Chapter 10: The South and Slavery, 1790s–1850s

Chapter Review

1. AMERICAN COMMUNITIES Cotton Communities in the Old Southwest

New lands in the Old Southwest offered opportunities for planters but also caused many tensions through the forcible relocation of slaves to the newly settled territories. Both planters and slaves were separated from their families and support networks with the move to the Old Southwest.

1. KING COTTON AND SOUTHERN EXPANSION

The labor of African American slaves was used to grow all of the South’s export crops during the colonial period. Cotton’s economic success and the reliance on the slave system that produced it created a unique culture very different from that of the North.

a. Cotton and Expansion into the Old Southwest

Growing cotton became profitable in 1793 when Eli Whitney, with the assistance of Catherine Greene, invented the cotton gin. The cotton gin mechanically removed the seeds from cotton fibers, a process that had been extremely time and labor intensive before. Georgia and South Carolina begin growing large amounts of cotton and soon other southern states joined suit. Because cotton rapidly depletes the soil where it is grown, the South’s increasing dependence on cotton motivated westward movement and settlement in the Old Southwest where fresh land could be found.

b. Slavery the Mainspring—Again

The export of cotton from the South was greatly responsible for the economic development of the North. By the start of the Civil War, cotton made up nearly 60 percent of American exports. Because mercantile services associated with the cotton industry were under Northern control, such as insurance and shipping, the North grew rich from the South’s slave system as well.

c. A Slave Society in a Changing World

Although slavery sentiments had been waning in the South, the invention of the cotton gin and the sudden profitability of cotton changed many peoples’ perceptions of the peculiar institution. Many southerners came to believe that slavery was a necessary economic institution. Outside of the South, anti-slavery sentiment was growing.

d. The Internal Slave Trade

The increase in cotton growth resulted in a corresponding increase in the internal slave trade. Expanding cotton growing regions in the Old Southwest required more slaves. Since the trans-Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in the early nineteenth century, new slaves could be purchased only from plantation owners in the Upper South. Many slave owners who sold slaves to the Old Southwest, therefore separating them from their families, did so for profit, not out of necessity.

1. THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVIVAL

African Americans in the antebellum South created a culture of their own that was both long lasting and far-reaching. African American communities created their own values, attitudes and their own form of Christianity. These were instrumental in sustaining a culture of endurance and resistance.

a. The Maturation of the American Slave System

On January 1, 1808 the United States ended its participation in the international slave trade. From then on, the growth of the slave system would rely entirely on natural increase. Because plantation agriculture concentrated slaves in small areas, nearly 75 percent of all slaves in the United States lived on plantations. Although slave families were frequently forcibly separated due to sale, the extended family and the African American church helped slaves survive the cruelty of slavery.

b. The Price of Survival

The American South had the distinction of being the only slave society that grew by natural increase rather than by the importation of new slaves from Africa. This natural increase was due to the high level of fertility among African American women. Pregnant slaves were undernourished and overworked which resulted in an infant mortality rate for slave children at twice the rate of white children. Poor housing, poor diet, and constant heavy work put slaves at much higher risk for sickness and death than their white counterparts.

c. From Cradle to Grave

White Southern slave owners claimed that the institution of slavery was more humane than the Northern wage labor system because slaves were fed, clothed, and housed by their masters from birth until death. Slave children lived with their mothers where they learned important skills for coping with the slave system like apparent acquiescence in white demands, sabotage, and petty theft. Black children did not receive any formal schooling and at age twelve were considered full grown and able to begin work in the fields.

d. Field Work and the Gang System of Labor

Three quarters of all slaves were employed in field labor because cotton was a crop that needed nearly year round labor. Work was hot and monotonous. Cotton growing was hard work requiring planting, plowing, weeding, and finally pickling the ripe cotton. Good slaves were expected to pick 150 pounds of cotton per day during the harvest season. Poor diet and extremely heavy labor often undermined the health of slaves.

e. House Servants

As profits from cotton made planters increasingly wealthy, many plantation owners decided to use a small portion of the plantation’s slaves as domestic servants. Although house work was less demanding than field work and they were often better fed and clothed than their field working counterparts, domestic service had its drawbacks as well. The constant presence of and supervision by white people and the practice of domestic servants living in the plantation home with their masters made domestic service stressful and separated house slaves from their families.

f. Artisans and Skilled Workers

A small percentage of slaves were skilled laborers. Such professions included carpenters, blacksmiths, mechanics, seamstresses, and weavers. Black people also worked as lumberjacks, deck hands, and miners. But because slaves were the property of their masters, any wages that they earned belonged to their masters as well. Slaves made up the greatest portion of the laboring classes in large cities. Urban centers offered slaves and free blacks the greatest opportunities to perform skilled occupations.

g. Slave Families

Despite the cruel system of slavery, families remained important in African American culture. Although no southern state formally recognized slave marriages, masters encouraged such unions in order to perpetuate the natural increase of the slave system. Marriage relations were different among slaves than they were among whites. Slave marriages were more equal than white marriages because both the husband and wife were powerless within the slave system. The separation of families due to the internal slave trade was both feared and common. To cope with this uncertainty, slaves created an extended family system where children referred to other children as “brother” or “sister” and older slaves as “aunt” or “uncle.”

1. FREEDOM AND RESISTANCE

Slaves rarely escaped the confines of slavery. Of the approximately 1,000 who did, almost all successful escapes were from the Upper South. Slaves in the Lower South or the Southwest were simply too far from free states for an escape to be feasible.

a. African American Religion

Black Christianity was an enabling religion and it allowed slaves to survive. African Americans found that spiritual freedom could not be destroyed by whites. African Americans in the nineteenth century reshaped Christianity into a distinctive faith suited to their own needs by using conjurers, drumming, singing and dancing. Christianity became a powerful medium for African Americans to express their desires for justice and freedom. Conversely, many southerners expected Christianity to make their slaves loyal and obedient servants. African American religious practices can best be characterized as a collective experience full of enthusiasm, emotion, and protest.

b. Other Forms of Resistance

White Southerners employed all means possible to prevent slave escapes. Despite these efforts, slaves continued to run away and to assist others in doing the same. “Running away nearby” was a relatively common practice where slaves fled their plantation but remained nearby. This was a form of rebellion and negotiation on the part of otherwise powerless slaves.

c. Slave Revolts

The ultimate revolt to slavery was outright revolt. In 1831 Nat Turner started a slave rebellion in which several white people were killed. Turner began planning his revolt after a religious vision. On the night of August 20, 1831, Turner and five other slaves struck. Moving from plantation to plantation and killing fifty-five whites in all, the rebelling slaves grew to a group of sixty by the morning of August 21 before they fled a group of armed white men. In the wake of the revolt more than forty blacks were executed, including Nat Turner. This revolt, and others, greatly increased fears among Southern whites about the possibility of a widespread rebellion. Only the use of force and coercion could keep African Americans enslaved.

d. Free African Americans

By 1860, nearly 250,000 free blacks lived in the South. Most free blacks lived in the countryside of the Upper South where they worked as farm laborers or as tenant farmers. Major southern cities, like Charleston and Savannah, were home to vibrant communities of free African Americans. These communities formed their own churches and social organizations. Throughout the 1830s Southern state legislatures restricted African Americans freedoms through the passage of “black codes.” The result of these codes was that aside from the right to own property, free blacks had no civil rights.

1. THE WHITE MAJORITY

Although two thirds of Southerners did not own slaves, the plantation elite dominated both the social and political life of the region. Poor whites and small farmers occupied less productive rural lands not in use under the plantation agriculture system. Middle class whites lived in southern cities.

a. Poor White People

Between 30 and 50 percent of all southern white people did not own land. The existence of slavery further limited the opportunities available to poor whites because slaves represented a stable workforce that could be employed in agricultural labor and skilled trades. The majority of poor whites vehemently insisted on their racial superiority to blacks. However, their impoverished status served to blur the supposedly obvious distinctions between independent whites and enslaved blacks.

b. Southern “Plain Folk”

Southern “plain folk,” also known as yeoman farmers, usually owned small farms that they worked with their families. A few owned slaves but most often they did not. Many yeoman farmers aspired to become members of the planter elite. As a result, they actively endorsed the political stances of the planter class in the hopes of one day joining their ranks. However, more yeoman farmers valued independence than wealth. Ironically, this independence rested in part on the slave system, which cemented the fact that all whites, regardless of economic status, were equal in the fact that they were free.

c. The Middling Ranks

Middle class whites, merchants, bankers, lawyers, and other professionals, congregated in the cities of the largely rural South. Libraries, cultural activities, and institutions of formal education were also located in the cities. Many planters regarded the middle class as less independent than themselves because the nature of their business required that they please clients, unlike the planter class who pleased only themselves.

1. PLANTERS

In 1830, only 36 percent of Southerners owned slaves and fewer than 3 percent owned more than fifty slaves. This great disparity in wealth indicates the varied classes of southern slave owners.

a. Small Slave Owners

The largest group of slave owners was small farmers hoping to move from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. Small farmers were economically vulnerable to events beyond their control, like poor crops or declining cotton prices. This made it very difficult for small farmers to make a successful start in slave system agriculture.

b. The Planter Elite

The slave-owning elite, who comprised less than 3 percent of the Southern population, enjoyed respect and political power that many southerners hoped to emulate. As the slave system spread farther west, the ranks of this elite group expanded to include plantation owners from Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

c. Plantation Life

Many wealthy planters lived in relative isolation with their families and slaves in the rural South. Each plantation aimed to be self-sufficient by producing most of the food and clothing that both slaves and the white family would need throughout the year in addition to the cash crop being raised for sale.

d. The Plantation Mistress

Plantation mistresses, because of the hierarchical, paternalistic influence of the slave system, played an integral role in plantation life and dealt with many burdens. However, their position held no real authority. Plantation mistresses spent most of their time tending ill members of the “plantation family” black and white and supervising domestic servants in the performance of daily chores. Life on the plantation could be characterized by extreme isolation and a lack of ties with friends and family outside the plantation.

e. Coercion and Violence

Most slave owners believed that strict discipline, coercion, and even violence were necessary in order to make slaves work hard. Because an owner could do what he pleased on his plantation, female slaves were often sexually abused by their masters.

1. THE DEFENSE OF SLAVERY

The South’s peculiar institution of slavery eventually led to the Civil War. The sheer number of African Americans in the South led to persistent fears, both real and imagined, of slave uprisings.

a. Developing Proslavery Arguments

Southerners justified slavery using passages in the Bible and by citing the histories of Greece and Rome as examples of successful slave societies. However, the strongest defense was that the Constitution permitted slavery. Northern antislavery opinion and potential unrest among slave communities was linked in Southern minds. Anything that did not reinforce the slave system was seen as a threatening challenge to it.

b. After Nat Turner

Nat Turner’s Revolt linked Northern abolitionist sentiment and slave rebellion in the minds of many Southerners. After the rebellion, William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator*, an antislavery paper. In the 1830s, southern states began to protect themselves from external abolitionist sentiment. In addition, by 1835 every southern legislature had tightened its laws concerning slavery and the control of slaves. In 1836, Southerners introduced the “gag rule” into Congress, a rule that prohibited the consideration or entertainment of abolitionist petitions. Finally, Southerners began to move from a stance of apology about the institution of slavery to an outright justification of it and denial of its evils.

c. Changes in the South

The differences in the pervasiveness of slavery and the number of slave holders in the Upper and Lower South threatened the regional political unity of the South as a whole. Additionally, the slave system began disintegrating in southern urban centers and cities. While these were clearly signs of tension, the defense of slavery quelled any debate on the subject in the South and prevented discussions about alternative sources of labor. Ultimately, the South’s policy of defending slavery would make compromise impossible.

***Answer the following questions from Chapter 10:***

1. **The Cotton Gin and Expansion into the Old Southwest:** Why was the cotton gin such a significant invention and what effect did it have on the economy and society of the South? Why and where was cotton in such demand?

2. **A Slave Society in a Changing World:** In what ways did slavery and King Cotton help and hinder the economy of the South? What effect did cotton have on cultural development? How did cotton affect the economy of the North?

3. **To Be a Slave**: What did it mean on a daily basis to be a slave? What were the statistics of slavery? What variety of work was there within the slave economy?

4. **The** **African American Community**: What type of community did African Americans build? How did the slave system influence it? How did African American values and attitudes permeate the South? What key institutions did white masters learn to live with?

5. **Slave Families:** How were slave tables structured? What were the realities and statistics of separation?

6. **African American Religion:** How did elements of African religions survive and how were they reshaped into Christianity? How did African Americans shape Christianity to their community? What was the effect of the Second Great Awakening? What religious ideas were most helpful to survival?

7. **Slave Revolts:** What were the basic events and outcomes in the Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner revolts? What was particularly significant about the latter? How did various southern states and cities react?

8. **Poor Whites:** What characterized poor whites? How did slavery affect poor whites? What were the relationships between poor whites and slaves?

9. **Yeoman Values:** What were the various values of yeoman? Why did Andrew Jackson appeal to them? Why did value structures become more and more rigid?

10. **Plantation Life:** What was plantation life like? How was this life at odds with economic reality?

11. **Coercion and Violence:** How did coercion and violence mark a system that insisted on a gracious image? What violations of ideology and law were there? What did Mary Boykin Chestnut comment on?

12. **The Defense of Slavery**: Why did pro slavery arguments become more common during this period? What do population figures tell us? Developing pro slavery arguments: Why did more pro slavery arguments develop at this point? What were the lines of argument of southern apologists? What were the effects of the Missouri Compromise and the Vesey-Turner revolts?

13. **After Nat Turner:** Why were the early 1830s a turning point for the South closing ranks on defending slavery? What specific steps did they take to keep out antislavery sentiments and literature and reinforce slavery? What were the arguments of James Hammond and George Fitzhugh?

14. **Changes in the South:** What changes took place in the South in terms of slavery? What type of dissent was there? What were the statistics of slave holding? What was the subject and significance of Hinton Helper’s *The Impending Crisis*?

15. **Conclusion**: How rapidly had cotton production, slavery and southern states expanded? What was the position of slavery by the mid-nineteenth century in the South? What differences were there between North and South?

***Vocabulary:***

1. Eli Whitney

2. Alabama Fever

3. Manumission

4. Absalom Jones

5. Richard Allen

6. Andrew Allen

7. Gabriel Prosser

8. Denmark Vesey

9. Gullah Jack

10. Yeomen

11. Black Codes

12. Mary Boykin Chesnut

13. The Liberator

14. William Lloyd Garrison

15. Abolitionist