

The Southern Economy

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, we'll discover the ways in which the expansion of slavery in the Deep South — stimulated by cotton production — widened the division between North and South. While many White northerners celebrated free labor, the southern economy depended to an ever greater extent on enslaved labor and cotton cultivation. This economy enriched an elite group of planters, merchants, traders, and politicians, many of whom insisted that slavery was a “positive good” for the region, through an ideology known as planter paternalism.

This tutorial, which examines the Southern economy and planter paternalism, breaks down as follows:

1. King Cotton

Northern cannon may have been the deciding factor in Andrew Jackson's victory over the British at New Orleans in 1815, but White southerners benefited the most from the battle. Jackson's victory secured American claims to the region, which included present-day Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Arkansas, and a flood of settlers soon followed. These migrants — the majority of whom came from Georgia, Tennessee, and the Carolinas — included entire families, individuals, land speculators, slave owners, and enslaved people.

Following the War of 1812, a huge increase in production resulted in a cotton boom. By mid-century, cotton became the key cash crop of the southern economy and the most important American commodity. In contrast to northern agriculture, which produced corn, wheat, and a variety of other foodstuffs for outside markets, southern agriculture centered on cotton cultivation for export and on the production of other necessary crops to feed enslaved people.

There were several reasons behind the cotton boom, the most important being technological innovation, international and national demand, western expansion, environmental factors, and the growth of the population of enslaved African Americans.

- **Technological innovation**

In 1793, Eli Whitney revolutionized the production of cotton when he invented the cotton gin, a device that separated the seeds from raw cotton. Suddenly, a process that was extraordinarily labor-intensive when done by hand could be completed quickly and easily.

- **International and national demand**

By the beginning of the 19th century, a demand for cotton already existed in the industrial textile mills of Great Britain, and it was a demand that southern planters were eager to satisfy. Likewise, the construction of textile mills in the Northeast increased the demand for southern cotton.

- **Western expansion**

Thomas Jefferson's "empire of liberty," which he believed would provide the foundations for a class of independent farmers, provided extensive opportunities for southern slaveholders to expand operations into the Deep South, particularly Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.

- **Environmental factors**

The rich dark soil of the Deep South — and the reason why the region became known as the "black belt" — was well suited for the cultivation of cotton. So was the climate, which offered well over the required 200 frost-free days a year necessary for cotton cultivation.

- **Growth of the enslaved population**

In 1807, the U.S. Congress abolished the foreign slave trade, which made it illegal for Americans to import enslaved people from Africa. Although smuggling continued to occur, the end of the international slave trade, combined with expansion into the Deep South, increased the demand for enslaved people born in the United States.



BIG IDEA

As a result of this combination of factors, an estimated 3.2 million African Americans lived in the southern United States by 1850. Almost two million of these individuals were forced to cultivate upwards of two billion pounds of cotton per year by the time of the Civil War. Southern cotton, which could be easily stored and transported, made up two-thirds of the world supply, which allowed southerners such as James Hammond of South Carolina to proclaim "cotton is king."



A Cotton Plantation on the Mississippi. Published in Currier & Ives, 1884.

2. Mirror Images of King Cotton: White Southerners' Experiences

The spread of cotton cultivation to the Deep South was accompanied by the migration of White merchants, speculators, rich planters, and ordinary White farmers.

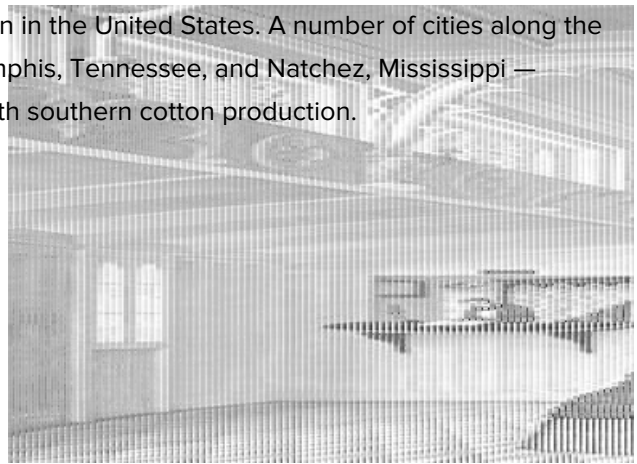
For many people who wanted to raise cotton, migration to the Deep South meant a fresh start and a chance for wealth. This process transformed many farmers into cotton producers. In the majority of cases, these individuals did not own large plantations. Rather, they remained small farmers who possessed either none or a handful of enslaved people, and mixed cotton production for profit with corn agriculture, livestock production, and other forms of subsistence.

As the cotton industry boomed in the South, the Mississippi River quickly became the essential water highway in the southern United States. Steamboats — thanks to their enormous freight-carrying capacity and ability to navigate shallow waterways — became a defining mode of transportation on the river. Steamboats also illustrated the class and social distinctions of the South. While the decks carried precious cargo, ornate rooms graced the interior. In these spaces, free White people socialized in the ships' saloons and dining halls while enslaved people served them.



By 1837, there were over 700 steamships in operation in the United States. A number of cities along the Mississippi River — including St. Louis, Missouri, Memphis, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi — became important hubs for commerce associated with southern cotton production.

The majority of steamboats on the Mississippi River were destined for the port of New Orleans, which Thomas Jefferson had secured for the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. By the middle of the 19th century, New Orleans became the center of the southern cotton boom because of its strategic position near the mouth of the Mississippi River.



As in this depiction of the saloon of the Mississippi River steamboat *Princess*, elegant and luxurious rooms often occupied the interiors of antebellum steamships, whose decks were filled with cargo.



This print of “The Levee - New Orleans” (1884) shows the bustling port of New Orleans with bales of cotton waiting to be shipped. The sheer volume of cotton indicates its economic importance throughout the century.

Steamboats moved down the Mississippi River, transporting cotton from plantations throughout the South and unloaded at New Orleans. From there, the bulk of American cotton went to Liverpool, England, where it was sold to British manufacturers who ran the cotton mills in Manchester and elsewhere. Southern cotton from New Orleans was also transported to American textile mills in the Northeast.

The lucrative national and international cotton trade brought new wealth and new residents to New Orleans. By the 1840s, New Orleans controlled 12 percent of the nation’s total banking capital and at least 40 percent of its population was foreign born. In both categories, New Orleans rivaled New York City — the center of the northern economy — in economic influence and population diversity.

3. Mirror Images of King Cotton: African Americans’ Experiences

The spread of cotton cultivation to the Deep South required not only the migration of White southerners, but also the forced relocation of enslaved African Americans. Some planters who migrated to the region were already wealthy and brought enslaved people with them. More common, however, was the purchase and transportation of enslaved people from coastal regions to the Deep South through the **domestic slave trade**.



TERM TO KNOW

Domestic Slave Trade

The trading of enslaved people within the borders of the United States.

The movement of African Americans to the Deep South through the domestic slave trade made up one of the largest forced internal migrations in the United States. Between 1790 and 1859, slaveholders in Virginia sold more than half a million enslaved people. In the early part of this period, many were sold to people living in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas. Beginning in the 1820s, however, slaveowners and traders in Kentucky and the Carolinas—along with those in the Chesapeake region—sold enslaved people to the Deep South. In addition, it was not uncommon for free Black people in the North to be kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South.

Enslaved people traveled to the Deep South by foot, enchained and walking in columns that numbered anywhere between 12 and 100 individuals. Traders might expect them to march up to 25 miles a day. The journey from Virginia to Mississippi or Louisiana could take up to eight weeks if one was traveling by land. Coastal vessels also shipped enslaved people from the Chesapeake region to slave markets in New Orleans. Kentucky and Tennessee, meanwhile, shipped many individuals south along the Mississippi River to slave markets in New Orleans or elsewhere in the region.

Solomon Northup, a free Black man from New York who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841, described the instance in great detail when he, along with fellow captive Eliza and her children Randall and Emily, arrived at a slave market in New Orleans:

Solomon Northup, A Freed Slave

“One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me....The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and Emily....Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work — such snivelling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her 100 lashes....Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman, could not wholly silence the afflicted mother.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Northup's narrative characterize Freeman, the slave trader?
2. How does Northup's narrative characterize Eliza?



BRAINSTORM

How does Northup's narrative reflect the mirror images (those of White southerners and enslaved African Americans) of King Cotton?

Overall, slave trafficking became big business in the United States and affected an enormous number of people. Consider some of the statistics below:

- Slaveholders and traders transported approximately 1.1 million enslaved people from the Upper South to the Deep South between 1790 and 1860.
- The average value of enslaved people also grew during this period, from around \$300 in 1810 to \$800 in 1860.



4. Planter Paternalism

Upon arriving in the Deep South, the labor involved with clearing land and preparing it for cotton cultivation could be backbreaking for enslaved people. Most enslaved people on a plantation labored as field hands, but a significant minority worked in planters' households as domestic servants.

Within the "big house," slaveowners often took a personal interest in the lives of their domestic servants and, likewise, many servants also took a keen interest in the lives of the White family with whom they lived. Sometimes, enslaved people pretended affection toward their enslavers; at other times, fondness was reciprocal.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Sojourner Truth (who escaped from captivity in 1826) fondly remembered her enslaver, John Dumont, but Dumont's wife, Sally, did not return any kindness toward Sojourner Truth and often abused her.



Plantation homes ranged from ornate buildings to simpler, large homes such as Moss Hill plantation house in Alabama, shown here. It was completed in 1845 and its design was typical of many southern plantation houses at the time.

Enslavers attempted to justify their various relationships with enslaved people through an ideology that historians refer to as **planter paternalism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Planter Paternalism

The premise that enslavers acted in the best interests of the people whom they enslaved. Advocates of planter paternalism understood their relationships with enslaved people in a manner similar to that between fathers and sons. They believed that African Americans were childlike individuals who required a "master's" care. In this way, planters attempted to use paternalism in order to rationalize slavery as a humane process rather than as an economic relationship that deprived the natural rights of an entire race in order to make a profit. Paternalism denied the exploitative aspects of slavery and, instead, portrayed slaveowners as father figures who cared deeply for their workers. Slaveholders, according to this ideology, took care of their enslaved people from birth to death, providing food, clothing, and shelter. This stood in stark contrast to the North, where workers in an emerging industrial society were at the mercy of economic forces beyond their control.

In this way, planter paternalism enabled White slaveholders to justify their position in southern society and to distinguish themselves from the North.

Among the clearest instances where White southerners used planter paternalism to distinguish themselves

from the North came on February 6, 1837, when South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun gave a speech on the Senate floor. In it, Calhoun insisted that slavery was “indispensable” for maintaining harmonious relations between White Americans and enslaved African Americans in the South. He then responded to northern critics of slavery by arguing that slavery was “a positive good.”

Calhoun’s speech contained several elements that were central to planter paternalism. At one point, he deemed the working and living conditions of enslaved people as superior to those of European workers:

John C. Calhoun, Speech to the Senate, 1837

“I may say with truth, that in few countries so much is left to the share of the laborer, and so little exacted from him, or where there is more kind attention paid to him in sickness or infirmities of age. Compare his condition with the tenants of the poor houses in the more civilized portions of Europe – look at the sick, and the old and infirm slave, on one hand, in the midst of his family and friends, under the kind superintending care of his master and mistress, and compare it with the forlorn and wretched condition of the pauper in the poorhouse.”

Calhoun then concluded this section of his speech by framing Southern slavery as an economic system immune from class conflict, or the “conflict between labor and capital” that affected northern and European factories:

“...I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions....There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and which explains why it is that the political condition of the slaveholding States has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North....”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. In the last section of the speech provided, Calhoun refers to “blind fanatics” who “are waging war” against slavery. Who might these “fanatics” be, and how might such a label highlight the growing differences between North and South?
2. With the evidence provided, why do you think Calhoun referred to slavery as a “positive good?” How does he use the ideology associated with planter paternalism to support his claims?



BRAINSTORM

Compare Calhoun’s speech with the previous account by Northup and apply the lens of race. How did race inform one’s perspective on southern slavery?



SUMMARY

Although a small White elite owned the vast majority of enslaved people in the South, much of the region and its populace was tied to cotton production and slavery in one way or another. Cotton

production stimulated settlement in the Deep South. Such settlement featured the free movement of White planters, farmers, and merchants. It also featured the forced relocation of millions of African Americans, whose labor was exploited. Planters and their allies justified their actions through an ideology known as planter paternalism, which stood in stark contrast to free labor ideology. Planter paternalism, along with the cotton and slave trades upon which it depended, distinguished the South from the North in the decades preceding the Civil War.

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REFERENCES

Calhoun, J. C. (1837). Slavery as a Positive Good. Speech. Retrieved January 20, 2017, from teachingamericanhistory.org/document/slavery-a-positive-good/



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TERMS TO KNOW

Domestic Slave Trade

The trading of enslaved people within the borders of the United States.

Planter Paternalism

The premise that enslavers acted in the best interests of the people whom they enslaved.



DATES TO KNOW

1793

Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin.

1807

Congress bans the international slave trade.

1812

The War of 1812 stimulates domestic manufacturing and increases demand for cotton.

1820–1830

The domestic slave trade expands to the Deep South.

1837

The United States has over 700 steamships in operation; John C. Calhoun defends slavery as a "positive good".