

10

TOWARD AN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1815–1850

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- The Democratization of Culture • The Northern Middle Class • The Plain People of the North • A New Popular Culture • Family, Church, and Neighborhood: The White South • Race • Citizenship

AMERICANS AFTER 1815 experienced wave after wave of social and cultural change. Territorial expansion, the growth of the market, and the spread of plantation slavery broke old social patterns. Americans in these years reinvented family life. They created American forms of popular literature and art. They flocked to evangelical churches that expanded and remade American religious life. They began, in short, to make a distinctively American culture.

The emerging American culture was more or less uniformly republican, capitalist, and Protestant. But different kinds of Americans made different cultures out of the revolutionary inheritance, market expansion, and revival religion. Southern farmers and their northern cousins thought differently about fatherhood and the proper way to make a family. Northeastern businessmen and southern planters agreed that economic progress was indeed progress, but they differed radically on its moral implications. Slaveholders, factory hands, rich and poor farmers, and middle-class women all heard the same Bible stories and learned different lessons. The result, visible from the 1830s onward, was an American national culture that was (and is) less an accepted body of rules than an ongoing conversation. This chapter identifies the varying ways in which Americans thought about four of the hot spots in that conversation: family life and personal identity, the Christian inheritance, the question of race, and the nature of republican citizenship.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CULTURE

The weakening of traditional authority created spaces that Americans filled in their own ways. Important pillars of old cultures remained: The Bible and revolutionary ideas of liberty and equality were fundamental. But the transportation network that

CHRONOLOGY

1825	Charles Grandison Finney begins religious revival meetings in upstate New York
1830	Joseph Smith founds the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints
1831	First minstrel show is presented
1843	William Miller's Adventists expect the world to end
1845	George Lippard's lurid novel <i>The Quaker City</i> becomes a best seller
1849	Astor Place theater riot in New York City leaves 20 dead
1852	Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>

carried wheat and cotton out of rural neighborhoods brought new things in: furniture and ways of arranging it, new clothing styles, new forms of entertainment, new information, new aspirations. In part, Americans made new ways of thinking and living as consumers of these cultural goods.

Among the items reaching Americans was information—newspapers, books, magazines, business communications, personal letters, and travelers who carried news. The information circulated among a public that was remarkably literate and well informed. The literacy rate in the preindustrial United States was among the highest ever recorded. In 1790, approximately 85 percent of adult men in New England and 60 percent of those in Pennsylvania and the Chesapeake could read and write. The literacy rate among women was lower—about 45 percent in New England—but on the rise. By 1820, all but the poorest white Americans, particularly in the North, could read and write. The United States, more than perhaps any other country, was a nation of readers.

A Revolution in Print

The rise of a reading public was accompanied by a print revolution: Enterprising men (and a few women) learned how to make their livings by providing cheap Bibles and English novels, almanacs, newspapers, and other printed matter. People were encouraged to read by their republican governments. The states provided schools, and the national government helped the flow of print in ways that were unprecedented.

The governments of Great Britain and the European powers tried to control the circulation of information; they established few post offices, taxed newspapers, monitored what was said in the newspapers and even in the mail, and prosecuted people who said the wrong things in print. There were attempts to do such things in America. The Stamp Tax of 1765 had included a tax on newspapers, and in 1798 Federalists had jailed editors with whom they disagreed. Americans defeated both of these attempts. The First Amendment guaranteed freedom of the press, and the U.S. government (with that brief Federalist exception) did not interfere with newspapers. Just the opposite:

Newspapers enjoyed discounted postal rates and circulated far beyond their points of publication. A law of 1792 allowed newspapers to mail copies to each other without cost, and the editors of country weeklies cut national and international news from the New York, Baltimore, and Philadelphia papers, combined it with local advertising and legal notices, and provided their readers with cheap sources of information that were remarkably uniform throughout the North and West and much of the South. In effect, then, government directly and knowingly subsidized the rise of a democratic and national reading public.

Newspapers were the most widely distributed form of print in the new republic. In 1790, 106 newspapers were being published in the United States. In 1835, 1,258 were in publication, 90 of which were dailies. In the latter year, the number of newspapers per capita in the United States was two to three times greater than in Great Britain. Though only about one household in 10 subscribed to a newspaper, the democratic public knew what was in them, for the papers were passed from hand to hand, read aloud in groups, and made available at taverns and public houses.

Improvements in distribution and printing technology encouraged other forms of popular literature as well. The emerging evangelical crusade made innovative use of print. Sunday school tracts, temperance pamphlets, and other religious materials were printed in New York and distributed efficiently and cheaply through the mails, while the American Bible Society devised a realistic plan to provide every household in America with a free Bible. Newspapers were men's reading, but the religious tracts tended to find their way into the hands of women. Women also were the principal readers of novels, a new form of reading matter that Thomas Jefferson and other authorities denounced as frivolous and aberrant. Novels were seen as dangerous not only because they contained questionable subject matter but also because girls and women read them silently and in private. Printed matter provided information and opinion for the men who exercised power and conducted the public life of democracy, but it could also provide sustenance for the spirits and imaginations of Americans who were excluded from power and the public.

The increase in literacy and in printed matter accelerated both the market and democratic individualism. Books and newspapers were scarce in the 18th century, and most Americans had experienced the written word only as it was read aloud by fathers, ministers, or teachers. After 1790, private, silent reading of new kinds of texts became common. No longer were adult male authorities the sole interpreters of the world for families and neighborhoods. The new print culture encouraged Americans to read, think, and interpret information for themselves.

THE NORTHERN MIDDLE CLASS

"The most valuable class in any community," declared the poet-journalist Walt Whitman in 1858, "is the **middle class**." At that time, the term *middle class* (and the social group that it described) had been in use no more than 30 or 40 years. The Market Revolution had created new towns and cities and transformed the old ones,

and it had turned the rural North into a landscape of family-owned commercial farms. Those who claimed the title “middle class” were largely the new kinds of proprietors made in that transformation—city and country merchants, master craftsmen who had turned themselves into manufacturers, and the mass of market-oriented farmers. They lived at the centers of the new marketing and communications networks, and they developed a self-conscious middle-class identity that was remarkably uniform throughout the North.

A New Middle Class

New England played a disproportionate role in the making of middle-class culture. The region was the first center of factory production, and southern New England farms were thoroughly commercialized by the 1830s. Yankee migrants dominated the commercial heartland of western New York and the northern regions of the Northwest. Even in the seaport cities (New York’s Pearl Street wholesale houses are a prime example), businessmen from New England were often at the center of economic innovation. This Yankee middle class invented cultural forms that became the core of an emerging business civilization. Liberty for them meant self-ownership and the freedom of action and ambition. Equality meant equality of opportunity. They upheld the autonomous and morally accountable individual against the claims of traditional neighborhoods and traditional families. They devised an intensely private, mother-centered domestic life. Most of all they adhered to a reformed Yankee Protestantism whose moral imperatives became the foundation of American middle-class culture.

The Evangelical Base

Religion helped to define the new middle-class culture. From the 1790s, a series of intense religious revivals took place on the western frontier. By the mid-1820s and 1830s, these revivals, together known as the **Second Great Awakening**, reached the emerging middle class of the North and continued in areas throughout the country into the 1850s. The evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, who led his first revival in 1825, was most responsible for bringing the awakening to the northern middle class. So fiery were the revivals in and around Finney’s base of Rochester, New York, and other towns along the Erie Canal that people began to call the area the “Burned-Over District.” The revivals had much in common with the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s. Transplanted New Englanders, the heirs of what was left of Yankee Calvinism, composed much of Finney’s audience and would have easily recognized his vivid warnings of hell for the sinful and unconverted.

Yet, the message of the Second Great Awakening also differed from the First in significant ways. Finney and other preachers reached beyond the traditional Puritan themes of original sin, innate sinfulness, and predestination. Those living through the economic changes associated with the Market Revolution had witnessed firsthand the ability of humans to shape their environment. And as middle-class Christians improved the material and social worlds, the doctrines of human inability and natural depravity, along with faith in divine providence, made less sense.

To such an audience, Finney preached the organizing principle of northern middle-class evangelicalism: “God,” he insisted, “has made man a moral free agent.” Neither the social order, the troubles of this world, nor the spiritual state of individuals was divinely ordained. People would make themselves and the world better by choosing right over wrong—though they would choose right only after submitting their rebellious wills to the will of God. It was a religion that valued individual holiness over a permanent and sacred social order. It made the spiritual nature of individuals a matter of prayer, submission, and choice. Thus, it gave Christians the means—through the spread of revivals—to bring on the thousand-year reign of Christianity that they believed would precede the Second Coming of Christ. As Charles Finney told his Rochester audience, “If [Christians] were united all over the world the Millennium might be brought about in three months.”

Yankee evangelists had been moving toward Finney’s formulation since the turn of the 19th century. Like Finney, they borrowed revival techniques from the Methodists (weeklong meetings, meetings in which women prayed in public, and an “**anxious bench**”—a space reserved in meetings for the most likely converts), but toned them down for their own more “respectable” audience. At the same time, middle-class evangelicals retained the Puritans’ Old Testament sense of cosmic history. They enlisted personal holiness in a fight to the finish between the forces of good and evil in this world. Building on these imperatives, the entrepreneurial families of the East and Northwest constructed an American middle-class culture after 1825. It was based, paradoxically, on an intensely private and emotionally loaded family life and an aggressively reformist stance toward the world at large.

Domesticity

The message of the Second Great Awakening had application in both the home and workplace, where qualities such as industry, sobriety, and self-discipline (all freely chosen moral behaviors) led to success in the new market culture. At the same time, the Yankee middle class made crucial distinctions between the home and the world—distinctions that grew from the disintegration of the old patriarchal household economy.

Men in cities and towns now went off to work, leaving wives and children to spend the day at home. Even commercializing farmers made a distinction between (male) work that was oriented toward markets and (female) work that was tied to household maintenance. The new middle-class evangelicalism encouraged this division of domestic labor. The public world of politics and economic exchange, said the preachers, was the proper sphere of men; women, on the other hand, were to exercise new kinds of moral influence within households. As one evangelical put it, “Each has a distinct sphere of duty—the husband to go out into the world—the wife to superintend the house-hold.... Man profits from connection with the world, but women never; their constituents [sic] of mind are different. The one is raised and exalted by mingled association. The purity of the other is maintained in silence and seclusion.”

The result was a feminization of domestic life. In the old yeoman-artisan republic, fathers were God’s delegated authorities on earth, assigned the task of

governing women, children, and other underlings. Middle-class evangelicals raised new spiritual possibilities for women and children. Mothers replaced fathers as the principal rearers of children, and they enlisted the doctrines of free agency and individual moral responsibility in that task. Middle-class mothers raised their children with love and reason, not fear. They sought to develop the children's conscience and their capacity to love, to teach them to make good moral choices, and to help them to prepare for conversion and a lifetime of Christian service.

Middle-class mothers could take up these tasks because they could concentrate their efforts on household duties and because they had fewer children than their mothers or grandmothers had had. In Utica, New York, for example, women who entered their childbearing years in the 1830s averaged only 3.6 births apiece; those who had started families only 10 years earlier averaged 5.1 births. Housewives also spaced their pregnancies differently. Unlike their forebears, who gave birth to a child about once every two years throughout their childbearing years, Utica's middle-class housewives had their children at five-year intervals, which meant that they could give each child close attention. As a result, households were quieter and less crowded; children learned from their mothers how to govern themselves and seldom experienced the rigors of patriarchal family government. Thus, mothers assumed responsibility for nurturing the children who would be carriers of the new middle-class culture, and male authorities recognized the importance of that job. Edward Kirk, a minister in Albany, insisted that "the hopes of human society are to be found in the character, in the views, and in the conduct of mothers."

Middle-class women and girls became a huge market for new forms of popular literature. There were cookbooks, etiquette books, manuals on housekeeping, sermons, and sentimental novels, many of them written and most of them read by women. The works of popular religious writers such as Lydia Sigourney, Lydia Maria Child, and Timothy Shay Arthur found their way into thousands of middle-class homes. **Sarah Josepha Hale**, whose *Godey's Lady's Book* was the first mass-circulation magazine for women, acted as an arbiter of taste not only in furniture, clothing, and food but also in sentiments and ideas. Upon reviewing the sentimental literature read in middle-class homes, Nathaniel Hawthorne was not the only "serious" writer to deplore a literary marketplace dominated by "a damned mob of scribbling women."

Hawthorne certainly had economic reason for complaint. Sentimental novels written by women outsold by wide margins his *Scarlet Letter* and *House of Seven Gables*; Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays; Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*; Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*; Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*; and other works of the American Renaissance of the 1850s. Susan Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* broke all sales records when it appeared in 1850. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) broke the records set by Warner. In 1854, Maria Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (the direct target of Hawthorne's lament about scribbling women) took its place as the third of the monster best sellers of the early 1850s.

These sentimental novels upheld the new middle-class domesticity. They sacralized the middle-class home and the trials and triumphs of Christian

women. In sentimental **domestic fiction**, women assume the role of evangelical ministers, demonstrating Christian living by precept, example, and moral persuasion. Female moral influence, wielded by women who had given themselves to God, is at war with the male world of politics and the marketplace—areas of power, greed, and moral compromise. Although few sentimental writers shared the views of the feminist Margaret Fuller, they would have agreed with her on the place of religion in women's lives. "I wish women to live first for God's sake," she wrote. "Then she will not make an imperfect man her God, and thus sink to idolatry."

Popular sentimental novels were not, as Hawthorne and his friends believed, frivolous fairy tales into which housewives retreated from the real world. They were subversive depictions of a higher spiritual reality that would move the feminine ethos of the Christian home to the center of civilization. That vision drove an organized public assault on irreligion, drunkenness, prostitution, slavery, and other practices and institutions that substituted passion and force for Christian love, an assault that tried to "domesticate" the world and shape it in the image of the middle-class evangelical home.

THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF THE NORTH

From the 1830s onward, northern middle-class reformers proposed their religious and domestic values as a national culture for the United States. Even in their own region, however, most people rejected their cultural leadership. The plain folk of the North were a varied lot: settlers in the lower Northwest who remained culturally southern; hill-country northerners who had experienced little of what their middle-class cousins called "progress"; refugees from the countryside who had taken up urban wage labor; and increasing thousands of Irish and German immigrants. They did share a cultural conservatism—often grounded in the traditional, father-centered family—that rejected sentimentalism and reformist religion out of hand. As often as not, that conservatism was grounded in religious values that were very different from those of the new middle class.

The Rise of Democratic Sects

During the American revolutionary era, state constitutions withdrew government support from religion, and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution clearly prescribed the separation of church and the national state. Reduced to their own sources of support, the established churches—Congregationalism in New England, the Church of England (renamed Episcopalianism) in the South and much of the mid-Atlantic—went into decline. In 1780, nearly all of the 750 Congregational churches in the United States were in New England. In the next 40 years, although the nation's population rose from 4 million to 10 million, the number of Congregational churches rose only to 1,100. Ordinary women and men were leaving the churches that had dominated the religious life of colonial America, sometimes ridiculing the learned clergy as they departed. To many elites in the former established churches, it seemed that the republic was plunging into atheism.

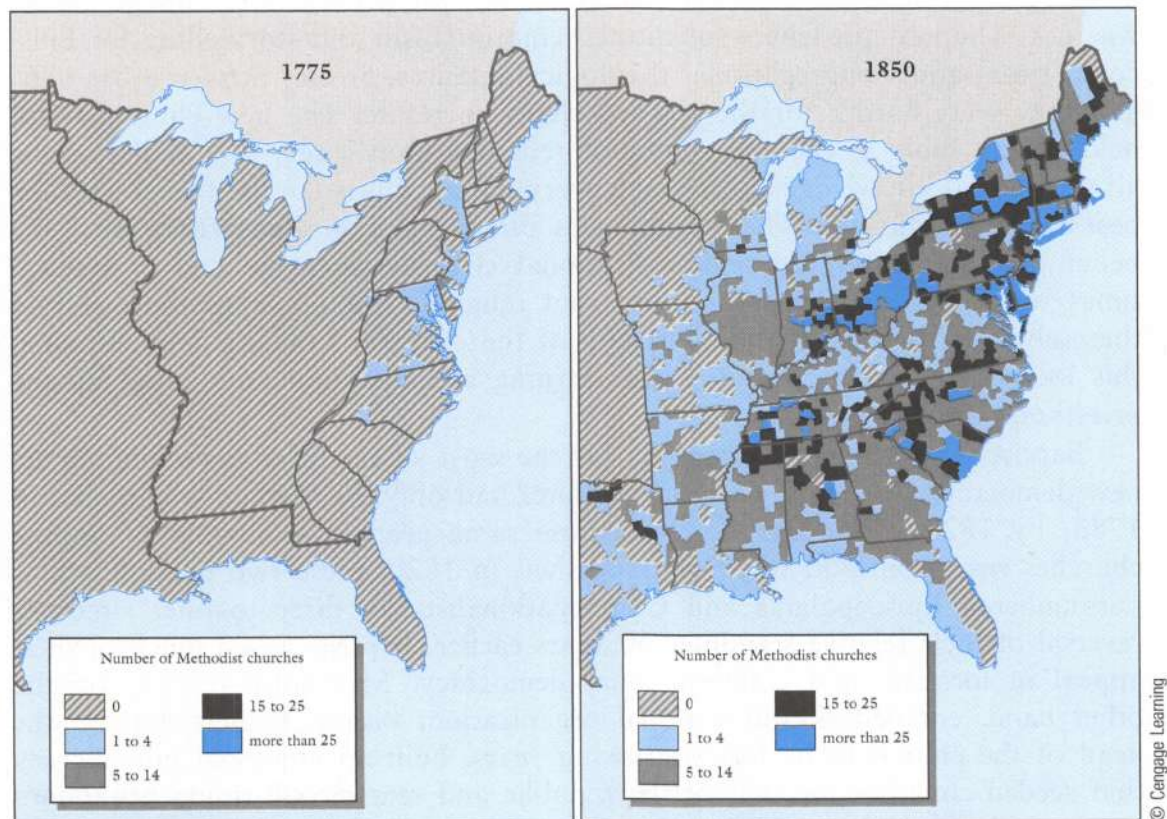
They were wrong. The collapse of the established churches, the social dislocations of the post-revolutionary years, and the increasingly antiauthoritarian, democratic sensibilities of ordinary northerners provided fertile ground for the growth of new democratic sects. These were the years of camp meeting revivalism, years in which Methodists and Baptists grew from small, half-organized sects into the great popular denominations they have been ever since. They were also years in which fiercely independent dropouts from older churches were putting together a loosely organized movement that would become the Disciples of Christ. At the same time, ragged, half-educated preachers were spreading the Universalist and Freewill Baptist messages in upcountry New England, while in western New York young **Joseph Smith** was receiving the visions that would lead to Mormonism.

The result was, first of all, a vast increase in the variety of choices on the northern religious landscape, but within that welter of new churches, the fastest-growing sects shared a roughly uniform democratic style. First, they renounced the need for an educated, formally authorized clergy. Religion was now a matter of the heart and not the head. **Crisis conversion** (understood in most churches as spiritual transformation that resulted from direct experience of the Holy Ghost) was a necessary credential for preachers; a college degree was not. The new preachers substituted emotionalism and storytelling for Episcopal ritual and Congregational theological lectures. Stories attracted listeners, and they were harder for the learned clergy to refute. The new churches also held up the Bible as the one source of religious knowledge, thus undercutting all theological knowledge and placing every literate Christian on a level with the best-educated minister. These tendencies often ended in **Restorationism**—the belief that all theological and institutional changes since the end of biblical times were man-made mistakes, and that religious organizations must restore themselves to the purity and simplicity of the church of the Apostles. In sum, this loose democratic creed rejected learning and tradition and raised up the priesthood of all believers.

Baptists and Methodists were by far the most successful at preaching to the new democratic audience. The United States had only 50 Methodist churches in 1783; by 1820 it had 2,700. Over those same years, the number of Baptist churches rose from 400 to 2,700. Together, in 1820, these two denominations outnumbered Episcopalians and Congregationalists by three to one, almost a reversal of their relative standings 40 years earlier. Baptists based much of their appeal in localism and congregational democracy. Methodist success, on the other hand, entailed skillful national organization. Bishop Francis Asbury, the head of the church in its fastest-growing years, built an episcopal bureaucracy that seeded churches throughout the republic and sent **circuit-riding preachers** to places that had none. These early Methodist missions were grounded in self-sacrifice to the point of martyrdom. Asbury demanded much of his itinerant preachers, and until 1810, he strongly suggested that they remain celibate. "To marry," he said, "is to locate." Asbury also knew that married circuit riders would leave many widows and orphans behind, for hundreds of them worked themselves to death. Of the men who served as Methodist itinerants before 1819, at least 60 percent died before the age of 40.

From seaport cities to frontier settlements, few Americans escaped the sound of Methodist preaching in the early 19th century. The Methodist preachers were common men who spoke plainly, listened carefully to others, and carried hymnbooks with simple tunes that anyone could sing. They also, particularly in the early years, shared traditional folk beliefs with their humble flocks. Some of the early circuit riders relied heavily on dreams; some could predict the future; many visited heaven and hell and returned with full descriptions.

In the end, however, it was the hopefulness and simplicity of the Methodist message that attracted ordinary Americans. Even more than Finney (a Presbyterian), the Methodists rejected the old terrors of Calvinist determinism and taught that although salvation comes only through God, men and women can open themselves to divine grace and thus play a decisive role in their own salvation. They also taught that a godly life is a gradual, lifetime growth in grace, thus allowing for repentance for minor, and sometimes even major, lapses of faith and behavior. By granting responsibility (one might say sovereignty) to the individual believer, the Methodists established their democratic credentials and drew hundreds of thousands of Americans into their fold.



MAP 10.1 Growth of American Methodism, 1775–1850

This is a county-by-county map of the rise of American Methodism from the Revolution through the eve of the Civil War. In 1775, Methodism was almost nonexistent in British North America. By 1850, the Methodists were the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, and they were truly a national faith: There were Methodist churches in almost every county in the country.

The Providential Worldview

Northern plain folk favored churches as doctrinally varied as the people themselves. These ranged from the voluntaristic “free grace” doctrines of the Methodists to the iron-bound Calvinism of most Baptists, from the fine-tuned hierarchy of the Mormons to the near-anarchy of the Disciples of Christ. They included the most popular faiths (Baptists and Methodists came to contain two-thirds of America’s professing Protestants), as well as such smaller sects as Hicksite Quakers, Universalists, Adventists, Moravians, and Freewill Baptists. Yet for all their diversity, these churches had important points in common. Most shared an evangelical emphasis on individual experience over churchly authority. Most favored democratic, local control of religious life and distrusted outside organization and religious professionalism. They also rejected middle-class optimism and reformism, even as several of the groups emerged in the same Burned-Over District of upstate New York as Finney and other preachers of the Second Great Awakening.

The most pervasive strain was a belief in providence—the conviction that human history is part of God’s vast and unknowable plan, and that all events are willed or allowed by God. Middle-class evangelicals spoke of providence, too, but they seemed to assume that God’s plan was manifest in the progress of market society and middle-class religion. Humbler evangelicals held to the older notion that providence is immediate, mysterious, and unknowable. They believed that the events of everyday life are parts of a vast blueprint that exists only in the mind of God—and not in the vain aspirations of women and men. When making plans, they added the caveat “the Lord willing,” and they learned to accept misfortune with fortitude. They responded to epidemics, bad crop years, aches and pains, illness, and early death by praying for the strength to endure.

Such providentialism lent itself to millennial thinking. Middle-class evangelicals were **postmillennialists**. They believed that Christ’s Second Coming would occur at the end of 1,000 years of social perfection brought about by the missionary conversion of the world. Ordinary Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ, however, were **premillennialists**. They assumed that the millennium would arrive with world-destroying violence, followed by 1,000 years of Christ’s rule on earth. Some northern evangelicals boldly predicted the fiery end of the world. Prophets rose and fell, and thousands of people looked for signs of the approaching millennium in thunderstorms, shooting stars, eclipses, economic panics and depressions, and—especially—in hints that God had placed in the Bible.

One avid student of those hints was William Miller, a Vermont Baptist who, after years of systematic study, concluded that God would destroy the world during the year following March 1843. Miller publicized his predictions throughout the 1830s, and near the end of the decade the **Millerites** (as his followers were called) accumulated thousands of believers—most of them conservative Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples in hill-country New England and in poor neighborhoods in New York, Ohio, and Michigan. As the end approached, the believers read the Bible, prayed, and attended meeting after meeting. A publicist named Henry Jones reported that a shower of meat and blood had fallen on Jersey City,

and newspapers published stories alleging that the Millerites were insane and sexually licentious. Some, the press reported, were sewing “ascension robes” in which they would rise straight to heaven without passing through death.

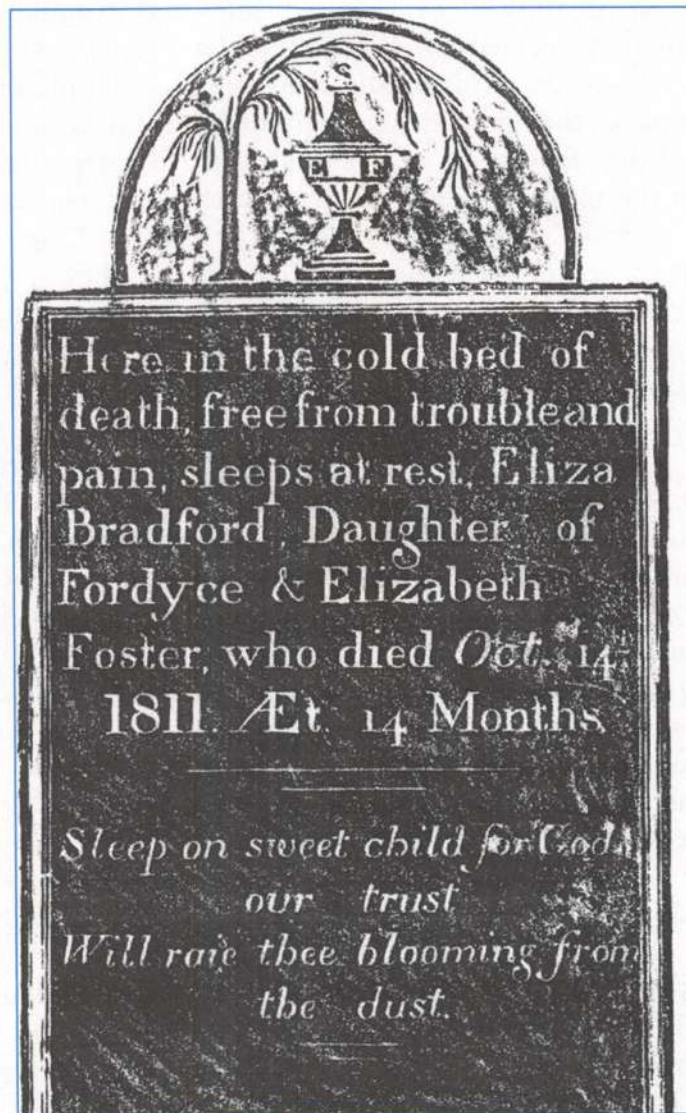
When the end of the year—March 23, 1844—came and went, most of the believers quietly returned to their churches. A committed remnant, however, kept the faith, and by the 1860s founded the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. The Millerite movement was a reminder that hundreds of thousands of northern Protestants continued to believe that the God of the Old Testament governed everything from bee stings to the course of human history, and that one day he would destroy the world in fire and blood.

Family and Society

Baptists, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, and the smaller popular sects evangelized primarily among persons who had been bypassed or hurt by the Market Revolution. Many had been reduced to dependent, wage-earning status. Others had become market

Child's Gravestone.

Below the weeping willow on this baby girl's gravestone is an inscription affirming that death has set the child “free from trouble and pain” and has ushered her into a better life.



The Granger Collection, NYC — All rights reserved.

farmers or urban storekeepers or master workmen; few had become rich. Their churches taught them that the temptations of market society were at the center of the world they must reject.

Often their rhetoric turned to criticism of market society, its institutions, and its centers of power. The Quaker schismatic Elias Hicks, a Long Island farmer who fought the worldliness and pride of wealthy urban Quakers, listed the following among the mistakes of the early 19th century: railroads, the Erie Canal, fancy food and other luxuries, banks and the credit system, the city of Philadelphia, and the study of chemistry. The Baptist millenarian William Miller expressed his hatred of banks, insurance companies, stock jobbing, chartered monopolies, personal greed, and the city of New York. In short, what the evangelical middle class identified as the march of progress, poorer and more conservative evangelicals often condemned as a descent into worldliness that would almost certainly provoke God's wrath.

Members of the popular sects often held to the patriarchal family form in which they had been raised, and with which both the Market Revolution and middle-class domesticity seemed at war. Hundreds of thousands of northern Protestants considered the erosion of domestic patriarchy a profound cultural loss and not, as it seemed to the middle class, an avenue to personal liberation. Their cultural conservatism was apparent in their efforts to sustain the father-centered family of the old rural North or to revive it in new forms.

For some, religious conversion came at a point of crisis in the traditional family. William Miller, for example, had a strict Calvinist upbringing in a family in which his father, an uncle, and his grandfather were all Baptist ministers. As a young man he rejected his family, set about making money, and became a deist—actions that deeply wounded his parents. When his father died, Miller was stricken with guilt. He moved back to his hometown, took up his family duties, became a leader of the Baptist church, and (after reading a sermon entitled “Parental Duties”) began the years of Bible study that resulted in his world-ending prophecies. Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the Disciples of Christ, dramatized his filial piety when he debated the freethinking socialist Robert Owen before a large audience in the Methodist meetinghouse in Cincinnati in 1828. He insisted that his white-haired father (a Scots Presbyterian minister) stand in the pulpit above the debaters.

The Emergence of Mormonism

Over the long term, the most successful religious group to emerge from the Burned-Over District was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (also known as the Mormon Church). In 1827, according to the group's founder and prophet, Joseph Smith, the Angel Moroni led him to golden plates near his family's farm outside Palmyra, New York. Smith translated the plates into *The Book of Mormon*, which, together with the Old and New Testaments, became the basis of a new faith. *The Book of Mormon* tells the story of a light-skinned people, descendants of the Hebrews, who had sailed to North America long before Columbus. They had an epic, violent history and a covenanted relationship with God, and Jesus had visited them following his crucifixion and resurrection.

In 1830, Smith printed 5,000 copies of *The Book of Mormon* and founded the Mormon Church. Like other religious groups of the era, its organization countered the weakening of patriarchal authority and other social disruptions connected to the Market Revolution. The church was ruled, not by professional clergy, but by an elaborate lay hierarchy of adult males. On top sat the father of Joseph Smith, who was appointed Patriarch of the Church. Below him were Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum, who were called First and Second Elders. The hierarchy descended through a succession of male authorities that finally reached the fathers of households. Smith claimed that this hierarchy restored the ancient priesthood that had disappeared over the 18 centuries of greed and error that he labeled the Great Apostasy of the Christian churches.

The Mormon Church grew rapidly, claiming 8,000 members by the mid-1830s. But its inclusiveness and new theology aroused suspicion and intense hostility among mainstream Protestant denominations. The Mormons faced persecution that drove them from western New York to Ohio, Missouri, Illinois, and ultimately Utah.

A NEW POPULAR CULTURE

Not all of the northern plain folk spent their time in church. Particularly in cities and towns, they became both producers and consumers of a nonreligious (sometimes irreligious) commercial popular culture. The sports and shows attended by northern plain folk, like the churches they attended, were often grounded in an antisentimental view of the world and in traditional forms of patriarchy and masculinity.

Blood Sports

Urban working-class neighborhoods were particularly fertile ground for popular amusements. Young workingmen formed a bachelor subculture that contrasted with the piety and self-restraint of the middle class. They organized volunteer fire companies and militia units that spent more time drinking and fighting rival groups than drilling or putting out fires. Gathering at firehouses, saloons, and street corners, they drank, joked, boasted, and nurtured notions of manliness based on physical prowess and coolness under pressure.

They also engaged in such “**blood sports**” as cock fighting, ratting, and dog fighting, even though many states had laws forbidding such activities. Such contests grew increasingly popular during the 1850s and often were staged by saloonkeepers doubling as sports impresarios. One of the best known was Kit Burns of New York City, who ran Sportsman Hall, a saloon frequented by prize-fighters, criminals, and their hangers-on. Behind the saloon was a space—reached through a narrow doorway that could be defended against the police—with animal pits and a small amphitheater that seated 250 but that regularly held 400 yelling spectators. Although workingmen dominated the audiences, a few members of the old aristocracy who rejected middle-class ways also attended

these events. In 1861, for instance, 250 spectators paid as much as \$3 each to witness a fight between roosters belonging to the prizefighter John Morrissey and Mr. Genet, president of the New York City board of aldermen. A newspaper estimated bets on the event at \$50,000.

Boxing

Prizefighting emerged from the same subterranean culture that sustained cockfights and other blood sports. This sport, imported from Britain, called for an enclosed ring, clear rules, cornermen, a referee, and a paying audience. Boxing's popularity rose during the 1840s and 1850s, a time of increasing immigration and violence in poor city neighborhoods. Many of the fighters had close ties with ethnic-based saloons, militia units, fire companies, and street gangs such as New York's (Irish) Dead Rabbits and (native) Bowery B'hoys, and many labored at occupations with a peculiarly ethnic base. Some of the best American-born fighters were New York City butchers—a licensed, privileged trade from which cheap immigrant labor was systematically excluded. Butchers usually finished work by 10 a.m. They could then spend the rest of the day idling at a firehouse or a bar and often were prominent figures in neighborhood gangs. A prizefight between an American-born butcher and an Irish day laborer would attract a spirited audience that understood its class and ethnic meaning.

An American Theater

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, all American theaters were in the large seaport cities. Those who attended were members of the urban elite, and nearly all of the plays, managers, and actors were English. After 1815, new theaters and theater sprang up not only in New York and Philadelphia but also in dozens of other new towns, while traveling troupes carried theatrical performances to the smallest hamlets. The new theaters catered to male, largely plebeian audiences. Before 1830, the poorer theatergoers—nearly all of them men—occupied the cheap balcony seats (with the exception of the second balcony, which was reserved for prostitutes); artisans and other workingmen filled benches in the ground-floor area known as “the pit”; wealthier and more genteel patrons sat in the boxes. Those sitting in the pit and balcony joined in the performance: They ate and drank, talked, and shouted encouragement and threats to the actors. The genteel New Yorker Washington Irving lamented the “discharge of apples, nuts, and gingerbread” flying out of the balconies.

As time passed, rowdyism turned into violence. Working-class theatergoers protested the elegant speech, gentlemanly bearing, and understated performances of the English actors, which happened to match the speech, manners, and bearing of the American urban elite. Protests were directed not only at the English actors but also at the ladies and gentlemen in the orchestra who were seen as adherents of an aristocratic English culture unsuitable in a democratic republic.

The first theater riot occurred in 1817, when the English actor Charles Incledon refused a New York audience's demand that he stop what he was doing and sing "Black-Eyed Susan." Such assaults grew more common even though separate theaters began to offer separate kinds of performances for rich and poor. The violence culminated in the rivalry between the American actor Edwin Forrest and the English actor William Charles Macready in the 1840s.

Playhouses that catered to working-class audiences continued to feature Shakespearean tragedies (*Richard III*, played broadly and with a lot of sword-play, was the favorite), but they soon shared the stage with works written in the American vernacular. The stage "Yankee," rustic but shrewd, appeared at this time, and so did Mose the Bowery B'hoy, a New York volunteer fireman who performed feats of derring-do. Both frequently appeared in opposition to well-dressed characters with English accents. The Yankee outsmarted them; Mose beat them up.

Minstrelsy

The most popular form of theater was the blackface **minstrel show**. These shows were blatantly racist, and they were the preferred entertainment of workingmen in northern cities from 1840 to 1880. The first minstrel show was presented in 1831 when a white showman named Thomas Rice blacked his face and "jumped Jim Crow," imitating a black shuffle-dance he had seen on the Cincinnati docks.

Minstrel shows developed a form that every theatergoer knew by heart. The shows lasted an hour and a half and were presented in three sections. The first consisted of songs and dances performed in a walkaround, in which the audience was encouraged to clap and sing along. This was followed by a longer middle section in which the company sat in a row with a character named Tambo at one end and a character named Bones at the other (named for the tambourine and bones, the instruments they played), with an interlocutor in the middle. The Tambo character, often called Uncle Ned, was a simpleminded plantation slave dressed in plain clothing. The Bones character, usually called Zip Coon, was a dandified, oversexed free black dressed in top hat and tails. The interlocutor was the straight man—fashionably dressed, slightly pretentious, with an English accent. This middle portion of the show consisted of a conversation among the three, which included pointed political satire, skits ridiculing the wealthy and the educated, and sexual jokes that bordered on obscenity. The third section featured songs, dances, and jokes, most of them familiar enough so that the audience could sing along and laugh at the right places.

The minstrel shows introduced African American song and dance—in toned-down, Europeanized form—to audiences who would not have permitted black performers on the stage. They also reinforced racial stereotypes that were near the center of American popular culture. Finally, hiding behind black masks, minstrel performers dealt broadly with aspects of social and political life that other performers avoided.

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IN THAT TERRIBLE BAND OF ROBBERS AND MUR-
DERERS, KNOWN FAR AND WIDE AS THE
MURRELL MEN.



At length the door opened, and two large fellows, with masks on their faces, carrying a dark lantern, entered, and in a gruff voice said I must go with them. Their first operation was to blindfold me—which done, one of them seized me in his brawny arms, bore me out, mounted me on a horse, and rode swiftly away—the other following. (See page 17.)

CINCINNATI.
PRINTED FOR, AND PUBLISHED BY E. E. BARCLAY.
1847.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society

Yellow-Back Novels. Here are two pulp fiction hits of the 1840s: an erotic novel about the “amorous and lively” Mary Ann Temple and a crime story about robberies and murders committed by the “Female Land Pirate”—not the kinds of women encountered in middle-class sentimental fiction.

Novels and the Penny Press

Few of the commodities made widely available by the Market Revolution were more ubiquitous than newspapers and inexpensive books. Improvements in printing and papermaking enabled entrepreneurs to sell daily newspapers for a penny. Cheap “story papers” became available in the 1830s, “yellowback” fiction in the 1840s, and dime novels from the 1850s onward. Although these offerings were distributed throughout the North and the West, they found their first and largest audience among city workers.

Mass-audience newspapers were heavily spiced with sensationalism. The *Philadelphia Gazette* in late summer 1829, for instance, treated its eager readers to the following: “Female Child with Two Heads,” “Bats,” “Another Shark,” “More Stabbing,” “Fishes Travelling on Land,” “Dreadful Steam Boat Disaster,” “Raffling for Babies,” “Combat with a Bear,” “Lake Serpent,” “Atrocious Murder,” and much more. Henry David Thoreau commented on the “startling and monstrous

events as fill the daily papers,” while his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson reported that Americans were “reading all day murders & railroad accidents.” These sensational stories portrayed a haunted, often demonic nature that regularly produced monstrosities and ruined the works of humankind, as well as a human nature that, despite appearances, was often deceptive and depraved.

Working-class readers discovered a similarly untrustworthy world in cheap fiction. George Lippard’s *The Quaker City* (1845) sold more than 200,000 copies in six years, making it the best-selling American book before the sentimental blockbusters of the 1850s. *The Quaker City* was a fictional exposé of the hypocrisy, lust, and cruelty of Philadelphia’s outwardly genteel and Christian elite. Lippard and other adventure writers (whose works accounted for 60 percent of all American fiction titles published between 1831 and 1860) indulged in a pornography of violence that included cannibalism, blood drinking, and murder by every imaginable means. They also dealt with sex in unprecedentedly explicit ways, introducing readers not only to seduction and rape but also to transvestitism, child pornography, necrophilia, miscegenation, group sex, homosexuality, and—perhaps most shocking of all—women with criminal minds and insatiable sexual appetites. The scenes of gore and sexual depravity were presented voyeuristically—as self-righteous exposés of the perversions of the rich and powerful and stories of the Founders’ Republic trampled upon by a vicious elite that pretended virtue but lived only for its appetites.

Popular fictions—like most popular plays and much of what went on in blood sports, the prize ring, and the penny press—were melodramatic contests between good and evil. Evil was described in terms reminiscent of original sin: It provided the background of all human action, and heroes met a demonic world with courage and guile without hoping to change it. Melodramatic heroes frequently acknowledged evil in themselves while claiming moral superiority over the hypocrites and frauds that governed the world. A murderer in Ned Buntline’s *G’bals of New York* (1850) remarks, “There isn’t no *real* witue [virtue] and honesty nowhere, ’cept among the perfessional dishonest.” By contrast, in middle-class sentimental novels, the universe was benign; good could be nurtured, and evil could be defeated and transformed. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s slave driver Simon Legree—the best-known villain in American literature—is evil not because of a natural disposition toward evil, but because he had been deprived of a mother’s love during childhood. The world, in Stowe’s view, could be nurtured into being good. Most northern plain folk (whether they favored church or popular entertainments) did not want to fix an imperfect and often chaotic world. They wanted only to live decently and bravely within it.

FAMILY, CHURCH, AND NEIGHBORHOOD: THE WHITE SOUTH

The southern states experienced cultural transformations of a more conservative nature—transformations grounded in persistent localism, in the father-centered family, and in the pervasive influence of a traditionalist evangelical Christianity.

The Beginnings of the Bible Belt

In the first third of the 19th century, evangelical Protestantism and revivalism of the Second Great Awakening transformed the South into what it has been ever since: the Bible Belt. That transformation began when poor and middling whites found spiritual alternatives to the culture of the gentry—to their formalistic Episcopalianism, their love of luxury and display, and their enjoyment of money and power. Early southern Baptists and Methodists demanded a crisis conversion followed by a life of piety and a rejection of what they called “the world.” To no small degree, the world was the economic, cultural, and political world controlled by the planters. James McGready, who preached in rural North Carolina in the 1790s, openly condemned the gentry: “The world is in all their thoughts day and night. All their talk is of corn and tobacco, of land and stock. The price of merchandise and negroes are inexhaustible themes of conversation. But for them, the name of Jesus has no charms; it is rarely mentioned unless to be profaned.” This was dangerous talk, as McGready learned when young rakes rode their horses through one of his outdoor meetings, tipped over the benches, set the altar on fire, and threatened to kill McGready.

Southern Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians spread their message during the awakening through the **camp meeting**, and this too was subversive of southern social distinctions. Though its origins stretched back into the 18th century, the first full-blown camp meeting took place at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. Here the annual “Holy Feast,” a three-day communion service of Scots-Irish Presbyterians, was transformed into an outdoor revival at which hundreds experienced conversion under Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist preaching. Estimates of the crowd at Cane Ridge ranged from 10,000 to 20,000 persons. Some converts fainted, others jerked uncontrollably, and a few barked like dogs, all of them visibly taken by the Holy Spirit. These exercises fell upon women and men, whites and blacks, rich and poor, momentarily blurring social hierarchy in moments of profound and very public religious ecstasy. A witness to a later camp meeting recounted that “to see a bold and courageous Kentuckian (undaunted by the horrors of war) turn pale and tremble at the reproof of a weak woman, a little boy, or a poor African; to see him sink down in deep remorse, roll and toss, and gnash his teeth, till black in the face, entreat the prayers of those he came to devour ... who can say the change was not supernatural?” Southern white men, even when under religious conviction, sometimes resisted this loss of mastery and self-control. One preacher remembered a “fine, strong, good-looking young man” who felt himself giving in to camp meeting preaching. He “found no relief until he drew a large pistole out of his pocket, with which he intended to defend himself if any one should offer to speak to him on the subject of religion.”

The early southern evangelicals irritated and angered the elite and white men generally, for they seemed to question not only worldliness but also the white male dominance that held the southern world together. The conversion of wives and children (not to mention slaves) could trouble southern families; the conversion of white men could render them “womanish.” The governors of southern farms and southern families, however, had little to worry about. The Baptists, Methodists,

and Presbyterians of the South, though they never stopped railing against greed and pride, found that they could conquer the South and live comfortably with a system of fixed hierarchy and God-given social roles—with slavery and father-dominated families in particular.

Slavery and Southern Evangelicals

Slavery became a major case in point. For a brief period after the Revolution, evangelicals joined with an elite minority of slaveholders to oppose slavery. Methodists and Baptists preached to slaves as well as to whites, and Bishop Francis Asbury, the principal architect of American Methodism, admired John Wesley's statement that slavery was against "all the laws of Justice, Mercy, and Truth." In 1780, a conference of Methodist preachers ordered circuit riders to free their slaves and advised all Methodists to do the same. In 1784, the Methodists declared that they would excommunicate members who failed to free their slaves within two years. Many lay Methodists took the order seriously. On the Delmarva Peninsula (Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia), for instance, Methodist converts freed thousands of slaves in the late 18th century.

The period of greatest evangelical growth, however, came during the years in which the South committed irrevocably to plantation slavery. As increasing numbers of both slaves and slave owners came within the evangelical fold, the southern churches had to rethink their position on human bondage. The Methodists never carried out their threat to excommunicate slaveholders, and in 1816 confessed, "little can be done to abolish the practice so contrary to moral justice." Similarly, the Baptists and Presbyterians never translated their antislavery rhetoric into action. By 1820, evangelicals were coming to terms with slavery. Instead of demanding freedom for slaves, they suggested, as the Methodist James O'Kelly put it, that slave owners treat slaves as "dear brethren in Christ." After 1830, with much of the planter elite converted to evangelicalism, this would evolve into a full-scale effort to Christianize the institution of slavery.

Gender, Power, and the Evangelicals

Southern white men, yeomen as well as planters, distrusted the early evangelicals for more than their views on slavery. The preachers seemed even more grievously mistaken about white manhood and the integrity of white families. Southerners were localistic and culturally conservative. They distrusted outsiders and defended rural neighborhoods grounded in the sovereignty of fathers.

The early evangelicals threatened southern patriarchy. They preached individual salvation to women, children, and slaves—often hinting that the "family" of believers could replace blood ties. Churches sometimes intervened in family disputes or disciplined family members in ways that subverted patriarchal control. Perhaps worse, many of the preachers failed to act out the standards of southern manhood



Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga, Tennessee, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas B. Whiteside.
HMA 1975.7.1

Colonel and Mrs. Whiteside. *Colonel and Mrs. James Whiteside are pictured at home in their mansion on the heights above Chattanooga, Tennessee. The colonel, Bible in hand, looks directly at his wife, while she looks shyly and indirectly back at him. Their infant son wears the traditional small child's dress, and the slaves are pictured as both subservient and comfortable. Here is southern patriarchy at its most genteel.*

in their own lives. James McGready and other camp meeting preachers often faced hecklers and rowdies and quietly took their beatings, which violated the southern notions of male honor.

As they had with slavery, southern evangelicals came to terms with the notions of manhood and the father-centered families of the South. The preachers learned to assert traditional forms of manhood. Their fathers and often themselves, they said, had fought the British and Indians heroically. They revealed that they had often been great drinkers, gamblers, fighters, and fornicators before submitting to God, and they also began fighting back when attacked. Peter Cartwright, who conquered much of Kentucky and southern Illinois for Methodism, walked on many occasions out of the pulpit to confront hecklers, and punched more than a few of them. The preachers also made it clear that they would pose no threat to the authority of fathers. They discouraged the excesses of female and juvenile piety. At the same time, church disciplinary cases involving adultery, wife beating, private drunkenness, and other offenses committed within families became more and more rare.

Religious Conservatism

More fundamentally, evangelicals upheld the southern world of fixed hierarchy and God-given social roles, and their churches reinforced localistic neighborhoods and the patriarchal family. Some southern communities began when a whole congregation moved onto new land. Others were settled by the chain migration of brothers and cousins, and subsequent revivals spread through family networks. Rural isolation limited most households to their own company during the week, but on Sundays church meetings united the neighborhood's cluster of extended families into a community of believers. In most neighborhoods, social connections seldom extended beyond that. The word "church" referred ultimately to the worldwide community of Christians, and the war between the "church" and the "world" referred to a cosmic history that would end in millennial fire. But in the day-to-day understandings of southern evangelicals, the church was the local congregation and the world was local sins and local sinners. Churches disciplined members for such worldly practices as drinking, gambling, dancing, swearing, fornication, and adultery.

Southern evangelicalism rested on the sovereignty of God, a conviction of human imperfection, and an acceptance of disappointment and pain as part of God's grand and unknowable design. When the young son of a planter family died, his mother was certain that he died because his parents had loved him more than God: "But God took him for he saw he was our idol." Francis Pickens of South Carolina lost his wife and child, and wrote, "I had almost forgot there was a God, and now I stand the scattered ... and blasted monument of his just wrath." It was a far cry from the middle-class North's sentimentalism and the romantic, redemptive deaths of children in sentimental fiction.

Within this flawed and dangerous world, patriarchal social relations were crucial to Christian living. Southerners revered the patriarch and slaveholder Abraham more than any other figure in the Bible, and John C. Calhoun would proclaim "Hebrew Theocracy" the best government ever experienced by humankind. The father must—like Abraham—govern and protect his household, the mother must assist the father, and the women, children, and slaves must faithfully act out the duties of their stations. Eternal salvation was possible for everyone, but the saved lived out their godliness by striving to be good mothers, good fathers, good slaves. By the same token, a Christian never questioned his or her God-given social role.

Pro-Slavery Christianity

In revolutionary and early national America, white southerners had been the most radical of republicans. Jeffersonian planter-politicians led the fights for equal rights and the absolute separation of church and state, and southern evangelicals were the early republic's staunchest opponents of slavery. By 1830, however, the South was an increasingly conscious minority within a democratic and capitalist nation. The northern middle classes proclaimed a link between material and moral progress, identifying both with individual autonomy and universal rights. A radical northern minority was agitating for the immediate abolition of slavery.

Southerners met this challenge with an “intellectual blockade” against outside publications and ideas and with a moral and religious defense of slavery. The Bible provided plenty of ammunition. Southerners preached that the Chosen People of the Old Testament had been patriarchs and slaveholders, and that Jesus had lived in a society that sanctioned slavery and never criticized the institution. Some ministers claimed that blacks were the descendants of Ham and thus deserved enslavement. The most common religious argument, however, was that slavery had given millions of heathen Africans the priceless opportunity to become Christians and to live in a Christian society. Thornton Stringfellow, a Virginia Baptist minister, insisted that “their condition ... is now better than that of any equal number of laborers on earth, and is daily improving.”

Like their northern counterparts, southern clergymen applauded the material improvements of the age, but they insisted that moral improvement occurred only when people embraced the timeless truths of the Bible. The South Carolinian William F. Hutson put it simply: “In religion and morals, we doubt all improvements, not known to certain fishermen who lived eighteen hundred years ago.” Northern notions of progress through individual liberation, equal rights, and universal Christian love were wrongheaded and dangerous. The Presbyterian John Adger asserted that relations of dominance and submission (and not “barbarism and personal savage independence”) were utterly necessary to both social and individual fulfillment, and that the distribution of rights and responsibilities was unequal and God-given. “The rights of the father are natural, but they belong only to the fathers. Rights of property are natural, but they belong only to those who have property,” and such natural rights were coupled with the awesome duties of fatherhood and proprietorship. In the end, southern pro-slavery intellectuals rejected Jefferson’s “self-evident” equality of man; Edmund Ruffin, for instance, branded that passage of the Declaration of Independence as “indefensible” as well as “false and foolish.”

The Mission to the Slaves

By the 1820s, southern evangelicalism had long since abandoned its hostility toward slavery, and slaveholders commonly attended camp meetings and revivals. These prosperous converts faced conflicting duties. Their churches taught them that slaves had immortal souls and that planters were responsible for their spiritual welfare. A planter on his deathbed told his children that humane treatment and religious instruction for slaves was the duty of slave owners; if these were neglected, “we will have to answer for the loss of their souls.” After Nat Turner’s bloody slave revolt in 1831, missions to the slaves took on new urgency: If the churches were to create a Christian society in the South, that society would have to include the slaves. The result after 1830 was a concerted attempt to Christianize the slaves.

To this end, Charles Colcock Jones, a Presbyterian minister from Georgia, wrote manuals on how to preach to slaves. He taught that no necessary connection linked social position and spiritual worth: There were good and bad slaveholders and good and bad slaves. He also taught, preaching from the Epistles of Paul

(“Servants, obey your masters”), that slaves must accept the master’s authority as God’s, and that obedience was their prime religious virtue. Jones warned white preachers never to become personally involved with their slave listeners—to pay no attention to their quarrels, their complaints about their master or about their fellow slaves, or about working conditions on the plantation. “We separate entirely their religious from their civil condition,” he said, “and contend that one may be attended to without interfering with the other.” The catechism Jones prepared for slaves included the question, “What did God make you for?” The answer was, “To make a crop.”

The evangelical mission to the slaves was not as completely self-serving as it may seem. For to accept one’s worldly station, to be obedient and dutiful within that station, and to seek salvation outside of this world were precisely what the planters demanded of themselves and their own families. An important goal of plantation missions was to create safe and profitable plantations. Yet that goal was to be achieved by Christianizing both slaveholders and slaves—a lesson that some slaveholders learned when they were expelled from their churches for mistreating their slaves. As for the slaves, we have seen that they listened selectively to what white missionaries preached, and turned evangelical Christianity into a religion of their own. This continued throughout the Second Great Awakening, which drew thousands of slaves into Methodist and Baptist churches. The slaves responded to the awakening’s democratizing message even as they continued to adapt Christianity to African practices, often organizing their own services beyond white oversight.

RACE

Americans in the first half of the 19th century revised the racial order as well as the religious and domestic order of their society. White Americans had long assumed that Africans belonged at the bottom of society, but they assumed that others belonged there as well. In a colonial world in which many whites were indentured servants, tenants, apprentices, and workers who lived in their employers’ homes, where increasing numbers of blacks were formally free and many others were hired out as semifree, few Americans made rigid distinctions concerning the “natural” independence of whites and the “natural” dependence of blacks. (All Americans, after all, were colonial dependents of the British king.) The language of colonial social division separated gentlemen from the “middling sort,” and relegated the propertyless and dependent to the “lower orders” or the “lower sort.” While the better-off whites were far from color blind, they wrote off poverty, disorder, drunkenness, and rioting as the work not of blacks but of an undifferentiated substratum of “Negroes, sailors, servants, and boys.”

Modern racism—the notion that blacks were a separate and hopelessly inferior order of humankind—emerged from developments in the early 19th century: national independence and the crucial new distinction between Americans who were citizens and those who were not, the recommitment to slavery in the South, and the making of what would be called “free labor” in the North. Whites who faced lifetimes of wage labor and dependence struggled to make dignity out of

that situation. At the same time, freed slaves entered the bottom of a newly defined “free labor” society and tried to do the same. With plenty of help from the wealthy and powerful, whites succeeded in making white democracy out of the rubble of the old patriarchal republic. In the process, they defined nonwhites as constitutionally incapable of self-discipline, personal independence, and political participation.

Free Blacks

There had been sizable pockets of slavery in the northern colonies, but revolutionary idealism, coupled with the growing belief that slavery was inefficient, led one northern state after another to abolish it. Vermont, where there were almost no slaves, outlawed slavery in its revolutionary constitution. By 1804, every northern state had taken some action, usually by passing laws that mandated gradual emancipation. The first of such laws, and the model for others, was passed in Pennsylvania in 1780. This law freed slaves born after 1780 when they reached their 28th birthday. Slaves born before 1780 would remain slaves, and slave children would remain slaves through their prime working years. By 1830, only a handful of aging blacks remained slaves in the North.

Gradual emancipation did not stop at the Mason-Dixon Line. We have seen that thousands of Chesapeake slaveholders freed their slaves in the decades following the Revolution. Virginia seriously considered abolishing slavery outright. In 1832, a Virginia constitutional convention argued the question of immediate emancipation by state law. With the western counties supporting abolition (but insisting that freed blacks be transported from the state) and some of the eastern, slaveholding counties threatening to secede from the state if abolition won, the convention rejected emancipation by a vote of 73–58. In the Deep South, where slavery was a big and growing business, whites did not talk about emancipation. They assumed that slavery was permanent, and that the only proper status for blacks was bondage and submission to whites.

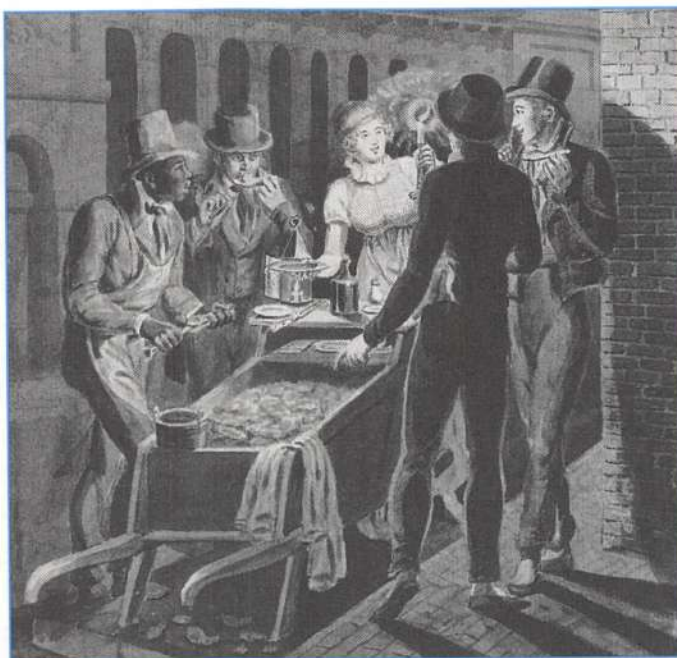
From Virginia on north, the rising population of free blacks gravitated to the cities and towns. Despite the flood of white immigrants from Europe and the American countryside, African Americans constituted a sizable minority in the rapidly expanding cities. New York City’s black population, 10.5 percent in 1800, was still 8.8 percent in 1820. Philadelphia, the haven of thousands of southern refugees, was 10.3 percent African American in 1800, 11.9 percent in 1820.

Blacks in the seaports tended to take stable, low-paying jobs. A few became successful (occasionally wealthy) entrepreneurs, while some others practiced skilled trades. Many took jobs as waiters or porters in hotels, as merchant seamen, as barbers, and as servants in wealthy families. Others worked as dockworkers and laborers. Still others became dealers in used clothing, or draymen with their own carts and horses, or food vendors in the streets and in basement shops. (In New York, oysters were a black monopoly.) As never before, free black faces and voices became parts of the landscape and soundscape of cities and towns—hawking buttermilk, hot corn, and oysters, talking and laughing in the streets,

jostling their way through city crowds. More than a few whites were disturbed. The New York journalist Mordecai Noah, like many other elite whites, had expected freed slaves to be grateful and deferential to their former masters, but “instead of thankfulness for their redemption, they have become impudent and offensive beyond all precedent.”

African Americans with money established businesses and institutions of their own. At one end were black-owned gambling houses, saloons, brothels, oyster cellars, and dance halls, which often served a mixed clientele. At the other end were institutions built by self-consciously “respectable” free blacks. Most prominent among these were churches, which sprang up wherever African Americans lived. In Philadelphia, black preachers Richard Allen and Absalom Jones rebelled against segregated seating in St. George’s Methodist Church and, in 1794, founded two separate black congregations. The African Methodist Episcopal Church grew from Allen’s church, and established itself as a national denomination in 1816. Sustained by the evangelical fervor of the Second Great Awakening, black evangelical churches proliferated in the North, promoting a liberating faith and the abolition of slavery. The membership of the African Methodist Episcopal Church reached 20,000 by the 1850s. Schools and relief societies, usually associated with churches, also grew quickly. Black Masonic lodges attracted hundreds of members. Many of the churches and social organizations took names that proudly called up the blacks’ African origins. In Philadelphia, for instance, there were African Methodists, Abyssinian Baptists, the Daughters of Ethiopia, the African Dorcas Society—to name only a few. Not only their names and activities but their presence as black-owned buildings filled with respectable former slaves caught the attention of their white and black neighbors. It was from this matrix of black businesses and

A Black Street Vendor, Selling Oysters in Philadelphia, circa 1814. *In early 19th-century New York and Philadelphia, African Americans monopolized the public sale of oysters and clams.*



The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

institutions that black abolitionists—David Walker in Boston, Frederick Douglass in New Bedford and Rochester, the itinerant Sojourner Truth, and many others—would emerge to demand abolition of slavery and equal rights for black citizens.

The Beginnings of Modern Racism

In post-revolutionary America, the most important social and political distinction was not between black and white or rich and poor. It was between the heads of independent households and the women, slaves, servants, apprentices, and others who were their dependents. Wage labor and tenancy reduced the number of northern whites who were, by traditional measures, independent. They fought that threat in a number of ways: Their skills and labor, they said, constituted a kind of property; their manhood conferred judgment and strength and thus independence. These were assertions of worth and independence that had little to do with the ownership of property. In ways that were sometimes subtle but just as often brutal, they often made those assertions at the expense of African Americans. Along with the value of their labor and their manhood, white men discovered the decisive value of white skin.

Whites in the early 19th century began refusing to work alongside blacks, and some of the earliest and most decisive racist assaults came when whites asserted their control over some occupations and relegated blacks to others. They chased blacks out of skilled jobs by pressuring employers to discriminate, and often by outright violence. As a result, African Americans disappeared from the skilled trades, while many unskilled and semiskilled blacks lost their jobs on the docks and in warehouses. In 1834, a Philadelphian reported that “colored persons, when engaged in their usual occupations, were repeatedly assailed and maltreated, usually on the [waterfront]. Parties of white men have insisted that no blacks shall be employed in certain departments of labor.” And as their old jobs disappeared, blacks were systematically excluded from the new jobs that were opening up in factories.

Even whites who remained in positions of personal dependence (servants, waiters, and other jobs that were coming to be defined as “black” work) refused the signs and language of servility. White servants refused to wear livery, which became the uniform of black servants of the rich. Whites also refused to be called “servants.” As early as 1807, when an English visitor asked a New England servant for her master, the woman replied that she had no master. “I am Mr. ___’s *help*,” she said. “I’d have you know, *man*, that I am no *sarvant*; none but *negars* are *sarvants*.” There was trouble off the job as well. As early as the 1790s, whites had disrupted African American church meetings, and they frequently attacked black celebrations of northern emancipation and Haitian independence. Black neighborhoods and institutions came under increasing attack. In the late 1820s and early 1830s, every northern city experienced antiblack rioting. In 1829, white mobs destroyed black homes and businesses in Cincinnati. Hundreds of blacks fled that city for Canada; many others sought refuge in slaveholding Kentucky. Between 1828 and 1849 in Philadelphia, simmering racial tensions between blacks and

working-class whites erupted into five sprawling race riots that wrecked black churches, businesses, and homes.

Above all, white populists pronounced blacks unfit to be citizens of the republic. Federalists and other upper-class whites had often supported various forms of black suffrage; less-privileged whites opposed it. The insistence that blacks were incapable of citizenship reinforced an equally natural white male political capacity. The most vicious racist assaults were often carried out beneath symbols of the revolutionary republic. Antiblack mobs in Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Toledo called themselves Minute Men and Sons of Liberty. Philadelphia blacks who gathered to hear the reading of the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July were attacked for “defiling the government.” The more respectable and powerful whites had long been worried about the mixed-race underclass of the cities and towns. Now, as the disorder that they expected of the lower orders took the form of race riots, the authorities responded. But rather than protect the jobs, churches, schools, businesses, friends, and political rights of African Americans from criminal attack, they determined to stop the trouble by removing black people—from employment, from public festivities, from their already-limited citizenship, and, ultimately, from the United States. Cities either excluded black children from public schools or set up segregated schools. In 1845, when Massachusetts passed a law declaring that all children had the right to attend neighborhood schools, the Boston School Committee blithely ruled that the law did not apply to blacks. Blacks were also excluded from white churches or sat in segregated pews. Even the Quakers seated blacks and whites separately.

CITIZENSHIP

The transition from republic to democracy—and the relation of that transition to the decline of patriarchy and efforts to shore up white manhood—took on legal, institutional shape in a redefinition of republican citizenship. The revolutionary constitutions of most states retained colonial freehold (property) qualifications for voting. In the yeoman societies of the late 18th century, freehold qualifications granted the vote to between one-half and three-quarters of adult white men. Many of the disfranchised were dependent sons who expected to inherit citizenship along with land. Some states dropped the freehold clause and gave the vote to all adult men who paid taxes, but with little effect on the voting population. Both the freehold and taxpaying qualifications tended to give political rights to heads of households, granting active citizenship to independent fathers and not to their dependents. Arthur St. Clair, the territorial governor of Ohio, argued for retention of the Northwest Ordinance’s 50-acre freehold qualification for voting in territorial elections in set-piece republican language: “I do not count independence and wealth always together,” he said, “but I pronounce poverty and dependence inseparable.” When Nathaniel Macon, a respected old revolutionary from North Carolina, saw that his state would abolish property qualifications in 1802, he suggested that the suffrage be limited to married men. Like St. Clair’s proposition, it was an attempt to maintain the old distinction between citizen-householders and disfranchised dependents.

Between 1790 and 1820, citizenship grounded in fatherhood and proprietorship gave way to a democratic insistence on equal rights for all white men. There were several reasons for that development. First, the proportion of adult white men who could not meet property qualifications multiplied at an alarming rate. In the new towns and cities, artisans and laborers and even many merchants and professionals did not own real estate. And in the West, new farms were often valued below property qualifications. This became particularly troublesome after the War of 1812, when a large proportion of veterans could not vote. In Shenandoah County, Virginia, for instance, 700 of 1,000 men at a militia muster could not vote. In 1829, the "Non-Freeholders of the City of Richmond" petitioned for the right to vote, arguing that the ownership of property did not make a man "wiser and better." "Virtue" and "intelligence," they insisted, were "not among the products of the soil." Even the aging Thomas Jefferson had come to believe, by 1824, that property restrictions violated "the principal of equal political rights."

In the early 19th century, state after state extended the vote to all adult white men. In 1790, only Vermont granted the vote to all free men. Kentucky entered the Union in 1792 without property or taxpaying qualifications. Tennessee followed with a freehold qualification, but only for newcomers who had resided in their counties for less than six months. The federal government dropped the 50-acre freehold qualification in the territories in 1812. Of the eight territories that became states between 1796 and 1821, none kept a property qualification, only three maintained a taxpaying qualification, and five explicitly granted the vote to all white men. In the same years, one eastern state after another widened the franchise. By 1840, only Rhode Island retained a propertied electorate, primarily because Yankee farmers in that state wanted to retain power in a society made up increasingly of urban, immigrant wage earners. (When Rhode Island finally reformed the franchise in 1843, the new law included a freehold requirement that applied only to the foreign-born, and explicitly withheld the franchise from blacks.) With that exception, the white men of every state held the vote.

Suffrage reform gave political rights to propertyless men, and thus took a long step away from the Founders' republic and toward mass democracy. At the same time, however, reformers explicitly restricted the vote to those who were white and male. New Jersey's revolutionary constitution, for instance, had granted the vote to "persons" who met a freehold qualification. This loophole enfranchised property-holding widows, many of whom exercised their rights. A law of 1807 abolished property restrictions and gave the vote to all white men. The same law ended female voting. The question of woman suffrage would not be considered again until women raised it in 1848. It would not be settled until well into the 20th century.

New restrictions also applied to blacks. The revolutionary constitutions of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine—northeastern states with tiny black minorities—granted the vote to free blacks. New York and North Carolina laws gave the vote to "all men" who met the qualifications, and propertied African Americans (a tiny but symbolically crucial minority)

routinely exercised the vote. Post-revolutionary laws that extended voting rights to all white men often specifically excluded or severely restricted votes for blacks. Free blacks lost the suffrage in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Maryland, Tennessee, and North Carolina—all states in which they had previously voted. By 1840, fully 93 percent of blacks in the North lived in states that either banned or severely restricted their right to vote, and the restrictions were explicitly about race. A delegate to the New York constitutional convention of 1821, noting the movement of freed slaves into New York City, argued against allowing them to vote: “The whole host of Africans that now deluge our city (already too impertinent to be borne), would be placed upon an equal with the citizens.” At the Tennessee convention that eliminated property and residence requirements for whites while it stripped the vote from free blacks in 1834, delegate G. W. L. Marr declared: “We the People” meant “we the free white people of the United States and the free white people only.” The convention declared blacks “outside the social compact.” A year later, Nathaniel Macon told a North Carolina convention that in 1776, free blacks had been “no part of the then political family.”

Thus, the “universal” suffrage of which many Americans boasted was far from universal. New laws dissolved the ties between political rights and property, and thus saved the citizenship of thousands who were becoming propertyless tenants and wage earners. The same laws that gave the vote to all white men, however, explicitly barred other Americans from political participation. Faced with the disintegration of Jefferson’s republic of proprietor-patriarchs, the wielders of power had chosen to blur the emerging distinctions of social class while they hardened the boundaries of sex and race. In 1790, citizenship had belonged to men who were fathers and farm owners. Forty years later, the citizenry was made up of those who were (the phrase came into use at this time) “free, white, and twenty-one.” Much more explicitly and completely than had been the case at the founding, America in 1830 was a white man’s republic.

CONCLUSION

By the second quarter of the 19th century, Americans had made a patchwork of regional, class, and ethnic cultures. The new middle classes of the North and West compounded their Protestant and republican inheritance with a new entrepreneurial faith in progress. The result was a way of life grounded in the self-made and morally accountable individual and the sentimentalized (often feminized) domestic unit.

Most Americans, however, did not live and think like the middle class. The poorer urban dwellers and farmers of the North remained grimly loyal to the unsentimental, male-dominated families of their fathers and grandfathers, to new and old religious sects that preached human depravity and the mysterious workings of providence, and to the suspicion that perfidy and disorder lurked behind the smiling moral order of market economics and middle-class culture.

In the South, most white farmers persisted in a neighborhood-based, intensely evangelical, and socially conservative way of life; when asked their opinions, they

often talked like classic Jeffersonian yeomen. Southern planters, although they shared in the northern elite's belief in material progress and the magic of the market, were bound by family values, a system of slave labor, and a code of honor that was strikingly at variance with middle-class faith in an orderly universe and perfectible individuals. And we have seen that slaves in these years continued to make cultural forms of their own. Despite their exclusion from the white world of liberty and equality, they tied their aspirations to the family, to an evangelical Protestant God, and to the individual and collective dignity that republics promise to their citizens.