

Setting the Stage – Origins of Slavery, Sectionalism, and the “Old South”

Colonial Slavery and the Early Republic

- I. Slavery in the British American colonies
 - a. Sugar planters in the Caribbean (e.g. Barbados and Jamaica) began importing enslaved Africans in the 17th century.
 - i. Historian Alan Taylor described the West Indies as “the great economic engine of the British empire”.
 - ii. The combination of sugar and slavery fueled the rapid expansion of a transatlantic trading network. By 1700 a complex network of lucrative trade routes interconnected the economies of the West Indies, the mainland colonies, England, and Africa.
 - iii. West Indian planters devoted almost all their land to cultivating sugar cane. They found it less expensive to import lumber, fish, livestock, and grain from the New England and Middle Colonies.
 - b. **Tobacco** planting in the Chesapeake
 - i. Tobacco saved the Chesapeake colonies (including Virginia and Maryland). As demand in England increased, tobacco production soared.
 - ii. Tobacco required a large supply of inexpensive labor. The spread of tobacco cultivation beyond the Chesapeake colonies created additional demand for slave labor.
 - c. In 1662, Virginia changed its laws regarding slavery; from that point, slavery became a lifelong, **inheritable status**. As such, the value of slaves increased over time.
 - d. Turning Point – **Bacon’s Rebellion** (1676)
 - i. Bacon’s Rebellion exposed tensions between the former indentured servants, who were poor, and the gentry (the genteel class of planters), who were rich.
 - ii. As planters became more wary of their former indentured servants, they turned to enslaved Africans as a more reliable and cost-effective source of labor.
 - iii. The number of enslaved Africans in Virginia rose from 300 in 1650 to 150,000 or 40 percent of the colony’s 1750 population.
 - e. The number of imported enslaved Africans to North America jumped from 10,000 in the seventeenth century to almost 400,000 in the eighteenth century.
 - i. Although slavery was legal in all 13 colonies, about 90% of enslaved Africans lived and worked in the South.
 - ii. Slaves were able to maintain cultural practices brought from Africa.
 - f. Social factors in the Southern colonies
 - i. A small but powerful group of wealthy planters dominated Southern society.
 - ii. Although the majority of white families in the South did not own slaves, they did aspire to become slave owners.
 - iii. Impoverished whites felt superior to enslaved whites this providing support for the slave system.
 - iv. Few seventeenth and eighteenth-century white colonists questioned human bondage as morally unacceptable.
 1. The **Quakers** of Pennsylvania were pacifists who opposed slavery and were among America’s first white abolitionists.
 - v. Resistance to slavery proved to be futile. Following the **Stono Rebellion** (1739), the South Carolina legislature enacted strict laws prohibiting slaves from assembling in groups, earning money, and learning to read.
- II. The Constitution and Slavery
 - a. Following the American Revolution, as the Framers met at the **Constitutional Convention** in Philadelphia, a “First Emancipation” was already taking place in the North. At that time, Northern states had eliminated or were gradually eliminating slavery.

- i. In addition, the Confederation Congress (under the Articles of Confederation, the U.S.'s first constitution) had already excluded slavery from the Northwest Territory through the **Northwest Ordinance of 1787**.
 - ii. As a result, slavery was becoming a distinctive Southern institution.
- b. The **Three-Fifths Compromise** –
 - i. The Constitution did not actually use the words “slave” or “slavery”. Afraid of alienating the Southern states, the Framers agreed to the Three-Fifths Compromise whereby slaves (euphemistically called “other persons”) were treated as three-fifths of a person for purposes of taxation and representation.
 - ii. This gave the Southern states an enlarged vote in the House of Representatives.
- c. The **Slave Trade Clause** –
 - i. Many delegates abhorred the slave trade and wanted to immediately abolish it. Delegates from South Carolina and Georgia ignored their moral arguments and pointed out that they needed to continue the slave trade in order to replenish slaves evacuated by the British during the Revolutionary War.
 - ii. Led by James Madison, pragmatic delegates wanted to avoid a dispute with the South that would fracture the convention.
 - 1. “Great as the evil is”, Madison wrote, “a dismemberment of the union would be worse”.
 - iii. The convention resolved the issue by agreeing to a compromise in which Congress would not interfere with the slave trade until 1808.

III. States’ Rights in the Early Republic

- a. During the administration of John Adams (1791-1801), Adams’ party, the Federalists, pushed a series of laws known as the Alien and Sedition Acts to punish the Democratic-Republicans.
 - i. Democratic-Republicans Thomas Jefferson and James Madison believed that the Alien and Sedition Act embodied a threat to individual liberties caused by unchecked Federalist power.
 - 1. They anonymously authored a series of resolutions that were approved by the Kentucky and Virginia legislatures. They denounced the Alien and Sedition Acts as “alarming infractions” of the First Amendment.
 - 2. The **Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions** advanced a states’ rights doctrine asserting that the Constitution arose as a compact among sovereign states. The states therefore retained the power to challenge and, if necessary, nullify federal laws.
- b. The other states did not support the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions. Nonetheless, Jefferson and Madison successfully turned public opinion against the Federalists.
 - i. The immediate dispute over the Alien and Sedition acts faded when the laws expired in 1801. However, their states’ rights argument had a deep and lasting impact.
 - 1. During the 1830s, John C. Calhoun promoted the theory of nullification, the idea that a state had the right to veto a federal law it considered unconstitutional.
 - 2. Criticized as “a recipe for disunion”, the doctrine of states’ rights played an important role in causing the Civil War.

Slavery in Antebellum Politics

I. The Missouri Compromise

- a. A debate over the extension of slavery into the Louisiana Territory sparked a divisive spirit of sectionalism.
 - i. When George Washington took office in 1789, the North and South were roughly equal in wealth and population. However, with each passing decade the North steadily outgained the South in

population growth. By 1819, the free states in the North had 105 representatives in the House compared with just 81 representatives for the South.

- ii. While the North controlled a solid majority of votes in the House, the Senate was evenly but precariously balanced between 11 free and 11 slave states.
- b. **Compromise – “A Sacred Pact”**
- i. In 1819, the territory of Missouri applied for statehood as a slave state. The Northern controlled House of Representatives responded by passing the **Tallmadge Amendment** prohibiting the further introduction of slaves into Missouri and providing for the gradual emancipation of the 10,000 slaves already in the territory.
 - ii. Outraged Southerners believed that the Tallmadge Amendment threatened the future of the plantation system while also implying an attack on the Southern way of life. Although the Senate rejected the Tallmadge Amendment, the issue of extending slavery into the western territories ignited a passionate sectional debate that shattered the harmony of the Era of Good Feelings.
 - iii. House Speaker Henry Clay promoted a compromise that settled the dispute by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. In addition, the Missouri Compromise prohibited slavery in the remaining portion of the Louisiana Purchase north of latitude **36°30’**.
 1. Many in the North viewed the 36°30’ line as a “sacred pact” that should never be broken.
- c. **Sectional tension – “A Fire Bell in the Night”**
- i. Before the Missouri controversy many Southern leaders acknowledged slavery as a “necessary evil” inherited from their colonial ancestors. But a new generation of Southern leaders increasingly began to defend slavery as a positive good.
 - ii. While Southerners defended slavery, many in the North began to fear that the institution posed a threat to free labor and industrial expansion. A small but vocal group of critics also began to question the morality of slavery.
 - iii. The Missouri Compromise temporarily defused the political crisis over slavery. However, the debate foreshadowed the sectional controversies that dominated American political life in the 1840s and 1850s. The Congressional power struggle that produced the Missouri Compromise create “the North” and “the South” as rival political sections.
 - iv. An alarmed Thomas Jefferson sensed the future peril when he wrote, “This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror.”

II. The Nullification Crisis

- a. The **Tariff of Abominations** –
 - i. Tariffs traditionally served the dual purposes of raising revenue and protecting American industry from European competition. In 1828, Congress passed a protective tariff that pushed rates to over 50% of the value of imports.
 - ii. Led by South Carolina, Southern states branded the hated law the “Tariff of Abominations”. Planters argued that while the industrial Northeast flourished, the South was forced to sell its cotton in an unprotected world market and buy imported goods at exorbitant rates.
- b. John C. Calhoun and the doctrine of Nullification –
 - i. Vice President **John C. Calhoun** responded to the tariff by writing the “South Carolina Exposition and Protest”. He drew upon states’ rights arguments first formulated by Jefferson and Madison in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions.
 - ii. Insisting that the Union was a compact of sovereign states, Calhoun argued that when a federal law exceeded the delegated powers of Congress, a state or states could declare the law “null and void” within their own borders.
- c. The Force Bill –

- i. The South Carolina legislature adopted an ordinance of nullification repudiating the tariff. President Andrew Jackson angrily denounced nullification as treason.
 - 1. Tied to their economic concerns were fears about national attitudes toward slavery. If Congress had the power to impose tariffs that were harmful to some states, South Carolinians asked, what would prevent it from enacting legislation to emancipate their slaves?
 - ii. Jackson demanded that Congress pass a “Force Bill” authorizing him to use the army to enforce federal laws in South Carolina.
 - iii. Henry Clay proposed a new compromise tariff and South Carolina rescinded its nullification ordinance.
- d. Nullification and **Secession** –
- i. Calhoun did not advocate secession. Instead, he saw nullification as a viable option that would prevent disunion.
 - ii. Jackson may have sensed that he had not gone far enough in suppressing nullification. On his deathbed in 1845 he bitterly regretted that he had not executed Calhoun for treason.
 - 1. Jackson’s intuition proved to be prescient. During the 1850s, South Carolina “**fire eaters**” abandoned nullification and increasingly embraced the doctrine of secession as the best way to remedy their grievances.

The Old South, 1800-1848

I. **The Cotton Gin** –

- a. During the late 1700s, new technological advances revolutionized the textile industry in Great Britain. The new inventions enabled British factories to turn cotton fibers into a cloth that was cooler and more comfortable than wool. These advances created a seemingly insatiable demand for raw cotton.
- b. Southern farms could not meet the demand for raw cotton because of the difficulty of separating the fluffy cotton fiber from its sticky seeds. It required a full day for one laborer to remove the seeds from a pound of cotton.
- c. In 1793, **Eli Whitney** invented a machine that could perform the tedious chore of separating the cotton fiber from its sticky seeds. His cotton engine or “gin” enabled enslaved people to clean fifty times as much cotton as could be done by hand.
 - i. The cotton gin revolutionized the Southern economy. Cotton production soared from just 9,000 bales in 1791 to 987,000 in 1831 and 4 million in 1860. (Each bale contained 500 pounds of cotton!)

II. **King Cotton** –

- a. Cotton quickly became America’s most valuable cash crop. By the 1840s, cotton production accounted for over half the value of all American exports.
- b. The excessive cultivation of tobacco had depleted the soil in the Chesapeake states. Ambitious planters looked south and west for fertile new land. They found them in a vast region of fertile land stretching from Georgia to Louisiana. Known as the **black belt** because of its rich black soil, this region soon produced two-thirds of the world’s supply of cotton. Proud Southern planters confidently boasted, “Cotton is King”.
- c. Impact of the cotton economy –
 - i. Cotton irrevocably altered the South’s attitude toward slavery. As the South became committed to a one-crop cotton economy, it also became committed to slavery. Of the 2.5 million slaves engaged in agriculture in 1850, 75% worked at cotton production.
 - ii. The presence of slavery discouraged immigrants from moving to the South. In 1860 just 4.4 percent of the Southern population was foreign-born. Meanwhile, between 1844 and 1854 over 3 million European immigrants flooded into eastern seaports.

- iii. As the South devoted more and more resources to growing cotton, the region lagged behind the North in trade and manufacturing. Southern cotton was primarily exported in Northern vessels.
 - 1. While Northern factories produced manufactured goods at an ever-increasing rate, Southern farmers purchased finished goods under a credit system that kept them in debt.
 - 2. The South's commitment to growing cotton slowed urban growth. With the exception of New Orleans and Charleston, the South had few urban centers. Instead, most Southerners lived on widely dispersed farms and plantations.
- iv. Taken together, the South's reliance upon cotton and slaves and its slow rate of industrialization and urbanization removed it from the dynamic innovations taking place in the North and West. As these forces of change accelerated, the South became committed to preserving and defending its distinctive regional identity.

III. White Society in the Old South

a. **Planters** –

- i. Planters comprised just 4% of the South's adult white male population. This small but powerful group owned more than half of all the slaves and harvested most of the region's cotton and tobacco.
- ii. A wealthy elite, planters dominated Southern economic and social life. The image of a paternalistic planter who lived in a white-columned mansion came to embody a distinctive way of life that valued tradition, honor, and genteel manners.

b. **Yeoman farmers** –

- i. The majority of white families in the antebellum South were independent yeoman farmers who owned few, if any, slaves.
- ii. Although the South's numerical majority, yeoman farmers did not set the region's political and social tone. Instead, they deferred to the large planters since many aspired to become large planters themselves.

c. **Poor whites** –

- i. As many as 25 to 40 percent of white Southerners were unskilled laborers who owned no land and no slaves. These "poor whites" often lived in the backwoods where they scratched out a meager living doing odd jobs.
- ii. Although they did not own slaves and frequently resented the aristocratic planters, poor whites nonetheless supported the South's biracial social structure. The existence of slavery enabled even the most impoverished white to feel superior to black people.
 - 1. Poor whites, yeoman farmers, and planters all shared a sense of white supremacy that bridged class distinctions.

IV. Aspects of Life Among Slaves in the Old South

a. **Domestic slave trade** –

- i. Congress outlawed the African slave trade in 1808. The spread of cotton plantations into the black belt caused a major change in the movement and distribution of slavery.
 - 1. In 1790, planters in Virginia and Maryland owned 56 percent of all enslaved Africans.
 - 2. Between 1800 and 1860, tobacco-depleted Chesapeake planters sold about one million slaves to planters in a region stretching from western Georgia to eastern Texas known as the Deep South.
- ii. The domestic slave trade uprooted countless families. Despite forced separation and harsh living conditions, slaves maintained strong kinship networks while creating a distinct African American culture.
 - 1. Religion played a particularly important role. For example, spiritual songs enabled slaves to express their sorrows, joys, and hopes for a better life.

b. **Resistance** –

- i. Enslaved people tried to escape when they could. For example, in 1841, slaves being shipped from Norfolk, Virginia, to New Orleans forced the captain to sail to the Bahamas where Britain had abolished slavery in 1833.
- ii. Slave revolts were infrequent. With the exception of **Nat Turner's insurrection** in 1831, vigilant planters successfully suppressed slave rebellions.
 - 1. Many slaves retaliated against their masters by slowing the pace of work, damaging equipment, and feigning illness.

c. **Free Blacks** –

- i. All blacks were not slaves. By 1860, as many as 250,000 free blacks lived in the South. Many of these "free persons of color" were the descendants of men and women who had been freed by idealistic owners following the Revolutionary War. Others successfully purchased their freedom.
- ii. Free blacks occupied a precarious position in Southern society. For example, they were often subject to discriminatory laws that denied them property rights and forbade them from working in certain professions and testifying against whites in court.

V. Attitudes Toward Slavery in the Old South

a. Slavery as a "Necessary Evil"

- i. During the late 1700s, many Southern leaders referred to slavery as a "necessary evil" inherited from their colonial past.
- ii. Leading Southern statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe advocated a policy of gradually emancipating slaves while at the same time compensating their owners.

b. Slavery as a "Positive Good"

- i. During the early 1830s slaveholders advanced a systematic argument to justify what they called "our **peculiar institution**." The word "peculiar" did not mean odd or strange. Instead, it referred to something distinctive or characteristic of the Southern way of life.
- ii. First expressed by John C. Calhoun, the "positive good" argument insisted that slaves benefitted from a benign and paternalistic institution. They argued that well-cared-for slaves actually had lives that were as good or better than the lives of so-called wage slaves working in textile mills in New England.
- iii. Proslavery advocates pointed to citations in the Bible condoning slavery. They also used "scientific" theories of their day to create a false image of blacks as inferior people who required paternal white guardianship.
- iv. Planters warned that slavery was vital to the South's and to the nation's economy. They vowed to resist any attempt to interfere with their "peculiar institution."