

The Peculiar Institution of American Slavery



Antebellum Slave trading Storefront

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other. Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever. Thomas Jefferson, 1782

I. Slavery's Economic Base

A. Whitney's cotton gin (1793) allowed cotton to become the dominant Southern crop, more important economically than tobacco, rice, and sugar

B. Both the North and the South profited from the prosperity of cotton

1. Cotton's huge profitability caused planters to buy more slaves and more land to take advantage of the economic potential

a) 1800 18 million lbs. of cotton exported (\$5,000,000 value), 7% of total exports

b) In 1830, 300 million lbs. of cotton exported (\$30,000,000 value), 41% of total exports

c) In 1860, 1,700 million lbs. of cotton exported (\$191,000,000 value), 57% of total exports

2. 80% of the world's cotton came from the South in 1860. Most went to factories in England

II. Slavery's Social Base

A. While a small number of whites owned slaves (only 1750 families owned over 100 slaves in 1850), they exerted enormous political and social power in the South

B. Dominance by the aristocracy was basically undemocratic

1. It widened the gap between rich and poor
2. It hampered state-supported public education
3. It attempted to preserve the "cavalier" tradition--courteous, hospitable, and chivalrous

C. Beneath the plantation slave owner were poor whites with less status

1. Lowland whites--mechanics, tradesmen, small cotton farmers. Owning no slaves, they were strong defenders of slavery
2. Poor whites--suffering from malnutrition and intense poverty
3. Mountain whites--lived in semi-isolation in Appalachian Mountains. Independent small farmers resenting both planters and slaves.

D. Beneath the poor whites were the 250,000 free blacks of the South. Free blacks were resented by Southern whites as examples of emancipation and many Northern whites because of their competition for work

E. Bottom of social pyramid: 4,000,000 slaves.

1. Legal importation of slaves ended in 1808.
2. Slaves mostly concentrated in "black belt" of the Deep South
3. Slaves were bought or sold at auctions
4. Slavery was degrading to the dignity of victims and to the humanity of the whites

III. Abolitionist Responses to Slavery

A. Abolitionists differed from early antislavery movements in their emphasis on racial equality and were divided into two main camps:

1. Gradualists (Theodore Weld) who favored a gradual erasure of slavery by Southern legislatures
 - a) Some suggested financial compensation to the owners
 - b) They believed serious social and economic problems could be avoided with gradual emancipation

2. Militants (William Lloyd Garrison) who argued that no compromise with the evil of slavery was possible
 - a) Demanded immediate emancipation without compensation
 - b) Opposed the Constitution as a "covenant with death and an agreement with hell."
 - c) Garrison published a powerful newspaper entitled *The Liberator* which attacked slavery and the government's collusion with the institution
3. Organized abolitionists
 - a) Set up an Underground Railroad that smuggled 2000 slaves a year to Canada and freedom
 - b) Barraged Congress with antislavery petitions despite a "gag rule" designed to prevent the discussion of slavery
 - c) Entered politics directly by establishing the Liberty Party

B. While abolitionists always remained small in number, their constant single-issue approach to slavery as a political and moral issue kept it in the public's eye

IV. Southern Defenses of Slavery

- A. Slavery was ordained by God, permitted in the Bible ("Slaves, obey your masters")
- B. Greek and Roman cultures each featured slavery
- C. Essential to the southern economy
- D. Preferable to the "wage slavery" of the North
- E. Beneficial to the blacks who had traded the barbarism of Africa for the blessings of security and Christianity