

## Chapter 16- The South and the Slavery Controversy

### 1793-1860

#### A. "Cotton Is King!"

1. As time passed, the Cotton Kingdom developed into a huge agricultural factory, pouring out avalanches of fiber; quick profits drew planters to the virgin bottomlands of the Gulf states; as long as the soil was still vigorous, the yield was bountiful and rewards high
  1. Caught up in an economic spiral, the planters in the South bought more slaves and land to grow more cotton, so as to buy still more slaves and land
  2. Northern shippers reaped a large part of the profits from the cotton trade; they would load bales of cotton at southern ports, transport them to England, sell their cargo for pounds, and buy needed manufactured goods for sale in the United States
  3. The prosperity of both North and South rested on the backs of southern slaves
2. Cotton accounted for half the value of all American exports after 1840—the South produced more than half of the world's supply of cotton—a fact that held foreign nations in partial bondage; Britain was then the leading industrial power, whose most important single manufacture in the 1850s was cotton cloth, from which 20% received work
3. Southern leaders were fully aware that Britain was tied to them by cotton threads and this dependence gave them a heady sense of power; in their eyes "Cotton was King," the gin was his throne and the black bondsmen were his henchmen (cotton was a powerful monarch as if war ever broke out, the South could cut off its outflow of cotton)

#### B. The Plant "Aristocracy"

1. Before the Civil War, the South was in some respects not so much a democracy as an oligarchy—or government by the few—heavily influenced by a planter aristocracy
  1. In 1850 only 1,733 families owned more than 100 slaves each, and this select group provided the cream of the political and social leadership of the section and nation
  2. In the tall-columned and white painted plantation mansion, dwelt the "cottonocracy"
2. The planter aristocrats enjoyed a lion's share of southern wealth
  1. They could educate their children in the finest schools, often in the North or aboard
  2. Their money provided the leisure for study, reflection, and statecraft, as was notably true of men like John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis
  3. They felt a keen sense of obligation to serve the public; it was no accident that Virginia and the other southern states produced a higher proportion of front-rank statesmen before 1860 than the "dollar-grubbing" North

3. But even in its best light, dominance by a favored aristocracy was basically undemocratic
  1. The gap between rich and poor widened and hampered tax-supported public education, because rich planters could send their children to private institutions
  2. A favorite author of elite southerners was Sir Walter Scott, whose manors and castles, helped them idealize a feudal society, though their economic activities were capitalistic
  3. Southern aristocrats, who sometime staged jousting tournaments, strove to perpetuate a type of medievalism that he died out in Europe; Mark Twain accused the British novelist of arousing the southerners to fight for a decaying social structure ("sham")
4. The plantation system also shaped the lives of southern women; the mistress of a great plantation commanded a sizable household staff of mostly female slaves
  1. She gave daily orders to cooks, maids, seamstresses, laundresses, and body servants
  2. Relationships between mistresses and slaves ranged from affectionate to atrocious; some mistresses showed tender regard for their bondswomen and some slave women took pride in their status as "members of the household" but slavery strained women
  3. Virtually no slaveholding women believed in abolition and relatively few protested when the husbands and children of their slaves were sold (whipping was common)

#### C. Slaves of the Slave System

1. Plantation agriculture was wasteful, largely because King Cotton and his money-hungry subjects despoiled the good earth; quick profits led to excessive cultivation, or "land butchery," which in turn caused a heavy leakage of population to the West and NW
2. The economic structure of the South became increasingly monopolistic; as the land wore thin, many small farmers sold their holdings to the prosperous and went north or west; essentially, in the South the big plantations got bigger and the small got smaller
3. Another cancer in the bosom of the South was the financial instability of the plantation system; the temptation to overspeculate in land and slaves cause many planters to plunge in beyond their depth; slaves represented a heavy investment of capital (perhaps \$1,200 each in the case of prime field hands and they might injure themselves or run away)
4. An entire slave quarter might be wiped out by disease or even by lightning
5. Dominance by King Cotton led to a dangerous dependence on a one-crop economy, whose price level depended on world conditions—system discouraged diversification
6. Southern planters resented watching the North grow fat at their expense; they were pained by the heavy outward flow of commissions and interest to northern middlemen, banks, agents, and shippers (South spent their life in servitude to Yankee manufacturing)

7. The Cotton Kingdom also repelled large-scale European immigration, which added so richly to the manpower and wealth of the North; in 1860 only 4.4% of the southern population was foreign born, as compared with 18.7% for the North
8. German and Irish immigration to the South was generally discouraged by competition of slave labor, by the high cost of fertile land, and by European ignorance of cotton growing
9. The diverting of non-British immigration to the North caused the white South to become the most Anglo-Saxon section of the United States nation

#### D. The White Majority

1. Few southern whites lived in mansions (1,733 families out of 345,000 families owned a hundred or more slaves and over two-thirds of the families owned fewer than ten slaves); even so, only about one-fourth of white southerners owned slaves or were in the family
2. Smaller slave owners did not own a majority of the slaves, but they made up a majority of the masters; these lesser masters were typically small farmers except with a few slaves
  1. The style of their lives probably resembled that of small farmers in the North more than it did that of the southern aristocracy; they lived in modest farmhouses and sweated beside their bondsmen in the cotton fields working just as hard as slaves
  2. Beneath the slave-owners on the pyramid was the great body of whites who owned no slaves at all; by 1860 their numbers had swelled to 6,120,825—75% of all whites
  3. Shouldered off the richest bottomlands by the mighty planters, they scratched a simple living from the thinner soils of the backcountry and the mountain valleys
  4. To them, the riches of the Cotton Kingdom were a distant dream and they often sneered at the lordly pretensions of the cotton “snobocracy”; these red-necked farmers participated in the market economy scarcely at all—subsistence farmers who raised corn and hogs, not cotton, and often lived isolated lives (occasional meeting)
3. Some of the least prosperous non-slaveholding whites were scorned even as “poor white trash”; known also as “hillbillies,” they were often described as listless, shiftless, and misshapen—many were not lazy but sick and suffered from malnutrition and parasites
4. All these whites without slaves had no direct stake in the preservation of slavery, yet they were among the stoutest defenders of the slave system that existed in the South
  1. There was the hope of buying a slave or two and parlaying their paltry holdings into riches—all in accord with the “American dream” of upward social mobility
  2. They took pride in their presumed racial superiority, which would be watered if the slavers were freed; many of the poorer whites were not economically much better off

5. Among white southerners were mountain whites who were marooned in the valleys of the Appalachian range that stretched from western Virginia to northern Georgia and Alabama; they were a kind of living ancestry as they did keep some Elizabethan habits
  1. As independent small farmers, distant from the Cotton Kingdom and rarely if ever in sight of a slave, these mountain whites had little in common with the whites of the flatlands—many of them hated both the haughty planters and their gangs of blacks
  2. They looked up on the impending strife between North and South as “a rich man’s war but a poor man’s fight” (included future president Andrew Johnson of TN)
  3. When the war came, the mountain whites constituted a vitally important peninsula of Unionism jutting down into the secessionist Southern sea; they played a significant role in crippling the Confederacy (only Republican strength in the solid South)

#### E. Free Blacks: Slaves Without Masters

1. The South’s free blacks numbered about 250,000 by 1860; precarious in standing
  1. In the upper South, the free black population traced its origins to emancipation inspired by the idealism of Revolutionary days; in the deeper South, many free blacks were mulattoes, usually children of a white planter and his black mistress
  2. Throughout the South were some free blacks who had purchased their freedom with earners from labor after hours; many free blacks owned property, especially in NO
2. The free blacks in the South were a kind of “third race”; these people were prohibited from working in certain occupations and forbidden from testifying against whites in court
  1. They were always vulnerable to being high-jacked back into slavery by unscrupulous slave traders; as free men and women, they were walking examples of what might be achieved by emancipation and hence were resented and detested by slave supporters
  2. Free blacks were also unpopular in the North, where about another 250,000 of them lived; several states forbade their entrance, most denied them from the right to vote, and some barred blacks from public schools—Northern blacks were especially hated by the pick-and-shovel Irish immigrants, with whom they competed for menial jobs
  3. Much of the agitation in the North against the spread of slavery into the new territories in the 1840s and 1850s grew out of race prejudice, not humanitarianism
3. Anti-black feeling was in fact frequently stronger in the North than in the South; it was sometimes observed that white southerners, who were often suckled and reared by black nurses, like the black as an individual but despised the race (the white northerner however often professed to like the race but disliked individual blacks)

#### F. Plantation Slavery

1. In society's basement in the South of 1860 were nearly 4 million black human chattels; their numbers had quadrupled since the dawn of the century, as the booming cotton economy created a seemingly unquenchable demand for the slave labor
  1. Legal importation of African slaves into America ended in 1808 when Congress outlaws slave imports; but the price of "black ivory" was so high in the years before the Civil War that uncounted thousands blacks were smuggled into the South
  2. Despite the death penalty for slavers, only one slave trader was ever executed, N.P. Gordon, whose death took place in New York in 1862, the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Civil War
  3. The huge bulk of the increase in the slave population came not from imports but instead from natural reproduction—a fact that distinguished slavery in America from other New World societies and implied much about the tenor of the slave regime
2. Above all, the planters regarded the slaves as investments, into which they had sunk nearly \$2 billion of their capital by 1860; slaves were the primary form of wealth in the South and as such they were cared for as any asset is cared for by a prudent capitalist
  1. Accordingly, they were sometimes spared dangerous work and if a neck was going to be broken, the master preferred it to be that of a wage-earning Irish laborer rather than that of a prime field hand, worth \$1,800 by 1860 (price had quintupled since 1800)
  2. Tunnel blasting and swamp draining were often consigned to itinerant gangs of expendable Irishmen because those perilous tasks were "death on blacks and mules"
3. Slavery was profitable for the great planters, though it hobbled economic development of the region as a whole; the profits of the cotton boom sucked ever more slaves from the upper to the lower South; by 1860, Deep South states of SC, FL, MI, ALA, and LA each had a majority of blacks and accounted for half of all slaves in the South
4. Breeding slaves in a way that cattle are bred was not openly encouraged
  1. But thousands of blacks from the soil-exhausted slave states of the Old South were "sold down the river" to toil as field-gang laborers on the cotton frontier
  2. Women who bore ten plus babies were prized as "rattlin' good breeders" and some of these fecund females were promised their freedom when they had produced ten
  3. White masters all too frequently would force their attentions on female slaves, fathering a sizable mulatto population, most of which remained enchained
5. Slave auctions were brutal sights; the open selling of slaves under hammer, was among the most revolting aspects of slavery; on auction block, families were separated with frequency, usually for economic reason such as bankruptcy or division of property
6. Abolitionists decried the practice, and Harriet Beecher Stowe seized on the emotional power of this theme by putting it at the heart of the plot of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

## G. Life Under the Lash

1. White southerners often romanticized about the happy life of their singing, dancing, banjo-strumming, joyful “darkies” but conditions varied greatly from region to region, from large plantation to small farm, and from master to master in the South
  1. Everywhere slavery meant hard work, ignorance, and oppression; the slaves usually toiled from dawn to dusk in the fields, under the watchful eyes and ready whip-hand of a white overseer or black “driver”—they had no civil or political rights
  2. They only had minimal protection from arbitrary murder or unusually cruel punishment; some states banned the sale of a child under the age of ten from his mother but all such laws were difficult to enforce, since slaves were forbidden to testify in court or even to have their marriages legally recognized
2. Floggings were common, for the whip was the substitute for the wage-incentive system and the most visible symbol of the planter’s mastery; strong-willed slaves were sometimes sent to “breakers,” whose technique consisted in lavish laying on the lash
3. But savage beatings made sullen laborers, and lash marks hurt resale values; the typical planter had too much of his own prosperity riding on the backs of his slaves to beat them
4. By 1860 most slaves were concentrated in the “black belt” of the Deep South that stretched from SC and GA into the new southwest states of ALA, MI, and LA
  1. This was the region of the southern frontier, into which the explosively growing Cotton Kingdom had burst in a few short decades; as on all frontiers, life was often rough and raw and in general the lot of the slave was harder there than in other areas
  2. A majority of blacks lived on larger plantations that harbored communities of twenty or more slaves; in some counties of the Deep South, especially along the lower Mississippi River, blacks accounted for more than 75 percent of the population
  3. There the family life of slaves tended to be relatively stable, and a distinctive African-American slave culture developed—forced separations of families were evidently more common on smaller plantations and in the upper South (slave marriages)
5. With impressive resilience, blacks managed to sustain family life in slavery and most slaves were raised in stable two-parent households; continuity of family identity evident
6. African-Americans also displayed African cultural roots when they avoided marriage between first cousins, in contrast to the frequent intermarriage in the planter aristocracy
7. African roots were also visible in the slaves’ religious practices; though heavily Christianized by the itinerant evangelists of the Second Great Awakening, blacks in slavery molded their own distinctive religious forms from a mixture of Christian and African elements—African practices also persisted the “responsorial” style of preaching, in which the congregation punctuates the minister’s remarks with assents and amens

## H. The Burdens of Bondage

1. Slavery was intolerably degrading to the victims; they were deprived of the dignity and sense of responsibility that come from independence and the right to make choices
  1. They were denied an education, because reading brought ideas, which brought discontent; many states passed laws forbidding their instruction and about 90% of adult slaves at the beginning of the Civil War was totally illiterate
  2. For all slaves, virtually all blacks, the “American dream” of bettering one’s lot through study and hard work was a cruel and empty mockery
2. Slaves often slowed the pace of their labor to the barest minimum that would spare them the lash, thus fostering the myth of black “laziness” in the minds of whites; they filched food from the “big house” and pilfered other goods that had been produced or purchased
  1. Slaves sabotaged expensive equipment, stopping the work routine altogether until repairs were accomplished; occasionally they even poisoned their master’s food
  2. The slaves also universally pined for freedom; many took to their heels as runaways, frequently in search of separated family members; others rebelled but not successfully
  3. In 1800 an armed insurrection led by a slave named Gabriel in Richmond, Virginia, was foiled by informers, and its leaders were handed; Denmark Vesey, a free black, led another ill-fated rebellion in Charleston in 1822 (hanged with followers)
  4. In 1831 the semiliterate Nat Turner, a visionary black preacher, led an uprising that slaughtered about sixty Virginians, mostly women and children; reprisals swift
3. The taint of slavery also left its mark on the whites; it fostered the brutality of the whip, the bloodhound, and the branding iron; white southerners increasingly lived in a state of imagined siege, surrounded by potentially rebellious blacks inflamed by abolitionist propaganda from the North; fears bolstered a theory of biological racial superiority
4. The south was turned into a reactionary backwater in an era of progress; one of the last bastions of slavery were forced to degrade themselves, along with their victims

## I. Early Abolitionism

1. The inhumanity of the “peculiar institution” gradually caused antislavery societies to sprout forth; abolitionist sentiment first stirred at the time of the Revolution, especially among Quakers; because of the widespread loathing of blacks, some of the earliest abolitionist efforts focused on transporting the blacks bodily back to Africa
  1. The American Colonization Society was founded for the purpose in 1817 and in 1822 the Republic of Liberia, on the fever-stricken West African coast, was established for former slaves; its capital Monrovia, was named after President Monroe

2. Some fifteen thousand freed blacks were transported there over the next four decades but most blacks had no wish to be transplanted into a strange civilization
3. By 1860 virtually all southern slaves were no longer Africans, but native-born African-Americans, with their own distinctive history and culture; yet the colonization idea appeal to some antislaveryites until the time of the Civil War
2. In the 1830s the abolitionist movement took on new energy and momentum, mounting to the proportions of a crusade; American abolitionists gained fervor in 1833 when their British counterparts unchained the slaves in the West Indies
3. Most important, religious spirit of the Second Great Awakening now inflamed many abolitionists against the sin of slavery; prominent among them was Theodore Dwight Weld, who had been in New York's Burned-Over District in 1820s; Weld appealed with special power and directness to his rural audiences of untutored farmers
4. Spiritually inspired by Finney, Weld was materially aided by two wealthy and devout New York merchants, the brothers Arthur and Lewis Tappan; in 1832, they paid his way to Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati which was presided over by the formidable Lyman Beecher, father of a remarkable brood (family of Beechers)
5. Expelled in 1834 for organizing an eighteen-day debate on slavery, Weld and his fellow "Lane Rebels" fanned out across the Old Northwest preaching the antislavery gospel; Weld assembled a potent propaganda pamphlet, *American Slavery As It Is*
6. *Its compelling arguments made it among the most effective abolitionist tracts and greatly influenced Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin*

#### J. Radical Abolitionism

1. On New Year's Day, 1831, a shattering abolitionist blast came from the bugle of William Lloyd Garrison, a mild-looking reformer of twenty-six; he was an emotionally high-strung son of a drunken father and a spiritual child of the Second Great Awakening
  1. Garrison published in Boston the first issue of his militantly antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*; with this mighty paper broadside, Garrison triggered a thirty-year war of words and in a sense fired one of the opening barrages of the Civil War
  2. Garrison proclaimed in strident tones that under no circumstances would he tolerate the poisonous weed of slavery but would stamp it out at once, root, and branch
  3. Other dedicated abolitionists rallied to Garrison's standard and in 1833, they founded that American Anti-Slavery Society; prominent among them was Wendell Phillips, a Boston patrician known as "abolition's golden trumpet"—he would eat no cane sugar and wear no cotton cloth, since both were produced by southern slaves



2. Black abolitionists distinguished themselves as living monuments to the cause of African-American freedom; their ranks included David Walk, whose *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) advocated a bloody end to white supremacy
3. Also noteworthy was Sojourner Truth, a freed black woman in New York who fought tirelessly for black emancipation and women's rights and Martin Delaney, one of the few black leaders to take seriously the notion of mass recolonization of Africa (he visited)
4. The greatest of the black abolitionists was Frederick Douglass; escaping from bondage in 1838, he was "discovered" by the abolitionists in 1841 when he gave a stunning impromptu speech at an antislavery meeting in Massachusetts; he lectured widely for the cause, despite frequent beatings and threats against his life (classic autobiography 1845)
  1. Douglass was as flexibly practical as Garrison was stubbornly principled; Garrison often appeared to be more interested in his own righteousness than in the substance of the slavery evil itself; he repeatedly demanded that the North secede from the South
  2. Yet he did not explain how the creation of an independent slave republic would bring an end to the "damning crime" of slavery; renouncing politics, on July 4, 1854, he publicly burned a copy of the Constitution as "a covenant with death and hell"
  3. Critics, including some of his former supporters, charged that Garrison was cruelly probing the moral wound in America's underbelly but offering no acceptable balm
5. Douglass along with other abolitionists, increasingly looked to politics to end the blight of slavery; these political abolitionists backed the Liberty party in 1840, the Free Soil Party in 1848, and eventually the Republican party in the 1850s
6. In the end, most abolitionists, including even the pacifistic Garrison himself, followed out the logic of their beliefs and supported a costly war as the price of emancipation

#### K. The South Lashes Back

1. Antislavery sentiment was not unknown in the South, and in the 1820s antislavery societies were more numerous south of the Mason-Dixon line than north of it; but after about 1830, the voice of white southern abolitionism was silenced (last gasp attempt—Virginia legislature debated and defeated emancipation proposals in 1831-1832)
  1. The debate marked a turning point; thereafter all the slave states tightened their slave codes and moved to prohibit emancipation of any kind, voluntary or compensated
  2. Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 sent a wave of hysteria sweeping over the snowy cotton fields, and planters in growing numbers slept with pistols by their pillows

3. Although Garrison had no connection with the Turner conspiracy, his *Liberator* appeared at about the same time, and he was bitterly condemned as a terrorist and an inciter of murder; the state of Georgia offered \$5,000 for his arrest and conviction
2. The nullification crisis of 1832 further implanted haunting fears in white southern minds, conjuring up nightmares of black incendiaries and abolitionist devils; jailing, whipping, and lynching now greeted rational efforts to discuss the slavery problem in the South
3. Proslavery whites responded by launching a massive defense of slavery as positive good
  1. They forgot their own section's previous doubts about the morality of the "peculiar institution"—slavery, they claimed, was supported by the authority of the Bible, and the wisdom of Aristotle; it was good for the Africans who were now "civilized"
  2. Slave masters did encourage religion in the slave quarters and white apologists also pointed out that master-slave relationships really resembled those of a family
  3. Southern whites were quick to contrast the "happy" lot of "servants" with that of the overworked northern wage slaves, including sweated women and stunted children
  4. Blacks mostly toiled in the fresh air and sunlight, not in dark and stuffy factories; they did not have to worry about slack times or unemployment, as did the "hired hands"
  5. Provided with a form of Social Security, they were cared for in sickness and old age, unlike the northern workers, who were set adrift when they outlived their usefulness
4. Curious proslavery arguments only widened the chasm between a backward-looking South and a forward-looking North and indeed much of the rest of the Western world
  1. The southerners reacted defensively to the pressure of their own fears and bristled before the merciless nagging of the northern abolitionists
  2. Increasingly the white South turned in upon itself and grew hotly intolerant of any embarrassing questions about the status of slavery in the Southern United States
5. Regrettably, the controversy over free people endangered free speech in the country
  1. Piles of petitions poured in upon Congress from the antislavery reformers and in 1836 sensitive southerners drove through the House the so-called Gag Resolution, which required all such antislavery appeals to be tabled without debate
  2. This attack on the right of petition aroused the sleeping lion in the aged ex-president John Quincy Adams, and he waged a successful eight-year fight for its repeal
6. Southern whites likewise resented the flooding of their mails with incendiary abolitionist literature; even if the blacks could not read, they could interpret the inflammatory drawings, such as those that showed masters knocking out slaves' teeth with clubs
7. In 1835 a mob in Charleston, South Carolina, looted the post office and burned a pile of abolitionist propaganda; capitulating to southern pressures, the Washington government

in 1835 ordered southern postmasters to destroy abolitionist material and called on southern state officials to arrest federal postmasters who did not comply

**L. The Abolitionist Impact in the North**

- 1.** Abolitionists were for a long time unpopular in many parts of the North; Northerners had been brought up to revere the Constitution and to regard the clauses on slavery as a lasting bargain; the ideal of Union had taken deep root (eloquence of Daniel Webster)
- 2.** The North also had a heavy economic stake in Dixieland; by the late 1850s, the southern planters owed northern bankers and other creditors about \$300 million, and much of this immense sum would be lost should the Union dissolve
- 3.** New England textile mills were fed with cotton raised by the slaves and a disrupted labor system might cut off this vital supply and bring unemployment to the North
- 4.** The Union during these critical years was partly bound together with cotton threads, tied by lords of the lash; it was not surprising that the strong hostility developed in the North against the boast-rocking tactics of the radical antislaveryites
- 5.** Repeated tongue-lashings by the extreme abolitionists provoked many mob outbursts in the North; a gang of young toughs broke until Lewis Tappan's NY house in 1834 and demolished its interior, while a crowd in the street cheered
  - 1.** In 1835 Garrison, with a rope tied around him, was dragged through the streets of Boston by the so-called Broadcloth Mob but escaped almost miraculously
  - 2.** Reverend Elijah P. Lovejoy, of Alton, Illinois, not content to assail slavery, impugned the chastity of Catholic women; his printing press was destroyed four times and in 1837 he was killed by a mob and became "the martyr (victim) abolitionist"
  - 3.** So unpopular were the antislavery zealots that ambitious politicians, like Lincoln, usually avoided the taint of Garrisonian abolition like the plague
  - 4.** Yet by the 1850s the abolitionist outcry had made a deep dent in the northern mind; many citizens had come to see the South as the land of the unfree and the home of a hateful institution; few northerners were prepared to abolish slavery outright, but a growing number, including Lincoln, opposed extending it to the western territories
  - 5.** People of this stamp ("free-soilers") swelled their ranks as the Civil War approached