staple cotton region. With the end of war in 1815, the cotton belt expanded dramatically. The defeat of native peoples and the expropriation of their land in the Southwest, the resumption of international trade, and the revival of textile production encouraged planters to extend the cotton lands of South Carolina and Georgia into a Deep South cotton belt that stretched beyond the Mississippi River.

The national government dominated by Jeffersonian Republicans made the cotton belt possible. Planters did not take their money and slaves into the interior until the government had ended Indian resistance and secured access to international markets through the system of rivers. Early settlers had demanded not only help against the Indians but also the free use of the Mississippi River. The Tennessee constitution of 1796, for instance, declared that “An equal participation of the free navigation of the Mississippi is one of the inherent rights of the citizens of this state.” (This at a time when Spain held sovereignty over the west bank of the river, the mouth of the river at New Orleans, and

the gulf coast from Florida to Louisiana, and when independent Indian peoples controlled nearly all of the interior.) Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase of 1803 secured free navigation of the Mississippi Valley for the United States. The Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 bought Florida and the Gulf Coast. A Mississippi editor praised the latter: "It rounds off our southern possessions, and for ever precludes foreign immisaries from stirring up Indians to war and negroes to rebellion, whilst it gives the southern country important outlets to the sea." With the final defeat of the southwestern Indians in the War of 1812, western Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana were opened to large-scale cotton cultivation.

Jefferson had proclaimed the west a great "Empire for Liberty," but it was liberty on southern terms. The Southwest was secured for the plantation, and until 1830 or so, the Northwest, which banned slavery, was settled by southern yeomen. Western settlement promised long-term southern political majorities and the protection of southern interests, and few imagined that the situation would change in the foreseeable future. Jefferson's Empire for Liberty was emerging as an empire for slavery.

The cotton belt grew quickly: by 1834, the new southwestern states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana grew more than half of a vastly increased U.S. cotton crop. In 1810, the South produced 178,000 bales of ginned cotton, more than 59 times the 3,000 bales it had produced in 1790. With the opening of southwestern cotton lands, production jumped to 334,000 bales in 1820 and to 1,350,000 bales in 1840. In these years, cotton made up from one-half to two-thirds of the value of all U.S. exports. The South produced three-fourths of the world supply of cotton—a commodity that, more than any other, was the raw material of industrialization in Britain and Europe and, increasingly, in the northeastern United States. Cotton, in short, was a very big business.

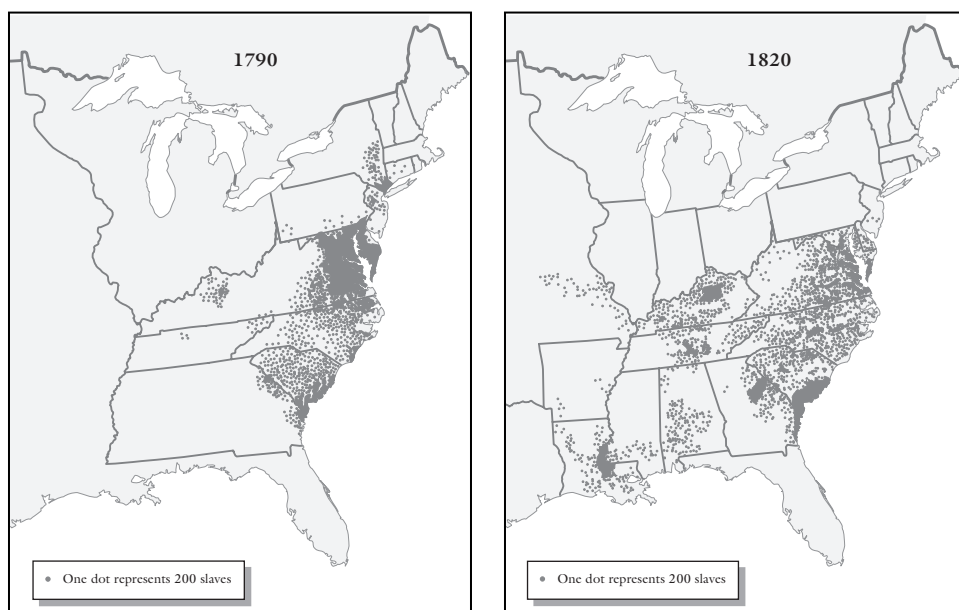


**Map 9.1 Cotton Production, 1801 and 1859** Short-staple cotton thrived wherever there was fertile soil, heat and humidity, low altitude, and a long growing season. As a result, a great belt of cotton and slavery took shape in the Lower South, from the midlands of South Carolina through East Texas.

### *The Interstate Slave Trade*

The international slave trade ended in 1808. Even before that date, the principal source of slaves for the emerging cotton belt was the old seaboard states—those with a growing population of slaves and a diminishing need for them. As early as the 1790s, the Chesapeake states of Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland were net exporters of slaves. Those states sent 40,000 to 50,000 enslaved workers south and west in that decade. The number rose to 120,000 in the 1810s. The slave families and slave communities of the Chesapeake lost 1 in 12 of their members in the 1790s, 1 in 10 between 1800 and 1810, and 1 in 5 between 1810 and 1820. In the 1820s, South Carolina and Kentucky joined the slave-exporting states (although South Carolina sent many thousands out of the low country and into its new upcountry cotton belt), and 150,000 slaves left their homes and crossed state lines. The trade in slaves reordered the human geography of the South. In 1790, planters in Virginia and Maryland had owned 56 percent of all American slaves. By 1860, they owned only 15 percent.

Some enslaved migrants—estimates run as high as 30 percent—left their old neighborhoods in the company of masters (or masters' sons) and familiar fellow slaves. These slaves made new plantations and new lives in the Southwest surrounded by some of the people they had known at home, but most were sold and resold as individuals in an organized interstate



**Map 9.2 Distribution of Slave Population, 1790, 1820, and 1860** In 1790, slaves were concentrated in the Chesapeake and in the South Carolina and Georgia low country. Over the next 70 years, Chesapeake planters put thousands of slaves into the interstate trade, which sold them into a Black Belt that stretched from the interior of the Carolinas to East Texas. View an animated version of this map or related maps at <http://www.thomsonedu.com/history/murrin>.

slave market. Soon after the Revolution, men known as “Georgia Traders” appeared in the Upper South, buying slaves on speculation and selling them farther south. By 1820, the slave trade had become an organized business with sophisticated financing, sellers who had an accurate knowledge of slave prices in various southern markets, a well-traveled shipping route between Norfolk and New Orleans, and systems of slave pens and safe houses along the roads of the interior. The domestic slave trade was the biggest and most modern business in the South, with the single exception of the plantation. The centrality of that trade advertised the nature of southern economic development: while northerners exchanged wheat, furniture, books, and shoes with each other, Southerners exchanged slaves.

Most slaves moved into the cotton belt with other slaves who were strangers and under the temporary ownership of traders who knew them only as merchandise. Those who were transported by ship experienced some of the horrors of the old Middle Passage from Africa: cramped quarters, minimal food, discipline at the hands of nervous white



Aby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg, VA

**Going to Tennessee** The Pennsylvanian Lewis Miller met with this group of slaves near Staunton, Virginia, in 1853. They were being sent from their old farms in Virginia to the slave markets of Tennessee and from there to the cotton fields of the newer southern states. In the years after 1820, hundreds of thousands of Upper South slaves suffered this migration.

crewmembers, and the odd murder or casual rape. Those who walked from the old plantations to the Southwest had their own share of terrors. The journey could take as long as seven weeks, and traders organized it with military precision. An old slave remembered the order of march: “them speckulators would put the chillens in a wagon usually pulled by oxens and the older folks was chained or tied together sos dey could not run off.” The slave Charles Ball remembered the same thing in poignant detail: he went south in an unwilling parade of about 50, in which the women

were tied together with a rope, about the size of a bed cord, which was tied like a halter round the neck of each; but the men . . . were very differently caparisoned. A strong iron collar was closely fitted by means of a padlock round each of our necks. A chain of iron about a hundred feet long was passed through the hasp of each padlock, except at the two ends, where the hasps of the padlocks passed through a link of the chain. In addition to this, we were handcuffed in pairs. . . .

The poor man to whom I was ironed, wept like an infant when the blacksmith, with his heavy hammer, fastened the ends of the bolts that kept the staples from slipping from our arms.

Traders and slaves camped along the roads or spent nights crammed into public houses and slave pens. Beatings, rapes, and other abuses along the road entered black folk memory and stayed there. One often-repeated (and apparently true) story told of a small boy taken from his mother’s arms and left with a tavern keeper to pay a bar bill.

### ***Cotton and Slave Labor***

The cotton plantations returned a rate of profit equal to northeastern banks and factories, and they were operated in a more calculating and businesslike way than the old estates on the Chesapeake and in the low country.

Most obviously, cotton planters exerted a more disciplined and direct control over their enslaved workers. Masters in the old settlements had encouraged slaves to create their own livelihoods—by hiring them out, giving them time and land with which to grow their own food, and working them by the task system or under slave overseers—all of which reduced the costs of supervising and providing for slaves while allowing them pockets of autonomy within slavery. On the cotton frontier, good land and slave labor were too valuable to be worked in casual ways, and new farms had to become profitable in a short time. Enslaved men and women who had grown up with the relatively loose work routines of the low country and the Chesapeake now performed the back-breaking labor of turning forests into farms. (They had to “whittle a plantation right out of the woods,” recalled one slave.) Slaves worked in gangs, usually under white owners or overseers. Clearing trees, rolling logs, pulling stumps, clearing and burning brush, and building cabins, fences, and out-buildings was hard labor. The planters preferred crews of young men for these tasks, but such slaves were expensive, and everyone was put to work. A teenaged boy sold from the Chesapeake to Mississippi saw women clearing brush from new land, and remarked that “such work was not done by women slaves in Virginia.” Another slave recalled that her

mother labored with a two-horse plow “when she warn’t cleanin’ new ground or diggin’ ditches.” The labor of making new farms lasted from dawn to dusk, and enslaved men and women worked under the eyes of owners who knew that they must turn the forest into cash-producing farms or go broke.

Once established, the plantations of the cotton belt were among the most intensely commercialized farms in the world. Many of them grew nothing but cotton, buying food from their neighbors or from merchants who sold corn meal and salt pork in bulk. Others grew supplementary crops and produced their own food. But nearly all of the plantation owners, from the proudest grandee to the ambitious farmer with a few slaves, organized labor in ways that maximized production and reinforced the dominance of the white men who owned the farms.

Slaves from the Chesapeake and the rice coast experienced cotton cultivation as a difficult step down. Cotton required a long growing season and a lot of attention, but it did not demand much skill. Early in the spring, the land was cleared and ploughed, and gangs of slaves walked the furrows dropping seeds. During the growing season, black laborers constantly thinned the plants and cleared the fields of weeds, “chopping” the fields with hoes in the hot, humid Deep South summer. The cotton ripened unevenly. In a harvest season that could last long past Christmas, pickers swept through the fields selecting only the ripe bolls, then repeated the task until the full crop was harvested. Cotton, in short, required constant unskilled labor. Slaves in the diversifying Chesapeake had made barrels and crates, boats, wagons, barns and storage sheds; slaves on the rice coast farther south had built complex systems of dikes and levees and had mastered the science of moving and controlling large amounts of water. In the cotton belt, they gave up those skills and went to work with axes, hoes, and their hands.

The work was relentless. Planters in the east had found it economical to allow slaves to work at varied tasks, at irregular times, or under the tasking system. They gave slaves only part of their food (often cornmeal and nothing else), then provided time and land with which slaves grew their own vegetables, chickens, and pigs. Planters on the cotton frontier did away with all that. Only a few cotton-belt planters retained the task system, and these were looked upon as eccentrics by their neighbors, who worked their slaves in gangs from dawn to dusk six days a week. Cotton land was too valuable to permit slave gardens. It made more sense to keep the slaves constantly at cotton cultivation and to supply them with all of their food. It was a more efficient and productive way of growing cotton. It was also a way of reducing the slaves’ customary privileges within slavery, and of enforcing the master’s role as the giver and taker of all things. Even slaves who grew their own food did so in white-supervised fields and not in family plots. An Alabama planter put it bluntly: “Allow it once to be understood by a Negro that he is to provide for himself, and you that moment give him an undeniable claim on you for a portion of his time to make this provision; and should you from necessity, or any other cause, encroach upon his time, disappointment and discontent are seriously felt.” In order to create “a perfect dependence,” this master insisted that “my Negroes have no time whatever.” The Louisiana planter Bennet H. Barrow explained that the master must make the slave “as comfortable at home as

possible, affording him what is essentially necessary for his happiness—you must provide for him your self and by that means creat[e] in him a habit of perfect dependence on you.”

The masters set harsher working conditions and longer hours than slaves had known in their old homes. Slaves could not hope to reinstitute the task system, the family gardens and little farms, the varied tasks, or the uneven hours of labor that they had known on the coast. Yet despite masters’ lack of encouragement, gardens—some of them large and profitable—quickly appeared in the new slave quarters, and enslaved workers found that they could hold masters to agreed-upon standards of time and work. Masters who demanded longer than customary hours or labor on Sunday found the work going slower. In the 1840s, a Mississippi planter noted that slaves had adapted to the long hours, close supervision, and pace of work under the gang system, but would perform the new customary workload and nothing more. “All of them know what their duty is upon a plantation, and that they are generally willing to do, and nothing more.” When asked to work harder or longer “they will not submit to it, but become turbulent and impatient of control, and all the whips in Christendom cannot drive them to perform more than they think they ought to do, or have been in the long habit of doing.”

On the whole, the exploitation of slave labor after 1820 became both more rigorous and more humane. Planters imposed a new and more total control over their slaves, but they clothed it within a larger attempt to make North American slavery into a system that was both paternalistic and humane, and to portray themselves as gentlemen and not as heartless slave-drivers. Food and clothing seems to have improved, and individual cabins for slave families became standard. State laws often forbade the more brutal forms of discipline, and they uniformly demanded that slaves be given Sunday off.

Material standards seem to have risen. One rough indicator is physical height. On the eve of the Civil War, southern slaves averaged about an inch shorter than northern whites, but they were fully three inches taller than newly imported Africans, two inches taller than slaves on the Caribbean island of Trinidad, and an inch taller than British Marines. Slaves suffered greater infant mortality than whites, but those who survived infancy lived out “normal” life spans. Brazil, Cuba, and other slave societies had to import Africans to make up for the deaths of slaves, but the slave population of the southern states increased threefold—from 657,000 to 1,981,000—between 1790 and 1830. With the importation of new Africans banned after 1808 (and with runaways outnumbering new Africans who were smuggled into the country), the increase was due entirely to the fact that—alone among the slave societies of the Western Hemisphere—the American slave population was healthy enough to reproduce itself.

Material conditions on the plantations sprang from both planter self-interest and an attempt to exert a kindly, paternal control over slaves that planters often called “our people” or “our family, black and white.” But humane treatment came at a high price. At the same time that they granted slaves protection from the worst kinds of brutality, cotton-belt states enacted slave codes that defined slaves as persons without rights. The Louisiana code of 1824, for instance, stated that “[The slave] is incapable of making any kind of contract. . . . They can

transmit nothing by succession. . . . The slave is incapable of exercising any public office, or private trust. . . . He cannot be a party in any civil action. . . . Slaves cannot marry without the consent of their masters, and their marriages do not produce any of the civil effects which result from such contract." It was an exact negative image of the rights enjoyed by the white men who owned the plantations, controlled the slaves, and wrote the laws.

### ***Mastery as a Way of Life***

Plantation masters, both the old southeastern nabobs and the cotton planters of newer regions, were the acknowledged economic, social, cultural, and political elite of the South. Their authority rested on economic power and on their connections—often family relationships—with each other. But they dressed their power in gentility and an aura of mastery, a visible "right to rule" that few others, North or South, could match. That power and authority was tied intimately to the ownership of slaves. When assessing a planter's standing, contemporaries seldom added up his acreage or the money that made up his family's fortune. Instead, they counted slaves. In the most common calculation, the ownership of 20 slaves separated planters from farmers. It was a good enough measure, for the planter class made itself out of slaves. Most obviously, the labor of enslaved persons bought the carpets, chandeliers, fine clothes, English chivalric novels, and race horses with which planters displayed their social mastery.

Southern ladies and gentlemen marked themselves off from others most clearly by the fact that they did not work. That too was a result of owning slaves. An observer of one plantation mistress noted that "She has a faithful nurse (Negro) to whose care she abandons her babes entirely, only when she has a fancy to caress them does she see them. Eight children and cannot lay to their charge the loss of a single night's rest." In short, the ownership of a slave transformed a harried housewife into a lady. A southern publicist boasted that "The non-slaveholder knows that as soon as his saving will admit, he can become a slaveholder, and thus relieve his wife from the necessities of the kitchen and the laundry and his children from the labors of the field." Southern farmers without slaves tended to sire very large families and to keep their children in the fields. The women worked outdoors as well. Southerners who owned slaves had fewer children, sent them to school, and moved their wives indoors. The skin of farm women was weathered, cracked, and darkened by the sun; plantation mistresses were smoother and less exhausted, and their skin was literally whiter. "Laborers was respected," recalled a small farmer, "but the men that owned slaves did not work and did not have there children do any work."

The opposite of gentility was the South Carolina farmer who, according to a neighbor, "used to work [his daughters] in the fields like Negroes." According to northern visitors, this association of labor with slavery encouraged laziness among southern whites and robbed work of the dignity it enjoyed in other parts of the country. Most southern white farmers would have disagreed, but the association of black labor, white leisure, and white gentility was central to the plantation regime. The South would not have been the South without it.

### *Southern Families*

Antebellum white southerners remained localistic and culturally conservative. Farm and plantation labor and the routines of daily life still centered in the household, and prospects for most whites remained rooted in inherited land and family help. While the new northern **middle class** nourished a cosmopolitan culture and a domestic sentimentalism that subverted traditional authority, southerners—planters and yeomen alike—distrusted outsiders and defended rural neighborhoods grounded in the authority of fathers and the integrity of families.

Most southern whites regarded themselves less as individuals than as representatives of families that extended through time from the distant past to unborn generations. Southern boys often received the family names of heroes as their first names: Jefferson Davis, for example, or Thomas Jefferson (later, “Stonewall”) Jackson. More often, however, they took the name of a related family—Peyton Randolph, Preston Brooks, Langdon Cheves—and carried them as proud and often burdensome badges of who they were. Children learned early that their first duty was to their family’s reputation. When young Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina was away at school, his sister wrote, “Don’t relax in your efforts to gain a good education. . . . I want you to be an ornament to your family.” Two years later, another sister wrote, “Do, Bud, study hard and make good use of your time. . . . I want you to do something for the Tillman name.”

In the white South, reputation and the defense of family honor were everything. Boys and girls were taught to act as though everyone were watching them, ready to note any hint of inadequacy. A boy with a reputation for cowardice, for ineptness at riding or fighting, or for failure to control his emotions or hold his liquor was an embarrassment to his family. An “unsullied reputation,” insisted Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi, placed a man “on a social level with all his fellows.” As John Horry Dent, an Alabama slave-holder and bad amateur poet, put it:

Honor and shame from all conditions rise;  
Act well your part and there the honor lies.

Among southern white men, wealth generally counted for less than did maintaining one’s personal and family honor and thus winning membership in the democracy of honorable males.

The code of honor, although it forged ties of equality and respect among white men, made rigid distinctions between men and women and whites and blacks. Women and girls who misbehaved—with transgressions ranging from simple gossip to poor housekeeping to adultery—damaged not only their own reputation but also the honor of the fathers, brothers, or husbands who could not control them. Such a charge could mean social death in a rural community made up of patriarchal households and watchful neighbors. In 1813, Bolling Hall of Alabama advised his daughter, “If you learn to restrain every thought, action, and word by virtue and religion, you will become an ornament.” A “good man” or a “good woman” was someone who upheld the family by acting within a prescribed social

role (“Act well your part”), and not, as the children of the northern middle class were being taught, by acting as an autonomous, self-governing individual.

When northerners attacked slavery because it denied the freedom of the individual, one southerner responded in a way that was meant to end the argument: “Do you say that the slave is held to involuntary service? So is the wife, [whose] relation to her husband, in the great majority of cases, is made for her and not by her.” Few white southerners would have questioned the good sense of that response. Southern life was not about freedom, individual fulfillment, or social progress. It was about honoring the obligations to which one was born.

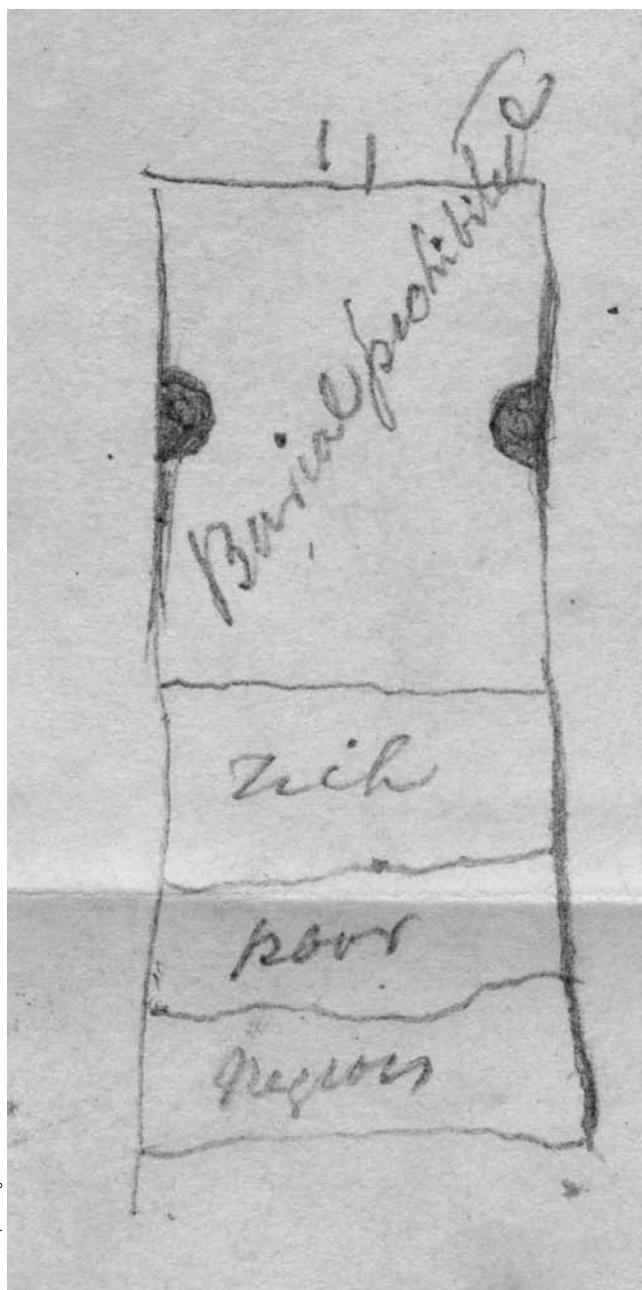
## The Southern Yeomanry

### *Yeomen and Planters*

Some southern boosters advertised cotton as a “democratic” crop that could be cultivated at a profit by almost any southern farmer, but that is not how it worked. Cotton, like other plantation crops, rewarded economies of scale: planters with big farms and many slaves operated more efficiently and more profitably than farmers with fewer resources. The wealthier planter families bought up good cotton land with ready access to markets and turned it into large plantations. They also bought up the majority of slaves. Only 30 percent to 35 percent of southern white families owned at least one slave in 1830, and that percentage dropped as time passed. On the eve of the Civil War, only one white family in four owned a slave. Among the minority of southerners who were slaveowners, half owned fewer than five, and less than 5 percent of white southerners owned 20 or more slaves—the roughly agreed-upon number that separated planters from farmers. Cotton, it turned out, was not democratic: among southern whites it produced not only an unequal distribution of wealth but a dual economy: plantations at the commercial center and a marginally commercial yeomanry on the fringes.

As land prices and local taxes rose in the plantation counties, many of the poorer whites moved out. Those who stayed subsisted on poor, hilly land far from navigable rivers. They tended to be commercial farmers, growing a few bales of cotton with family labor and perhaps a slave or two. Many of them were poor relatives of prosperous plantation owners. They voted the great planters into office and used their cotton gins and tapped into their marketing networks. Some of them worked as overseers for their wealthy neighbors, sold them food, and served on local slave patrols. Economic disparities between planters and farmers in the plantation belt continued to widen, but the farmers remained tied to the cotton economy and its economic and social imperatives.

Most yeomen, however, lived away from the plantations in neighborhoods with few slaves and limited commercial activities. Large numbers of them moved into nonslave territory north of the Ohio River, but most of them stayed in the South: in the upcountry and the eastern slopes of the Appalachians from the Chesapeake through Georgia, the western slopes of the mountains in Kentucky and Tennessee, the pine-covered hill country of northern Mississippi and Alabama, and in swampy, hilly, heavily wooded lands throughout the



The Library of Virginia

**A Map of the Burial Ground in Farmville, Virginia** In 1840, a lawyer sketched the map of a graveyard in slaveholding country near the Appomattox River to make a point in a court case. It was a map of the living as well: rich whites at the top, poor whites in the middle, blacks at the bottom, yet all occupying the same ground.

southern states. All of these areas were unsuitable for plantation crops. Here the farmers built a yeoman society that retained many of the characteristics of the 18th-century countryside, North and South. But while northern farmers commercialized in the 19th century, their southern cousins continued in a household- and neighborhood-centered agriculture until the Civil War and beyond.

Many southern farmers stayed outside the market almost entirely. The mountaineers of the southern Appalachians sent a trickle of livestock and timber out of their neighborhoods, but the mountains remained largely outside the market until the coming of big-business coal mines in the late 19th century. Moreover, farmers in large parts of the upcountry South preferred raising livestock to growing cotton or tobacco. They planted cornfields and let their pigs run loose in the woods and on unfenced private land. In late summer and fall, they rounded up the animals and sold them to drovers who herded them cross-country and sold them to flatland merchants and planters. Thus these hill-country yeomen lived off a market with which they had little firsthand experience. It was a way of life that sustained some of the most fiercely independent neighborhoods in the country.

A larger group of southern yeomen practiced mixed farming for household subsistence and neighborhood exchange, with the surplus sent to market. Most of them owned their own land. The settlement of new lands in the old backcountry and the southwestern states reversed the 18th-century drift toward white tenancy. Few of these farmers kept slaves. In the counties of upland Georgia, for instance, between 7 in 10 and 9 in 10 households were without slaves. These farmers practiced a "subsistence plus" agriculture that was complicated by the nature of southern cash crops. Northern yeomen before 1815 had grown grain and livestock with which they fed their families and traded with neighbors. Whatever was left over, they sent to market. But cotton, like tobacco and other southern cash crops, was not a food. It could be turned into clothing, and often was: farm women in the South spun and wove small cotton crops into clothes for their families. (This at a time when cards, spinning wheels, and looms were disappearing from northern farmhouses.) Most middling and poor southern farmers played it safe: they put their improved land into corn and sweet potatoes, and set pigs and cattle loose to browse the remaining land. The more substantial and ambitious of them cultivated a few acres of cotton. They grew more cotton as transportation made markets more accessible, but few southern yeomen became wholly dependent on the market. With the income from a few bales of cotton, they could pay their debts and taxes and buy coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, cloth, and shoes. But they continued to enter and leave the market at will, and to retain the ability to subsist within their neighborhoods. In the yeoman neighborhoods of the southern states, the economic and social practices of the 18th century were alive and well.

### ***Yeoman Neighborhoods***

The way of life in most southern farm neighborhoods discouraged business-like farming and individual ambition. Because few farms were self-sufficient, farmers routinely traded labor and goods with each other. In the plantation counties, such cooperation tended to

reinforce the power of planters, who put some of their resources at the disposal of their poorer neighbors. In the upcountry, cooperation reinforced neighborliness. As one upland Georgian remarked, “Borrowing . . . was neighboring.” Debts contracted within the network of kin and neighbors were generally paid in kind or in labor, and creditors often allowed their neighbors’ debts to go unpaid for years.

Among southern neighborly restraints on entrepreneurialism, none was more distinctive than the region’s attitude toward fences. Northerners never tired of comparing their neatly fenced farms with the dilapidated or absent fences of the South. In the capitalist North, well-maintained fences were a sign of ambitious, hardworking farmers. The poor fences of the South, they said, were a sign of laziness. Actually, the scarcity of fences in most southern neighborhoods was the result of local custom and state law. Georgia, for instance, required farmers to fence their planted fields but not the rest of their land. In country neighborhoods where families fished and hunted for food, and where livestock roamed freely, fences conflicted with a local economy that required neighborhood use of privately owned land. In this sense, the northerners were right: the absence of fences in the South reflected neighborhood constraints on the private use of private property, and thus on individual acquisitiveness and ambition. Such constraints, however, were necessary to the subsistence of families and neighborhoods as they were organized in the upland South.

Southern farmers marketed their cotton and food surpluses at country stores, and again the patterns of the 18th and early 19th centuries persisted. Northern stores, particularly in the more commercializing regions, were stocking their shelves with a wider variety of imported and domestic goods to serve farm families that no longer produced for themselves and that had money in their pockets. Southern yeomen, on the other hand, bought very little. A relatively prosperous backwoods farmer in South Carolina recalled that “My farm gave me and my whole family a good living on the produce of it, and left me, one year after another, one hundred and fifty silver dollars, *for I never spent more than ten dollars a year*, which was for salt, nails and the like. Nothing to wear, eat or drink was purchased, as my farm provided all.”

Families such as these continued to live without carpets or curtains, to eat homegrown food from wooden or pewter plates, and to wear everyday cloth spun and woven by the women of the family, although many who could afford it wore clothing fashioned from machine-made cloth on Sunday. And like the rest of their transactions, yeomen seldom bought items or settled transactions in cash. The store of Leach Carrigan and Samuel Carrigan in South Carolina, for instance, traded 85 percent of its merchandise for cotton. While the northern countryside and the lowland plantation districts functioned in businesslike ways, the old barter economy—and the forms of family independence and neighborly cooperation on which it rested—persisted in the southern upcountry.

Unlike the plantations, the farm neighborhoods of the South were places in which white people worked. Most farmers relied solely on family labor. They sired many children and put them to work at an early age. Farm wives often labored in the fields, particularly at peak times. Even those who were spared from field work took up heavy burdens.

A southern yeoman remembered that his mother worked “in the house sutch as cooking carding spinning and weaving and washing. Thare [were] 14 in the family,” and “she did not have any servant to help her.” George Washington Lewis, who grew up on his father’s southern farm, recalled a boyhood filled with hard labor. He “chopped, plowed, hoed, carded, reaped, mowed and bound sheaves, in fact all kinds of work necessary on a farm and lots of it. Split rails, built fences, log roled and danced with the girls at quiltings.” We may be happy to learn that this boy found time for fun, but we must note—as northern critics did not—that he spent most of his waking hours at hard physical labor.

## The Private Lives of Slaves

### **Focus Question**

Describe the cultural life that slaves made for themselves within the limits of slavery.

In 1790, slaves in the Chesapeake had lived for generations in the same neighborhoods—old communities filled with kinfolk, ancestral graveyards, family gardens, and familiarity with each other and with local whites. They had made a distinctively African American way of life within the boundaries of slavery. Slaves along the South Carolina–Georgia rice coast, living and working in large groups under minimal white supervision, had made their own African American ways. In the first half of the 19th century, hundreds of thousands of these people were torn from their communities and sold into the cotton states. It began a period of cultural destruction and reconstruction equaled only by the process of enslavement. We can view that process intimately by looking into the most vital of slave institutions: the slave family and slave religion.

### **Slave Families**

In law, in the census, and in the minds of planters, slaves were members of a plantation household over which the owner exercised absolute authority as owner, paternal protector, and lawgiver. Yet both slaveholders and slaves knew that slaves could not be treated like farm animals or little children. Wise slaveholders learned that the success of a plantation depended less on terror and draconian discipline (though whippings—and worse—were common) than on the accommodations by which slaves traded labor and obedience for privileges and some measure of autonomy within the bonds of slavery. After achieving privileges, the slaves called them their own: holidays, garden plots, friendships and social gatherings both on and off the plantation, hunting and fishing rights, the right to trade slave-made goods, and—most vitally—the right to live in families of their own. These hard-won privileges provided some of the ground on which slaves in the old plantation states had made their own lives within slavery. The domestic slave trade and the movement onto the cotton frontier cut that ground from beneath their feet. Slaves learned painfully that they were not members of families or communities—either the masters’ or their own. They were property, and they could be bought and sold.

The most precious privilege on Chesapeake plantations had been the right to make and maintain families. As early as the Revolutionary era, most Chesapeake slaves lived in units consisting of a mother, a father, and their small children. On Charles Carroll's Maryland farms in 1773, for example, 325 of the 400 slaves lived in such families. At Thomas Jefferson's Monticello, most slave marriages were for life, and small children almost always lived with both parents. The most common exceptions to this practice were fathers who had married away from their own plantations and who visited "broad wives" and children during their off hours. Owners encouraged stable marriages because they made farms more peaceful and productive and because they flattered the owners' own religious and paternalistic sensibilities. For their part, slaves demanded families as part of the price of their labor.

Yet slave families had always been vulnerable. Many slaveholders assumed that they had the right to coerce sex from female slaves. Some (including Thomas Jefferson) kept slaves as mistresses. The planters tended, however, to keep these liaisons within bounds. While the slave community seldom punished sex before marriage, it took adultery seriously. Slaveholders knew that violations of married slave women could be enormously disruptive and strongly discouraged them. Slave sales also threatened families, but most sales before 1800 or so took place within neighborhoods, damaging slave families and communities without destroying them. The most serious threat was the death or bankruptcy of the



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**Five Generations of a Slave Family on a South Carolina Sea Island Plantation, 1862** Complex family ties such as those of the family shown here were among the most hard-won and vulnerable cultural accomplishments of enslaved blacks.

slaveholder, which led to the liquidation of estates and the division of property among heirs. Yet even these events, in comparison to what came later, tended to keep slaves in the same extended neighborhood.

### ***The Slave Trade and the Slave Family***

That changed with the growth of the cotton belt and the interstate slave trade. Masters in the seaboard states claimed (often truthfully) that they tried to keep slave families together and that they sold slaves to traders only out of dire necessity or as a means of getting rid of troublesome individuals. The latter category could be used as a threat. One slave remembered that “Slaves usually got scared when it became clear that Negro-Trader [John] White was in the community. The owners used White’s name as a threat to scare the slaves when they had violated some rule.” “If a man did anything out of the way,” recalled another slave, “he was in more danger of being sold than being whipped.” Thomas Jefferson, reputedly the kindest of masters, punished a troublesome slave by selling him in 1803, declaring that he would be sent into “so distant an exile . . . as to cut him off completely from ever being heard of [again].”

Chesapeake planters and slaves knew, however, that the slave trade was more than a means of settling debts or punishing individuals. It had become an important source of income. Myths of slave “breeding farms” in the Chesapeake are just that—myths. Slaves in the exporting states continued to live in families that produced and nurtured their own children, but the children could expect to be sold into long-distance markets when they came of age. The systematic selling of teenaged and young adult slaves, who commanded the highest prices, became a standard way in which Chesapeake gentlemen maintained their status. John Randolph of Roanoke, one of the great planter-politicians of Virginia, routinely translated younger members of his “plantation family” into cash. In 1823, he traveled to New York to see the great match race between the northern horse American Eclipse and the southern horse Henry. In a moment of pride and exuberance, he shouted from the grandstand that he would bet “a year’s crop of negroes” on the southern champion.

Professional slave traders made no effort to hide their willingness to break slave families. Neither did the southwestern planters who bought slaves from the older states. One planter insisted that “it is better to buy *none in families*, but *to select only choice, first rate, young hands from 14 to 25 years of age*, (buying no children or aged negroes.)” Seaboard planters, trying to convince themselves and anyone who would listen that they were responsible paternalists, made a sharp division between the plantation “family” and the well-known horrors of the domestic slave trade, but the slaves knew better. A Virginia slave woman had this to say of the planter who had sold her daughters: “he was a mean dirty slave trader.”

Separated from their kinfolk and communities, cotton-belt slaves began the old process of negotiation with their masters, and they reconstructed families. Cotton planters preferred young men for the labor of clearing the land, but they soon began importing nearly equal numbers of women, encouraging marriage, and providing cabins for slave families. Families made for greater peace and quiet on the plantations, and they were a good long-term

investment in the production of new slaves. The slaves grasped the opportunity. As early as the 1820s, 51 percent of rural Louisiana slaves lived in families composed of two parents and their children. That figure was smaller than it had been on the old farms, but in view of what the slaves had been through, it was surprisingly large.

Slaveholders who encouraged slave marriages—perhaps even solemnizing them with a religious ceremony—knew that marriage implied a form of self-ownership that conflicted with the slaves' status as property. Some conducted ceremonies in which couples "married" by jumping over a broomstick. Others had the preacher omit the phrases "let no man put asunder" and "till death do you part" from the ceremony. Slaves knew that such ceremonies had no legal force. A Virginia slave remarked, "We slaves knowed that them words wasn't bindin'. Don't mean nothin' lessen you say, 'What God has jined, caint no man pull asunder.' But dey never would say dat. Jus' say 'Now you married.'" A South Carolina slave preacher routinely ended the ceremony with "Till death or buckra [whites] part you."

Slaves built their sense of family and kinship around such uncertainties. Because separation from father or mother was common, children spread their affection among adult relatives, treating grandparents, aunts, and uncles almost as though they were parents. In fact, slaves often referred to all of their adult relatives as "parents." They also called non-relatives "brother," "sister," "aunt," and "uncle," thus extending a sense of kinship to the slave community at large. Slaves chose as surnames for themselves the names of former owners, Anglicized versions of African names, or names that simply sounded good. They rarely chose the name of their current owner. Families tended to use the same given names over and over, naming boys after their father or grandfather, perhaps to preserve the memory of fathers who might be taken away. They seldom named girls after their mothers, however. Unlike Southern whites, slaves never married a first cousin, even though many members of their community were close relatives. The origins and functions of some of these customs are unknown. We know only that slaves practiced them consistently, often without the knowledge of the slaveholders.

### ***The Beginnings of African American Christianity in the Chesapeake***

Until the mid-18th century, neither enslaved Africans nor their masters showed much interest in christianizing slaves. That changed with the rise of evangelical Christianity in the South (see chapter 10). Blacks participated in the revivals of the southern Great Awakening, and the number of Christian slaves increased steadily in the second half of the 18th century. In the slave communities of the Upper South, as well as the burgeoning free and semifree black populations in the towns, the evangelical revivals of the late 18th and early 19th centuries appealed powerfully to African Americans, who sensed that the bonds of slavery were loosening. By 1820, most blacks in the Chesapeake considered themselves Christians. They would take their religion with them when they went farther south.

Between the Revolution and 1820, Chesapeake slaves embraced Christianity and began to turn it into a religion of their own. Slaves attended camp meetings, listened to **itinerant preachers**, and joined the Baptist and Methodist congregations of the southern revival.

The revivalists, in turn, welcomed slaves and free blacks to their meetings and sometimes recruited them as preachers. Evangelical preaching, singing, and spiritual exercises were much more attractive than the cold, high-toned lectures of the Anglicans. So were the humility and suffering of evangelical whites, most of whom were poor men and outsiders. Finally, the slaves gloried in the evangelicals' assault on the slaveholders' culture and in the antislavery sentiments of many white evangelicals (see chapter 10). The result was a huge increase in the number of African American Christians. Methodists, who counted converts more carefully than some others, claimed 20,000 black members in 1800—one in three American Methodists.

The integrated congregations, however, did not last. There were exceptions, but most congregations were in fact internally segregated, with blacks sitting in the back of the church or upstairs in the gallery, and with only whites serving in positions of authority. Blacks, with both positive and negative encouragement from whites, organized independent churches in Baltimore, Wilmington, Richmond, Norfolk, and the scattered villages that had risen to serve the Chesapeake's new mixed economy. Even Charleston boasted an independent Methodist conference made up of 4,000 slaves and free blacks in 1815. By 1820, roughly 700 independent black churches operated in the United States. There had been none at all 30 years earlier. And on the plantations, slaves met informally—sometimes with the masters' permission, sometimes without it—to preach and pray.

### ***Slave Theology***

Slaves understood and used the message of Christianity in their own ways. The biblical notion that slavery could be punishment for sin and the white southern notion that God intended blacks to be slaves never took root among enslaved Christians. Hannah Scott, a slave in Arkansas, remarked on what she heard a white preacher say: "But all he say is 'bedience to de white folks, and we hears 'nough of dat without him telling us.'" One slave asked a white preacher, "Is us slaves gonna be free in heaven?" The preacher had no answer. As one maid boldly told her mistress, "God never made us to be slaves for white people."

Another way in which slave religion differed from what was preached to them by whites was in the practice of conjuring, folk magic, root medicine, and other occult knowledge, most of it passed down from West Africa. Such practices provided help in areas in which Christianity was useless. They could reputedly cure illnesses, make people fall in love, ensure a good day's fishing, or bring harm to one's enemies. Sometimes African magic was in competition with plantation Christianity. Just as often, however, slaves combined the two. For instance, slaves sometimes determined the guilt or innocence of a person accused of stealing by hanging a Bible by a thread, then watching the way it turned. The form was West African; the Bible was not. The slave root doctor George White boasted that he could "cure most anything," but added that "you got to talk wid God an' ask him to help out." "Maum Addie," a slave in coastal South Carolina, dealt with the malevolent African spirits called plat-eyes with a combination of African potions, the Christian God, and a stout stick: "So I totes mah powder en sulphur en I carries mah stick in mah han en puts mah truss in Gawd."

While Christianity could not cure sick babies or identify thieves, it gave slaves something more important: a sense of themselves as a historical people with a role to play in God's cosmic drama. In slave Christianity, Moses the liberator (and not the slaveholders' Abraham) stood beside Jesus. The slaves' appropriation of the book of Exodus denied the smug assumption of the whites that they were God's chosen people who had escaped the bondage of despotic Europe to enter the promised land of America. To the slaves, America was Egypt, they were the chosen people, and the slaveholders were Pharaoh. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a Boston abolitionist who went south during the Civil War to lead a Union regiment of freed South Carolina slaves, wrote that his men knew the Old Testament books of Moses and the New Testament book of Revelation. "All that lies between," he said, "even the life of Jesus, they hardly cared to read or to hear." He found their minds "a vast bewildered chaos of Jewish history and biography; and most of the events of the past, down to the period of the American Revolution, they instinctively attribute to Moses."

The slaves' religious songs, which became known as spirituals, told of God's people, their travails, and their ultimate deliverance. In songs and sermons, the figures of Jesus and Moses were often blurred, and it was not always clear whether deliverance—accompanied by divine retribution—would take place in this world or the next. But deliverance always meant an end to slavery, with the possibility that it might bring a reversal of relations between slaves and masters. "The idea of a revolution in the conditions of the whites and blacks," said the escaped slave Charles Ball, "is the cornerstone of the religion of the latter."

### ***Religion and Revolt***

In comparison with slaves in Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil, and other New World plantation societies, North American slaves seldom went into organized, armed revolt. The environment of the United States was unfriendly to such events. American plantations were relatively small and dispersed, and the southern white population was large, vigilant, and very well-armed. Whites also enjoyed—until the cataclysm of the Civil War—internal political stability. There were thus few situations in which slaves could hope to win their freedom by violent means. Thousands of slaves demonstrated their hatred of the system by running away. Others fought masters or overseers, sabotaged equipment and animals, stole from planters, and found other ways to oppose slavery, but most knew that open revolt was suicide.

Christianity convinced slaves that history was headed toward an apocalypse that would result in divine justice and their own deliverance. It thus contained the possibility of revolt. But slave preachers seldom indulged in prophecy and almost never told their congregations to become actively engaged in God's divine plan, for they knew that open resistance was hopeless. Slave Christians believed that God hated slavery and would end it, but that their role was to have faith in God, to take care of one another, to preserve their identity as a people, and to await deliverance. Only occasionally did slaves take retribution and deliverance into their own hands, and each time they were armed with some mix of republican equalitarianism and evangelical Christianity.

### *Gabriel's Rebellion*

Masters who talked of liberty, natural rights, and equality before God sometimes worried that slaves might imagine that such language could apply to themselves. The Age of Democratic Revolution took a huge step in that direction in 1789, when the French Revolution—fought in the name of “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity”—went beyond American notions of restored English liberties and into the heady regions of universal natural rights. Among the first repercussions outside of France was a revolution in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue. That island’s half-million slaves fought out a complicated political and military revolt that began with the events in Paris in 1789 and resulted—after the defeats of Spanish, English, and French armies—with the creation of the independent black republic of Haiti on the western one-third of the island. Slave societies throughout the hemisphere heard tales of terror from refugee French planters and stories of hope from the slaves they brought with them (12,000 of these entered South Carolina and Louisiana alone). In 1800, a conservative Virginia white complained that “Liberty and Equality has been infused into the minds of the negroes.” A South Carolina congressman agreed that “this newfangled French philosophy of liberty and equality” was stirring up the slaves. Even Thomas Jefferson, who applauded the spread of French republicanism, conceded that “the West Indies appears to have given considerable impulse to the minds of the slaves . . . in the United States.”

Slaves from the 1790s onward whispered of natural rights and imagined themselves as part of the Democratic Revolution. This covert republic of the slaves sometimes came into the open. In Richmond in 1800, a slave blacksmith named **Gabriel** hatched a conspiracy to overthrow Virginia’s slave regime. Gabriel had been hired out to Richmond employers for most of his adult life; he was shaped less by plantation slavery than by the democratic, loosely interracial underworld of urban artisans. In the late 1790s, the repressive acts of the Federalist national government and the angry responses of the Jeffersonian opposition (see chapter 7), along with the news from Haiti, drove the democratic sensibilities of that world to new heights.

Gabriel, working with his brother and other hired-out slave artisans, planned his revolt with military precision. Working at religious meetings, barbecues, and the grog shops of Richmond, they recruited soldiers among slave artisans, adding plantation slaves only at the last moment. Gabriel planned to march an army of 1,000 men on Richmond in three columns. The outside columns would set diversionary fires in the warehouse district and prevent the militia from entering the town. The center would seize Capitol Square, including the treasury, the arsenal, and Governor James Monroe.

Although his army would be made up of slaves, and although his victory would end slavery in Virginia, Gabriel hoped to make a republican revolution, not a slave revolt. His chosen enemies were the Richmond “merchants” who had controlled his labor. Later, a co-conspirator divulged the plan: The rebels would hold Governor Monroe hostage and split the state treasury among themselves, and “if the white people agreed to their freedom they would then hoist a white flag, and [Gabriel] would dine and drink with the merchants of the city on the day when it would be agreed to.” Gabriel expected what he called “the poor

white people” and “the most redoubtable republicans” to join him. He in fact had the shadowy support of two Frenchmen, and rumors indicated that other whites were involved, although never at levels that matched the delusions of the conspirators or of worried whites. Gabriel planned to kill anyone who opposed him, but he would spare Quakers, Methodists, and Frenchmen, for they were “friendly to liberty.” Unlike earlier slave insurgents, Gabriel did not plot violent retribution or a return to or reconstruction of West Africa. He was an American revolutionary, and he dreamed of a truly democratic republic for Virginia. His army would march into Richmond under the banner “Death or Liberty.”

Gabriel recruited at least 150 soldiers who agreed to gather near Richmond on August 30, 1800. The leaders expected 500 to 600 more to join them as they marched upon the town. On the appointed day, however, it rained heavily, washing out bridges and making roads impassable. Rebels could not reach the meeting point, and amid white terror and black betrayals, Gabriel and his henchmen were hunted down, tried, and sentenced to death. In all, the state hanged 27 supposed conspirators, while others were sold and transported out of Virginia. The condemned carried their republican dreams to their graves. A white Virginian marveled that the rebels on the gallows displayed a “sense of their [natural] rights, [and] a contempt of danger.” When asked to explain the revolt, one condemned man replied in terms that could only have disturbed the white republicans of Virginia: “I have nothing more to offer than what General Washington would have had to offer, had he been taken by the British and put to trial by them. I have adventured my life in endeavoring to obtain the liberty of my countrymen, and am a willing sacrifice in their cause.”

### ***Denmark Vesey***

**Denmark Vesey**, a free black of Charleston, South Carolina, hatched the most ambitious conspiracy. Vesey was a leading member of an African Methodist congregation that had seceded from the white Methodists and had been independent from 1817 to 1821. At its height, the church had 6,000 members, most of them slaves. Vesey and some of the other members read widely in political tracts, including the antislavery arguments in the Missouri debates (see chapter 11) and in the Bible. They talked about their delivery out of Egypt, with all white men, women, and children being cut off. They identified Charleston as Jericho and planned its destruction in 1822. A few dozen Charleston blacks would take the state armory, then arm rural slaves who would rise up to help them. They would kill the whites and commandeer ships in the harbor and make their getaway, presumably to black-controlled Haiti. Word of the conspiracy spread secretly into the countryside, largely through the efforts of Gullah Jack, who was both a Methodist and an African conjurer. Jack recruited African-born slaves as soldiers, provided them with charms as protection against whites, and used his spiritual powers to terrify others into keeping silent.

In the end, the Vesey plot was betrayed by slaves. As one coerced confession followed another, white authorities hanged Vesey, Gullah Jack, and 34 other accused conspirators—22 of them in one day. But frightened whites knew that most of the conspirators (estimates ranged from 600 to 9,000) remained at large and unidentified.



**Nat Turner** This contemporary woodcut depicts scenes from Nat Turner's rebellion. In this bloodiest of all North American slave revolts, 55 whites, most of them women and children, were shot and hacked to death.

### ***Nat Turner***

In August 1831, in a revolt in Southampton County, Virginia, some 60 slaves shot and hacked to death 55 white men, women, and children. Their leader was **Nat Turner**, a Baptist lay preacher. Turner was neither a conjurer like Gullah Jack (he violently opposed plantation conjurers) nor a republican revolutionary like Denmark Vesey or the Richmond slave Gabriel. He was, he told his captors, a Christian prophet and an instrument of God's wrath. As a child, he had prayed and fasted often, and the spirit—the same spirit that had spoken to the prophets of the Bible—had spoken to him. When he was a young man, he had run away to escape a cruel overseer, but God said that He had not chosen him merely to have him run away, and Nat had returned. He justified his return with one of the slaveowners' favorite verses of scripture: "He who knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." But Turner knew that his Master was God, not a slaveowner.

Around 1830, Turner received visions of the final battle in Revelation, recast as a war between white and black spirits. He saw Christ crucified against the night sky, and the next morning he saw Christ's blood in a cornfield. Convinced by a solar eclipse in February 1831 that the time had come, Turner began telling other slaves about his visions, recruited his force, and launched his bloody and hopeless revolt.

The revolts of Gabriel, Turner, and Vesey, along with scores of more limited conspiracies, deeply troubled southern whites. Slaveholders were committed to a paternalism that was increasingly tied to the South's attempt to make slavery both domestic and Christian. For their part, slaves recognized that they could receive decent treatment and pockets of autonomy in return for outward docility. Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner opened wide cracks in that mutual charade. During the Turner revolt, slaves whose masters had been murdered

joined the rebels without a second thought. A plantation mistress who survived by hiding in a closet listened to the murders of her husband and children, then heard her house servants arguing over possession of her clothes. A Charleston grandee named Elias Horry, upon finding that his coachman was among the Vesey conspirators, asked him, “What were your intentions?” The formerly docile slave replied that he had intended “to kill you, rip open your belly, and throw your guts in your face.”

## A Balance Sheet: The Plantation and Southern Growth

### **Focus Question**

What were the nature and limits of the market revolution in the South? Why?

The cotton plantation was a profitable business. In 1860, the cash value of the southern slave population was \$3 billion. That was more than the value of investments in banking, railroads, and manufacturing combined. The best estimates put the annual rate of return on the larger plantations at 10 percent—higher than factories, banks, and other more modern enterprises. Land and slaves produced wealth and social esteem in the South, and planters invested their profits in more slaves and more land. The result was a lack of diversification and an increasing concentration of resources in the hands of the planter class. There was significant economic growth in the South, but most of it happened on the largest farms.

The commercialization of the northern family farm created a rural demand for credit, banking facilities, farm tools, clothing, and other consumer goods and services, spurring a revolution in commerce, finance, and industry. The South, on the other hand, was a poor



The Historic New Orleans Collection, Accension #1977.13734311

**A Cotton Press** Mule-driven presses such as the one shown here packed southern cotton into bales for easier transport to market. The cotton was pressed into a frame by a wooden screw carved from a whole tree.

## HISTORY THROUGH FILM

### Beloved (1998)

*Directed by Jonathan Demme. Starring Danny Glover (Paul D), Oprah Winfrey (Sethe), Beah Richards (Baby Suggs).*

**O**prah Winfrey produced and starred in this adaptation of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. It is a story of persisting personal and communal wounds inflicted by slavery, told from within a damaged black household near Cincinnati in 1873.

The action begins when Paul D (Danny Glover) walks up to the house of Sethe (Oprah Winfrey) and her daughter, Denver. As he enters, the house fills with a red glow and shakes itself into a storm of furniture and kitchen implements. The house is haunted by the ghost of Sethe's baby girl. Paul D is a former slave from Sweet Home, the horrific Kentucky plantation from which Sethe escaped. He moves in, the ghost moves out, and the film follows this household through the next year.

Peace lasts only a short time. A strange young woman named Beloved moves in and becomes Denver's sister, Sethe's

daughter, and Paul D's mystical seducer. (The camera pans back from the seduction scene in the red glow that we remember from the initial haunting.) Paul D discovers that Sethe had killed her own baby in 1856 and he leaves. Beloved, now pregnant, demands (and gets) Sethe's time, money, and affection. Sethe loses her job and runs out of food and money, serving Beloved all the while. Denver begs work from an old teacher, and the community of black women, who have shunned Sethe and her family throughout the movie, begin leaving food.

In the climactic scene, Denver waits on the porch for her new white employer (a former abolitionist), when the black women arrive to sing and chant in an effort to exorcise ghosts from the house. Sethe, crazed, followed by naked and pregnant Beloved, comes onto the porch and attacks the employer with an ice pick. The women subdue her, Denver rides off (like her brothers before her) to another life, and Beloved disappears. The film ends with the return of Paul D, and we are left with the hope that Sethe may outlive her ghosts.

Although the action occurs in 1873, the explanation lies in slavery and in the 1856 escape attempt told—in conversation, dreams, and flashbacks—as memory. Love scenes between Sethe and Paul D display the scars of whippings, particularly on Sethe. She saw her mother hanged, she was whipped and beaten while pregnant, and her owner's sons held her down and sucked the milk from her. (Sethe learns later that her husband, whom she thought had abandoned her, witnessed this scene from a hayloft and went hopelessly insane.) Her escape is botched and violent. Sethe secretly sends her two sons ahead to Baby Suggs (Beah Richards), her mother-in-law in Ohio. Sethe sets off alone, gives birth to Denver on the banks of the Ohio River, crosses the river, and spends one perfect month tending her children and going to Baby Suggs's church meetings in the woods—meetings at which Suggs demands that her people love themselves. Then the old master arrives to take them back to Kentucky. Sethe grabs the children, takes them into an outbuilding, and tries to kill them, succeeding only with Denver's infant older sister.

It all works better in Morrison's novel than in Oprah Winfrey's movie, but both are terrible and disturbing dramatizations of the injury slavery inflicted and of African American attempts to both absorb and transcend the crimes committed against them.



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*Beloved* (1998) stars Danny Glover and Oprah Winfrey and is based on Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.

market for manufactured goods. Most white farmers relied on the production of their households and neighbors, and they remained marginal to the market economy. They bought finished goods from the outside, but at a rate that was far lower than their northern counterparts. The slaves wore cheap cloth made in the Northeast and bought by their masters, and their trade in slave-made goods, while it was crucial to subsistence and a valued form of “independence” within slavery, resulted in only low-level (often furtive) entry into the market. For their part, the larger planters furnished themselves and their homes with finery from Europe. The South continued to export its plantation staples and to pay outsiders for shipping, financial services, and finished goods. A market revolution produced commercial agriculture, urbanization, a specialized labor force, and technological innovation in the North. In the South, it simply produced more cotton and more slavery.

Not that the South neglected technological change and agricultural improvement. Southerners developed Eli Whitney’s table-top cotton gin into big machines capable of performing complex milling operations. They improved steamboat design as well, creating flat-bottomed boats that could travel far up shallow rivers. They also developed, among others, a machine with a huge wooden screw powered by horses or mules to press ginned cotton into tight bales for shipping. Jordan Goree, a slave craftsman in Huntsville, Texas, won a reputation for being able to carve whole trees into perfect screws for these machines. There were, however, few such innovations, and they had to do with the processing and shipping of cotton. Despite the experiments of a few gentleman-planters, there were almost no improvements in the *cultivation* of cotton. The truth is that cotton was a labor-intensive crop that discouraged innovation. Moreover, plantation workers often resisted their enslavement by sabotaging expensive tools and draft animals, scattering manure in haphazard ways, and passively resisting innovations that would have added to their drudgery. So the cotton fields continued to be cultivated by enslaved people working with clumsy, mule-drawn plows that barely scratched the soil, by women wielding heavy hoes, and by gangs who harvested the crop by hand.

Southern state governments spent little on **internal improvements**. A Virginia canal linked the flour mills at Richmond with inland grain fields, and another would connect Chesapeake Bay with the National Road, thus realizing—too late—Washington’s and Jefferson’s dreams of a thoroughfare between the Chesapeake and the Ohio Valley. But cotton-belt planters built their farms on alluvial land with ready access to the South’s magnificent system of navigable rivers. They had little interest in expensive, state-supported internal improvements that their own neighborhoods did not need. Upcountry whites, particularly in the Upper South, sometimes campaigned for roads and canals, but they seldom got such measures through planter-dominated legislatures.

Nor did the South build cities, much less a regional *system* of cities. In 1800, about 82 percent of the southern workforce and about 70 percent of the northern workforce were employed in agriculture. By 1860, only 40 percent of the northern workforce was so employed. In the South, the proportion had risen to 84 percent. The old northern seaports

grew dramatically in the early 19th century, and they extended their sway over systems of satellite cities. New York, which became America's great city in the first third of the 19th century, exercised not only commercial but also cultural power over the old capital at Albany, as well as new Erie Canal cities such as Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo. Between 1800 and 1840, the urban population of New York State rose from 12.7 percent to 19.4 percent, despite the settlement of huge tracts of new agricultural land. In Massachusetts, the urban population rose from 15.4 percent to 37.9 percent in these years. By 1840, every northeastern and mid-Atlantic state with the exceptions of Maine and Vermont had at least 10 percent of their people living in cities. No southern state urbanized at that level. Virginia, at 6.9 percent, had the largest urban population of any of the future Confederate states.

Commercial and manufacturing cities sprouted up throughout the interior of the North. The few southern cities were located on the periphery of the region and served as transportation depots for plantation crops. River cities like Louisville, Memphis, and St. Louis were little more than stopping places for steamboats. The great seaports of New Orleans, Charleston, and Baltimore had in the past shipped plantation staples directly to British and European markets. But as the 19th century progressed, they sent more and more of their goods by coasting vessel to New York City, where they were trans-shipped to foreign ports. In turn, Europe's manufactured goods were funneled into New York, then sold off to the southern (and northern) countryside. The commercial metropolis of the southern United States was becoming less London and more New York. What had *not* changed was the colonial status of the South.

Thus while the North and the Northwest developed towns and cities throughout their regions, southern cities continued to be few and to perform the colonial functions of 18th-century seaport towns. Southern businessmen turned to New York City for credit, insurance, and coastal and export shipping. From New York they ordered finished goods for the southern market. *De Bow's Review*, the principal business journal of the South, reported that South Carolina storekeepers who bought goods from Charleston wholesalers concealed that fact and claimed they had bought them directly from New York City, for it was well known that New York provided better goods at lower prices than any supplier in the South. De Bow testified to the superior skill and diversification of the North when, after trying several New Orleans sources, he awarded the publishing contract for his *Review* to a northern printer. That was not surprising in any case, because De Bow received three-fourths of his income from northern advertisers. In all, southerners estimated that 40 cents of every dollar produced by cotton remained in the Northeast.

## Conclusion

On the eve of the Civil War, James H. Hammond, a slaveholding senator from South Carolina, asked, "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 make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war on cotton. Cotton

is king.” Hammond was arguing, as Jefferson had argued in 1807, that farmers at the fringes of the world market economy could coerce the commercial-industrial center. He was wrong. The commitment to cotton and slavery had isolated the South politically. It had also deepened the South’s dependence on the world’s financial and industrial centers. The North transformed itself from a part of the old colonial periphery (the suppliers of food and raw materials) into a part of the core (the suppliers of manufactured goods and financing) of the world market economy, while the South continued to export plantation staples in exchange for imported goods. In the process, the South worked itself deeper and deeper into dependence, now as much upon the American Northeast as upon the old colonial rulers in London.

#### SUGGESTED READINGS

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