Chapter 11
Slavery and the Old South, 1800—1860

Chapter Summary

Chapter 11 explores the society and culture of the antebellum American South. Among the issues discussed in this chapter are the cultural, social, and economic distinctions between the Upper South and the Lower South, the characteristics of slave life and culture, the divisions in free white southern society, and the emerging proslavery argument used by the South to defend the institution of slavery.

I. The Lower South
   A. Cotton and Slaves
   B. The Profits of Slavery
      1. Urban slavery

II. The Upper South
   A. A Period of Economic Adjustment
      1. Growing urbanization
   B. The Decline of Slavery

III. Slave Life and Culture
   A. Work Routines and Living Conditions
   B. Families and Religion
   C. Resistance

IV. Free Society
   A. The Slaveholding Minority
   B. The White Majority
   C. Free Black People

V. The Proslavery Argument

VI. Conclusion

Learning Objectives

After a careful examination of Chapter 11, students should be able to do the following:

1. Distinguish geographically, economically, and demographically between the Upper South, the Lower South, and the Border South.

2. List the factors that contributed to the rise of short staple cotton as a profitable commodity in the Old South. Explain why slave labor was considered by southern planters to be particularly suitable to the cultivation of cotton.
3. Describe the physical characteristics and operation of a southern plantation.

4. Discuss the profitability of the institution of slavery, including the return on investment and the increase in value of slave property during the first half of the nineteenth century.

5. Discuss the reasons why southern planters feared industrialization and urbanization and explain the impact they felt these trends could have on the southern institution of slavery.

6. Identify Edmund Ruffin and explain his contribution to promoting agricultural reform in the Upper South.

7. List factors that contributed to the decline of slave population in the Upper South during the first half of the nineteenth century.

8. Describe the work routines and living conditions of slaves in the antebellum South.

9. Define the term *slave codes* and explain how they defined the status of slaves and the rights of slave owners in the antebellum South.

10. Describe the characteristics of family life in slave communities of the antebellum South.

11. Describe African Christianity and explain its distinctions from white Protestant Christianity.

12. Identify three examples of slave rebellion in the antebellum South and comment on the success or failure of each.

13. Explain the meaning of the term *Underground Railroad* and explain its connection to the issue of slave resistance.

14. Describe the typical lifestyle of an antebellum southern planter.

15. Describe the diversity and complexity of the nonslaveholding southern white community.

16. Define the term *black codes* and describe how they were used to restrict the rights of free African Americans and to preserve racial inequity in the South.

17. Outline the major points of the proslavery argument. Explain the impact of religion on the institution of slavery and the impact of slavery on religious institutions.

**Topics for Classroom Lecture**

1. Prepare a presentation on historical myth with a focus on the antebellum South. Begin the class with a clip from the film *Gone with the Wind* and ask students to comment on the images they associate with the antebellum South. Then, discuss the reality of life in the Old South. Ask students why Americans have created myths about their history in general and why we have created myths about the antebellum South in particular.

2. Discuss the status of women on the antebellum southern plantation. Consider both plantation mistresses and female slaves. Describe the living conditions of each as well as their relationship with
each other. How did the sexual mores of southern planters impact the lives of both female slaves and plantation mistresses? How did the patriarchal system of the antebellum South validate this situation?

3. Discuss the connection between religion and politics in the slave community. What roles were played by the African American preacher in the slave community? Examine the lyrics of spirituals and have students point out the connection between the lyrics of these religious songs and the slaves’ political agenda of freedom. Play some spirituals for the class to give students a feel for the power of the music. An excellent collection is *Spirituals in Concert* by Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman.

4. Prepare a lecture on southern white dissent in the antebellum South. Was the white South united in its defense of slavery? Where did dissent appear, and what issues promoted opposition to the proslavery argument? How were dissenters treated by the defenders of slavery?

**Topics for Class Discussion and Essays**

1. Introduce students to the concept of historiography by reviewing some of the classic works on the institution of slavery. Use a variety of historical treatments of this issue to help students understand the idea of revisionist history and to help them see how even a historian’s objectivity is impacted by his or her historical context. Some classic historical treatments of the issue of slavery include U. B. Phillips’s *American Negro Slavery* (1918), Kenneth Stampp’s *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), Stanley Elkins’s *Slavery* (1959), Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman’s *Time on the Cross* (1974), and Eugene Genovese’s *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972).

2. Have the class examine the proslavery argument. Why did the South change its perception from believing slavery to be a necessary evil to believing it to be a positive good? Discuss the fact that, by 1850, the national debate on slavery had changed from being a primarily legal debate to being a moral debate. What impact did this transition in the debate have on the southern defense of the institution? Why was the biblical defense of the institution so critical to the argument?

3. Have students look at the connection between racism and slavery. Increasing numbers of Americans began to oppose the institution of slavery during the early nineteenth century. Did opposition to slavery necessarily mean a person was not racist? Was it possible to have racist reasons for opposing slavery? Were there any aspects of the proslavery argument with which opponents of the institution might actually agree?

**Topics for Term Papers and Class Projects**

1. If your location permits, have students visit plantations from the antebellum period. If you are not so located, contact historical sites in Natchez, Mississippi, Charleston, South Carolina and environs, or Virginia and show students slides of the various architectural styles and varying degrees of opulence reflected in the southern plantation lifestyle.

2. Write a paper on the life of Sojourner Truth. Involved in both the abolitionist and women’s movements of the early nineteenth century, her life offers an insight into the connection between these two social reform movements.

3. Write a paper on children in slavery. A fairly recently examined issue, the plight of children in slavery will reveal to students a particularly moving and poignant aspect of this tragic chapter in American history.
Resources for Lectures and Research Projects


Audio-Visual Resources

This four-part series examines the American experience with slavery from 1450 until the abolition of the institution during the Civil War.

*Ship of Slaves: The Middle Passage*, A&E Video, 50 minutes.
This video explores the story behind Steven Spielberg’s 1997 movie *Amistad*. 