

p. 254) slaves constituted close to half the total population and were responsible for producing 90 percent of the cotton and almost all of the rice and sugar. In the upper South whites outnumbered slaves by more than three to one and were less dependent on their labor. To understand southern thought and behavior it is necessary to bear in mind these major differences between the cotton kingdom with its entrenched one-crop plantation system and the upper South, which was actually moving away from this pattern during the pre-Civil War period.

Economic Adjustment in the Upper South

Tobacco, the original plantation crop of the colonial period, continued to be the principal slave-cultivated commodity of the upper tier of southern states during the pre-Civil War era. But markets were often depressed, and profitable tobacco cultivation was hard to sustain for very long in one place because it rapidly depleted the soil. As a result, there were continual shifts in the areas of greatest production and much experimentation with new crops and methods of farming in the older regions. This process began immediately after the Revolution when soil exhaustion and declining prices induced the planters of tidewater Virginia and Maryland to

shift from tobacco to wheat. Further west, in the upland areas known as the Piedmont, tobacco continued to be the money crop for a longer period because of the availability of rich soils.

After a brief boom following the War of 1812, prices again collapsed and many upland planters shifted to wheat, only to find that their new crop was soon ravaged by plant pests and diseases. Some reverted to tobacco—in the words of historian Avery Craven, “the old hopeless shifting from one crop to another began again.” Despite the problems associated with tobacco, the crop moved westward; by 1860 more was grown in the new western states than in the older eastern ones, and Kentucky had emerged as a major producer.

During the lengthy depression of the tobacco market that lasted from the 1820s to the 1850s, agricultural experimentation was widespread in Virginia and Maryland. Increased use of fertilizer, systematic rotation of tobacco with other crops, and the growth of diversified farming based on a mix of wheat, corn, and livestock contributed to a gradual revival of agricultural prosperity.⁶ Such changes increased the need for capital but reduced the demand for labor. Improvements were financed in part by selling surplus slaves in regions of the lower South where staple crop production was more profitable. The interstate slave trade, which sent hundreds of thousands of slaves in a southwesterly direction between 1815 and 1860, was thus a godsend to the slaveowners of

the upper South and a key to their survival and returning prosperity.

Some economic historians have concluded that the most important crop produced in the tobacco kingdom was not the "stinking weed" but human beings cultivated for the auction block. Respectable planters tended to sell slaves reluctantly, usually only when debts or the need to make changes seemed to require it. But the economic effect was clear: the natural increase of their slaves beyond what the planters needed for their operations provided them with a crucial source of capital in a period of transition and innovation.

Nevertheless, the fact that slave labor was declining in importance in the upper South meant that the peculiar institution had a weaker hold on public loyalty there than in the cotton states. Diversification of agriculture was accompanied by a more rapid rate of urban and industrial development than was occurring elsewhere in the South. As a result, Virginians, Marylanders, and Kentuckians were seriously divided on whether their ultimate future lay with the Deep South's plantation economy or with the industrializing, free labor system that was flourishing just north of their borders.

The Rise of the Cotton Kingdom

The warmer climate and good soils of the lower tier of southern states made it possible to raise crops more naturally suited than tobacco or cereals to the plantation form of agriculture and the heavy use of slave labor. Since the colonial period, rice and a special variety of fine cotton (known as "long staple") had been grown profitably on vast estates along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia. In lower Louisiana, between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, sugar was the cash crop. As in the West Indies, sugar production required a large investment and a great deal of back-breaking labor: or, in other words, large, well-financed plantations and small armies of slave laborers. But cultivation of rice, long-staple cotton, and sugar was limited by natural conditions to peripheral, semitropical areas. It was the rise of "short-staple" cotton as the South's major crop that strengthened the hold of slavery and the plantation on the southern economy.

Short-staple cotton differed from the long-staple variety in two important ways: its bolls

contained seeds that were much more difficult to extract by hand, and it could be grown almost anywhere south of Virginia and Kentucky—the main requirement was a guarantee of two hundred frost-free days. Before 1793, the seed extraction problem had prevented short-staple cotton from becoming a major market crop. But the invention of the cotton gin resolved that difficulty, and the subsequent westward movement opened vast areas for its cultivation. Unlike rice and sugar, cotton could be grown on small farms as well as on plantations. But large planters enjoyed certain advantages that made them the main producers. Only relatively large operators could afford their own gins or possessed the capital to acquire the fertile bottomlands that brought the highest yields. They also had lower transportation costs because they were able to monopolize the land along the rivers and streams that were the South's natural arteries of transportation.

Cotton was well suited to a plantation form of production. The required tasks were relatively simple and could be performed by supervised gangs of unfree workers. Furthermore, there was enough work to be done in all seasons to keep the force occupied throughout the year. Unlike cereals, which have only to be planted, allowed to grow, and then harvested rapidly, cotton requires constant weeding or "chopping" while growing and can be picked over an extended period. The relative absence of seasonal variations in work needs made the use of slave laborers advantageous.

The first major cotton-producing regions were inland areas of Georgia and South Carolina that were already thinly settled at the time the cotton gin was introduced. The center of production shifted rapidly westward during the nineteenth century. By the 1830s, Alabama and Mississippi had surpassed Georgia and South Carolina. By the 1850s, Arkansas, northwest Louisiana, and east Texas were the most prosperous and rapidly growing plantation regions. The rise in total production that accompanied this geographical expansion was phenomenal. Between 1792 and 1817, the South's output of cotton rose from about 13,000 bales to 461,000; by 1840 it was 1,350,000; nine years later it had risen to 2,850,000; and in 1860 production peaked at the colossal figure of 4,800,000 bales. Most of this cotton went to supply the booming textile indus-

try of Great Britain. Lesser proportions went to the manufacturers of continental Europe and the northeastern United States.

"Cotton is king!" proclaimed a southern orator in the 1850s, and he was right. By that time, three quarters of the world's supply of cotton came from the American South, and this single commodity accounted for over half of the total dollar value of American exports. Cotton growing and the network of commercial and industrial enterprises that marketed and processed this crop constituted the most important economic interest in the United States on the eve of the Civil War. Since slavery and cotton seemed inextricably linked, it appeared self-evident to many Southerners that their peculiar institution was the keystone of national wealth and economic progress.

Despite its overall success, however, the rise of the cotton kingdom did not bring a uniform or steady prosperity to the lower South. Many planters worked the land until it was exhausted and then took their slaves westward to richer soils, leaving depressed and ravaged areas in their wake.

Planters were also beset and sometimes ruined by fluctuations in markets and prices. Boom periods or flush times were followed by falling prices and a wave of bankruptcies. The great periods of expansion and bonanza profits were 1815–1819, 1832–1837, and 1849–1860. The first two booms were deflated by a fall in cotton prices resulting from overproduction. During the eleven years of rising output and high prices preceding the Civil War the planters gradually forgot their earlier troubles and began to imagine that they were immune to future economic disasters.

Despite the insecurities associated with cotton production, most of the time this crop represented the best chance for profitable investment that existed in the Old South. Prudent planters who had not borrowed too heavily during flush times could survive periods of depression by cutting costs and making their plantations self-sufficient. Instead of buying food and clothing for their slaves, as they normally did when cotton prices were high, they could shift acreage away from cotton and plant subsistence crops. For those with worn-out land, two options existed: they could sell their land and move west or they could sell their slaves to raise capital for fertilization, crop rotation, and other improvements that could

help them survive where they were. Hence planters had little incentive to seek alternatives to slavery, the plantation, and dependence on a single cash crop. From a purely economic point of view they had every reason to rally to the defense of slavery.

Slavery and Industrialization

As the sectional quarrel with the North intensified, Southerners became increasingly alarmed by their region's lack of economic self-sufficiency. Dependence on the North for capital, marketing facilities, and manufactured goods was seen as evidence of a dangerous subservience to "external" economic interests. Southern nationalists like J. D. B. DeBow, editor of the influential *DeBow's Review*, called during the 1850s for the South to develop its own industries, commerce, and shipping. As a fervent defender of slavery, DeBow did not believe that such diversification would require a massive shift to free wage labor. He saw no reason why slaves could not be used as the main work force in an industrial revolution. But his call for a diversified economy went unanswered. Men with capital were doing too well in plantation agriculture to risk their money in other ventures.

It is difficult to determine whether it was some inherent characteristic of slavery as a labor system or simply the strong market demand for cotton and the South's capacity to meet it that kept most slaves working on plantations and farms. A minority—about 5 percent during the 1850s—were, in fact, successfully employed in industrial tasks. Besides providing most of the labor for mining, lumbering, and constructing roads, canals, and railroads, slaves also worked in cotton mills and tobacco factories.

In the 1840s and '50s, a debate raged among white capitalists over whether the South should use free whites or enslaved blacks as the labor supply for industry. William Gregg of South Carolina, the foremost promoter of cotton mills in the Old South, defended a white labor policy, arguing that factory work would provide new economic opportunities for a degraded class of poor whites. But other advocates of industrialization feared that the growth of a free working class would lead to social conflict among whites and

preferred using slaves for all supervised manual labor. In practice, some factories employed slaves, others white workers, and a few even experimented with integrated work forces. As nearly as can be determined, mills that hired or purchased slave labor were just as profitable and efficient as those paying wages to whites.

It is clear, however, that the union of slavery and cotton that was central to the South's prosperity impeded industrialization and left the region dependent on a one-crop agriculture and on the North for capital and marketing. Slaves were the only available workers who could be employed on plantations; rural whites refused to work for low wages when they had the alternative of subsistence farming on marginal lands in the southern backcountry. Industry, on the other hand, was concentrated in towns and cities where white labor was more readily available. When agriculture was booming—as it was during the 1850s—urban and industrial slaves tended to be displaced by whites and shifted to farming. So long as plantations yielded substantial profits, there could be no major movement of slaves from agriculture to industry. If anything, the trend was in the opposite direction.

The "Profitability" Issue

Some Southerners were obviously making money, and a great deal of it, using slave labor to raise cotton. The great mansions of the Alabama "black belt" and the lower Mississippi could not have been built if their owners had not been successful. But did slavery yield a good return for the great majority of slaveholders who were not large planters? Did it provide the basis for general prosperity and a relatively high standard of living for the southern population in general, or at least for the two thirds of it who were white and free? These questions have been hotly debated by economic historians. Some knowledge of the main arguments regarding its "profitability" is helpful to an understanding of the South's attachment to slavery.

For many years historians believed that slave-based agriculture was, on the average, not very lucrative. Planters' account books seemed to show at best a modest return on investment. In the 1850s, the price of slaves rose at a faster rate

than the price of cotton, allegedly squeezing many operators. Some historians even concluded that slavery was a dying institution by the time of the Civil War. Profitability, they argued, depended on access to new and fertile land suitable for plantation agriculture, and virtually all such land within the limits of the United States had already been taken up by 1860. Hence slavery had reached its natural limits of expansion and was on the verge of becoming so unprofitable that it would fall of its own weight in the near future.

A more recent interpretation, based on modern economic theory, holds that slavery was in fact still an economically sound institution in 1860 and showed no signs of imminent decline. A reexamination of planters' records using modern accounting methods shows that during the 1850s planters could normally expect an annual return of 8 to 10 percent on capital invested. This yield was roughly equivalent to the best that could then be obtained from the most lucrative sectors of northern industry and commerce.

Furthermore, it is no longer clear that plantation agriculture had reached its natural limits of expansion by 1860. Production in Texas had not yet peaked, and construction of railroads and levees was opening up new areas for cotton growing elsewhere in the South. With the advantage of hindsight, economic historians have pointed out that improvements in transportation and flood control would enable the post-Civil War South to double its cotton acreage. Those who now argue that slavery was profitable and had an expansive future have made a strong and convincing case.

But the larger question remains: what sort of economic development did a slave plantation system foster? The system may have made slaveholders wealthy, but did the benefits trickle down to the rest of the population—to the majority of whites who owned no slaves and to the slaves themselves? Did it promote efficiency and progressive change? Economists Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman have argued that slave plantation agriculture was much more efficient than northern family farming. They came to this conclusion using a measure of productivity involving a ratio of "input—capital, labor, and land—to "output"—the dollar value of the crop when sold. Critics have pointed out that the higher efficiency rate for plantation agriculture may be due entirely to market conditions, or, in other words, to the

fact that cotton was in greater demand than such northern commodities as wheat and livestock. Hence, Fogel and Engerman's calculations do not prove their assertion that the plantation was an internally efficient enterprise with good managers and industrious, well-motivated workers.

Other evidence suggests that small slaveholders and nonslaveholders shared only to a very limited extent in the bonanza profits of the cotton economy. Because of various insecurities—lack of credit, high transportation costs, and a greater vulnerability to market fluctuations—they had to devote a larger share of their acreage to subsistence crops, especially corn and hogs, than did the planters. They were thus able to survive, but their standard of living was lower than that of most northern farmers. Slaves benefited from planter profits to the extent that they were better fed, housed, and clothed than they would have been had their owners been less prosperous. But to suggest that they were better off than northern wage laborers is proslavery propaganda rather than documented fact.

The South's economic development was skewed in favor of a single route to wealth, open only to the minority possessing both a white skin and access to capital. The concentration of capital and business energies on cotton production foreclosed the kind of diversified industrial and commercial growth that would have provided wider opportunities. Thus, in comparison to the industrializing North, the South was an underdeveloped region in which neither slaves nor lower-class whites had much incentive to work hard. A lack of public education for whites and the denial of even minimal literacy to slaves represented a critical failure to develop human resources. Good ground exists for concluding that the South's economy was condemned to backwardness so long as it was based on slavery.

THE SURVEILLING SOCIETY

If the precise effect of slavery on the South's economic life remains debatable, there is less room for disagreement concerning its impact on social arrangements and attitudes. More than any other factor, the ownership of slaves determined gradations of social prestige and influence among whites. The large planters were the dominant class, and nonslaveholders were of lower social rank. But the fact that all whites were free and that most blacks were slaves created a sharp

cleavage between the races that could create the impression (some would say the illusion) of a basic equality within "the master race." In the language of sociologists, inequality in the Old South was determined in two ways: by "class"—differences in status resulting from unequal access to wealth and productive resources—and by "caste"—the inherited advantages or disadvantages associated with racial ancestry. An awareness of both systems of social ranking is necessary for an understanding of southern society.

The Planters' World

Those who know the Old South only from modern novels, films, and television programs are likely to envision a land filled with majestic plantations. Pillared mansions behind oak-lined carriageways are portrayed as scenes of aristocratic splendor, where courtly gentlemen and elegant ladies, attended by hordes of uniformed black servants, lived in refined luxury. It is easy to conclude from such images that the typical white Southerner was an aristocrat who belonged to a family that owned large numbers of slaves.

The great houses existed—many of them can still be seen in places like the low country of South Carolina and the lower Mississippi Valley—and some wealthy slaveholders did maintain as aristocratic a life-style as was ever seen in the United States. But census returns indicate that this was the world of only a small percentage of slaveowners and a minuscule portion of the total white population.

In 1850 only 30 percent of all white Southerners belonged to families owning slaves; by 1860 the proportion had shrunk to 25 percent. Even in the cotton belt of the Deep South, slaveholders were a minority of whites on the eve of the Civil War—about 40 percent. Planters, defined by the census takers as agriculturalists owning twenty or more slaves, were the minority of a minority. In 1860 planters and their families constituted about 12 percent of all slaveholders and less than 4 percent of the total white population of the South. But even the master of twenty to fifty slaves could rarely live up to the popular image of aristocratic grandeur. To build a great house and entertain lavishly, a planter had to own at least fifty slaves and preferably many more. In 1860

these substantial planters comprised less than 3 percent of all slaveholders and less than 1 percent of all whites.

Although few in numbers, the great planters had a weighty influence on southern life. They set the tone and values for much of the rest of society, especially for the smaller slaveowners who sought to imitate the planters' style of living to the extent that resources allowed. Although many of them were too busy tending to their plantations to become openly involved in politics, they held more than their share of high offices and often exerted a decisive influence on public policy. Within those regions of the South where plantation agriculture predominated, they were a ruling class in every sense of the term.

Contrary to legend, most of the great planters of the pre-Civil War period were self-made rather than descendants of the old colonial gentry. For example, one Irish immigrant started out with a log cabin and a few acres in upland South Carolina around 1800. Gradually acquiring more land, he planted cotton at a time when the boom was just beginning. Eventually he bought slaves and tore down the log cabin to put up a frame house. Within five years, he was able to build a "big house" with columns, set up his own cotton gin, buy a carriage, and become a local magistrate. At the time of his death in 1854, he had served in the state legislature and had built up an estate of 2000 acres, 114 slaves, and 4 cotton gins. Despite his humble origins, the local newspapers referred to him as "a gentleman of the old school."

As the cotton kingdom spread westward from South Carolina and Georgia to Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, the men who became the wealthiest planters were even less likely to have genteel backgrounds. A large proportion of them began as hard-driving businessmen who built up capital from commerce, land speculation, banking, and even slave-trading. They then used their profits to buy plantations. The highly competitive, boom-or-bust economy of the Southwest put a greater premium on sharp dealing and business skills than on genealogy. Stephen Duncan, probably the most prosperous cotton planter in the South during the 1850s (he owned 8 plantations and 1018 slaves), had invested the profits from his banking operations. Among the largest sugar planters of southern Louisiana at this time were Maunsel White and John Burnside, Irish immi-

grants who had prospered as New Orleans merchants, and Isaac Franklin, former king of the slave traders.

To be successful, a planter had to be a shrewd businessman who kept a careful eye on the market, the prices of slaves and land, and the extent of his indebtedness. Reliable "factors"—the agents who marketed the crop and provided advances against future sales—could assist him in making decisions, but a planter who failed to spend a good deal of time with his account books could end up in serious trouble. Managing the slaves and plantation production was also difficult and time-consuming, even when overseers were available to supervise day-to-day activities. Hence few planters could be the men of leisure featured in the popular image of the Old South.

Some of the richest and most secure did aspire to live in the manner of a traditional landed aristocracy. A few were so successful that they were accepted as equals by visiting English nobility. "Big houses," elegant carriages, fancy-dress balls, and excessive numbers of house servants all reflected aristocratic aspirations. The romantic cult of chivalry, described in the popular novels of

Sir Walter Scott, was in vogue in some circles and even led to the nonviolent reenactment of medieval tournaments. Dueling, despite some efforts to repress it, remained the standard way to settle "affairs of honor" among gentlemen (see the special feature in this chapter, pp. 334–35). Another sign of gentility was the tendency of planters' sons to avoid "trade" as a primary or secondary career in favor of law or the military. Planters' daughters were trained from girlhood to play the piano, speak French, dress in the latest fashions, and sparkle in the drawing room or on the dance floor. The aristocratic style originated among the older gentry of the seaboard slave states, but by the 1840s and '50s it had spread southwest as a second generation of wealthy planters began to displace the rough-hewn pioneers of the cotton kingdom.

Planters and Slaves

No assessment of the planters' outlook or "world view" can be made without considering their relations with their slaves. Planters, by the census definition, owned more than half of all the slaves in the South and set the standards for treatment and management of them. Most of the planters, it is clear from their private letters and journals, as well as from proslavery propaganda, liked to think of themselves as kindly and paternalistic. Often they referred to their slaves as if they were members of an extended patriarchal family—a favorite phrase was "our people." Blacks in general were described as a race of perpetual children requiring constant care and supervision by superior whites. Paternalistic rhetoric increased greatly after abolitionists began to charge that most slaveholders were sadistic monsters. To some extent, the response was part of a defensive effort to redeem the South's reputation and self-respect.

There was, nevertheless, an element of truth in the planters' claim that their slaves were relatively well treated. Recent comparative studies have suggested that North American slaves of the pre-Civil War-period enjoyed a higher standard of living than those in other New World slave societies such as Brazil and the West Indian sugar islands. Food, clothing, and shelter were normally sufficient to sustain life and labor at above a bare

subsistence level; family life was encouraged and to some extent flourished; and average life expectancy, birth rate, and natural growth in population were only slightly below the average for southern whites. The rapid increase of the slave population in the Old South stands in sharp contrast to the usual failure of slave populations to reproduce themselves.

But relatively good physical conditions for slaves do not demonstrate that planters put ethical considerations ahead of self-interest. The ban on the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 was effective enough to make the domestic reproduction of the slave force an economic necessity if the system were to be perpetuated. Rising slave prices thereafter inhibited extreme physical abuse and deprivation. Slaves were valuable property and the main tools of production for a booming economy, and it was in the interest of masters to see that their property remained in good enough condition to work hard and bear large numbers of children. Furthermore, a good return on their investment enabled southern planters to divert a significant portion of their profits to slave maintenance—a luxury not available to masters in less prosperous plantation economies.

The testimony of slaves themselves and of some independent white observers suggests that masters of large plantations generally did not have close and intimate relationships with the mass of field slaves. The kind of affection and concern associated with a father figure appears to have been limited mainly to relationships with a few favored house servants or other elite slaves, such as drivers and highly skilled craftsmen. The field hands on large estates dealt mostly with overseers who were hired or fired on their ability to meet production quotas.

When they were being most realistic, planters conceded that the ultimate basis of their authority was force and intimidation, rather than the natural obedience due to a loving parent. Scattered among their statements are admissions that they must rely on the "principle of fear," "more and more on the power of fear," or—most graphically—that it was necessary "to make them stand in fear." Devices for inspiring fear including whipping—a common practice on most plantations—and the threat of sale away from family and friends. Planters' manuals and instructions to overseers reveal that certain and

swift punishment for any infraction of the rules or even for a surly attitude was the preferred method for maintaining order and productivity.

Despite economic considerations, some masters inevitably yielded to the temptations of power or to their bad tempers and tortured or killed their slaves. Others raped slave women or forced them into sexual relationships. Slaves had little legal protection against such abuse because slave testimony was not accepted in court. Abolitionists were correct in condemning slavery on principle because it gave one human being nearly absolute power over another. Human nature being what it is, such a situation was bound to result in atrocities. Even Harriet Beecher Stowe acknowledged in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, her celebrated antislavery novel of 1852, that most slaveholders were not as sadistic and brutish as Simon Legree. But—and this was her real point—there was something terribly wrong with an institution that made a Simon Legree possible.

The World of the Common Whites

As we have seen, 88 percent of all slaveholders in 1860 owned fewer than twenty slaves and thus were not planters in the usual sense of the term. Of these, the great majority had fewer than ten. Some of the small slaveholders were urban merchants or professional men who needed slaves only for domestic service, but more typical were farmers who used one or two slave families to ease the burden of their own labor. Relatively little is known about life on these small slaveholding farms; unlike the planters, the owners left few records behind. But we do know that life was relatively spartan. Masters lived in log cabins or small frame cottages and slaves in lofts or sheds that were not usually up to plantation housing standards.

For better or worse, relations between owners and their slaves were more intimate than on larger estates. Unlike planters, these farmers often worked in the fields alongside their slaves and sometimes ate at the same table or slept under the same roof. But such closeness did not necessarily result in better treatment. Slave testimony reveals that both the best and the worst of slavery could be found on these farms, depending on the character and disposition of the master.

Given a choice, most slaves preferred to live on plantations because they offered the sociability, culture, and kinship of the quarters, as well as better prospects for adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Marginal slaveholders often sank into poverty and were forced either to sell their slaves or give them short rations.

Just below the small slaveholders on the social scale was a substantial class of yeoman farmers who owned land that they worked themselves. Contrary to another myth about the Old South, most of these people did not fit the image of the degraded, shiftless "poor white." Such poor whites did exist, mainly as squatters on stretches of barren or sandy soil that no one else wanted. But they were a minority of the nonslaveholding rural population. The majority were proud, self-reliant farmers whose way of life did not differ markedly from that of family farmers in the Midwest during the early stages of settlement. If they were disadvantaged in comparison with farmers elsewhere in the United States, it was because the lack of economic development and urban growth perpetuated frontier conditions and denied them the opportunity to produce a substantial surplus for market.

The yeomen were mostly concentrated in the backcountry where slaves and plantations were rarely seen. In every southern state, there were hilly sections unsuitable for plantation agriculture. The foothills or interior valleys of the Appalachians and the Ozarks offered reasonably good soils for mixed farming, and long stretches of "piney barrens" along the Gulf Coast were suitable for raising livestock. In such regions slaveless farmers concentrated, giving rise to the "white counties" that complicated southern politics. A somewhat distinct group were the genuine mountaineers, who lived too high up to succeed at farming and relied heavily on hunting, lumbering, and distilling whiskey.

The lack of transportation facilities, more than some failure of energy or character, limited the prosperity of the yeomen. A large part of their effort was devoted to growing subsistence crops, mainly corn. They raised a small percentage of the South's cotton and tobacco, but production was severely limited by the difficulty of marketing. Their main source of cash was livestock, especially hogs. Hogs could walk to market over long distances, and massive droves from the backcountry to urban markets were commonplace. But southern livestock, which was generally allowed to forage in the woods rather than being fattened on grain, was of poor quality and did not bring high prices or big profits to raisers.

Although they did not benefit directly from the peculiar institution, most yeomen and other non-slaveholders tolerated slavery and were fiercely opposed to abolitionism in any form. A few

antislavery Southerners, most notably Hinton R. Helper of North Carolina, tried to convince the yeomen that they were victimized by planter dominance and should work for its overthrow. These dissenters presented a plausible set of arguments, emphasizing that slavery and the plantation system created a privileged class and severely limited the economic opportunities of the nonslaveholding white majority.

Most yeomen were staunch Jacksonians who resented aristocratic pretensions and feared concentrations of power and wealth in the hands of the few. When asked about the gentry, they commonly voiced their disdain of "cotton snobs" and rich planters generally. In state and local politics, they sometimes expressed these feelings by voting against planter interests on issues involving representation, banking, and internal improvements. Why, then, did they fail to respond to antislavery appeals that called on them to strike at the real source of planter power and privilege?

One reason was that some nonslaveholders hoped to get ahead in the world, and in the South this meant acquiring slaves of their own. Just enough of the more prosperous yeomen broke into the slaveholding classes to make this dream seem believable. Planters, anxious to ensure the loyalty of nonslaveholders, strenuously encouraged the notion that every white man was a potential master.

But the main reason why most nonslaveholders went along with the proslavery leadership was their intense fear and dislike of blacks. Although

they had no natural love of planters and slavery, they believed—or could be induced to believe—that abolition would lead to disaster. In part their anxieties were economic; freed slaves would compete with them for land or jobs. But their racism went deeper than this. "Now suppose they was free," a nonslaveholder told a northern traveler, "you see they'd think themselves just as good as we . . . just suppose you had a family of children, how would like to hev a nigger feeling just as good as a white man? how'd you like to hev a nigger steppin' up to your darter?" Emancipation was unthinkable because it would remove the pride and status that automatically went along with a white skin in this acutely race-conscious society. Slavery, despite its drawbacks, served to keep blacks "in their place" and to make all whites however poor or underprivileged they might be, feel that they were superior to somebody.

A Closed Mind and a Closed Society

Despite the tacit assent of most nonslaveholders, the dominant class never lost its fear that lower-class whites would turn against slavery. They felt threatened from two sides: from the slave quarters where a new Nat Turner might be gathering his forces, and from the backcountry where yeomen and poor whites might heed the call of abolitionists and rise up against planter domination. Beginning in the 1830s, the ruling element tightened the screws of slavery and used their control of government and communications to create a mood of impending catastrophe designed to ensure that all southern whites were of a single mind on the slavery issue.

Before the 1830s, open discussion of the rights or wrongs of slavery had been possible in many parts of the South. Apologists commonly described the institution as "a necessary evil." In the upper South, as late as the 1820s, there had been significant support for the American Colonization Society with its program of gradual, voluntary emancipation accompanied by deportation of the freedmen. In 1831 and '32—in the wake of the Nat Turner uprising—the Virginia state legislature debated a gradual emancipation plan. Major support for ensuring white safety by

getting rid of both slavery and blacks came from representatives of the yeoman farmers living west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. But the defeat of the proposal effectively ended the discussion. The argument that slavery was "a positive good"—rather than an evil slated for gradual elimination—won the day.

The "positive good" defense of slavery was an answer to the abolitionist charge that the institution was inherently sinful. The message was carried in a host of books, pamphlets, and newspaper editorials published between the 1830s and the Civil War. Who, historians have asked, was it meant to persuade? Partly, the argument was aimed at the North, as a way of bolstering the strong current of antiabolitionist sentiment. But Southerners themselves were a prime target; the message was clearly calculated to resolve the kind of doubts and misgivings that had been freely expressed before the 1830s. Much of it may have been over the heads of nonslaveholders, many of whom were semiliterate, but some of the arguments, in popularized form, were used to arouse racial anxieties that tended to neutralize antislavery sentiment among the lower classes.

The proslavery argument was based on three main propositions. The first and foremost was that enslavement was the natural and proper status for people of African descent. Blacks, it was alleged, were innately inferior to whites and suited only for slavery. Biased scientific and historical evidence was presented to support this claim. Secondly, slavery was held to be sanctioned by the Bible and Christianity—a position made necessary by the abolitionist appeal to Christian ethics. Ancient Hebrew slavery was held up as a divinely sanctioned model, and Saint Paul was quoted endlessly on the duty of servants to obey their masters. Southern churchmen took the lead in reconciling slavery with religion and also made renewed efforts to convert the slaves as a way of showing that enslavement could be a means for spreading the gospel.

Finally, efforts were made to show that slavery was consistent with the humanitarian spirit of the nineteenth century. The premise that blacks were naturally dependent led to the notion that they needed some kind of "family government" or special regime equivalent to the asylums that existed for the small numbers of whites who were also incapable of caring for themselves. The plan-

tation allegedly provided such an environment, as benevolent masters guided and ruled this race of "perpetual children."

By the 1850s, the proslavery argument had gone beyond mere apology for the South and its peculiar institution and featured an ingenious attack on the free labor system of the North. According to the Virginian George Fitzhugh, the master-slave relationship was *more* humane than the one prevailing between employers and wage laborers in the North. Slaves had security against unemployment and a guarantee of care in old age, while free workers might face destitution and even starvation at any time. Worker insecurity in free societies led inevitably to strikes, bitter class conflicts, and the rise of socialism; slave societies, on the other hand, could more effectively protect property rights and maintain other traditional values because its laboring class was both better treated, and at the same time, more firmly controlled.

In addition to arguing against the abolitionists, proslavery Southerners attempted to seal off their region from antislavery ideas and influences. Whites who were bold enough to criticize slavery publicly were mobbed or persecuted. One of the last and bravest of the southern abolitionists, Cassius M. Clay of Kentucky, armed himself with a brace of pistols when he gave speeches until the threat of mob violence finally forced him across the Ohio. In 1856 a University of North Carolina professor was fired because he admitted that he would vote for the moderately antislavery Republican party if he had a chance. Clergymen who questioned the morality of slavery were driven from their pulpits, and northern

travelers suspected of being abolitionist agents were tarred and feathered. When abolitionists tried to send their literature through the mails during the 1830s, it was seized in southern post offices and publicly burned.

Such flagrant denials of free speech and civil liberties were inspired by fears that nonslaveholding whites and slaves would get the wrong ideas. Hinton R. Helper's book, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, an 1857 appeal to nonslaveholders to resist the planter regime, was suppressed with particular vigor; those found with copies were beaten up or even lynched. But the deepest fear was that slaves would hear the abolitionist talk or read antislavery literature and be inspired to rebel. Such anxieties rose to panic pitch after the Nat Turner rebellion. Consequently, new laws were passed making it a crime to teach slaves to read and write. Other repressive legislation aimed at slaves banned meetings unless a white man was present, severely restricted the activities of black preachers, and suppressed independent black churches. Free blacks, who were thought to be possible instigators of slave revolt, were denied basic civil liberties and were the object of growing surveillance and harassment.

All these efforts at thought control and internal security did not allay the fears of abolitionist subversion, lower-class white dissent, and, above all, slave revolt. The persistent barrage of proslavery propaganda and the course of national events in the 1850s created a mood of panic and desperation. By this time an increasing number of Southerners had become convinced that safety from abolitionism and its associated terrors required a formal withdrawal from the Union—secession.