

Unit 11 - The Cotton Revolution

Focus Questions

1. How did the nineteenth-century cotton boom influence economic, social, and cultural developments in the American South? In what ways did the rise of the “Black Belt” affect the lives and experiences of antebellum slaves?
2. Why did many white southerners adopt white supremacist perspectives and views of slavery as a “positive good,” even when the majority of those people did not own slaves?
3. In what ways did enslaved individuals negotiate or resist their bondage?

Key Terms

Black Belt
Planters
Gullah

Harriet Jacobs
Nat Turner

Introduction

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the southern states experienced extraordinary change that would define the region and its role in American history for decades, even centuries, to come. Between the 1830s and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the American South expanded its wealth and population and became an integral part of an increasingly global economy. It did not, as previous generations of histories have told, sit back on its cultural and social traditions and insulate itself from an expanding system of communication, trade, and production that connected Europe and Asia to the Americas. Quite the opposite; the South actively engaged new technologies and trade routes while also seeking to assimilate and upgrade its most “traditional” and culturally ingrained practices—such as slavery and agricultural production—within a modernizing world.

Beginning in the 1830s, merchants from the Northeast, Europe, Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean flocked to southern cities, setting up trading firms, warehouses, ports, and markets. As a result, these cities—Richmond, Charleston, St. Louis, Mobile, Savannah, and New Orleans, to name a few—doubled and even tripled in size and global importance. Populations became more cosmopolitan, more educated, and wealthier. Systems of increasingly stratified social classes developed where they had never clearly existed. Ports that had once focused entirely on the importation of slaves and shipped only regionally became hubs for daily and weekly shipping lines to New York City, Liverpool, Manchester, Le Havre, and Lisbon. The world was slowly but surely coming closer together, and the South was right in the middle.

11.1 – The Importance of Cotton

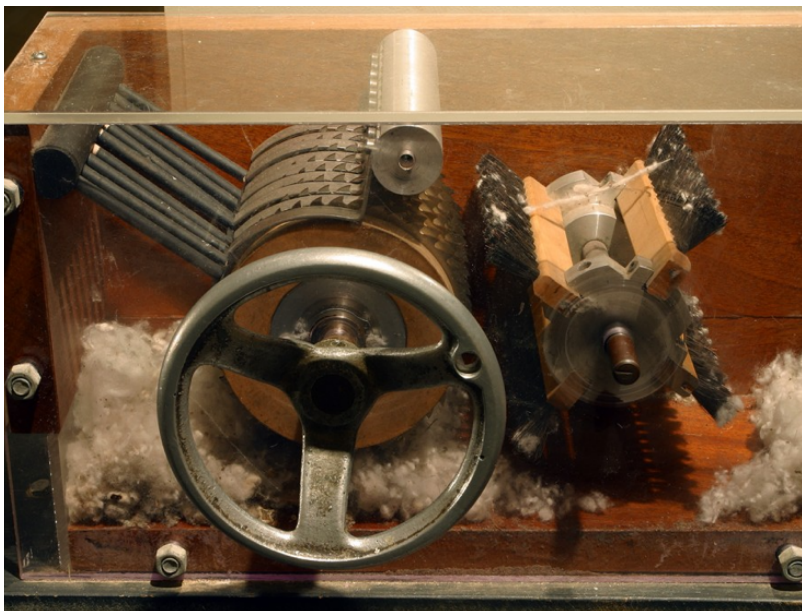
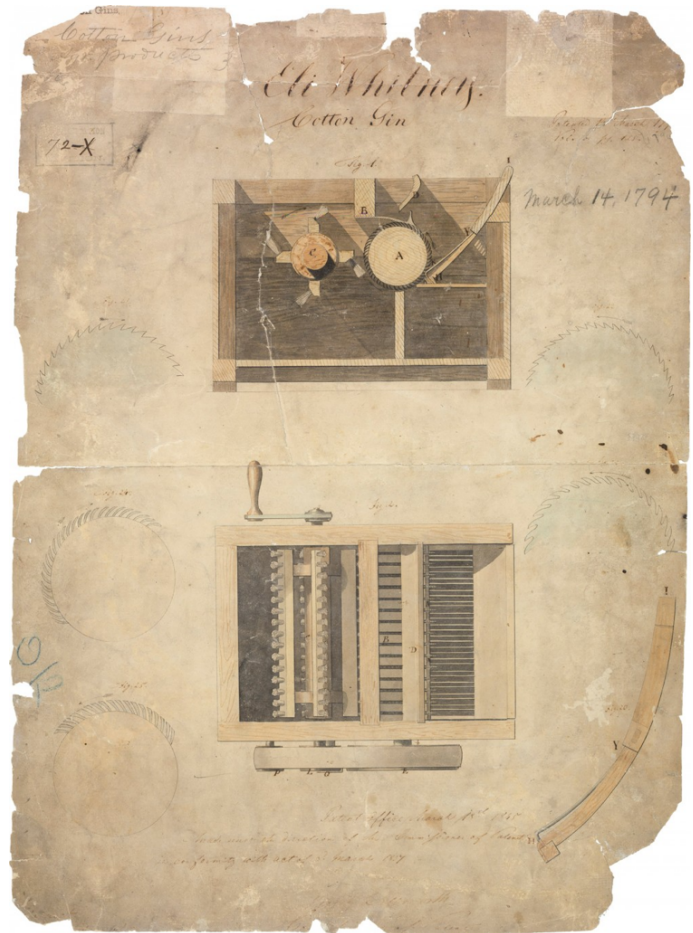
In November 1785, the Liverpool firm of Peel, Yates & Co. imported the first seven bales of American cotton ever to arrive in Europe. Prior to this unscheduled, and frankly unwanted, delivery, European merchants saw cotton as a product of the colonial Caribbean islands of Barbados, Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), Martinique, Cuba, and Jamaica. The American South, though relatively wide and expansive, was the go-to source for rice and, most importantly, tobacco.

Few knew that the seven bales sitting in Liverpool that winter of 1785 would change the world. By the early 1800s, the American South had developed a niche in the European market for “luxurious” long-staple cotton grown exclusively on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.¹ But this was only the beginning of a massive flood to come and the foundation of the South’s astronomical rise to global prominence. Before long, botanists, merchants, and planters alike set out to develop strains of cotton seed that would grow farther west on the southern mainland, especially in the new lands opened up by the Louisiana Purchase of 1803—an area that stretched from New Orleans in the South to what is today Minnesota, parts of the Dakotas, and Montana.

The discovery of *Gossypium barbadense*—often called Petit Gulf cotton—near Rodney, Mississippi, in 1820 changed the American and global cotton markets forever.² Petit Gulf, it was said, “slid through” the cotton gin—a machine developed by Eli Whitney in 1794 for deseeding cotton—more easily than any other strain. It also grew tightly, producing more usable cotton than anyone had imagined up to that point. Perhaps most importantly, though, Petit Gulf cotton came up at a time when Native Americans were removed from the Southeast—southern Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana—where Petit Gulf cotton grew. After Indian removal, land became readily available for white men with a few dollars and big dreams. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 allowed the federal government to survey, divide, and auction off millions of acres of land for however much bidders were willing to pay. Suddenly, farmers with dreams of owning a large plantation could purchase dozens, even hundreds, of acres in the fertile Mississippi River Delta for cents on the dollar. Pieces of land that would cost thousands of dollars elsewhere sold in the 1830s for several hundred, at prices as low as 40¢ per acre.³

Thousands rushed into the blossoming Cotton Belt. Joseph Holt Ingraham, a writer and traveler from Maine, called it a “mania.”⁴ William Henry Sparks, a lawyer living in Natchez, Mississippi, remembered it as “a new El Dorado” in which “fortunes were made in a day, without enterprise or work.” The change was astonishing. “Where yesterday the wilderness darkened over the land with her wild forests,” he recalled, “to-day the cotton plantations whitened the earth.”⁵ Money flowed from banks, many newly formed, on promises of “other-worldly” profits and overnight returns. Banks in New York City, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and even London offered lines of credit to anyone looking to buy land in the region. Some even sent their own agents to purchase cheap land at auction for the express purpose of selling it, sometimes the very next day, at double and triple the original value, a process known as speculation.

The explosion of available land in the fertile Cotton Belt brought new life to the South. By the end of the 1830s, Petit Gulf cotton had been perfected, distributed, and planted throughout the region. Advances in steam power and water travel revolutionized southern farmers’ and planters’ ability to deseed and bundle their products and move them to ports popping up along the Atlantic seaboard. Indeed, by the end of the 1830s, cotton had become the primary crop not only of the deep South but of the entire nation.

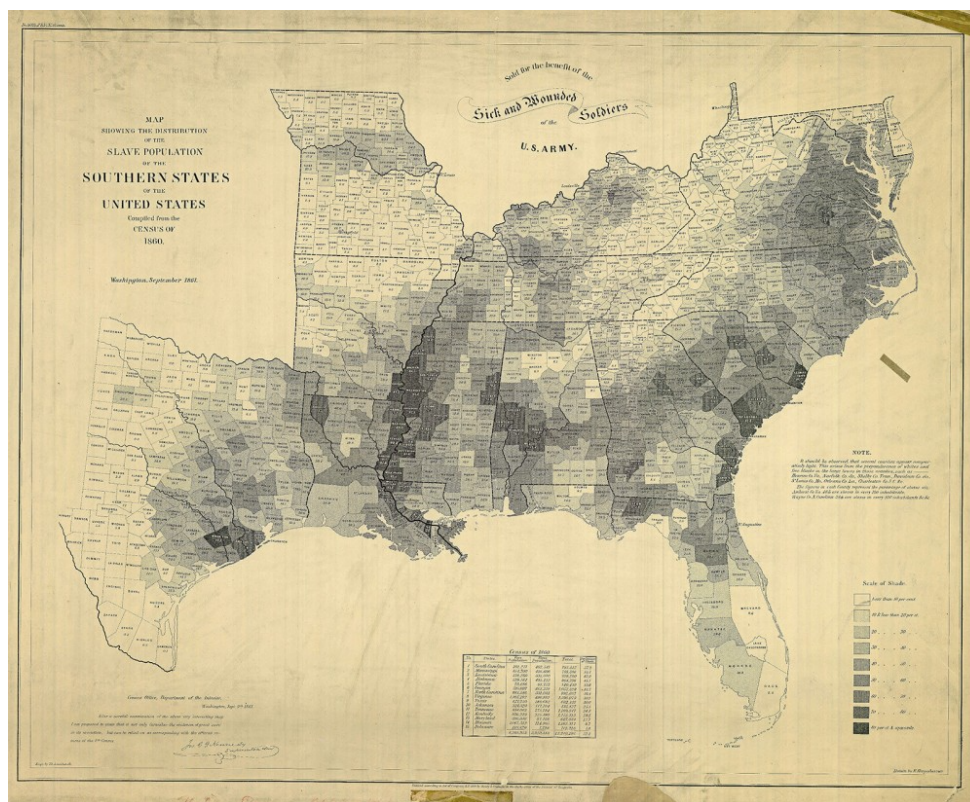


Above: Eli Whitney's mechanical cotton gin revolutionized cotton production and expanded and strengthened slavery throughout the South. Eli Whitney's Patent for the Cotton gin, March 14, 1794; Records of the Patent and Trademark Office; Record Group 241. Wikimedia.

Left: A nineteenth-century cotton gin on display at the Eli Whitney Museum. Wikimedia.

11.2 – Cotton Becomes King

The numbers were staggering. In 1793, just a few years after the first shipment of American cotton to Europe, the South produced around five million pounds of cotton, again almost exclusively the product of South Carolina's Sea Islands. Seven years later, in 1800, South Carolina remained the primary cotton producer in the South, sending 6.5 million pounds of the luxurious long-staple blend to markets in Charleston, Liverpool, London, and New York.⁶ But as the tighter, more abundant, and vibrant Petit Gulf strain moved west with the dreamers, schemers, and speculators, the American South quickly became the world's leading cotton producer. By 1835, the five main cotton-growing states—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—produced more than five hundred million pounds of Petit Gulf for a global market stretching from New Orleans to New York and to London, Liverpool, Paris and beyond. That five hundred million pounds of cotton made up nearly 55 percent of the entire United States export market, a trend that continued nearly every year until the outbreak of the Civil War. Indeed, the two billion pounds of cotton produced in 1860 alone amounted to more than 60 percent of the United States' total exports for that year.⁷



This map, published by the US Coast Guard, shows the percentage of slaves in the population in each county of the slave-holding states in 1860. The highest percentages lie along the Mississippi River, in the "Black Belt" of Alabama, and coastal South Carolina, all of which were centers of agricultural production (cotton and rice) in the United States. E. Hergesheimer (cartographer), Th. Leonhardt (engraver), *Map Showing the Distribution of the Slave Population of the Southern States of the United States Compiled from the Census of 1860*, c. 1861. Wikimedia.

The astronomical rise of American cotton production came at the cost of the South's first staple crop—tobacco. Perfected in Virginia but grown and sold in nearly every southern territory and state, tobacco served as the South's main economic commodity for more than a century. But tobacco was a rough crop. It treated the land poorly, draining the soil of nutrients. Tobacco fields did not last forever; in fact, fields rarely survived more than four or five cycles of growth, which left them dried and barren, incapable of growing much more than patches of grass. Of course, tobacco is, and was, an addictive substance, but because of its violent pattern of growth, farmers had to move around, purchasing new lands, developing new methods of production, and even creating new fields through deforestation.

and westward expansion. Tobacco, then, was expensive to produce—and not only because of the ubiquitous use of slave labor. It required massive, temporary fields, large numbers of laborers, and constant movement.

Cotton was different, and it arrived at a time best suited for its success. Petit Gulf cotton, in particular, grew relatively quickly on cheap, widely available land. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1794, and the emergence of steam power three decades later, cotton became the common person's commodity, the product with which the United States could expand westward. This trend reflected Thomas Jefferson's vision of an idyllic republic of small farmers—a nation in control of its land, reaping the benefits of honest, free, and self-reliant work, a nation of families and farmers, expansion and settlement. But this all came at a violent cost. With the democratization of land ownership through Indian removal, federal auctions, readily available credit, and the seemingly universal dream of cotton's immediate profit, the South's lasting tradition of human bondage became normalized and engrained; by the 1860s, that very tradition, seen as the backbone of southern society and culture, would split the nation in two. The heyday of American slavery had arrived.

11.3 – Changes in Antebellum Slaveholding

The rise of cotton and the resulting upsurge in the United States' global position wed the South to slavery. Without slave labor there could be no Cotton Kingdom, no massive production of raw materials stretching across thousands of acres and worth millions of dollars. Indeed, cotton and plantation slavery grew alongside one another. The existence of slavery and its importance to the southern economy became the defining factor in what would be known as the Slave South. Although slaves had first arrived in North America in 1619, long before cotton became a profitable commodity, the use and purchase of slaves, the moralistic and economic justifications for the continuation of slavery, and even the urgency to protect the practice from extinction all received new life from the rise of cotton and the economic, social, and cultural growth spurt that accompanied its success.

The massive change in the South's enslaved population between 1790 and 1810 makes historical sense. During that time, the South advanced from a region of four states and one rather small territory to a region of six states (Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee) and three rather large territories (Mississippi, Louisiana,



Though taken after the end of slavery, these stereographs show various stages of cotton production. The fluffy white staple fiber is first extracted from the boll (a prickly, sharp protective capsule), after which the seed is separated in the ginning and taken to a storehouse. Unknown, Picking cotton in a great plantation in North Carolina, U.S.A., c. 1865-1903. Wikimedia.

and Orleans). By 1790, two years after the ratification of the Constitution, 654,121 slaves lived in the South—then just Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and the Southwest Territory (now Tennessee). Just twenty years later, in 1810, that number had increased to more than 1.1 million individuals in bondage.⁸ The free population of the South also nearly doubled over that period—from around 1.3 million in 1790 to more than 2.3 million in 1810.

The enslaved population of the South did not increase at any rapid rate over the next two decades, until the cotton boom took hold in the mid-1830s. Indeed, following the constitutional ban on the international slave trade in 1808, the number of slaves in the South increased by just 750,000 in twenty years. However, the demand for laborers to grow and harvest cotton led to a massive internal slave trade, and the migration of nearly nine hundred thousand people to cotton plantations. By the 1850s slavery became so endemic to the Cotton Belt that travelers, writers, and statisticians began referring to the area as the **Black Belt**, not only to describe the color of the rich land but also to describe the skin color of those forced to work its fields, line its docks, and move its products.

As cotton increasingly became the economic center of the South, **planters** expanded their social, political and economic dominance of the region. A planter was the head of a commercial farm and, by definition, owned at least twenty slaves. Although less than 4% of free white southerners were classified as planters in the 1860 census, this wealthy minority possessed more than half of all slaves in the antebellum South and controlled the majority of arable land, much of which was utilized for cotton, rice, sugar or tobacco cultivation. Wealthy planters and their families often lived in opulent mansions surrounded by pastoral beauty, while their enslaved field laborers lived and worked in separate areas under the supervision of white **overseers** and drivers. Planters were also disproportionately represented in local and state governments—as lawmakers, judges, coroners, and sheriffs—and yielded significant power in the federal government. In many ways, the southern elite came to represent the South's ambition and economic successes, even though very few people could hope to achieve planter status without inheriting land and slaves.

11.4 – Plantation Life

Between 50-75% of antebellum American slaves spent at least part of their lives living on plantations, and by mid-century, most of those plantations were dedicated to cotton cultivation. Field laborers working cotton usually lived in communal slave quarters and worked in “gangs,” transported by drivers to the cotton fields to work throughout daylight hours during growing and harvesting season. Because that season is relatively short, however, cotton workers were often relatively healthy and self-sufficient, particularly compared to slaves on sugar and rice plantations, which faced a more demanding cycle of farming and processing in more sickly coastal conditions.

Around one-quarter of plantation slaves were assigned to domestic service as valets, footmen, maids and cooks in the planters' “big houses,” or to such skilled work as ginning, blacksmithing, carpentry, sewing, cooking, spinning and weaving. Elderly and disabled slaves were also expected to work as long as they were capable, and might be tasked with tending household gardens, watching over children and the sick, feeding chickens, shucking corn or oysters, and assisting others. Regardless of the type of work slaves performed, they faced the constant threat of punishment for a variety of offenses or failures to satisfy requirements (ranging from ineptitude to laziness to outright resistance), usually in the form of whipping.

Perhaps the most important aspect of southern slavery during this so-called Cotton Revolution was the value placed on both the crop and the bodies of slaves cultivating it. Once the fever of the initial land rush subsided, land values became more static and credit became more restricted. For Mississippi land that in 1835 cost no more than \$600, a farmer or investor would have to shell out more than \$3,000 in 1850. By 1860, that same land, depending on its record

of production and location, could cost as much as \$100,000.⁹ In many cases, cotton growers, especially planters with large lots and enslaved workforces, put up slaves as collateral for funds dedicated to buying more land. If that land for one reason or another (weevils, a late freeze, or a simple lack of nutrients) did not produce a viable crop within a year, the planter would lose not only the new land but also the slaves he or she put up as a guarantee of payment.

So much capital went into the production of cotton, the expansion of land, and the maintenance of enslaved workforces that by the 1850s, nearly every ounce of credit offered by American banks dealt directly with some aspect of the cotton market. Millions of dollars changed hands. Slaves, the literal and figurative backbone of the southern cotton economy, served as the highest and most important expense for any successful cotton grower. Prices for slaves varied drastically, depending on skin color, sex, age, and location, both of purchase and birth. In Virginia in the 1820s, for example, a single female slave of childbearing age sold for an average of \$300; an unskilled man above age eighteen sold for around \$450; and boys and girls below age thirteen sold for between \$100 and \$150.¹⁰

By the 1840s and into the 1850s, prices had nearly doubled—a result of both standard inflation and the increasing importance of enslaved laborers in the cotton market. In 1845, “plow boys” under age eighteen sold for more than \$600 in some areas, measured at “five or six dollars per pound.”¹¹ “Prime field hands,” as they were called by merchants and traders, averaged \$1,600 at market by 1850, a figure that fell in line with the rising prices of the cotton they picked. For example, when cotton sat at 7¢ per pound in 1838, the average “field hand” cost around \$700. As the



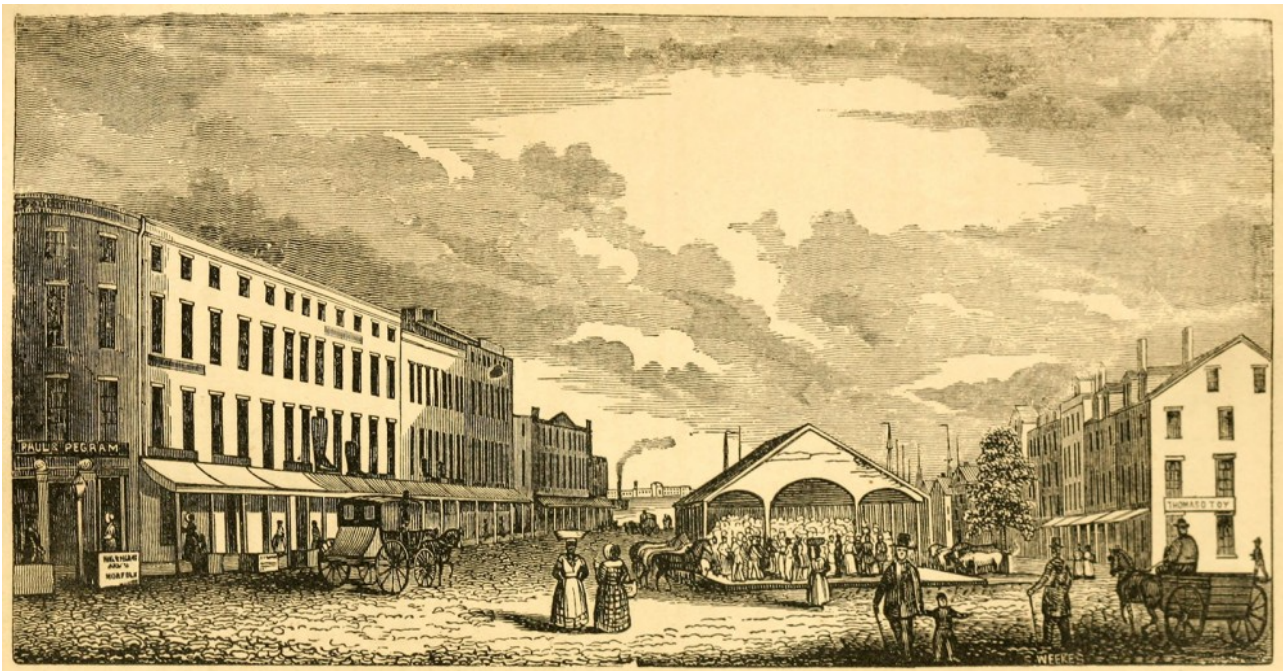
*The slave markets of the South varied in size and style, but the St. Louis Exchange in New Orleans was so frequently described it became a kind of representation for all southern slave markets. Indeed, the St. Louis Hotel rotunda was cemented in the literary imagination of nineteenth-century Americans after Harriet Beecher Stowe chose it as the site for the sale of Uncle Tom in her 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. After the ruin of the St. Clare plantation, Tom and his fellow slaves suddenly became property that had to be liquidated. Brought to New Orleans to be sold to the highest bidder, Tom found himself “[b]eneath a splendid dome” where “men of all nations” scurried about. J. M. Starling (engraver), *Sale of estates, pictures and slaves in the rotunda, New Orleans*, 1842. Wikimedia.*

price of cotton increased to 9¢, 10¢, then 11¢ per pound over the next ten years, the average cost of an enslaved male laborer likewise rose to \$775, \$900, and then more than \$1,600.¹² Adjusted for inflation, that amount is comparable to over \$52,000 in 2019.

The key is that cotton and slaves helped define each other, at least in the cotton South. By the 1850s, slavery and cotton had become so intertwined that the very idea of change—be it crop diversity, antislavery ideologies, economic diversification, or the increasingly staggering cost of purchasing and maintaining slaves—became **anathema** to the southern economic and cultural identity. Cotton had become the foundation of the southern economy. Indeed, it was the only major product, besides perhaps sugarcane in Louisiana, that the South could effectively market internationally. As a result, southern planters, politicians, merchants, and traders became more and more dedicated—some would say “obsessed”—to the means of its production: slaves and slavery. In 1834, Joseph Ingraham wrote that “to sell cotton in order to buy negroes—to make more cotton to buy more negroes, ‘ad infinitum,’ is the aim and direct tendency of all the operations of the thorough going cotton planter; his whole soul is wrapped up in the pursuit.”¹³ Twenty-three years later, such pursuit had taken a seemingly religious character, as James Stirling, an Englishman traveling through the South, observed, “[slaves] and cotton—cotton and [slaves]; these are the law and the prophets to the men of the South.”¹⁴

11.5 – Injury and Risk in the Cotton Industry

The Cotton Revolution was a time of capitalism, panic, stress, and competition. Planters expanded their lands, purchased slaves, extended lines of credit, and went into massive amounts of debt competing against newcomers, speculators, traders. A single bad crop could cost even the wealthiest planter their entire livelihood, along with those of their slaves and families. Although the cotton market was large and profitable, it was also fickle, risky, and cost-intensive. The more wealth one gained, the more land one needed to procure, which led to more slaves, more credit,



In southern cities like Norfolk, Virginia, markets sold not only vegetables, fruits, meats, and sundries, but also slaves. Enslaved men and women, like the two walking in the direct center, lived and labored next to free people of all races. S. Weeks, Market Square, Norfolk, from Henry Howe's Historical Collections of Virginia, 1845. Wikimedia.

and more expenses. The decades before the Civil War in the South, then, were not times of slow, simple tradition. They were times of high competition, high risk, and high reward, no matter where one stood in the social hierarchy.

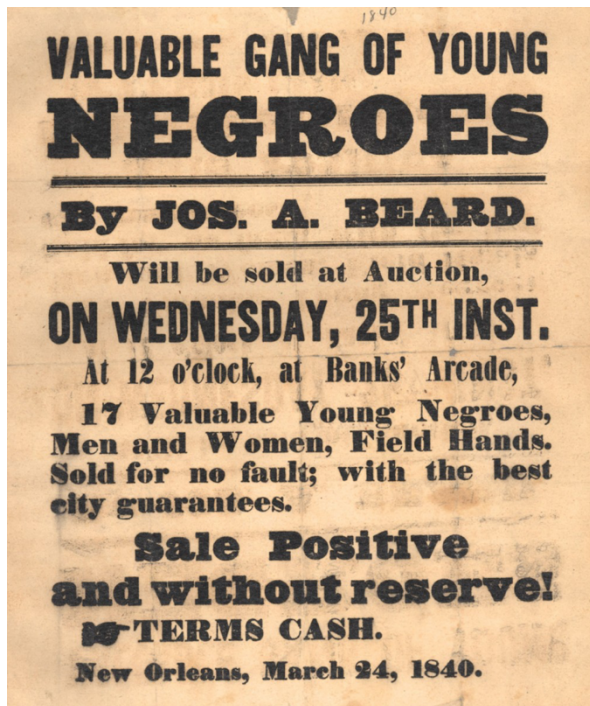
The most tragic, indeed horrifying, aspect of slavery was its potential for inhumanity. All slaves had memories, emotions, experiences, and thoughts. They saw their experiences in full color, felt the pain of the lash, the heat of the sun, and the heartbreak of loss, whether through death, betrayal, or sale. Slave communities developed in large part through a shared sense of suffering, common work, and even family ties. Slaves communicated with one another in the slave markets of the urban South and worked together to help their families, ease their loads, or simply frustrate their owners. Simple actions of resistance, such as breaking a hoe, running a wagon off the road, causing a delay in production due to injury, running away, or even becoming pregnant provided negotiation strategies shared by nearly all slaves in the agricultural workforce, a fostered a sense of unity that remained largely unsaid but was acted out daily.

With nearly four million individual slaves residing in the South in 1860, and nearly 2.5 million living in the Cotton Belt alone, the system of communication, resistance, and potential violence among slaves did not escape the minds of slaveholders across the region and the nation as a whole. As early as 1785, Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that slaves should be freed, but then they should be colonized to another country, where they could become an “independant [*sic*] people.” White people’s prejudices, and black people’s “recollections . . . of the injuries they have sustained” under slavery, would keep the two races from successfully living together in America. If freed slaves were not colonized, eventually there would be “convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”¹⁵

Southern writers, planters, farmers, merchants, and politicians expressed the same fears more than a half century later. “The South cannot recede,” declared an anonymous writer in an 1852 issue of the New Orleans–based *De Bow’s Review*. “She must fight for her slaves or against them. Even cowardice would not save her.”¹⁶ To many slaveholders

in the South, slavery was the saving grace of not only their own economic stability but also the maintenance of peace and security in everyday life. Much of pro-slavery ideology rested on the notion that slavery provided a sense of order, duty, and legitimacy to the lives of individual slaves, feelings that Africans and African Americans, it was said, could not otherwise experience. Without slavery, many white southerners believed, “blacks” (the word most often used for “slaves” in regular conversation) would become violent, aimless, and uncontrollable.

Some commentators recognized the problem in the 1850s as the internal slave trade—the legal trade of slaves between states, along rivers, and along the Atlantic coastline—increased. The more slaves one person owned, the more money it cost to maintain them and to extract product from their work. As planters and cotton growers expanded their lands and purchased more slaves, their expectations and productivity increased. But those increases came on the backs of slaves with heavier workloads, longer hours, and more intense punishments. “The great limitation to production is labor,” wrote one commentator in the *American Cotton Planter* in 1853. Many planters recognized this



The slave trade sold people — men, women, and children — like mere pieces of property, as seen in the advertisements produced during the era. 1840 poster advertising slaves for sale in New Orleans. Wikimedia.

limitation and worked night and day, sometimes literally, to find the furthest extent of that limit.¹⁷ According to some contemporary accounts, by the mid-1850s, the expected production of an individual slave in Mississippi's Cotton Belt had increased from between four and five bales (weighing about 500 pounds each) per day to between eight and ten bales per day, on average.¹⁸ Other (perhaps more reliable) sources, such as the account book of Buena Vista Plantation in Tensas Parish, Louisiana, list average daily production at between 300 and 500 pounds "per hand," with weekly averages ranging from 1,700 to 2,100 pounds "per hand." Cotton production "per hand" increased by 600 percent in Mississippi between 1820 and 1860.¹⁹ Each slave, then, was working longer, harder hours to keep up with his or her slaveholder's expected yield.

11.6 – The Urbanizing South

Much of the story of slavery and cotton lies in the rural areas where cotton actually grew. Slaves worked in the fields, and planters and farmers held reign over their plantations and farms. But the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s saw an extraordinary spike in urban growth across the South. For nearly a half century after the Revolution, the South existed as a series of plantations, county seats, and small towns, some connected by roads, others connected only by rivers, streams, and lakes. Cities certainly existed, but they served more as local ports than as regional, or national, commercial hubs. For example, New Orleans, then the capital of Louisiana (which entered the union in 1812), was home to just over 27,000 people in 1820; even with such a seemingly small population, it was the second-largest city in the South. Baltimore had more than 62,000 people in 1820.²⁰ Given the standard nineteenth-century measurement of an urban space (at least 2,500 people), the South had just ten cities in that year, one of which—Mobile, Alabama—contained only 2,672 individuals, nearly half of whom were enslaved.²¹

As late as the 1820s, southern life was predicated on a rural lifestyle—farming, laboring, acquiring land and slaves, and producing whatever that land and those slaves could produce. The market, often located in the nearest town or city, rarely stretched beyond state lines. Even in places like New Orleans, Charleston, and Norfolk, Virginia, which had active ports as early as the 1790s, shipments rarely, with some notable exceptions, left American waters or traveled farther than the closest port down the coast. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, American involvement in international trade was largely confined to ports in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and sometimes Baltimore—which loosely falls under the demographic category of the South—and imports dwarfed exports. In 1807, U.S. imports outnumbered exports by nearly \$100 million, and even as the Napoleonic Wars broke out in Europe, causing a drastic decrease in European production and trade, the United States still took in almost \$50 million more than it sent out.²²

Cotton changed much of this, at least with respect to the South. Before cotton, the South had few major ports, almost none of which actively maintained international trade routes or even domestic supply routes. Internal travel was difficult, especially on the waters of the Mississippi River, the main artery of the North American continent and the eventual gold mine of the South. With the Mississippi's strong current, deadly undertow, and constant sharp turns, sandbars, and subsystems, navigation was difficult and dangerous. The river promised a revolution in trade, transportation, and commerce only once the technology existed to handle its impossible bends and fight against its southbound current. By the 1820s and into the 1830s, small ships could successfully navigate their way to New Orleans from as far north as Memphis and even St. Louis but could not return upriver. Most often, traders and sailors scuttled their boats on landing in New Orleans, selling the wood for a quick profit or a journey home on a wagon or caravan.

The rise of cotton benefited from a change in transportation technology that aided and guided the growth of southern cotton into one of the world's leading commodities. In 1860, the port of New Orleans received and unloaded 3,500 steamboats, all focused entirely on internal trade. These boats carried around 160,000 tons of raw product that merchants, traders, and agents converted into nearly \$220 million in trade, all in a single year.²³ More than 80 percent of the yield was from cotton alone, the product of the same fields tilled, expanded, and sold over the preceding three

decades. Only now, in the 1840s and 1850s, could those fields, plantations, and farms simply load their products onto a boat and wait for the profit, credit, or supplies to return from downriver.

The explosion of steam power changed the face of the South, and indeed the nation as a whole. Everything that could be steam-powered was steam-powered, sometimes with mixed results. Cotton gins, wagons, grinders, looms, and baths, among countless others, all fell under the net of this new technology. Most importantly, the South's rivers, lakes, and bays were no longer barriers and hindrances to commerce. Quite the opposite; they had become the means by which commerce flowed, the roads of a modernizing society and region. And most importantly, the ability to use internal waterways connected the rural interior to increasingly urban ports, the sources of raw materials—cotton, tobacco, wheat, and so on—to an eager global market.

Gordon, pictured here, endured terrible brutality from his slaveholder before escaping to Union Army lines in 1863. He would become a soldier and help fight to end the violent system that produced the horrendous scars on his back. Matthew Brady, Gordon, 1863. Wikimedia.



11.7 – Life in Southern Cities

Between 1820 and 1860, quite a few southern towns experienced dramatic population growth, which paralleled the increase in cotton production and international trade to and from the South. The 27,176 people New Orleans claimed in 1820 expanded to more than 168,000 by 1860. In fact, in New Orleans, the population nearly quadrupled from 1830 to 1840 as the Cotton Revolution hit full stride. At the same time, Charleston's population nearly doubled, from 24,780 to 40,522; Richmond expanded threefold, growing from a town of 12,067 to a capital city of 37,910; and St. Louis experienced the largest increase of any city in the nation, expanding from a frontier town of 10,049 to a booming Mississippi River metropolis of 160,773.²⁴

The city and the field, the urban center and the rural space, were inextricably linked in the decades before the Civil War. And that relationship connected the region to a global market and community. As southern cities grew, they became more cosmopolitan, attracting types of people either unsuited for or uninterested in rural life. These people—merchants, skilled laborers, traders, sellers of all kinds and colors—brought rural goods to a market desperate for raw materials. Everyone, it seemed, had a place in the cotton trade. Agents (many of them [transients](#) from the North, and in some cases Europe) represented the interests of planters and cotton farmers in the cities, making connections with traders who in turn made deals with manufacturers in the Northeast, Liverpool, and Paris.

Among the more important aspects of southern urbanization was the development of a middle class in the urban centers, something that never fully developed in the more rural areas. In a very general sense, the rural South fell

under a two-class system in which a landowning elite controlled the politics and most of the capital, and a working poor survived on subsistence farming or basic, unskilled labor funded by the elite. The development of large urban centers founded on trade, and flush with transient populations of sailors, merchants, and travelers, gave rise to a large, highly-developed middle class in the South. Predicated on the idea of separation from those above and below them, middle-class men and women in the South thrived in the active, feverish rush of port city life.

Skilled craftsmen, merchants, traders, speculators, and store owners made up the southern middle class. Fashion trends no longer required an honest function, such as a broad-brimmed hat to protect one from the sun, knee-high boots for horse riding, and linen shirts and trousers to fight the heat of an unrelenting sun. Silk, cotton, and bright colors came into vogue, especially in coastal cities like New Orleans and Charleston; cravats, golden brooches, diamonds, and “the best stylings of Europe” became the standards of urban middle-class life in the South.²⁵ Neighbors, friends, and business partners formed and joined the same benevolent societies. These societies worked to aid the less fortunate in society, the orphans, the impoverished, the destitute. But in many cases these benevolent societies simply served as a way to keep other people out of middle-class circles, sustaining both wealth and social prestige within an insular, well-regulated community. Members and partners married one another’s sisters, stood as godparents for one another’s children, and served, when the time came, as executors of fellow members’ wills.

The city bred exclusivity. That was part of the rush, part of fever of the time. Built upon the cotton trade, funded by European and Northeastern merchants, markets, and manufactories, Southern cities became headquarters of the nation’s largest and most profitable commodities—cotton and slaves. And they welcomed the world with open checkbooks and open arms.

11.8 – Southern Slave Kinship



Eyre Crowe, *Slaves Waiting for Sale*, Richmond, Virginia, 1861. University of Virginia, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas*.

The South, more than perhaps any other region in the United States, had a great diversity of cultures and circumstances. The South still relied on the existence of slavery; and as a result, it was home to nearly four million enslaved people by 1860, amounting to more than 45 percent of the entire Southern population.²⁶ Naturally, these people, though fundamentally unfree in their movement, developed a culture all their own. They created [kinship networks](#), systems of (often illicit) trade, linguistic codes, religious congregations, and even benevolent and social aid organizations—all within the grip of slavery, a system dedicated to extraction rather than development, work and production rather than community and emotion.

The concept of family, more than anything else, played a crucial role in the daily lives of slaves. Family and kinship networks, and the benefits they carried, represented an institution through which slaves could piece together a sense of community, a sense of feeling and dedication, separate from the forced system of production that defined their daily lives. The creation of family units, distant relations, and communal traditions allowed slaves to maintain religious beliefs, ancient ancestral traditions, and even names passed down from generation to generation in a way that challenged the dehumanizing aspects of enslavement. Ideas passed between relatives on different plantations, names were given to children in honor of the deceased, and basic forms of love and devotion created a sense of individuality, an identity that assuaged the loneliness and desperation of enslaved life. Family defined how each plantation and each community functioned, grew, and labored.

African-born slaves who arrived in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had engaged in marriages—sometimes polygamous—with those of the same ethnic groups whenever possible. This practice allowed for the maintenance of cultural traditions, such as dialect, religion, naming practices, and even the rare practice of bodily scarring. In some more isolated parts of the South, such as Louisiana and coastal South Carolina, ethnic homogeneity thrived and, as a result, traditions and networks survived relatively unchanged for decades. One prominent example of this is the **Gullah** culture, which developed among slaves in the coastal “low country” of South Carolina and Georgia. In the eighteenth century, slaveholders in that region preferred slaves from the rice-growing regions of West Africa, particularly around Sierra Leone. Absentee slaveholders owning large, isolated rice plantations enabled their slaves to retain many cultural roots from West Africa, including languages, names, farming and craft traditions, and cuisine. Many descendants of Gullah and “Geechee” slaves (so named because many of them arrived in the low country via the Ogeechee River in Georgia) still maintain the creole language and cultural heritage of their African ancestors.

However, as the number of slaves arriving in the United States increased, and generations of American-born slaves overtook the original African-born populations, the practice of marriage, especially among members of the same ethnic group, or even simply the same plantation, became vital to the continuation of aging traditions. Marriage, though not a legal bond for slaves, served as the single most important aspect of cultural and identity formation, as it connected slaves to their own pasts, and gave some sense of protection for the future.²⁷ By the start of the Civil War, approximately two-thirds of slaves were members of households, each household averaging six people—mother, father, children, and often a grandparent, elderly aunt or uncle, and “in-laws.” Those who did not have a marriage bond, or even a nuclear family, still maintained family ties, most often living with a single parent, brother, sister, or grandparent.²⁸

Many slave marriages endured for many years, but the threat of disruption, often through sale, always loomed. As the internal slave trade increased following the constitutional ban on slave importation in 1808 and the rise of cotton in the 1830s and 1840s, slave families, especially those established prior to the slaves’ arrival in the United States, came under increased threat. Hundreds of thousands of marriages, many with children, fell victim to sale “downriver”—a



People of color were present throughout the American South, particularly in urban areas like Charleston and New Orleans. Some were relatively well off, like this *femme de couleur libre* who posed with her mixed-race child in front of her New Orleans home, maintaining a middling position between free whites and unfree blacks. Free woman of color with quadroon daughter; late-eighteenth-century collage painting, New Orleans. Wikimedia.

euphemism for the near constant flow of slave laborers down the Mississippi River to the developing cotton belt in the Southwest.²⁹ In fact, during the Cotton Revolution alone, between one-fifth and one-third of all slave marriages were broken up through sale or forced migration.

But this was not the only threat. Slaveholders recognized that marriage was, in the most basic and tragic sense, a privilege granted and defined by them for their slaves. And as a result, many slaveholders used slaves' marriages, or the threats thereto, to squeeze out more production, counteract disobedience, or simply make a gesture of power and superiority. Threats to family networks, marriages, and household stability did not stop with the death of a slaveholder. An enslaved couple could live their entire lives together, even having been born, raised, and married on the slave plantation, and, following the death of their owner, find themselves at opposite sides of the known world. It only took a single relative, [executor](#), creditor, or friend of the deceased to make a claim against the estate to cause the sale and dispersal of an entire slave community.

11.9 – Gender, Slavery, and Power Dynamics

Enslaved women were particularly vulnerable to the shifts of fate attached to slavery. In many cases, female slaves did the same work as men, spending the day—from sunup to sundown—in the fields picking and bundling cotton. In some rare cases, especially on larger plantations, planters tended to use women as house servants more than men, but this was not universal. In both cases, however, enslaved women's experiences were different than their male counterparts, husbands, and neighbors. Sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, and constant childrearing while continuing to work the fields all made life as a female slave more prone to disruption and uncertainty. **Harriet Jacobs**, an enslaved woman from North Carolina, chronicled her master's attempts to sexually abuse her in her narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Jacobs suggested that her successful attempts to resist sexual assault and her determination to love whom she pleased was "something akin to freedom."³⁰

But this "freedom," however empowering and contextual, did not cast a wide net. Many enslaved women had no choice concerning love, sex, and motherhood. On plantations, small farms, and even in cities, rape was ever-present. Like the splitting of families, slaveowners used sexual violence as a form of terrorism, a way to promote increased production, obedience, and power relations. In numerous contemporary accounts, particularly violent slaveowners forced men to witness the rape of their wives, daughters, and relatives, often as punishment, but occasionally as a sadistic expression of power and dominance.³¹

As property, enslaved women had no legal recourse for sexual assault, and society, by and large, did not see a crime in this type of violence. Some racist scientists claimed that whites could not physically rape Africans or African Americans, as the sexual organs of the distinct races were not compatible in that way. Some state laws supported this view, claiming that rape could only occur between either two white people or a black man and a white woman; all other cases fell under a silent acceptance.³²

The consequences of sexual assault, too, fell to the victim in the case of slaves. Pregnancies that resulted from rape did not always lead to a lighter workload for the mother. And if a slave acted out against a rapist—whether the assailant was her slaveholder, mistress, overseer, or any other white attacker—her actions were seen as crimes rather than desperate acts of survival. For example, a 19-year-old slave named Celia was raped repeatedly by her slaveholder in Callaway County, Missouri. Between 1850 and 1855, Robert Newsom raped Celia hundreds of times, producing two children and several miscarriages. Sick and desperate in the fall of 1855, Celia took a club and struck her master in the head, killing him. But instead of sympathy and aid, or even an honest attempt to understand and empathize, the community called for the execution of Celia. On November 16, 1855, after a trial of ten days, Celia, the 19-year-old rape victim and slave, was hanged for her crimes against her owner.³³



The women in this photograph are Selina Gray and two of her daughters. Gray was the enslaved housekeeper to Robert E. Lee. National Park Service.

Gender inequality did not always fall along the same lines as racial inequality. Southern society, especially in the age of cotton, deferred to white men under whom laws, social norms, and cultural practices were written, dictated, and maintained. White women and free women of color lived in a society dominated, in nearly every aspect, by men. Denied voting rights, women of all statuses and colors had no direct representation in the creation and discussion of law. Husbands, it was said, represented their wives because the public sphere was too violent, heated, and high-minded for women. Society expected women to serve as domestic foundations of the republic, gaining respectability through their work at home and in support of their husbands and children, away from the rough and boisterous realm of masculinity. In many cases, too, the law did not protect women the same way it protected men. In most states, marriage—an act expected of any self-respecting, reasonable woman of any class—effectively transferred all of a woman's property to her husband, forever, regardless of claim or command. Divorce existed as a legal procedure, but it was difficult for wives to initiate and often, if successful, ruined a wife's standing in society, and even led to well-known cases of suicide.³⁴

In many ways, though, the rhythms of daily life defied the standard narrative of the Old South. Slavery existed to dominate, yet slaves formed bonds, maintained traditions, and crafted new cultures. They fell in love, had children, and protected one another using basic intellect and the privileges granted them by their captors. Within slave communities, resilience and dedication often fostered cultural sustenance. Among the enslaved, women, and the impoverished-but-free, cultures thrived in ways that are difficult to see through the bales of cotton and the stacks of money sitting on the docks and in the counting houses of the South's urban centers.



The issue of emigration elicited different reactions from African Americans. Tens of thousands left the United States for Liberia, a map of which is shown here, to pursue greater freedoms and prosperity. Most emigrants did not experience such success, but Liberia continued to attract black settlers for decades. J. Ashmun, Map of the West Coast of Africa from Sierra Leone to Cape Palmas, including the colony of Liberia..., 1830. Library of Congress.

11.10 – Religion in the Slave South

Economic growth, violence, and exploitation coexisted and mutually reinforced evangelical Christianity in the South. The revivals the Second Great Awakening established the region's prevailing religious culture. Led by Methodists, Baptists, and to a lesser degree, Presbyterians, this intense period of religious regeneration swept the along southern backcountry. By the outbreak of the Civil War, the vast majority of southerners who affiliated with a religious denomination belonged to either the Baptist or Methodist faith.³⁵ Both churches in the South had briefly attacked slavery before transforming into some of the most vocal defenders of slavery and the southern social order.

White Southern ministers contended that God himself had selected Africans for bondage but also considered the evangelization of slaves to be one of their greatest callings.³⁶ Missionary efforts among southern slaves largely succeeded and Protestantism spread rapidly among African Americans, leading to a proliferation of biracial congregations and prominent independent black churches. Some black and white southerners forged positive and rewarding biracial connections; however, more often, black and white southerners described strained or superficial religious relationships.

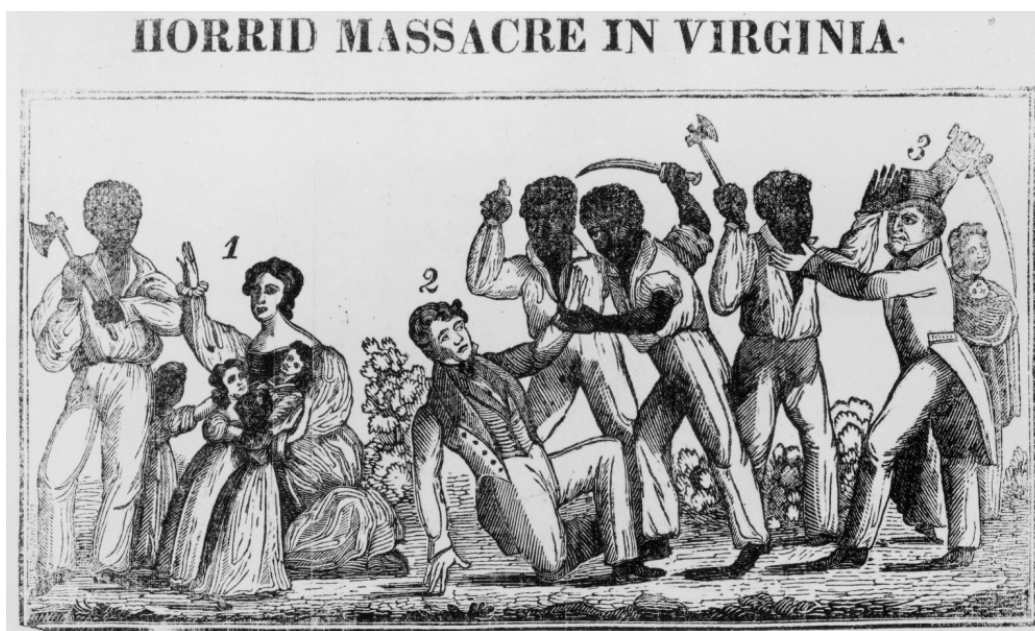
As the institution of slavery hardened racism in the South, relationships between missionaries and Native Americans transformed as well. Missionaries of all denominations were among the first to represent themselves as “pillars of white authority.” After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, as plantation culture expanded into the Deep South, mission work became a crucial element of Christian expansion. Frontier mission schools carried a continual flow of Christian influence into Native American communities. Some missionaries learned indigenous languages, but many more worked to prevent indigenous children from speaking their native tongues, insisting on English for Christian understanding. By the late 1830s, missionaries in the South preached a pro-slavery theology that emphasized

obedience to masters, the biblical basis of racial slavery via the [curse of Ham](#), and the “civilizing” paternalism of slave owners to congregations of all races.

Slaves most commonly received Christian instruction from white preachers or masters, whose religious message typically stressed slave subservience. Anti-literacy laws ensured that most slaves would be unable to read the Bible in its entirety and thus could not acquaint themselves with such inspirational stories as Moses delivering the Israelites out of slavery in the Old Testament. Contradictions between God’s Word and slaveholders’ cruelty did not pass unnoticed by many enslaved African Americans. As former slave William Wells Brown declared, “slaveholders hide themselves behind the Church,” adding that “a more praying, preaching, psalm-singing people cannot be found than the slaveholders of the South.”³⁷

Many slaves chose to create and practice their own versions of Christianity that typically incorporated aspects of traditional African religions with limited input from the white community. **Nat Turner**, the leader of the nation’s only sustained slave revolt, found inspiration from religion early in his life. Adopting an austere Christian lifestyle during his adolescence, Turner claimed to have been visited by “spirits” during his twenties and considered himself something of a prophet. He claimed to have had visions, in which he was called on to do the work of God, leading some contemporaries (as well as historians) to question his sanity.³⁸

This woodcut captured the terror felt by white southerners in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion. Fearful white reactionaries killed hundreds of enslaved people—most of whom were unconnected to the rebellion—and the state created stricter, more limiting laws concerning slavery. African American Intellectual History Society.



Inspired by his faith, Turner instigated the deadliest slave rebellion in the antebellum South. On the morning of August 22, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, Nat Turner and six collaborators attempted to free the region’s enslaved population. Turner initiated the violence by killing his slaveholder with an ax blow to the head. By the end of the day, Turner and his band, which had grown to over fifty men, killed fifty-seven white men, women, and children on eleven farms. By the next day, the local militia and white residents had captured or killed all of the participants except Turner, who hid for a number of weeks in nearby woods before being captured and executed. The white terror that followed Nat Turner’s rebellion led to an increase of anti-literacy laws, as well as the dissolution of black-led congregations.

11.11 – Southern Gender Roles and Traditions of Honor

Evangelical religion also shaped understandings of what it meant to be a southern man or a southern woman. Southern manhood was largely shaped by an obsession with masculine honor, whereas southern womanhood centered on expectations of sexual virtue or purity. Honor prioritized the public recognition of white masculine claims to reputation and authority. Southern men developed a code to ritualize their interactions with each other and to perform their expectations of honor. This code structured language and behavior and was designed to minimize conflict. But when conflict did arise, the code also provided rituals that would reduce the resulting violence. The formal duel exemplified the code in action.

If two men could not settle a dispute through the arbitration of their friends, they would exchange pistol shots to prove their equal honor status. Duelists arranged a secluded meeting, chose from a set of deadly weapons, and risked their lives as they clashed with swords or fired pistols at one another. Some of the most illustrious men in American history participated in a duel at some point during their lives, including President Andrew Jackson, Vice President Aaron Burr, and U.S. senators Henry Clay and Thomas Hart Benton. In all but Burr's case, dueling helped elevate these men to prominence. Violence among the lower classes, especially those in the backcountry, involved fistfights and shoot-outs. Tactics included the sharpening of fingernails and filing of teeth into razor-sharp points, which would be used to gouge eyes and bite off ears and noses. In a duel, a gentleman achieved recognition by risking his life rather than killing his opponent, whereas those involved in rough-and-tumble fighting achieved victory through maiming their opponent.

The legal system was partially to blame for the prevalence of violence in the Old South. Although states and territories had laws against murder, rape, and various other forms of violence (including specific laws against dueling), upper-class southerners were rarely prosecuted, and juries often acquitted the accused. Despite the fact that hundreds of duelists fought and killed one another, there is little evidence that many duelists faced prosecution, and only one, Timothy Bennett (of Belleville, Illinois), was ever executed for that crime. By contrast, prosecutors routinely sought cases against lower-class southerners, who were found guilty in greater numbers than their wealthier counterparts.

The southern emphasis on honor affected women as well. While southern men worked to maintain their sense of masculinity; so too southern women cultivated a sense of femininity. Femininity in the South was intimately tied to the domestic sphere, even more so than for women in the North. The cult of domesticity strictly limited the ability of wealthy southern women to engage in public life. While northern women began to organize reform societies, southern women remained bound to the home, where they were instructed to cultivate their families' religious sensibility and manage their household. Managing the household was not easy work, however. For women on large plantations, managing the household would include directing a large bureaucracy of potentially rebellious slaves. For most southern women who did not live on plantations, managing the household included nearly constant work in keeping families clean, fed, and well-behaved. On top of these duties, many southern women were required to help with agricultural tasks.

Female labor was an important aspect of the southern economy, but the social position of women in southern culture was understood not through economic labor but rather through moral virtue. While men fought to get ahead in the turbulent world of the cotton boom, women were instructed to offer a calming, moralizing influence on husbands and children. The home was to be a place of quiet respite and spiritual solace. Under the guidance of a virtuous woman, the southern home would foster the values required for economic success and cultural refinement.

Female virtue came to be understood largely as a euphemism for sexual purity, and southern culture, southern law, and southern violence largely centered on protecting that virtue of sexual purity from any possible imagined threat. In a world saturated with the sexual exploitation of black women, southerners developed a paranoid obsession with

protecting the sexual purity of white women. Black men were presented as an insatiable sexual threat, and the “myth of the black rapist” would remain prominent in American society for generations to come. Racial systems of violence and domination were wielded with crushing intensity for generations, all in the name of keeping white womanhood as pure as the cotton that anchored southern society.

11.12 – Conclusion

Cotton recreated the antebellum South. The wildly profitable commodity opened a previously closed society to the grandeur, the profits, the exploitation, and the social dimensions of a larger, more connected, global community. In this way, the South, and the world, benefited from the Cotton Revolution and the urban growth it sparked, but slavery remained, and the internal slave trade grew to untold heights as the 1860s approached. Politics, race relations, and the burden of slavery continued beneath the roar of steamboats, [countinghouses](#), and the exchange of goods. Underneath it all, many questions remained—chief among them, what to do if slavery somehow came under threat.

11.13 – Reference Material

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