CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE SOUTH AND SLAVERY, 1790s–1850s

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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
  * The domination of southern life by the slave system
  * The economic implications of “King Cotton”
  * The creation of African American communities under slavery
  * The social structure of the white South and its increasing defensiveness
AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: NATCHEZ-UNDER-THE-HILL  Natchez and Natchez Under-the-Hill were adjacent communities. The former was an elegant planter community; the latter was a mixed community of rivermen, gamblers, Indians, and blacks. The Natchez elite found the Under-the-Hill community an increasing irritant and potential threat to racial control. Rumors of a slave insurrection plot led the planters to drive the gamblers and other undesirables away. The vignette illustrates the diverse nature of the antebellum South and the realities of where power lay.

KING COTTON AND SOUTHERN EXPANSION  Eli Whitney’s and Catherine Greene’s cotton gin revolutionized the Southern economy by making it profitable to cultivate short-staple cotton. After the War of 1812 Southerners poured into Western Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, driving out the Indians who already lived there. A generation later they poured into Louisiana and Texas. Each surge of expansion ignited a speculative frenzy. The growth of the cotton economy committed the South to slavery at the very time that opinion about slavery elsewhere was changing. As a result, Congress banned the slave trade in 1808 and the South was forced to rely on natural increase and the internal slave trade. Slave and planter migration stimulated the slave trade, giving rise to brutal conditions that mocked professions of slave benevolence. The harsh truth is that many owners sold slaves and separate families to increase their profits. Slavery was profitable for slaveholders, and its cotton brought international capital that helped finance northern industry and trade. But cotton and slavery tied up capital leaving the South lagging behind the North in urban population, industrialization, canals, and railroads. Though other crops were grown, cotton dominated the Southern economy.

TO BE A SLAVE  Between 1790 and 1860, the slave population grew from 700,000 to four million. During this period, a distinctive African-American community developed because most slaves lived in groups of ten or more and so were able to form a sense of community. The reliance on natural increase meant less, new African influences on community development. The slaves’ first challenge was to survive, for their life expectancy was significantly lower than whites. Slaveholders claimed they treated their slaves more humanely than northern industrialists treated their workers. Slaves typically lived in one-room cabins with dirt floors and a few furnishings. Slaves received the essentials for survival like food and clothing, though neither was adequate and were frequently supplemented by the slaves’ own efforts. To survive, slaves learned how to avoid punishments and to flatter whites. Some slaves worked as house servants but most were field hands and were under constant white supervision. Some slaves were skilled workers, filling in the positions left vacant due to the absence of immigrant labor. But 75 percent worked as field hands, from sunup to sundown. They performed the heavy field labor needed for getting out a cotton crop, driven by the threat of the master’s lash. Not surprisingly, many suffered from poor health. The opening of western lands contributed to the instability of slave life, as many were separated from their families by sale or migration and faced new hardships in the West.

THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY  Slaves created a community where an indigenous culture developed, influencing all aspects of Southern life. Masters had to learn to live with the two key institutions of African-American community life: the family and the church. Although slave marriages were not recognized by law, and frequently not respected by masters, they were a haven of love and intimacy for the slaves. Parents gave children a
supportive and protective kinship network. Although masters sometimes tried to avoid splitting up families, it happened all too frequently. But separated children drew upon supportive networks of family and friends. Slaves were not permitted to practice African religions, though numerous survivals did work their way into the slaves’ folk culture. The first and second Great Awakenings introduced Christianity to many slaves. In the 1790s, African-American churches began emerging. Whites hoped it would make the slaves obedient. But slaves found a liberating message that strengthened their sense of community and offered them spiritual freedom.

Most slaves understood that they could not escape bondage. About 1,000 per year escaped, mostly from the upper South. More common was running away and hiding in the swamps or woods for about a week and then returning. A few slaves organized revolts. Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey organized large-scale conspiracies to attack whites in Richmond and Charleston. Although their plans were uncovered before being carried out, they did manage to leave whites with tremendous anxiety. Nat Turner led the most famous slave revolt in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. Turner used religious imagery to lead slaves as they killed 55 whites. After Turner’s revolt, white southerners continually kept the idea of slave insurrection in mind.

By 1860, there were nearly 250,000 free black people. They mainly lived in the countryside working as tenants or farm laborers. In cities, free black communities flourished, particularly among the artisans. These communities had a precarious position as their members lacked basic civil rights.

THE WHITE MAJORITY A commercial middle class of merchants, bankers, factors, and lawyers emerged to sell southern crops on the world market. They lived in cities that acted as shipping centers for agricultural goods. Two-thirds of all southern whites lived in nonslaveholding families. Most yeomen were self-sufficient farmers whose strong sense of community was reinforced by close kin connections and bartering. But between 30 to 50 percent of southern whites were landless. These poor whites lived a marginal existence as laborers and tenants, at odds with slaves, but also engaging in complex and sometimes clandestine relations with them. Some yeomen hoped to acquire slaves themselves, but many were content with self-sufficient non-market agriculture. Yeomen supported slavery because they believed that it brought them higher status.

PLANTERS Most slaveholders owned only a few slaves and frequently drifted in and out of that status as bad crops or high prices curtailed or increased their income. Middle-class professionals had an easier time climbing the ladder of success. Andrew Jackson used his legal and political position to rise in Southern society. Beginning as a landless prosecutor, he died a plantation owner with over 200 slaves.

Most slaveholders inherited their wealth but sought to expand it. As slavery spread so did the slave-owning elite. The extraordinary concentration of wealth in places like Natchez created an elite lifestyle. But most wealthy planters lived fairly isolated lives. Although some planters cultivated an image of gracious living in the style of English aristocrats, the reality was that plantations were large enterprises that required much attention to a variety of tasks. Plantations aimed to be self-sufficient.
Following southern paternalism, in theory, each plantation was a family with the white master at its head. The plantation mistress ran her own household but could not challenge her husband’s authority. They frequently spent extended periods isolated on rural plantations. With slaves to do much of the labor conventionally assigned to women, it is no surprise that plantation mistresses accepted the system. The slave system rested on coercion and violence. Slave women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation, though sometimes long-term relationships did develop. Children of master-slave relationships seldom were publicly acknowledged and often remained in bondage.

THE DEFENSE OF SLAVERY  Slavery lay at the base of southern society and gave rise to various pro-slavery arguments. In the post-Revolution era, Southern whites found justifications in the Bible or by pointing to classical Greece and Rome. They pointed out that the Constitution recognized slavery and that they were defending property rights. Fearing slave revolts, growing abolitionism, and the cutting off of expansion, by the 1830s southerners barricaded themselves against outsiders and to stifle debate on the subject. But they also developed arguments that slavery was good for the slaves. George Fitzhugh contrasted slavery, which created a community of interests, with the heartless individualism that ruled the lives of northern factory workers. Despite efforts to stifle debate, some southern whites objected to slavery. The growing cost of slaves meant that the percentage of slaveholders was declining and class divisions widening. Hinton Rowan Helper denounced the institution, indicating tensions between rich and poor in the South. But the lines within the South remained tightly drawn.

CONCLUSION  The cotton economy had grown rapidly, but slavery was an international anachronism, out of place in the modern world.

Lecture Suggestions

1. Look at the nature of the Southern economy and show students why expansion was so crucial. As it was the clash over the expansion of slavery that led to the Civil War, this would seem a crucial point. Emphasize the inefficiency of slave labor and that slaveholders found it cheaper to keep moving rather than maintain their soil. This created a society that was hungry for fresh lands and set in motion a chain of events that led to a confrontation with the equally land-hungry North.

2. Examine the role of the nonslaveholders. Emphasize their importance to the maintenance of the slave system. Examine why they supported the slave system, even though they did not own slaves. Emphasize that the yeomanry in the plantation areas had connections with slaveholders and that non-plantation yeomen wanted to be left alone. See Bill Cecil-Fronsman’s Common Whites (Kentucky, 1992) on this point.

3. To discuss slave life, divide the lecture in half. The first half would examine the brutality of the slaves’ existence. The second half would examine how the slaves were able to survive. Focus on how the institution stripped slaves of their dignity, but that they were able to forge an existence that allowed them some degree of control over their own lives. Make the connection to the material in Chapter Four on the development of African-American culture.
Discussion Questions

1. Why did the introduction of the cotton gin cause such a change in the Southern economy? How did it lead to expansion into new areas?

2. Who were the yeomen farmers? What was their interest in slavery?

3. Slaveholders claimed they treated slaves better than factory owners treated their workers. Is this true? Is this a valid comparison?

4. How did slaves manage to “survive” slavery?

5. How did slaveholders justify slavery? How did that defense change over time?

Out of Class Activity

Many college libraries have copies of George Rawick’s collection of the WPA interviews with former slaves (*The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*) (Greenwood, 1972). Working individually or in groups, students could research any number of topics—male/female roles, children’s roles, slaves’ attitudes towards masters, etc.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject

Eugene D. Genovese’s *The Political Economy of Slavery* (Random House, 1965) has a tremendously challenging first chapter that lays out a controversial interpretation of the nature of Southern society and the causes of the Civil War. Barney’s *Passage of the Republic* (Heath, 1987) has a great deal of material on the nature of Southern society as well.

Audio Visual Aids

“Slavery and Slave Resistance” Includes still pictures, artifacts, and music to show slavery from colonial times to the Civil War. (Color, 22 minutes, 1969)

“Out of Slavery: 1619–1860” Traces the development of the African slave trade and the growth of slavery in America. Portrays the back role in the American Revolution, resistance to slavery, and their role in the abolition movement. (B&W, 21 minutes, 1965)

“Fanny Kemble’s Journal” Uses selections from Fanny Kemble’s journal to describe every day life on a plantation. Like the author, the film is critical of the institution of slavery. (Color, 28 minutes, 1987)