American Stories

A Young Slave Discovers the Path to Freedom

As a young slave, Frederick Douglass was sent by his master to live in Baltimore. When he first met his mistress, Sophia Auld, he was “astonished at her goodness” as she began to teach him to read. Her husband, however, ordered her to stop. Maryland law forbade teaching slaves to read. A literate slave was “unmanageable,” “utterly unfit . . . to be a slave,” he said. From this episode Douglass learned that “what he most dreaded, that I most desired . . . and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn.”

In the seven years he lived with the Aulds, young Frederick used “various stratagems” to teach himself to read and write. In the narrative of his early life, written
after his dramatic escape to the North, Douglass acknowledged that his master’s “bitter opposition” had helped him achieve his freedom as much as did Mrs. Auld’s “kindly aid.”

Most slaves did not, like Douglass, escape. But all were as tied to their masters as Douglass was to the Aulds. Nor could whites in antebellum America escape the influence of slavery. Otherwise decent people were often compelled by the “peculiar institution” to act inhumanely. After Sophia Auld’s husband’s interference, Douglass observed that she was transformed into a demon by the “fatal poison of irresponsible power.” Her formerly tender heart turned to “stone” when she ceased teaching him. “Slavery proved as injurious to her,” Douglass wrote, “as it did to me.”

A slavebreaker, Mr. Covey, to whom Douglass was sent in 1833 to have his will broken, also paid the cost of slavery. Covey succeeded for a time, Douglass sadly reported, in breaking his “body, soul, and spirit” by brutal work and discipline. But one hot August day in 1833 he could stand it no longer; the two men fought a long, grueling battle. Douglass won. Victory, he said, “rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood.” Although it would be four more years before his escape north, the young man never again felt like a slave. The key to Douglass’s resistance to Covey’s power was not just his strong will, or even the magical root he carried, but rather his knowledge of how to challenge and jeopardize Covey’s reputation and livelihood as a slavebreaker. The oppressed survive by knowing their oppressors.

As Mrs. Auld and Covey discovered, as long as some people were not free, no one was free. Douglass observed, “You cannot outlaw one part of the people without endangering the rights and liberties of all people. You cannot put a chain on the ankle of the bondsman without finding the other end of it about your own necks.” After quarreling with a house servant, one plantation mistress complained that she “exercises dominion over me—or tries to do it. One would have thought . . . that I was the Servant, she the mistress.” Many whites lived in constant fear of a slave revolt. A Louisiana planter recalled that he had “known times here when there was not a single planter who had a calm night’s rest; they then never lay down to sleep without a brace of loaded pistols at their sides.” In slave folktales, the clever Brer Rabbit usually outwitted the more powerful Brer Fox or Brer Wolf, thus reversing the roles of oppressed and oppressor.

**Slavery in America** was both an intricate web of human relationships and a labor system. Two large themes permeate this chapter. First, after tracing the economic development of the Old South in global context, in which slavery and cotton played vital roles, this chapter will emphasize the dreams, daily lives, and relationships of masters and slaves who, like Douglass and the Aulds, lived, loved, learned, worked, and struggled with one another in the years before the Civil War.

Perhaps no issue in American history has generated as many interpretations or as much emotional controversy as slavery. Three interpretive schools developed over the years, each adding to our knowledge of “the peculiar institution.” The first saw slavery as a relatively humane institution in which plantation owners took care of helpless, childlike slaves. The second depicted slavery as a harsh and cruel system of exploitation. The third, and most recent, interpretation described slavery from the perspective of the slaves, who, like Douglass, did indeed suffer brutal treatment yet nevertheless survived with integrity, intelligence, and self-esteem supported by community and culture. While the first and second interpretive schools emphasized workaday interactions among powerful masters and seemingly passive, victimized slaves, the third focused on...
the creative energies, agency, and vibrancy of life in the slave quarters from sundown to sunup.

In a unique structure, this chapter follows these masters and slaves through their day, from morning in the Big House through the hot afternoon in the fields to the slave cabins at night. Although slavery crucially defined the Old South, diverse social groups and international trade patterns contributed to the tremendous economic growth of the South from 1820 to 1860. We will look first at these socioeconomic aspects of antebellum southern life and then follow whites and blacks through a southern day from morning to noon to night.
BUILDING A DIVERSE COTTON KINGDOM

Many myths obscure our understanding of the antebellum South. It was not a monolithic society filled only with large cotton plantations worked by hundreds of slaves. The realities were much more complex. Large-plantation agriculture was dominant in the antebellum South, but most southern whites (75 percent) were not even slaveholders, much less large planters. Although rich slaveholding planters dominated the political and social life of the South, middling, yeoman “self-working farmers” with few or no slaves played a significant role. Most southern farmers lived not in imposing mansions but in modestly small or dark, cramped, two-room cabins. Cotton was a key cash crop in the South, but more acreage was actually planted in corn. Some masters were kindly, but many were not; some slaves were contented, but most were not.

There were many Souths, encompassing several geographic regions, each with different economic bases and social structures reflecting its own cultural values. The older Upper South of Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, and Kentucky grew different staple crops from those grown in the newer Lower or “Black Belt” South, from South Carolina to eastern Texas. Within each state, moreover, the economies of flat coastal areas differed from inland upcountry forests and pine barrens. A still further diversity existed between these areas and the Appalachian highlands, running from northern Alabama to western Virginia. Southern cities, few in number—New Orleans, Savannah, Charleston, and Richmond—differed dramatically from rural areas.

The Varied Economic Life in the South

Note the short-fiber cotton–growing “Black Belt” running from southern Virginia to eastern Texas. Despite the economically varied South, cotton was “king.”
Although the South was diverse, agriculture dominated its industry and commerce. In 1859, a Virginia planter complained about a neighbor who was considering abandoning his farm to become a merchant. "To me it seems to be a wild idea," the planter wrote in his diary. Southerners placed a high value on agriculture. Slavery was primarily a labor system intended to produce wealth for landowners. Although slavery in older areas was paternalistic, with masters and slaves owing mutual obligations, increasingly it became a capitalist enterprise intended to maximize profits. As such, it was tied into a growing international web of economic relations.

The Expansion of Slavery in a Global Economy

In the 20 years preceding the Civil War, the South's agricultural economy grew slightly faster than the North's. Personal income in 1860 was 15 percent higher in the South than in the prosperous states of the Old Northwest. If the South had become an independent nation in 1860, it would have ranked as one of the wealthiest countries in the world in per capita income, a wealth based mainly on cotton.

The world was deeply involved in the tremendous economic growth of the South in the early nineteenth century. The expansion of cotton depended on five factors: technological developments, land, labor, demand, and a global system of trade. The technological breakthrough was the cotton gin, invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, which allowed farmers to separate the cotton fibers from the sticky seeds in the hardier "short staple" cotton plant. The gin wedded the southern economy to cotton production, increased the need for more land and labor, and stimulated slavery's southwestward expansion into Alabama, Mississippi, western Tennessee and, with the Louisiana Purchase, into Louisiana, Arkansas, and eastern Texas. The opening up of vast new territories to cotton production brought the South into a global economy of trade.

For several centuries, British, Dutch, French, and Spanish merchants had been developing a worldwide system of trade, exchanging European manufactured goods for gold and silver from Latin America; silk, spices, cotton, and tea from China and India; and tobacco, coffee, sugar, and lumber from the Caribbean and North America. This international web of trade in turn motivated further technological developments, speeding the coming of the Industrial Revolution.

Starting in England in the late eighteenth century, the industrial factory system, made possible by an agricultural revolution providing surplus food and labor to cities, gradually replaced "putting out" various tasks to a cottage industry of rural people. Inventions of the spinning jenny, the flying shuttle, and the steam engine, which mechanized textile manufacturing, put textile production under one roof. Stimulating these developments was the demand by the British and other European nations' working classes to replace heavy linen and woolen clothes with lightweight, inexpensive cotton clothes. As British textile manufacturers sought to supply this demand, they eagerly bought all the cotton they could from the American South. Compared to the importation of only 22 million pounds of cotton from the United States in the pre-cotton gin year of 1787, by 1840, England imported 366 million pounds!

To meet this huge demand, southern farmers rushed westward to the fresh, fertile lands of the Gulf States to plant cotton as well as corn and other crops. Large-plantation owners, who alone could afford to purchase the gins, slaves, and vast lands needed to grow cotton, spread the plantation system southwestward. Despite the abolition of slavery in the North and occasional talk of emancipation in the South, slavery became more deeply entrenched in southern life. Thoughts of ending slavery were dispelled by one word: cotton.

Although more acreage was planted in corn, cotton was the largest cash crop and for that reason was called "king." In 1820, the South became the world's largest producer of cotton, and from 1815 to 1860 cotton represented more than half of all American exports. Cotton spurred economic growth not only in England but also throughout the United States. New England textile mills bought it; northern merchants profitably shipped, insured, and marketed it; northern bankers acquired capital from cotton sales; and western grain farmers found the South a major market for their foodstuffs.

The supply of cotton to Sheffield and Leeds in England, Brussels, and other European cities, as well as to Lowell and Lawrence, Massachusetts, grew at an astonishing rate. Cotton production soared from 461,000 bales in 1817 to 4.8 million bales in 1860, a more than tenfold jump.

Slavery in Latin America

Europeans depended on the slave-based economy in Latin America as well as in the American South. Africans were enslaved not only in Virginia and the
Carolinas but also in Jamaica, Barbados, Cuba, Martinique, and other European-owned islands in the West Indies, in Spanish Mexico and Central America, and throughout South America, including Portuguese Brazil, which at 1 million in 1800 had the largest slave population in all the Americas.

Historians used to argue that because of restraints of Catholicism, Roman legal codes, and the greater frequency of racial intermarriage, slavery was more benign and less barbaric in Spanish Latin America than in the United States, and that slaves enjoyed more dignity as people. Though it is true that Latin American slaves had more religious holidays and days of rest than in the North, and that caste distinctions based on gradations of color were more prevalent, it is now thought that slavery was just as harsh, if not more so, and that differences within Latin America and between Latin and North American slavery were more economic, demographic, and regional than religious and cultural.

Slavery emerged in Latin America out of economic necessity to provide labor where the indigenous population of Indians, decimated by both disease and intermarriage, could not be replaced. Sugar was to Latin America as cotton was to the southern United States, doubling in output at the beginning of the nineteenth century to meet growing European demands. In Cuba, Jamaica, and Barbados, and other Caribbean islands and in the Bahia region of Brazil, slaves were indispensable to the sugarcane industry, cutting, carting, milling, boiling, and refining sugar for a growing global market that included rum and other liquor distilleries. By 1840, Cuba was the world’s largest producer of cane sugar.

Enslaved Africans also worked in Peruvian and Chilean vineyards and in cacao, cocoa, cotton, and tobacco fields throughout Central and South America. They toiled in Mexican, Colombian, Peruvian, Venezuelan, and Brazilian gold, silver, and copper mines; as construction menials, cowboys, tradespeople, dockworkers, teamsters, and muleteers for overland and maritime transportation; and as servants to royal and religious officials. Women were generally expected to perform the same physical labor as men.

The conditions of work in Bolivian mines and Brazilian sugar fields, for example, were as harsh as in southern Black Belt cotton fields, and perhaps even worse. Slaves labored in gangs yet were held accountable as individuals. As market demands for sugar increased in the nineteenth century, sugar growers pressured slaves to increase their productivity, which rose from 1,500 to 2,500 pounds per year. Since slaves could produce enough sugar within two years to equal the value of their purchase, they were literally worked to debilitation and death, the average working life in the fields falling from 15 to 7 years and the death rate increasing from 6 to 10 percent. Whippings were used to enforce obedience, and strict supervision and control were maintained to prevent Africans from mixing with Indians and Europeans and from fleeing to nearby jungles to join communities of escaped slaves, called maroons.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Latin American slavery was the heavy preponderance of enslaved African men and the absence of women and families compared to the United States. By the nineteenth century, the gender ratio was three men to every two women, with a 2:1 ratio on the sugar estates of Brazil and Cuba; as late as 1875, only one in six Brazilian slaves was recorded as married. The birthrate was lower in Latin America, 40 births per 1,000 compared to 50 per 1,000 in the United States, and the death rate was appalling, the result of hard work, tropical epidemic diseases, malnutrition, and an extremely high infant mortality rate. With low birthrates and lower life expectancy (age 23 in Brazil, 35 in the United States), the slave population in Latin America actually dropped in the nineteenth century. While Brazil’s slave population climbed to just 1,510,000, numbers in the United States reached more than 4 million by 1860.

Unlike in the United States, where natural births increased the slave population, Latin Americans used the African slave trade to replenish lost labor. Between 1810 and 1870, after the 1807 abolition of the slave trade by Great Britain and the United States, nearly 2 million Africans were taken to the Americas, 60 percent to Brazil and 32 percent to Cuba and Puerto Rico, as compared to 2.7 percent smuggled illegally to the American South. The last American countries to abolish slavery were Cuba (1880) and Brazil (1888). Although official abolition of slavery was slow to occur, intermarriages among Europeans, Indians, and Africans in Latin America led to an increase in the population of free people of color, who by midcentury outnumbered slaves (80 percent in Brazil)—strikingly different from the United States, where free blacks constituted only 12 percent of the population.

Latin American slaves obtained their freedom by various means: through racial intermarriage, as payment for special favors and other contracts, in wills on a master’s death, and by purchasing their own freedom by extra work and hiring out. Relative autonomy and incentives such as presents, privileges, extra rations, holidays, and their own gardens to supplement diet deficiencies were given to many Latin American slaves. One slaveholder manual said, “the slave who owns neither flees nor causes
disorder.” Thus, although conditions in Latin America were as harsh as or even harsher than in the American South, rights of slaves were more fluid, shifting with changing economic and demographic conditions.

White and Black Migrations in the South

Conditions changed in the United States, too. Seeking profits from the British and from the worldwide demand for cotton, southerners migrated southwestward in huge numbers between 1830 and 1860, pushing the southeastern Indians and Mexicans in Texas out of the way. Like northern grain farmers, southern farmers followed parallel migration paths westward. From the coastal states they trekked westward into the lower Midwest and into the Lower South. By the 1830s, the center of cotton production had shifted from the Carolinas and Georgia to Alabama and Mississippi. This process continued in the 1850s as southerners forged into Arkansas, Louisiana, and eastern Texas. A father and his sons would go first, find land and clear it, plant some corn and later some cotton, and begin to raise a cabin. Leaving the sons to finish, the father would return east, where his wife and daughters had been managing the farm, pack up the household, and bring it to the new home.

These migrating southern families were not only pulled by the prospect of fresh land, cheap labor, and new riches, but they were also pushed westward by deteriorating economic conditions. A long depression in the Upper South beginning in the 1820s affected tobacco and cotton prices, as years of constant use had exhausted formerly fertile lands. In a society that valued land ownership, farm families had several choices. One was to move west; another was to stay and diversify. Farmers of the Upper South therefore shifted to grains, mainly corn and wheat, which required less slave labor, and to selling slaves.

The internal slave trade from Virginia and the Upper South “down the river” to the Old Southwest thus became a multimillion-dollar “industry” in the 1830s. Between 1830 and 1860, an estimated 300,000 Virginia slaves were transported south for sale. One of the busiest routes was from Alexandria, Virginia, almost within view of the nation’s capital, to a huge depot near Natchez, Mississippi, one of the richest large-plantation areas of the South, indeed a city with more millionaires than any other in the United States. Although southern states occasionally attempted to control the traffic in slaves, these efforts were poorly enforced. Besides, the reason for outlawing the slave trade was generally not humanitarian but rather reflected fear of a rapid increase in the slave population. Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana all banned the importation of slaves after the Nat Turner revolt in Virginia in 1831, resuming only in the profitable 1850s.

Congress formally ended external slave imports on January 1, 1808, the earliest date permitted by the Constitution and the same year that Great Britain ended its slave trade. Enforcement by the United States was weak, and many thousands of Africans continued to be smuggled to North America until the end of the Civil War. The increase in the slave population was not the result of this illegal trade, however, but of natural reproduction, often encouraged by slave owners eager for more laborers and salable human property for higher profits.

A Slave Coffle

This engraving of a group of slaves in chains depicts the stark inhumanity of the slave trade. Note the white man (in the right corner) raising the whip to hurry the slaves along. In front of him are a woman and child, and another woman stares at him in moral disbelief. What is your response to this engraving? (Library of Congress)
South Carolina, argued that poor whites should be given preference for factory work. The Tredegar Iron Company of Richmond, which manufactured boilers and steam engines, axes and saws, and cannon and shot, decided in 1847 to shift from white labor “almost exclusively” to slave laborers, who were cheaper and not likely to organize. This strategy foreshadowed the many future companies that exploited black labor while putting an economic squeeze on organized white workers who, along with southern white artisans (blacksmiths, cabinetmakers, butchers, and tanners) were threatened by black slave competition. Some even opposed slavery.

Whether in factories, mines, or cotton fields, slavery was profitable as a source of labor and capital investment. In 1859, the average plantation slave produced $78 in cotton earnings for his master annually while costing only about $32 to be fed, clothed, and housed. The “crop value per slave” increased from about $15 in 1800 to $125 in 1860. Enslaved women were likely to bear from two to six children, increasing their value. Slaves were a good investment. In 1844, a “prime field hand” sold for $600. A cotton boom beginning in 1849 raised this price to $1,800 by 1860. A slave owner could prosper by buying slaves, working them for several years, and selling them for a profit.

The economic growth of the South was impressive, but the dependence on a cotton and slave economy was limiting. Generally, agricultural growth spurs the rise of cities and industry, but not in the Old South. In 1860, the South had 35 percent of the U.S. population but only 15 percent of its manufacturing. Just before the Civil War, one southerner in 14 was a city dweller, compared with one of every three northerners.

Some southerners were aware of the dangers of the single focus on cotton. De Bow’s Review, an important journal published in New Orleans, called for more economic independence in the South through agricultural diversification, industrialization, and an improved transportation system. De Bow urged using slave labor in factories. But the planter class disagreed. As long as money could be made through a patriarchal, agricultural slave system that also valued honor and regulated race and gender relationships, plantation owners saw no reason to risk capital in new ventures.

Paternalism and Honor in the Planter Class

The aversion to industrialism in the South stemmed from the fact that most southerners, inheriting traditions of medieval chivalry, Protestantism, and their Celtic Scots–Irish cultural heritage, espoused a lifestyle of refined paternalism based on a rigid sense of social-class hierarchy and obligations. Wealthy planters, emulating the aristocratic English landowning class, claimed a privileged status as social “betters” and insisted on being treated with deference by those below them. This was especially important for those living in elegant mansions in isolated areas surrounded by black slaves and envious poor whites, circumstances that led to a violent undercurrent throughout the South.

The head of the plantation had to care for his “inferiors,” much like a kindly father. This meant providing the necessities of life to slaves (and white overseers), treating them as humbly as he could, and expecting faithful obedience, loyalty, and hard work in return. The plantation wife was an essential part of this culture. Placed on a pedestal and expected to uphold genteel values of sexual purity, spiritual piety, and submissive patience, she managed the household...
Although the South had a diverse agricultural economy, growing tobacco, rice, and sugar, cotton was the primary cash crop. Note the spectacular and simultaneous growth of cotton production and slave population between 1790 and 1860.

Reflecting on the Past  In what 20-year period did the greatest growth occur? By 1860, which states have the densest concentration of cotton production? Where are the most slaves? How do you explain any differences? Why, for example, were there so many slaves in Virginia and South Carolina? What were the implications of the increasing importance of cotton for U.S. exports for relations with other countries, especially England?

The cotton gin, invented by Eli Whitney in 1793, used a mechanized comb to remove the seeds from the cotton ball. Whitney's machine could clean the seeds out of the cotton faster than 50 people working by hand.

By 1860, slavery had extended throughout the South, with the greatest concentrations of slaves in the cotton-producing states (the "slave belt") of the Deep South.

- 500 slaves
- 1,000 bales
and extended gracious hospitality to social equals. That she also had to put up with a double sexual standard and the hypermasculinity of plantation life made it all the more important that she reflect ladylike virtues and be fiercely protected.

This masculine code, which valued activities such as politics, war, hunting, and gambling, carried with it a rigid code of honor. Southern men enjoyed political and military ceremonies and reviews, as well as leisure activities of the hunt, cards, cockfighting, and horse racing. They were sensitive to lapses of appropriate, chivalrous behavior and to insults to their honor. Such slighted led to duels, regulated by strict gentlemanly rules. One southern visitor said that the “smallest breach of courtesy” was “sufficient grounds for a challenge.” Another described the life of the plantation elite in Natchez in 1847: “Many of the chivalric gentry whom I have been permitted to see dashing about here on highbred horses, seem to find their greatest enjoyment in recounting their bear hunts, ‘great fights,’ and occasional exploits with revolvers and Bowie knives.” Although duels were outlawed in most states, the laws were routinely ignored. Ironically, the sometimes lawless and violent paternalistic code of honor in the Old South was intended to uphold law, order, and the plantation system.

**Slavery, Class, and Yeoman Farmers**

Slavery clearly served social as well as economic purposes. Although the proportion of southern white families that owned slaves slowly declined from 40 to 25 percent as some families sold slaves to cotton planters, the ideal of slave ownership permeated all classes and determined southern society’s patriarchal and hierarchical character. At the top stood the paternalistic planter aristocracy, much of it new wealth, elbowing its way among old established families like the Byrds and Carters of Virginia. Some 10,000 rich families owned 50 or more slaves in 1860; about 3,000 of these owned more than 100. A slightly larger group of small planters held from 10 to 50 slaves. But the largest group, 70 percent of all slaveholders in 1860, comprised 270,000 middle-level, yeoman farm families with fewer than 10 slaves. The typical slaveholder worked a small family farm of about 100 acres with 8 or 9 slaves, who were perhaps members of the same family. The typical slave, however, was more likely to be one of 20 or more on a large farm or small plantation.

William Airs, a South Carolina low-country farmer, owned nine slaves and worked 130 acres of mostly cotton in 1850. A decade later, with the addition of one more slave, he was able to buy more land and produced 54 bushels of rice in addition to cotton. In 1841, a young white North Carolinian, John Flintoff, went to Mississippi dreaming of wealth and prestige. Beginning as an overseer managing an uncle’s farm, he bought a “negro boy 7 years old” even before he owned any land. After several years of unrewarding struggle, Flintoff married and returned to North Carolina. There he finally bought 124 acres and a few cheap, young blacks, and by 1860, he had a modest farm with several slaves growing corn, wheat, and tobacco. Although he never realized his grand dreams, his son went to college, and his wife, he reported proudly, “has lived a Lady.”

Slavery was a powerful force in the lives of middle-level farmers like Flintoff and Airs, who had only a few slaves. Economic, social, and political standing depended on owning slaves. Most white southerners thus supported slavery whether they owned slaves or not. They also defended the institution because it gave them feelings of superiority over blacks and of kinship, if not quite equality; with other whites. Although there was always a small element of southern society that believed in emancipation, most southerners did not. An Alabama farmer with a small farm told a northern visitor in the 1850s that if the slaves got their freedom, “they’d all think themselves just as
good as we... How would you like to hev a nigger feelin’ just as good as a white man?”

Yeoman farmers also stoutly defended their independence and their property and lands as “self-working farmers.” Small as it was, their land and household was indispensably important to their livelihood, self-esteem, and political rights in a region dominated by the privileged elite. Fiercely proud of their independence and jealously protective of their modest properties, the yeoman farmers struggled for a share of political power against the planters. Other than defending states’ rights and their property against the national government (and sometimes against their powerful planter neighbors), yeoman political behavior focused on such local issues as militia organization and the election of sheriffs and tax collectors.

Yeoman farmers also defended their “households of faith,” adamantly believing in an evangelical Christianity that endorsed the sanctity both of the family and of slavery. Acknowledging spiritual equality (slaves, one woman said, may have “souls as well as white people”), they practiced a measure of equality in their daily lives. The yeoman household economic...
system included wives, the older children, and perhaps a handful of slaves or one slave hired on weekends. A neighbor said of Ezekiel Stokes of South Carolina that his slaves “were but three or four for help, and he and his family worked with [them] in the fields.”

The Nonslaveholding South

Below Airs, Flintoff, and other middling farmers lived the majority of white southerners who owned no slaves at all. Some 30 to 50 percent were landless. This nonslaveholding class, 75 percent of all southerners, was scattered throughout the South. Newton Knight, for example, worked a harsh piece of land cut out of the pines of southern Mississippi. He and his wife lived in a crude log cabin, scratching out their livelihood by growing corn and sweet potatoes and raising chickens and hogs. A staunch Baptist given to fits of violence, Knight had once killed a black.

Abner Ginn lived in the South Carolina low country, and although he had 560 acres in 1850, most of it was woodland and swamp, little of it cleared. On this land, worth only $1,000, he and his wife and nine children (six were under age 10) grew subsistence foodstuffs such as corn and sweet potatoes and managed a small herd of beef cattle and some dairy cows and pigs. He also managed to grow two bales of cotton for market. He had no slaves, though occasionally he would hire one to help him split rails, dig fence posts, and cut shingles. During the 1850s, as Ginn’s children grew older and were able to help more, he brought more land under cultivation and added wheat, rye, rice, and some horses. More successful than most nonslaveholding whites, the “hard-working” Abner Ginn was called “a well-off poor man.” Success mainly meant retaining his independence and land and increasing its value.

Living throughout the South but especially upcountry in the Appalachian highlands, whites like
Ginn and Knight worked poorer lands than yeomen and planters. Far from commercial centers, they were largely self-sufficient, raising almost all their food and trading hogs, eggs, small game, or homemade items for cash and necessary manufactured items such as kettles and rifles. With the indispensable help of their wives and children, they maintained a subsistence household economy, making soap, shoes, candles, whiskey, coarse textiles, and ax handles. They lived in two-room log houses separated by a “dog run.” Their drab, isolated life was brightened when neighbors and families gathered at corn huskings and quilting parties, logrolling and wrestling matches, and political stump and revivalist Baptist or Methodist camp meetings.

Nonslaveholding farmers were in the majority. In 1860 in North Carolina and even in the large plantation states of Mississippi and Louisiana, 60–70 percent of farms were less than 100 acres. Despite numerical majorities, these farmers were politically marginalized. Resenting the tradition of political deference to “betters,” they were unable to challenge planters for political power. Most fought with the Confederacy during the Civil War; a few, such as those in southern Mississippi who organized a guerrilla band of Unionists, silently harbored Unionist views.

Another group was herdsmen raising hogs and other livestock, fed on corn or allowed to roam in the woods. These whites supplied bacon and pork to local slaveholders (who often thought hog raising beneath their dignity) and drove herds to stockyards in Nashville, Louisville, and Savannah. The South raised two-thirds of the nation’s hogs. In 1860, the value of southern livestock was $500 million, twice that of cotton. However valuable the total size of the hog business, hog herdsmen were low on the southern social ladder.

Below them were the poorest whites of the South, about 10 percent of the population. Often sneeringly called “dirt eaters” and “crackers,” they scraped out a living in isolated, inhospitable areas by growing vegetables, hunting small game, and raising a few pigs. Some made corn whiskey, and many hired out as farmhands for an average wage of $14 per month. Because of poor diet and bad living conditions, these poor whites often suffered from hookworm and malaria. This, along with the natural debilitation of heat and poverty, gave them a reputation as lazy, shiftless, and illiterate. An English visitor described them as “the most degraded race of human beings claiming an Anglo-Saxon origin that can be found on the face of the earth.”

Poor whites stayed poor partly because the slave system allowed the planter class to accumulate a disproportionate amount of land and political power. High slave prices made entry into the planter class increasingly difficult, raising class tensions. Because large planters dominated southern life and owned the most slaves, slavery and the relations between slaves and masters is best understood by looking at plantation life during a typical day from morning to night.
MORNING: MASTER AND MISTRESS IN THE BIG HOUSE

It is early morning in the South. Imagine four scenes. In the first, William Waller of Virginia and a neighbor are preparing to leave with 20 choice slaves on a long trip to the slave market in Natchez, Mississippi. Waller is making this “intolerable” journey to sell some of his slaves in order to ease his heavy debts. Although he “loaths the vocation of slave trading,” he must recover some money to see his family “freed from my bondage” of indebtedness. To ease his conscience, he intends to supervise the sale personally, thus securing the best possible deal not only for himself but also for his departing slaves.

On another plantation, owned by the wealthy James Hammond of South Carolina, the horn blows an hour before daylight to awaken slaves for field work. Hammond rises soon after, aware that to run an efficient plantation he must “draw the rein tighter and tighter” to hold his slaves “in complete check.” In general, he says, “15 to 20 lashes will be sufficient flogging” for most offenses, but “in extreme cases” the punishment “must not exceed 100 lashes in one day.”

On an Alabama plantation, Hugh Lawson is up early, writing a sorrowful letter telling about the death of a “devotedly attached and faithful” slave, Jim. “I feel desolate,” Hugh writes, “my most devoted friend is gone.” As Lawson pens his letter, a female slave, already awake, “walked across a frosty field in the early morning” to the big house to build a fire for her mistress. As the mistress wakes up, she says to the slave, a grown woman taking care of two families, “Well, how’s my little nigger today?”

In a fourth household, a middling farm in up-country Georgia, Charles Brock awakens at dawn to join his two sons and four slaves digging up stumps and plowing fields of grains and sweet potatoes, while Brock’s wife and a female slave tend the cows.

As these diverse scenes suggest, slavery thoroughly permeated the lives of southern slaveholders. For slaves, morning was a time for getting up early for work. But for white slaveholders, morning involved contact with slaves in many ways: as burdens of figuring profit and loss, as objects to be kept
obedient and orderly, as intimates and fellow workers, and as ever-present reminders of fear, hate, and uncertainty.

The Burdens of Slaveholding

Robert Francis Withers Allston (1801–1864) was a major rice planter in a low, swampy, mosquito-infested tidal area of South Carolina where four rivers empty into Winyah Bay. It was a perfect spot for growing rice, but so unhealthy that few whites wanted to live there. The death rate among slaves was appallingly high. In 1840, a total of 18,274 slaves toiled there, but only 2,193 whites, many for only part of the year.

Robert was the fifth generation of Allstons to live in this inhospitable land. By 1860, he owned seven plantations along the Pee Dee River, totaling some 4,000 acres, in addition to 9,500 acres of pasture and timberland. He held nearly 600 slaves, 236 of whom worked at the home plantation, Chicora Wood. The total value of his land and slaves in the 1850s was approximately $300,000. Rich in land and labor, he had large mortgages and debts.

Allston was an enlightened, talented, public-spirited man. Educated at West Point and trained for the law, he did far more than practice agriculture. He served South Carolina for many years as state senator and governor. His political creed of “virtue and purity,” he wrote in 1838, was based on “the principles of Thomas Jefferson.” The core of his conviction was a “plain, honest, commonsense reading of the Constitution,” which for Allston meant the constitutionality of slavery and nullification and the illegitimacy of abolitionism and the U.S. Bank. Allston also reflected Jefferson’s humane side. Active in the Episcopal Church, he advocated liberalization of South Carolina’s poor laws, an improved system of public education open to rich and poor, humanitarian care of disabled people, and the improvement of conditions for the Catawba Indians.

In 1832, Allston married the equally enlightened Adele Petigru. She participated fully in the management of the plantation and ran it while Robert was away on political business. In a letter to her husband in 1850, Adele demonstrated her diverse interests by reporting on family affairs and the children’s learning, sickness among the slaves, the status of spring plowing, the building of a canal and causeway, the bottling of wine, and current politics. After Robert’s death during the Civil War, she would assume control of the Allston plantations, abandoned when Union troops arrived.

Except during the worst periods of mosquitoes and heat, both Allstons were fully engaged in plantation operations. Managing thousands of acres of rice required not only an enormous investment in labor and equipment, but also careful supervision of both slaves and an elaborate irrigation system. Although working rice rather than cotton, Allston’s concerns were typical of large planters.

His letters frequently expressed the burdens of owning slaves. Although Allston was careful to distribute enough cloth, blankets, and shoes to his slaves and to give them rest, the sickness and death of slaves, especially young fieldworkers, headed his list of concerns. “I lost in one year 28 negroes,” he complained, “22 of whom were task hands.” He tried to keep slave families together, but sold slaves when necessary. In a letter to his son Benjamin, he expressed concern over the bad example set by a slave driver who was “abandon’d by his hands” because he had not worked with them the previous Sunday. In the same letter, Allston urged Benjamin to keep up the “patrol duty,” less to guard against runaway slaves, he said, than to restrain “vagabond whites.” Clearly, the paternal planter class felt a duty to control lower-class whites as well as black slaves.

Other planters likewise saw slavery as both a duty and a burden. Many insisted that they worked harder than their slaves to feed and clothe them. R. L. Dabney of Virginia exclaimed, “there could be no greater curse inflicted on us than to be compelled to manage a parcel of Negroes.” Curse or not, Dabney and other planters profited from their burdens, a point they seldom admitted.

The Plantation Mistress

Adele Allston and other plantation wives experienced other kinds of burdens. “The mistress of a plantation,” wrote one, “was the most complete slave on it.” Another complained, “It is the slaves who own me. Morning, noon, and night, I’m obliged to look after them,” burdens that Adele Allston would have understood.

In accord with the southern code of honor, plantation mistresses were expected to adhere to domestic values by improving their husbands’ morals, which often meant restraining them from excessive cruelty, and by beautifying their parlors for proper hospitality. They also suffered under a double standard of morality. Although they were expected to act as chaste ladies, their husbands had virtually unrestricted sexual access to slave women. “God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system,” Mary Boykin Chesnut wrote in her diary. “Any lady is ready to tell
you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.” But plantation wives had their own double standard: a former slave woman said of her mistress, “though a warm-hearted woman, [she] was a violent advocate of slavery. I have ... puzzled how to reconcile this with her otherwise Christian character.”

Chesnut called the sexual dynamics of slavery “the sorest spot.” But there were others. Together with enslaved black females, plantation mistresses had to tend to the food, clothing, health, and welfare of not just their husbands and children, but the slaves, too. A Tennessee planter's son remembered his mother and grandmother as “the busiest women I ever saw.”

The plantation mistress, then, served many roles: as a potential humanizing influence on men; as a tough, resourceful, responsible manager of numerous plantation affairs; as a perpetuator of the system; and sometimes as a victim herself.

Justifying Slavery
The behavior of Douglass's mistress discussed at the beginning of this chapter suggests that slavery led otherwise good people to act inhumanely. Increasingly attacked as immoral, slaveholders felt compelled to justify the institution, not only to opponents of the system, but perhaps also to themselves. Until the 1830s, they explained away slavery as a “necessary evil.” But unlike in England, where opposition to slavery in the British West Indies succeeded in getting it abolished in 1834, in the United States, as abolitionists stepped up their attack in the 1830s, southerners shifted to justifying slavery in five arguments as, in John C. Calhoun’s words, “a positive good.”

A biblical justification was based in part on the curse that had fallen on the son of Ham, one of Noah’s children, and in part on Old and New Testament admonitions to servants to obey their masters. A leading southern economic magazine, De Bow's Review, said in 1851 that “civilization itself may almost be said to depend upon the continued servitude of blacks in America.”

The legal justification rested on the U.S. Constitution’s refusal to forbid slavery and on three passages clearly implying its legality: the “three-fifths” clause, the protection of the overseas slave trade for 20 years, and the mandate for returning fugitive slaves across state lines.

A fourth justification for slavery was pseudoscientific. Until the 1830s, most white southerners believed that blacks were degraded not by nature but by African climate and their slave condition. Claiming scientific authority, books were written to show black deficiency because of cranial shape and size. With the rise of the “positive good” defense in the 1830s, southerners began to argue that blacks had been created separately as an inherently inferior race, and therefore the destiny of the inferior...
Africans was to work for the superior Caucasians. At best, the slave system would domesticate “uncivilized” blacks. As Allston put it, “The educated master is the negro’s best friend upon earth.”

A sociological defense of slavery was implicit in Allston’s paternalistic statement. George Fitzhugh, a leading advocate of this view, argued, “the Negro is but a grown child and must be governed as a child,” and so needed the paternal guidance, restraint, and protection of a white master. Many southerners believed that chaos and race mixing would ensue if slaves were freed. Allston wrote that emancipation was unthinkable because it would lead to “giving up our beautiful country to the ravages of the black race and amalgamation with savages.”

Fitzhugh compared the treatment of southern slaves favorably with that of free laborers working in northern factories. These “wage slaves,” he argued, worked as hard as slaves, yet with their paltry wages they had to feed, clothe, and shelter themselves. Since southern masters took care of all these necessities, freeing their slaves would be a heartless burden to both blacks and whites.

Southern apologists for slavery faced the difficult intellectual task of justifying a system that ran against the main ideological directions of nineteenth-century American society: the expansion of individual liberty, mobility, economic opportunity, and democratic political participation. The southern defense of slavery had also to take into account the 75 percent of white families who owned no slaves but envied those who did. To deflect potential class antagonisms among whites, wealthy planters developed a justification of slavery that emphasized white superiority regardless of class.

The underlying but rarely admitted motive behind all these justifications was that slavery was profitable, as it was in Latin America. As the southern defense of slavery intensified in the 1840s and 1850s, it aroused greater opposition from northerners and from slaves themselves. Perhaps slavery’s worst cruelty was not physical but psychological: to be enslaved and barred from participation in a nation that espoused freedom and equality of opportunity.

NOON: SLAVES IN HOUSE AND FIELDS

It is two o’clock on a hot July afternoon on the plantation. The midday lunch break is over, and the slaves are returning to work in the fields. Lunch was the usual cornmeal and pork. The slaves now work listlessly, their low stamina resulting from a deficient diet and suffocating heat and humidity. Douglass remembered that “we worked all weathers . . . It was never too hot, or too cold.” Mary Reynolds, a Louisiana slave, recalled that she hated most having to pick cotton “when the frost was on the bolls,” which made her hands “git sore and crack open and bleed.”

Daily Toil

The daily work schedule for most slaves, whether in the fields or the “Big House,” was long and demanding. Awakened before daybreak, they worked on an average day 14 hours in the summer and 10 hours in the winter; during harvest, an 18-hour workday was not uncommon. Depending on the size of the workforce and the crop, the slaves were organized either in gangs or according to tasks. Gangs, usually of 20 to 25, worked the cotton rows under the watchful eye and quick whip of a driver. Ben Simpson, a Georgia slave, remembered vividly his master’s “great, long whip platted out of rawhide” that struck any slave who would “fall behind or give out.”

Under the task system, which slaves preferred and negotiated for cleverly, each slave had a specific task to complete daily. It gave slaves incentive to work hard enough to finish early, but their work was scrutinized constantly. An overseer’s weekly report to Robert Allston in 1860 noted that he had “flogged for hoeing corn bad Fanny 12 lashes, Sylvia 12, Monday 12, Phoebee 12, Susanna 12, Salina 12, Celia 12, Iris 12.” Black slave drivers were no less demanding. One reported to his master that because the slaves only got 11/2 acres plowed instead of 7, “I gave them ten licks a peace [sic] upon their skins [and] I gave Julyann eight or ten licks for misplacing her hoe.”

An average slave was expected to pick 130 to 150 pounds of cotton per day; work on sugar and rice plantations was even harder. Sugar demanded constant cultivation, digging ditches in snake-infested fields. At harvest time, cutting, stripping, and carrying the cane to the sugar house for boiling was exhausting, as was cutting and hauling huge quantities of firewood. Working in the low-country rice fields was worse: slaves spent long hours standing in water up to their knees.

House slaves, mostly women, had relatively easier assignments, though they were usually called on to help with the harvest. Their usual work was in or near the Big House as maids, cooks, seamstresses, laundresses, coachmen, drivers, gardeners, and “mammies.” Slaves did most of the skilled artisan work on the plantation as carpenters, stonemasons, blacksmiths, weavers, mechanics, and millers. House slaves ate and dressed better than those in
Scenes from the Life of the Enslaved  Slaves survived nobly despite hard work, ill health, a deficient diet, and poor living conditions. Enslaved families had a double burden of work and caring for their families, as seen in the photographs (top) of women working in the fields, one picking cotton with a child and the other helping till rice, and in the drawing (bottom left) of the woman cooking in her cabin while her children look out from the doorway. But female slaves also managed to develop networks of support while working, as seen in the drawing (bottom right) of the three women winnowing rice. (Top: Photographs from Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations/Art Resource, NY; bottom left: Private Collection; bottom right: From Down by the Riverside by Charles Joyner.)

the fields, and there was more intimacy between whites and blacks. But there were disadvantages: close supervision, duty day and night, and conflicts with whites that could range from being given unpleasant jobs to insults, spontaneous angry whippings, and sexual assault. The most feared punishment, however, other than sale to the Deep South, was to be sent to the fields.

Slave Health and Punishments
Although slave owners had an interest in keeping their workforce healthy, slaves led sickly lives. Home was a crude, one-room log cabin with a dirt floor and a fireplace. Cracks and holes allowed mosquitoes easy entry, disturbing sleep. Typical furnishings included a table, some stools or boxes to sit on, an iron pot and wooden dishes, and perhaps a bed. Cabins were crowded, usually housing more than one family. Clothing, issued once or twice a year, was shabby and uncomfortable. Women often made their own and their children’s clothes.

Studies on the adequacy of slave diet disagree. But compared with Latin American slaves, North American slaves were fed well. Once a week, each slave got an average ration of a peck of cornmeal,
three to four pounds of salt pork or bacon, some molasses, and perhaps some sweet potatoes. The mainstay was corn. While a few slaves were able to grow vegetables and to fish or hunt, most rarely enjoyed fresh meat, dairy products, fruits, or vegetables. The limitations of their diet led to theft of food and the practice of eating dirt, which caused worms. Deficient slave diet also resulted in skin disorders, cracked lips, sore eyes, vitamin deficiency diseases, and even mental illness.

Enslaved women especially suffered weaknesses caused by vitamin deficiency, hard work, and disease, as well as those associated with menstruation and childbirth. Women were expected to do the same tasks in the fields as the men, in addition to cooking, sewing, child care, and traditional female jobs in the quarters when the fieldwork was finished. “Pregnant women,” the usual rule stated, “should not plough or lift” and had a three-week recovery period following birth. But these guidelines were often violated. Mortality of slave children under age 5 was twice as high as for white children.

Life expectancy for North American slaves was longer than for those in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the rigorous sugar industry used them up within a few years. However, because of poor diet and the climate, slaves in the United States were highly susceptible to epidemics. Despite some resistance as a result of the sickle-cell trait, many slaves died from malaria, yellow fever, cholera, and other diseases spread by mosquitoes or bad water. Slaves everywhere suffered and died from intestinal ailments in the summer and respiratory diseases in the winter. An average of 20 percent (and sometimes 50 to 60 percent) of the slaves on a given plantation would be sick at one time, and no overseer’s report was complete without recording sicknesses and days of lost labor.

The relatively frequent incidence of whippings and other physical punishments aggravated the poor physical condition of the slaves. Many slaveholders offered rewards—a garden plot, an extra holiday, hiring out, and passes—as inducements for faithful labor, and they withheld these privileges as punishment. But southern court records, newspapers, plantation diaries, and slave memoirs reveal that sadistic punishments were frequent and harsh.

The slave William Wells Brown reported that on his plantation, the whip was used “very frequently and freely” for inadequate or uncompleted work, stealing, running away, and insolence and lying. Whippings ranged from 10 to 100 strokes of the lash. Former slaves described a good owner as one who did not “whip too much” and a bad owner as one who “whipped till he’d bled you and blistered you.” Slaveholders had many theories on the appropriate kind of lash to inflict sufficient pain and punishment without damaging a valuable laborer. Other punishments included confinement in stocks and jail during leisure hours, chains, muzzling, salting lash wounds, branding, burning, castration, mauling by dogs, and having to do “women’s work.”

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described as having "large raised scars ... in the small of his back and on his abdomen nearly as large as a person's finger." A Georgia female was "considerably marked by the whip." Branding left even more vivid marks. One fugitive, Betty, was described as recently "burnt ... with a hot iron on the left side of her face." "I tried to make the letter M," her master admitted in his diary.

**Slave Law and the Family**

Complicating master–slave relationships was the status of slaves as simultaneously human beings and property, a legal and psychological ambiguity the South never resolved. On the one hand, slaves had names, personalities, families, and wills of their own, making them fellow humans. On the other hand, they were items of property, purchased to perform specific profit-making tasks. As a Kentucky court put the problem in 1836, "Although the law of this state considers slaves as property,... it recognizes their personal existence."

This ambiguity led to confusion in the laws governing treatment of slaves. Until the early 1830s, some southern abolitionist activity persisted, primarily in the Upper South, and slaves had slight hopes of being freed. But they also suffered careless, often brutal treatment. This confusion changed with the convergence in 1831 of Nat Turner's revolt and William Lloyd Garrison's attack on slavery in the *Liberator* (see Chapter 12). After 1831, the South tightened up the slave system. Laws prohibited manumission, and slaves' hopes of freedom other than by revolt or escape vanished. At the same time, laws protecting them from overly severe treatment were strengthened.

But laws were rarely enforced, and treatment varied with individual slaveholders, depending on their mood and other circumstances. Most planters, like Robert Allston, encouraged their slaves to marry and tried to keep families intact, believing that families made black males more docile and less inclined to run away. But some masters failed to respect slave marriages or broke them up because of financial problems, which southern law permitted them to do. A North Carolina Supreme Court justice said in 1853, "Our law required no solemnity or form in regard to the marriage of slaves."

Adding to the pain of forced breakup of the slave family was the sexual abuse of enslaved women. Although the frequency of such abuse is unknown, the presence of thousands of mulattoes in the antebellum era points to the practice. White men in the South took advantage of slave women by offering gifts for sexual "favors," by threatening those who refused sex with physical punishment or the sale of...
a child or loved one, by purchasing concubines, and by outright rape. As Frederick Douglass put it, “The slave woman is at the mercy of the fathers, sons or brothers of her master.”

To obtain cheap additional slaves for the workforce, slaveholders encouraged young slave women to bear children, whether married or not. If verbal prodding and inducements such as less work and more rations did not work, masters would force mates on slave women. “Massa” Hawkins, for example, chose Rufus to live with an unwilling 16-year-old Rose Williams. Years later, she recalled how she first repulsed him: “I puts de feet ‘gainst him and give him a shove and out he go on de floor.” When Rufus persisted, Rose took a poker and “lets him have it over de head.” Hawkins then threatened Rose with a “whippin’ at de stake” or sale away “from my folks.” This was too much for her. “What am I’s to do? So I ‘cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields.”

Slaves, however, usually chose their own mates on the basis of mutual attraction during a courtship complicated by threats of white interference. As among poor whites, premarital intercourse was frequent, but promiscuous behavior was rare. Most couples maintained affectionate, lasting relationships. This, too, led to numerous sorrows. Members of slave families, powerless to intervene, had to witness the flogging or physical abuse of loved ones. William Wells Brown remembered that “cold chills ran over me and I wept aloud” when he saw his mother whipped. For this reason, some slaves preferred to marry a spouse from another plantation.

Although motherhood was the key event in an enslaved woman’s life, bearing children and the double burden of work and family responsibilities challenged her resourcefulness. Some masters provided time off for nursing mothers, but the more common practice was for them to work in the fields with their newborn infants lying nearby, wrapped in cloth for protection from the sun. Women developed support networks, looking after one another’s children; meeting to sew, quilt, cook, or do laundry; and attending births, caring for the sick and dying, and praying together.

The worst trauma for slaves was the separation of families, a haunting fear rarely absent from slave consciousness. Although many slaveholders had

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**AMERICAN VOICES**

**Harriet Jacobs, A Female Slave Sasses Her Abusive Master**

When a North Carolina slave, Harriet Jacobs, is told by Dr. Flint, her master, who had been making obscene suggestions to her, that she must stop seeing a free black lover, she confronts Flint in this exchange from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, published in Boston in 1861.

“So you want to be married, do you?” said he, “and to a free nigger:”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’ll soon convince you whether I am your master, or the nigger fellow you honor so highly. If you must have a husband, you may take up with one of my slaves.”

What a situation to be in, as the wife of one of his slaves, even if my heart had been interested!

I replied, “Don’t you suppose, sir, that a slave can have some preference about marrying? Do you suppose that all men are alike to her?”

“Do you love this nigger?” said he, abruptly.

“Yes, sir.”

“How dare you tell me so!” he exclaimed, in great wrath. After a slight pause, he added, “I supposed you thought more of yourself; that you felt above the insults of such puppies.”

I replied, “If he is a puppy I am a puppy, for we are both of the negro race. It is right and honorable for us to love each other. The man you call a puppy never insulted me, sir; and he would not love me if he did not believe me to be a virtuous woman.”

He sprang upon me like a tiger, and gave me a stunning blow. It was the first time he had ever struck me; and fear did not enable me to control my anger. When I had recovered a little from the effects, I exclaimed, “You have struck me for answering you honestly. How I despise you!”

- Who do you think “wins” the exchange?
- Why do you think so?
- What does this exchange suggest about the southern justification of slavery?
both moral and economic reasons to maintain families, inevitably they found themselves destroying them. One study of 30 years of data from the Deep South shows that masters dissolved one-third of all slave marriages. Even then, the slaves tried to maintain contact with loved ones sold elsewhere. “My Dear Wife for you and my Children my pen cannot Express the Griffe I feel to be parted from you all,” wrote Abream Scriven.

Notice for a Slave Sale

Announcement of a slave sale in Charleston, 1860. What do you learn about the economics and morality of slavery from this poster? (Five Slave Narratives: A Compendium)

There was a sound basis, in fact, for the abolitionists’ contention that slavery was a harsh, brutal system. However, two points need to be emphasized. First, although slavery led otherwise decent human beings to commit inhumane acts, many slaveholders throughout the South were not cruel; they did what they could for their slaves, out of both economic self-interest and Christian morality. Second, whether under kind or cruel masters, the slaves endured with dignity, communal sensitivity, and occasional joy. If daytime in the fields describes slavery at its worst, nighttime in the quarters, as examined from the black perspective, reveals noble survival powers and their capacity to mold an African American culture even under slavery.
NIGHT: SLAVES IN THEIR QUARTERS

It is near sundown, and the workday is almost over. Some slaves begin singing the gentle spiritual "Steal Away to Jesus," and others join in. To the unwary overseer or master, the song suggests happy slaves, content with their earthly lot and looking forward to heaven. To the slaves, however, the song is a signal that, as ex-slave Wash Wilson put it, they are to "steal away to Jesus" because "dere gwine be a 'ligious meetin' dat night."

In the slave quarters, away from whites and daily work, Wilson said, "sometimes us sing and pray all night." In the quarters, slaves preserved much of their African heritage and created an elaborate black community that helped them make sense out of their lives. In family life, religion, song, dance, the playing of musical instruments, and the telling of stories, the slaves both sought release from suffering and created a vibrant community and culture.

Black Christianity

As suggested by the scene Wash Wilson described, Christian worship was indispensable to life in the slave quarters, mixed with elements of Islamic and African religious practices. The revivals of the early nineteenth century led to an enormous growth of Christianity among black Americans. Black religious gatherings were usually forbidden unless white observers were present or white preachers led them. Independent black Baptist and Methodist churches, especially in the border states and cities, served slaves, free blacks, and occasionally even whites. These separate churches steered a careful path to maintain their freedom and avoid white interference, as did slave preachers, who occasionally administered baptisms and marriages.

The vast majority of southern black slaves attended plantation churches set up by their masters. These churches were rigidly segregated, either by a roped-off rear section for the blacks or, as one slave said, "us niggers sat on one side and de white folks sat on the other." Robert Allston built a prayer house for his slaves, reporting with pride that they were "attentive . . . and greatly improved in intelligence and morals." For the slaveholders, religion was a
form of social control. Sermons emphasized the importance of work, obedience, and respect for the master's property. “All that preacher talked about,” one slave remembered, “was for us slaves to obey our master and not to lie and steal.” To enforce obedience, slaves were required to say catechisms that emphasized the masters’ view of black inferiority and sinfulness: “Q. Who was the first Negro? A. Cain. Q. How did he become so? A. The Lord set a black mark upon him. Q. Did the Southern slave come from him? A. Yes.”

There were limits, however, to white control. Although some slaves accommodated to the master’s brand of Christianity and patiently waited for heavenly deliverance, others rebelled and sought earthly liberty. Not far from Allston’s plantation, several slaves were discovered (and imprisoned) for singing “We’ll soon be free / We’ll fight for liberty / When de Lord will call us home.” Douglass organized an illegal Sabbath school, “the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed,” where he and others risked whippings while learning about Christianity and how to read. In religious schools and meetings like these, the slaves created an “invisible” church. On Sunday morning, they dutifully sat through the “white fo’ks service in de morning,” Sarah, an Alabama slave recalled, waiting for the “real meetin’” and “real preachin’” later that night.

Long into the night, they would sing, dance, shout, and pray in the call-and-response pattern characteristic of black religion to this day. “Ya’ see,” Sarah explained, “niggers lack ta shout a whole lot an’ wid de white fo’ks al’round ‘em, dey couldn’t shout jes’ lack dey want to.” But at night they could, taking care to deaden the sound to keep the whites away by hanging curtains from the trees or, in an African custom, to turn over a pot to “catch the sound.” Another African practice, the ring shout, a dance forbidden by Methodists, was transformed into the “ecstatic shout,” praising the Lord. The religious ceremony in “the hush arbor” relieved the day’s burdens and expressed communal religious values. “At night,” another slave recalled with pride, “was when the darkies really did have they freedom of spirit.”

Although many of the practices were African, the messages reiterated over again in the invisible slave church were the Judeo-Christian themes of suffering
and deliverance from bondage. “We prayed a lot to be free,” Anderson Edwards said. “The folks would sing and pray and testify and clap their hands,” recalled Simon Brown, “just as if God was right there in the midst of them.” The freedom the slaves sought was a complex blend of a peaceful soul and an earthly escape from slavery, as reflected in spirituals.

The Power of Song

A group of slaves gathers at night in the woods behind their quarters to sing and shout together. Two moods are expressed. First, they mourn with “trebbled spirit” being stolen from Africa, their families “sold apart.” But second, they sing: “There’s a better day a-coming. / Will you go along with me? / There’s a better day a-coming. / Go sound the jubilee.”

Music was a crucial form of expression in the slave quarters on both secular and religious occasions. The slaves were adept at creating a song, as one woman recalled, “on de spurn of de moment.” Jeanette Robinson Murphy described a process of spontaneous creation that, whether in rural gospels or urban jazz, describes black music to this day. “We’d all be at the ‘prayer house’ de Lord’s day,” she said, when all of a sudden in the midst of a white preacher’s sermon, “de Lord would come a-shinin’ thoo dem pages and revive dis ole nigger’s heart.” She continued, “I’d jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pat, and dey would all cotch de words and I’d sing it to some ole shout song I’d heard ’em sing from Africa, and dey’d all take it up and keep in it, and keep a-addin’ to it, and den it would be a spiritual.”

Spirituals reiterated the basic Judeo-Christian theme: a chosen people, the children of God, were held in bondage but would be delivered: “To the Promised Land I’m Bound to Go,” “Go Down Moses,” and “Who Will Deliver Po’ Me?” What they meant by deliverance often had a double meaning: freedom in heaven and freedom in the North. Where, exactly, was the desired destination of “Oh Canaan, sweet Canaan / I am bound for the land of Canaan”? Was it heaven? Freedom “anyplace else but here”? A literal reference to the terminus of the Underground Railroad in Canada? For different slaves, and at different times for the same person, it meant all of these.

Slave songs did not always contain double or hidden meanings. Sometimes slaves gathered simply for music, to play fiddles, drums, and other instruments fashioned on West African models. Slave musicians were invited to perform at white ceremonies and parties, but most played for the slave community. Weddings, funerals, holiday celebrations, family reunions, and a successful harvest were all occasions for a communal gathering, usually with music.

So, too, was news of external events that affected their lives—a crisis in the master’s situation, a change in the slave code, a Civil War battle, or emancipation. “The songs of the slave,” Douglass wrote, “represent the sorrows of his heart”: broken families, burdens of work, trouble, toil, and homelessness. But they also expressed joy, triumph, and deliverance. Each expression of sorrow usually ended in an outburst of eventual liberation and justice. The deep sorrow of “sometimes I feel like a motherless chile” was transformed later in the song into “sometimes I feel like / A eagle in de air. . . . / Gonna spread my wings an’ / Fly, fly, fly.”

The Enduring Family

The role of music in all milestones of family life suggests that the family was central to life in the slave quarters. Although sexual abuse and family separation were all too real, so was the hope for family continuity. Naming practices, for example, show that children were connected to large extended families.

The benefits of family cohesion were those of any group: love, protection, education, moral guidance, cultural transmission, status, role models, and support. All these existed in the slave quarters. As the slaves gathered in the quarters at the end of the day, parents passed on to their children the family story, language patterns and words, recipes, folktales, musical traditions, and models of strength and beauty. Thus they preserved cultural traditions, which enhanced the identity and self-esteem of parents and children alike. Parents also taught their children how to cope with slavery and survive. As young ones neared the age for full-time fieldwork, their parents instructed them in the best ways to pick cotton or corn, how to avoid the overseer’s whip, whom to trust and learn from, and ways of fooling the master.

Opportunities existed on many plantations for parents to perform extra work for money to buy sugar or clothing; to hunt and fish, thereby adding protein to their family’s diet; or to tend a small garden to grow vegetables. In such small ways, they improved the welfare of their families. J. W. C. Pennington proudly recalled helping his “father at night in
A frequent activity of family life in the slave quarters was telling stories. The folktale was an especially useful and indirect way in which older slaves could express hostility toward their masters, impart wisdom to the young, and teach them how to survive and gain a measure of freedom, while at the same time entertaining themselves. Folktales, cleverly indirect, reveal to historians a great deal about the enslaved Africans’ view of their experience and aspirations.

Although the tales took many forms, perhaps the best known are the “Brer Rabbit” animal stories. The trickster rabbit, who existed originally in West African folklore (and in Brazilian fables as a tortoise), was weak and careless, often looked down on by the other animals. Like the slaves, he was a victim. But he was also boastful, outwardly happy, and full of mischief. More important, he knew how to use cleverness and cunning to outwit stronger foes (like Brer Wolf), usually by knowing them better than they knew him, a psychological necessity for all who are oppressed.

In one story, the powerful Brer Tiger took all the water and food for himself during a time of famine, leaving the weaker animals miserable. Brer Rabbit, however, turned things around. He played on Brer Tiger’s fears that he would be blown away by a “big wind,” which was secretly manufactured by the rabbit with the help of other creatures. The tiger was so afraid of the wind (perhaps the winds of revolt?) that he begged Brer Rabbit to tie him “tightly” to a tree to keep from being blown away. Brer Rabbit, although initially resistant in order to make Brer Tiger beg harder, was finally happy to oblige, after which all the creatures of the forest were able to share the cool water and juicy pears that the tiger had denied them.

In another folktale, Brer Rabbit fell into a well but then got out by tricking Brer Wolf into thinking it was better to be in the cool bottom of the well than outside where it was hot. As the wolf lowered himself down in one bucket, Brer Rabbit rose up in the other, laughingly saying as he passed Brer Wolf, “Dis am life; some go up and some go down.” In these stories, the slaves vicariously outwitted their more powerful masters and usually reversed roles.

The accompanying story excerpt is from perhaps the most famous animal tale, “The Tar Baby Tricks Brer Rabbit.” This version is by William J. Faulkner, who, after he retired as minister and dean of men at Fisk University, gathered and recorded the folktales he had heard in his youth in South Carolina from a former slave. Rev. Faulkner did not like to tell stories in dialect because he believed readers formed stereotyped judgments from the dialect and missed the significance of the tale itself. We enter the story as an angry Brer Wolf has decided on a plan to catch the lazy Brer Rabbit, who refused to help the wolf build a well and has been fooling him by drinking from the well while Brer Wolf was asleep.

When you have finished reading the story, ask yourself what you learned about slavery from this story. Did violence work for Brer Rabbit or did it only make things worse? What finally worked? How do you interpret the ending? Brer Rabbit returned to the briar patch, “the place where I was born.” But is the briar patch, with all its thorns, scratches, and roots, more like Africa or slavery? Or what?

Reflecting on the Past Think about the stories you heard as a child or now find yourself telling others. How do they express the realities, flaws, values, and dreams of the American people? The same question applies to the songs we sing, the art we make, the rhythms we move to, and the jokes we tell: What do they tell us about ourselves and our values? In answering these questions, we deepen our knowledge of history.
Tar Baby

Brer Wolf studied and studied to find a way to catch Brer Rabbit. He scratched his head, and he pulled his chin whiskers until by and by he said, “I know what I’ll do. I’ll make me a tar baby, and I’ll catch that good-for-nothing rabbit.”

And so Brer Wolf worked and worked until he had made a pretty little girl out of tar. He dressed the tar baby in a calico apron and carried her up to the well, where he stood her up and fastened her to a post in the ground so that nobody could move her. Then Brer Wolf hid in the bushes and waited for Brer Rabbit to come for some water.

But three days passed before Brer Rabbit visited the well again. On the fourth day, he came with a bucket in his hand. When he saw the little girl, he stopped and looked at her. Then he said, “Hello. What’s your name? What are you doing here, little girl?”

The little girl said nothing.

This made Brer Rabbit angry, and he shouted at her, “You no-mannered little snip, you! How come you don’t speak to your elders?”

The little girl still said nothing.

“I know what to do with little children like you. I’ll slap your face and teach you some manners if you don’t speak to me,” said Brer Rabbit.

Still the little girl said nothing.

And then Brer Rabbit hit his head and said, “Speak to me, I say. I’m going to slap you.” With that, Brer Rabbit slapped the tar baby in the face, and his right hand stuck.

“A-ha, you hold my hand, do you? Turn me loose, I say. Turn me loose. If you don’t, I’m going to slap you with my left hand. And if I hit you with my left hand, I’ll knock the daylight out of you.”

But the little girl said nothing. So Brer Rabbit drew back his left hand and slapped the little girl in her face, arm, and his left hand stuck.

“Oh, sir, you’re going to hurt both my hands, are you? You better turn me loose. If you don’t, I’m going to kick you. And if I kick you, it’s going to be like thunder and lightning!” With that, Brer Rabbit drew back his right foot and kicked the little girl in the shins with all his might, blap! Then his right foot stuck.

“You hold my foot, do you? Turn me loose, I say. Turn me loose. If you don’t, I’m going to kick you with my left foot. And if I kick you with my left foot, I’ll throw you in the briar patch.”

So Brer Rabbit drew back his left hand and slapped the little girl in her face, arm, and his left hand stuck.

“I know what I’m going to do with you. I’ll throw you in the briar patch,” said Brer Rabbit.

“No, sir, Brer Wolf, I haven’t been bothering your water. I was just going over to Brer Bear’s house, and I stopped by here long enough to speak to this little no-manners girl,” said Brer Rabbit.

“Yes, you’re the one,” said Brer Wolf. “You’re the very one who’s been stealing my drinking water all this time. And I’m going to kill you.”

“Please, sir, Brer Wolf, don’t kill me,” begged Brer Rabbit.

“I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Yes, I’m going to kill you, but I don’t know how I’m going to do it yet,” growled Brer Wolf. “Oh, I know what I’ll do. I’ll throw you in the fire and burn you up.”

“All right, Brer Wolf,” said Brer Rabbit. “Throw me in the fire. That’s a good way to die. That’s the way my grandmother died, and she said it’s a quick way to go. You can do anything with me, anything you want, but please, sir, don’t throw me in the briar patch.”

“No, I’m not going to throw you in the fire, and I’m not going to throw you in the briar patch. I’m going to throw you down the well and drown you,” said Brer Wolf.

“All right, Brer Wolf,” said Brer Rabbit. “That’s an easy way to die, but I’m surely going to smell up your drinking water, sir.”

“No, I’m not going to drown you,” said Brer Wolf. “Drowning is too good for you.” Then Brer Wolf thought and thought and scratched his head and pulled his chin whiskers. Finally he said, “I know what I’m going to do with you. I’ll throw you in the briar patch.”

“No, no, Brer Wolf,” cried Brer Rabbit. “Please, sir, don’t throw me in the briar patch. Those briars will tear up my hide, pull out my hair, and scratch out my eyes. That’ll be an awful way to die, Brer Wolf. Please, sir, don’t do that to me.”

“That’s exactly what I’ll do with you,” said Brer Wolf all happy-like. “Then he caught Brer Rabbit by his head and neck, and he swung him around and around over his head, and threw him way over into the middle of the briar patch.

After a minute or two, Brer Rabbit stood up on his hind legs and laughed at Brer Wolf and said to him, “Thank you, Brer Wolf. Thank you. This is the place where I was born. My grandmother and grandfather and all my family were born right here in the briar patch.”

And that’s the end of the story.

Note: Masters often spread tar on fences to catch slaves who, when hungry, would sneak into fields and orchards to steal food. Tar stuck on the hands would betray the “guilty” slave.
making straw hats and willow-baskets, by which means we supplied our family with little articles of food, clothing and luxury.”

Slaves were not always totally at the mercy of abusive masters and overseers. Mary Prince used sass to tell her Antigua mistress “not to use me so.” She told her Bermuda master, who struck her for dropping some plates, that “he was a very indecent man—very spiteful,” and that “I would not live longer with him.” Occasionally, one family member could intervene to prevent the abuse of another. Harriet Jacobs fended off her master’s advances partly by her cleverness and sass (“I openly . . . expressed my contempt for him”), and partly by threats to use her free grandmother’s considerable influence in the community against him. That enraged but stopped him.

When family intervention, appeals for mercy, or conjurers’ magic did not work, some slaves resorted to force. In 1800, a slave named Ben shot dead a white man for living with Ben’s wife, and another slave killed an overseer in 1859 for raping his wife. Female slaves risked serious consequences by protecting themselves or family members. When Cherry Loguen was attacked by a knife-wielding rapist, she knocked him out with a large branch. When an Arkansas overseer abused a slave woman named Lucy, her son reported that she “jumped on him and like to tore him up.”

The love and affection that slaves had for each other was sometimes a liability. Many slaves, women especially, were reluctant to run away because they did not want to leave their families. Those who fled were easily caught because, as an

Slave Families in Their Quarters  In these photographs of the quarters “at night,” slave men, women, and children created a vibrant black community, socializing outdoors as they did house chores, and providing love, support, and self-esteem to family members. The 1862 photograph (top left) shows five generations of one family from a South Carolina plantation. What comment would you make about gender roles in these two photographs? (Top: Library of Congress; Bottom: Collection of the New-York Historical Society [PR.002.347.20])
RESISTANCE AND FREEDOM

Songs, folktales (as seen in this chapter’s “Recovering the Past” feature), and other forms of cultural expression enabled slaves to articulate their resistance to slavery. For example, in the song “Ole Jim,” on Jim’s “journey” to the “kingdom,” he invited others to “go long” with him, taunting his owner: “O blow, blow, Ole Massa, blow de cotton horn / Ole Jim’ll neber wuck no mó’ in de cotton an’ de corn.” From refusal to work, it was a short step to outright revolt. In another song, “Samson,” the slaves clearly stated their determination to abolish the house of bondage: “An’ if I had—n my way / I’d tear the buildin’ down! / . . . And now I got my way / And I’ll tear this buildin’ down.” Every hostile song, story, or event, like Douglass’s fight with Covey, was an act of resistance by which slaves asserted their dignity and gained a measure of mental freedom.

Forms of Black Protest

Slaves protested the burdensome demands of continuous forced labor in various “day-to-day” acts of resistance. These ranged from breaking tools to burning houses, from stealing food to defending fellow slaves from punishment, from self-mutilation to work slowdowns, and from poisoning masters to feigning illness.

Slave women, aware of their childbearing value, were adept at missing work on account of “disorders and irregularities.” They established networks of support while winnowing and pounding rice or shucking corn, sharing miseries but also encouraging each other in private acts of sass and subtle defiance such as ruining the master’s meals and faking sickness or painful menstrual cramps.

Overseers also suffered from these acts of disobedience, for their job depended on productivity, which in turn depended on the goodwill of the slave workers. Slaves adeptly played on the frequent struggles between overseer and master.

Many slaveholders resorted to using black drivers rather than overseers, but this created other problems. Slave drivers were “men between,” charged with the tricky job of getting the master’s work done without alienating fellow slaves or compromising their own loyalties. Although some drivers were as brutal as white overseers, many became leaders and role models for other slaves. A common practice of the drivers was to appear to punish without really doing so. Solomon Northrup reported that he “learned to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them.”

Another form of resistance was to run away. The typical runaway was a young male who ran off alone and hid out in a nearby wood or swamp. He left to avoid a whipping or because he had just been whipped, to protest excessive work demands, or, as one master put it, for “no cause” at all. But there was a cause—the need to experience a period of freedom away from the restraints and discipline of the plantation. Many runaways would sneak back to the quarters for food, and after a few days, if not tracked down by hounds, they would return, perhaps to be whipped, but also perhaps with some concessions for better treatment. Some slaves left again and again. Remus and his wife Patty ran away from their master in Alabama three times; after each jailing, they ran away again.

Some runaways hid out for months and years in communities of escaped slaves known as maroons, especially in Florida, where Seminole and other Indians befriended them. In these maroons, blacks and Natives intermarried and shared a common hostility to whites. The Seminole resistance against the United States after the acquisition of Florida in 1819 was in fact a black–Seminole alliance, which succeeded for several years in evading American troops. Creek and other Indians were hired to track down runaways and eventually the black Seminole were re-enslaved and removed to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma, where some escaped again to the Texas–Mexico borderlands. Large maroon communities, also known as cimarrons, quilombos, and palenques, existed in the mountains of Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, as well as on West Indian islands.

Slaves were ingenious in their means of escape: forging passes, posing as master and servant, disguising one’s gender, sneaking aboard ships, and pretending...
loyalty until taken by the master on a trip to the North. One slave even had himself mailed to the North in a large box. The Underground Railroad, organized by abolitionists, was a series of safe houses and stations where runaway slaves could rest, eat, and spend the night before continuing. Harriet Tubman, who led some 300 slaves out of the South on 19 separate trips, was the railroad’s most famous "conductor." It is difficult to know exactly how many slaves actually escaped to the North and Canada, but the numbers were not large. One estimate suggests that in 1850, about 1,000 slaves (out of more than 3 million) attempted to run away, and most of them were returned. Nightly patrols by whites reduced the chances for any slave to escape and probably deterred many slaves from even trying.

Other ways in which slaves sought their freedom included petitioning Congress and state legislatures, bringing suit against their masters that they were being held in bondage illegally, and persuading masters to provide for emancipation in their wills. Many toiled to purchase their own freedom by hiring out to do extra work at night and on holidays.

### Slave Revolts

The ultimate act of resistance was rebellion. Countless slaves committed individual acts of revolt. In addition, there were hundreds of conspiracies whereby slaves met to plan a group escape and often the massacre of whites. Most of these conspiracies never led to action, either because circumstances changed or the slaves lost the will to follow through or, more often, because some fellow slave—perhaps planted by the master—betrayed the plot. Such spies thwarted the elaborate conspiracies of Gabriel in Virginia in 1800 and Denmark Vesey in South Carolina in 1822. Both men were skilled, knowledgeable leaders who planned their revolts in hopes that larger events would support them—a possible war with France in 1800 and the Missouri debates in 1820. Both conspiracies were thwarted before revolts could begin, and both resulted in severe reprisals by whites, including mass executions of leaders and the random killing of innocent blacks. The severity of these responses indicated southern whites' enormous fear of slave revolt.

Only a few organized revolts ever actually took place, especially compared to Latin America where slaves revolted far more frequently: St. Domingue in 1791, Barbados in 1816, British Guiana (Demerara) in 1823, Jamaica in 1831–1832, Cuba in 1843–1844, and Brazil in 1810, 1814, 1835, 1843, and the 1880s. In Brazil, weaker military control, easier escape to rugged interior areas, the larger number of blacks to whites, the disproportionate ratio of males to females, and continued dependence on the African slave trade to replenish workers (rather than natural increase) explained these frequent revolts. Compared with the near 1:1 gender ratio of slaves in the United States, Latin American slaves had little family or female restraint on violent revolts.

The most famous slave revolt in North America, led by Nat Turner, occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Turner was an intelligent, skilled, unmarried, religious slave who had experienced many visions of “white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle.” He believed himself “ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty.” He and his followers intended, Turner said, “to carry terror and devastation” throughout the country. On a hot, August night, Turner and his followers crept into the home of Turner's master—a “kind master” with “the greatest confidence in me”—and killed the entire family. Before the insurrection was finally put down, 55 white men, women, and children had been murdered and twice as many blacks killed in the aftermath. Turner hid for two weeks before he was apprehended and executed, but not before dictating a chilling confession to a white lawyer.

The Nat Turner revolt was a crucial moment for southern whites. A Virginia legislator suspected that there was “a Nat Turner ... in every family,” and slaveholders throughout the South slept less securely. The fact that Turner was an intelligent and trusted slave and yet led such a terrible revolt suggests again how difficult it is to generalize about slavery and slave behavior. Slaves, like masters, had diverse personalities and changeable moods, and their behavior could not be predicted easily. Sometimes humble and deferential, at other times obstinate and rebellious, the slaves made the best of a bad situation and did what they needed to do to survive with a measure of self-worth.

### Free Blacks: Becoming One’s Own Master

Frederick Douglass said of the slave, “Give him a bad master, and he aspires to a good master; give him a good master, and he wishes to become his own master.” In 1838, Douglass forged a free black’s papers as a seaman and sailed from Baltimore to become his own master in the North, where he found “great insecurity and loneliness.” Apart from the immediate difficulties of finding food, shelter, and
Throughout the Americas, enslaved Africans found many ways to protest their enslavement, including revolt, escape, and petitioning the abolition of slavery altogether. Maroons were communities of successful runaway slaves who fled to dense forested and largely inaccessible areas where they often intermarried with Native groups. Some carried on a kind of guerrilla warfare with Europeans who tried to track them down. Reflecting on the Past Do you see any patterns in the outbreaks of this partial mapping of slave revolts, by either place or time? What relationships do you see, if any, between slave revolts and abolition? Between national independence movements and abolition? What other observations would you make about the data on this map?
work, he realized that he was a fugitive in a land "whose inhabitants are legalized kidnappers" who could at any moment seize and return him to the South. Douglass thus joined the 12 percent of the African American population who were not slaves.

Between 1820 and 1860, the number of free blacks in the United States doubled, from 233,500 to 488,000. This rise resulted from natural increase, successful escapes, "passing" as whites, purchasing of freedom, and manumission.

More than half the free blacks lived in the South, most (85 percent in 1860) in the Upper South. They were found scattered on impoverished rural farmlands and in small towns, feared by whites as an inducement to slave unrest. One-third of the southern free African American population lived in cities or towns. In part because it took a long time to buy freedom, they tended to be older, more literate, and lighter-skinned than other African Americans. In 1860, more than 40 percent of free blacks were mulattoes (compared with 10 percent of the slaves). Free blacks in Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, New Orleans, and other southern cities developed vibrant African American communities—their churches, schools, and benevolent societies flourishing in the midst of white hostility.

Most free African Americans in the antebellum South were poor farmhands, day laborers, or woodcutters. In the cities, they worked in factories and lived in appalling poverty. A few skilled jobs, such as bartering, shoemaking, and plastering, were reserved for black men, but they were barred from more than 50 other trades. Women worked as cooks, laundresses, and domestics. The 15 percent of free African Americans who lived in the Lower South were divided into two distinct castes. Most were poor. But in New Orleans, Charleston, and other southern cities, a small, mixed-blood free black elite emerged, closely connected to white society and distant from poor blacks. A handful even owned land and slaves.

Most free blacks had no such privileges. In most states, they could not vote, bear arms, buy liquor, assemble, speak in public, form societies, or testify against whites in court. Nevertheless, the African American persistence to support each other in prayer meetings, burial societies, and back alleys was stronger than white efforts to impede it.

Urban whites sought to restrain free blacks from mixing with whites in working-class grogshops, gambling halls, and brothels, as well as to confine them to certain sections of the city or (increasingly by the 1850s) to compel them to leave altogether. Those who stayed had trouble finding work, were required to carry papers, and had to have their actions supervised by a white guardian. Southern whites especially

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**Growth of Black Population: Slave and Free, 1820–1860**

Although the number of free African Americans doubled in size between 1820 and 1860, their proportion relative to the total black population actually decreased. Does this mean that southern whites were more or less likely to end slavery voluntarily?

![Graph showing growth of black population](image)

**Timeline**

- **1787** Constitution adopted with proslavery provisions
- **1793** Eli Whitney invents cotton gin
- **1800** Gabriel conspiracy in Virginia
- **1808** External slave trade prohibited by Congress
- **1820** South becomes world’s largest cotton producer
- **1822** Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy in Charleston
- **1830s** Southern justification of slavery changes from a necessary evil to a positive good
- **1831** Nat Turner’s slave revolt in Virginia
- **1845** Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass published
- **1850s** Cotton boom
- **1852** Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes best-selling Uncle Tom’s Cabin
- **1860** Cotton production and prices peak
feared contact between free blacks and slaves. A Baltimore black paper said in 1826 that “though we are not slaves, we are not free.”

The key institution in these developments was the African American church, “the Alpha and Omega of all things,” Martin Delaney wrote to Douglass. Welcoming the freedom from white control, independent urban black churches grew enormously in the two decades before the Civil War. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in Baltimore doubled its membership between 1836 and 1856. By 1860, Baltimore had 15 African American churches representing five different denominations, and in Virginia 14 new black Baptist churches were founded between 1841 and 1860. These institutions gave spiritual solace, set community standards, and offered a host of educational, insurance, self-help, and recreational opportunities.

Nor were African American Catholics left out. Baltimore and New Orleans had strong black Catholic communities made up of Creoles, converts, former slaves, and refugees from Haiti. The first ordained black priests were three Georgia sons, born of a mulatto slave mother and an Irish immigrant father and educated at Holy Cross in the 1850s, though it would be three decades before another black was ordained. In the absence of African American priests, black sisterhoods took on special importance. The Sisters of the Holy Family and other communities of Catholic black women, begun in eastern

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**A Black Congregation at Prayer** Churches for free blacks, rare before 1800, became a major source of social as well as religious activity by the 1840s. (Library of Congress)
cities, started schools and ministered to the aged and infirm as they spread with black Catholic communities westward to Louisville and St. Louis.

African American churches were centers of vital urban black community activities and springboards for activist black preachers seeking larger changes in American society. The Reverend J. C. Pennington, an escaped slave, attended lectures at Yale Divinity School (though he was denied the right to enroll or borrow books). Licensed to preach in 1838, he headed prominent black churches in New Haven, Hartford, and New York City. Pennington started several schools, was an abolitionist leader of the National Negro Convention movement (described in Chapter 12), and founded a black missionary society focused on Africa. Charles Ray was educated at Wesleyan University in Connecticut and, as minister of a New York City black church for 20 years, was involved with the Underground Railroad and editor of *The Colored American*. Such black religious leaders prepared the way not only for civil war, but also for an unprecedented postwar growth of African American churches.

A young AME minister, Henry M. Turner, proudly proclaimed in the 1850s, "We, as a race, have a chance to be Somebody, and if we are ever going to be a people, now is the time." Turner's exhortations had been heralded 20 years earlier by Maria Stewart, the first African American woman to give published public speeches. Stewart's religious conversion gave her confidence to brave censure and ridicule in speaking out on behalf of abolitionism and equal rights for free blacks and women. She argued that had St. Paul known "of our wrongs and deprivations, . . . he would make no objections to our pleading in public for our rights."

In part because free blacks were becoming more of a "people" demanding their "rights," they faced a crisis in the 1850s. Growing prosperity and the deepening conflict between the North and South over slavery in the territories caused many white southerners to be even more concerned than usual with the presence of free blacks. Pressures increased in the late 1850s to either deport or enslave them. Not surprisingly, some black leaders began to look more favorably on migration to Africa. That quest was interrupted, however, by the outbreak of the Civil War, rekindling in Douglass the "expiring embers of freedom."

**Conclusion**

**Douglass's Dream of Freedom**

Frederick Douglass eventually won his freedom by forging a free black sailor's pass and escaping through Chesapeake Bay to New York. In a real sense, he wrote himself into freedom. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, "written by himself" in 1845, was a way for Douglass both to expose the many evils of slavery and to create his own identity, even to the point of choosing his own name. Ironically, Douglass had learned to value reading and writing from his Baltimore masters, the Aulds. This reminds us again of the intricate and subtle ways in which the lives of slaves and masters were tied together in the antebellum South. Our understanding of the complexities of this relationship is enhanced as we consider the variations of life in the Big House in the morning, in the fields during the afternoons, in the slave quarters at night, and in the degrees of freedom blacks achieved through resistance, revolt, and free status.

In a poignant moment in his *Narrative*, Douglass described his boyhood dreams of freedom as he looked out at the boats on the waters of Chesapeake Bay. Contrasting his own enslavement with the boats he saw as "freedom's swift-winged angels," Douglass vowed to escape: "This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. . . . There is a better day coming." As we will see later, southern white planters also bemoaned their lack of freedom relative to the North and made their own plans to achieve independent status through secession. Meanwhile, as that struggle brewed beneath the surface of antebellum life, many other Americans were dismayed by various evil aspects in their society, slavery among them, and sought ways of shaping a better America to match ideal dreams with social realities. We turn to these other dreams in the next chapter.

**Recommended Reading**

Recommended Readings are posted on the Web site for this textbook. Visit www.ablongman.com/nash
CHAPTER 11  Slavery and the Old South  387

Questions for Review and Reflection

1. In what ways—social and economic—was the South dependent on slavery and cotton, and in what ways was it not? How much variety—social and economic—existed in the Old South?
2. Compare and contrast North American with Latin American slavery.
3. Show your understanding of the morning, noon, and night structure of this chapter by explaining it to a friend not in the course. How does this structure reflect three different interpretations of slavery?
4. List five or six different ways in which slaves resisted their enslavement and achieved a measure of autonomy, agency, and self-esteem.
5. What does the author of this chapter think was the worst thing about slavery? What do you think? What does the institution of slavery suggest about American values and how have they changed over time?

Fiction and Film

The Bondswoman’s Narrative (2002) by Hannah Crafts, recently discovered and edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is perhaps the earliest known novel by an African American woman. Written in the 1850s, hers is a captivating story of a light-skinned North Carolina slave, part fiction and part autobiography, whose escape to the North involved a series of horrifying experiences. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), follows various black and white lives in antebellum Kentucky and the Deep South. Charles Johnson’s Middle Passage (1990) describes antebellum life in New Orleans and on slave trade ships between West Africa and the Caribbean. Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved (1988) is a powerful and moving account of African American life both during and after slavery. Alice Randall’s The Wind Done Gone (2001) is a parody of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936). Kindred (1979), by Octavia Butler, a contemporary African American science fiction writer, is about a black Los Angeles woman who is transported back to 1815, where she endures the brutality of slavery even as she seeks to save the life of the son of her slave-owning white ancestors. A recent novel about slavery is perhaps the best. Edward P. Jones’s The Known World (2003) won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. His exquisitely written story examines all aspects of the morality of slavery and depicts the complex human dimensions of black and white relations going far beyond conventions of evil white slaveholders and victimized slaves. Amistad is a 1997 Hollywood film based on a successful mutiny on a slave ship in 1839 near Cuba and the subsequent capture and trial of the mutineers in Connecticut, where they were defended by former president John Quincy Adams. The film, featuring the rebel leader Cinque, contains vivid scenes aboard slave ships. Beloved is a heartbreaking but ultimately inspiring 1998 film version of Toni Morrison’s novel.

Discovering U.S. History Online

Slave Culture
www.kingtisdell.org/exhibit.htm
This site offers an illustrated explanation of slavery culture in Savannah from antebellum Savannah to the end of the Reconstruction era.

Letters from the Slave States
www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1857stirling.html
This site provides a reprint of an article with interviews of plantation owners and former slaves.

Africans in America, 1791–1831
These PBS images and documents (both primary source and modern commentaries) illustrate the growth and entrenchment of slavery, the rise of abolitionism (especially in Philadelphia), and the black church.

Songs of the Underground Railroad
www.appleseedrec.com/underground/sounds.html
This site presents samples of popular slavery songs and interpretations of the meaning of the lyrics.

Virginia Runaways
www.wise.virginia.edu/history/runaways
This site presents a “digital database” of the detailed “runaway and captured slave and servant advertisements from 18th-century Virginia newspapers.”

North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920
http://www.metalab.unc.edu/docsouth
The University of North Carolina site offers a rich collection of narratives about slavery, edited by William Andrews, who has written widely and well about slave narratives.