

Section 1: Growth of the Cotton Industry

THE SOUTH'S AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

After the American Revolution, the use of slaves began to decline. One reason was that many Americans felt keeping slaves in a nation founded on freedom was wrong. Another reason was that using slaves was no longer economically profitable to the owner. That is because crop prices fell. Farmers planted less, so they needed less slave labor. Some found it cheaper to just free their slaves.

ELI WHITNEY AND THE COTTON GIN

Cotton was not a new crop to the southern states. However, few farmers planted much, for the shortstaple cotton that grew well there was very hard to separate from its seeds. Northerner **Eli Whitney** changed that when he invented the **cotton gin**. This hand-cranked cylinder easily pulled cotton and seeds apart. With the cotton gin, cotton crops became profitable. A cotton gin could clean as much cotton as planters could plant and their slaves could pick. A **planter** was a large-scale farmer who held more than 20 slaves.

THE COTTON BOOM

For southern farmers, cotton had many advantages over other crops. Unlike food products, cotton could be stored for long periods of time. Plus its lightness made it fairly inexpensive to transport. As a result, the cotton-supported slave trade grew, even as Congress worked to limit slavery in the nation.

THE COTTON TRADE

Most of the country's cotton was produced in the **cotton belt**, which stretched from South Carolina to Texas. Because of a lack of transportation systems such as roads and canals, southern farmers relied on rivers to move their cotton. When the cotton reached a port, the farmers sold their cotton to merchants, who contacted **factors** to arrange transportation for the cotton aboard trading ships.

AGRICULTURAL DIVERSITY

Scientific agriculture, or the use of scientific methods to improve farming, encouraged southern farmers to rotate the kinds of crops they planted. So, farmers also grew corn, rice, sugarcane, wheat, tobacco, hemp, and flax. Some industries, such as the **Tredegar Iron Works**, also flourished, but most of the South focused on farming.

Section 2: Free Southern Society

FOUR MAIN GROUPS OF SOUTHERN SOCIETY

Only about one-third of all southerners owned slaves. Far fewer were actually wealthy planters. However, those few planters were among the most influential southern citizens, and many were political leaders.

On the vast plantations, the planter ran the farm business. A wealthy planter would have overseers to help him. The planter's wife ran the household, which included many house slaves. She also was in charge of important social events such as dances and dinners.

Most southern farmers were yeomen. **Yeomen** owned small farms averaging about 100 acres, and often they worked side by side with the few slaves they might own.

Many white southerners were poor. They owned no slaves at all. Often they lived on land that

could not grow crops. These farmers were at the bottom of the economic ladder.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

Religion was central to southern life. One reason was its social impact. Often farm families only saw their far-spread neighbors at church functions. Some southerners also believed that Christianity justified slavery—a belief not shared by Christians in the North.

SOUTHERN CITIES

The economy of the South also depended on the businesses conducted in its busy cities. As in northern cities, southern cities provided many services to residents, including water systems and street maintenance. Southern cities used slave labor, too. Businesses either owned slaves or hired them out from nearby planters.

FREE AFRICAN AMERICANS

Not all African Americans were slaves. Some were free. Some had been born free. Others had bought their freedom from their slaveowners or had run away. About half of these free African Americans lived in the South.

The presence of free African Americans concerned some white southerners. They worried that those who were free would incite those who were enslaved to rise up against their slaveowners. As a result, southern cities and states passed laws aimed at limiting the rights of these free African Americans. Virginia went so far as to forbid former slaves from living in the state without permission.

Free African Americans posed another threat to white southerners, too. Many whites felt the African American could not survive outside of slavery, and these free men and women proved that was wrong.

Section 3: The Slave System

SLAVES AND WORK

Most planters used the gang labor system to get their fields farmed. In this system, enslaved men, women, and children over 10 years of age all worked the same field work for the same long day from dawn until dark.

Slaves with special skills often were rented out by their owners. Sometimes these slaves were allowed to keep part of what they earned. Because of this, some skilled slaves were able to save enough money to buy their own freedom.

LIFE UNDER SLAVERY

To most southern slaveholders, slaves were property, not people. As property, slaves could be bought and sold. Usually, this business occurred at a slave auction. At these auctions, family members could be sold away from each other forever.

Many slaveholders used cruel punishments to make sure their slaves stayed obedient. In addition, many states passed strict slave codes. These laws limited what slaves could do. For example, in some states it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write.

SLAVE CULTURE

For enslaved African Americans, the family was the most important part of their lives. Parents made sure their children knew the African part of their history, including African customs and traditions. Since they could not read and write, they passed this information verbally. Some of their stories were **folktales**—stories with morals—to teach children how to survive slavery.

Religion was also an important part of the culture of enslaved African Americans. Christian slaves believed that, in God's eyes, they were equal to anyone else. They held onto the hope that someday they would be freed. Often, these beliefs were expressed in the **spirituals** they sang.

CHALLENGING SLAVERY

Enslaved African Americans found a variety of ways to protest their treatment. Some even ran away. Most runaways, though, were forced to return. That was because getting all the way North to freedom was filled with dangers and hardships.

Sometimes, slaves protested with violence. They risked certain punishment. This was true of Virginia slave **Nat Turner**. During **Nat Turner's Rebellion** in 1831, slaves killed about 60 white people. In the end, though, more than 100 slaves were killed and Turner was executed. As a result, many states strengthened their slave codes.