CHAPTER 16

The South and the Slavery Controversy, 1793–1860

# Focus Questions

1. What were the rungs on the social ladder of the South?

2. Where and how did slaves live in the South?

3. What did slaves do to resist the “peculiar institution”?

4. Who were prominent abolitionists, and what distinguished one from another?

5. How did the South react to the growing agitation of abolitionists?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** The explosion of cotton production fastened the slave system deeply upon the South, creating a complex, hierarchical racial and social order that deeply affected whites as well as blacks.

**Theme:** The economic benefits of an increasing production of cotton due to the cotton gin and slavery were shared between the South, the North, and Britain. The economics of cotton and slavery also led to bigger and bigger plantations, since they could afford the heavy investment in human capital.

**Theme:** The emergence of a small but energetic radical abolitionist movement caused a fierce proslavery backlash in the South and a slow but steady growth of moderate antislavery sentiment in the North.

chapter summary

Whitney’s cotton gin made cotton production enormously profitable and created an ever-increasing demand for slave labor. The South’s dependence on cotton production tied it economically to the plantation system and racially to white supremacy. The cultural gentility and political domination of the relatively small plantation aristocracy concealed slavery’s great social and economic costs for whites as well as blacks.

Most slaves were held by a few large planters. But most slaveowners had few slaves, and most southern whites had no slaves at all. Nevertheless, except for a few mountain whites, the majority of southern whites strongly supported slavery and racial supremacy because they cherished the hope of becoming slaveowners themselves, and because white racial identity gave them a sense of superiority to blacks.

The treatment of the economically valuable slaves varied considerably. Within the bounds of the cruel system, slaves yearned for freedom and struggled to maintain their humanity, including family life.

The older black colonization movement was largely replaced in the 1830s by a radical Garrisonian abolitionism demanding an immediate end to slavery. Abolitionism and the Nat Turner rebellion caused a strong backlash in the South, which increasingly defended slavery as a positive good and turned its back on many of the liberal political and social ideas gaining strength in the North.

Most northerners were hostile to radical abolitionism and respected the Constitution’s evident protection of slavery where it existed. But many also gradually came to see the South as a land of oppression and any attempt to extend slavery as a threat to free society.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Analyze the complex relations among the different elements of southern society: planter-aristocrats, small planters, poor whites, slaves, and free blacks. Contrast the dominant slaveholding elite with the mass of poorer whites who nevertheless supported slavery.

REFERENCES: Bruce Collins, *White Society in the Antebellum South* (1985); Ira Berlin, *Slaves Without Masters* (1975).

* Examine the nature of slavery. Explain how slavery was both an economic institution and a social system that shaped whites and blacks alike, including their social and family life.

REFERENCE: Brenda Stevenson, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (1996).

* Describe the lives of blacks under slavery. Show both the burdens of the system and the slaves’ struggles to survive and maintain their humanity.

REFERENCE: Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1976).

* Explain the various responses to slavery, from radical abolitionism to the defense of slavery as a positive good, and why the abolitionists had such a great impact even though they were an unpopular minority.

REFERENCE: Lewis Perry and Michael Fellman, *Antislavery Reconsidered* (1979).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Describe the operation of a typical large plantation or the working life of a typical large-plantation owner, including relations with overseers and slaves. (See section Examining the Evidence on page 354.)
* Examine the black family and black religion. Consider how slavery affected both white and black views of women, family, and sexuality. (See boxed quote on page 355.)
* Examine the paradox that slavery often involved intimate and personal relationships between individual whites and blacks (exemplified by the photo of the slave nurse with white child), even while it maintained a strict and often violent system of control over the slaves as a group. Ask why this paternalistic element of American slaveholding was so important to southerners’ self-justification of slavery.
* Review the creation of the Republic of Liberia. Determine if the colonization or relocation concept would have worked at any point in pre–Civil War America.
* Investigate the actions of the Royal Navy’s West African Squadron. What issues arise when one nation acts to enforce its laws (in this case the prohibition on the slave trade) on an international stage?
* Review the case of the *Amistad*, specifically the arguments made by John Quincy Adams before the Supreme Court.
* Explore the British efforts to free slaves in the West Indies. Why was Britain successful in 1833 in ending slavery in the West Indies when it was still going strong in the United States?
* Discuss the northern debate over the meansof ending slavery by contrasting Garrison’s radical abolitionism with the moderate no-expansion position of a politician like Lincoln.

# character sketches

## Theodore Dwight Weld (1803–1895)

Weld was the leader of the abolitionist Lane rebels, the West’s most influential antislavery preacher, and the author of *American Slavery as It Is,* the most important abolitionist propaganda book besides *Uncle Tom’s Cabin.*

He was converted by Charles Finney and joined Finney’s holy band of young men who wanted to “convert the world.” Weld’s first causes were temperance and manual labor, but the English abolitionist Charles Stuart converted him to antislavery.

He and his fellow antislavery Lane Seminary students worked in the poverty-stricken black community of Little Africa in Cincinnati. After he led the Lane rebels out of the seminary, he traveled and lectured constantly on behalf of the antislavery cause.

In 1838, he married Angelina Grimké, who, with her sister Sarah, had left South Carolina to become a prominent abolitionist. Angelina helped Weld write *American Slavery as It Is,* but they both eventually retired from active crusading to raise their family and organize a school in New Jersey.

**Quote:** “Slavery, with its robbing of body and soul from birth to death, its exactions of toil unrecompensed, its sunderings from kindred, its frantic orgies of lust, its intellect levelled with dust, its baptisms of blood, and its legacy of damning horrors to the eternity of the spirit—slavery in this land of liberty, and light, and revivals of millenial glory—its days are numbered and well-nigh finished.… The nation is shaking off its slumbers to sleep no more.” (1934)

REFERENCE: Robert Abzug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (1980).

## William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879)

Garrison was the most famous American abolitionist, an advocate of nonresistance, and editor of *The Liberator*.

His father, a Canadian sea captain who drank heavily, deserted the family when Garrison was a child. Garrison received little education and practiced a number of trades before becoming a printer in Maryland.

He first crusaded for nationalism and temperance, then for moderate abolition, before being converted to radical abolition. Besides attacking slavery, *The Liberator* promoted many other causes, including peace, women’s rights, temperance, and abolition of capital punishment.

Garrison eventually denounced the northern churches and the Constitution for their compromises with slavery. He was often threatened by antiabolitionist mobs, and several southern states offered rewards for his arrest. Despite his pacifism, he supported the Civil War as a means to end slavery.

**Quote:** “I am earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—and *I will be heard.*” (*The Liberator,* 1831)

REFERENCE: Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (2000).

## Frederick Douglass (1817–1895)

Douglass was a former slave who became the leading pre–Civil War black abolitionist and the most influential African American of the nineteenth century.

Douglass’s original name was Frederick Bailey. His father was white and his mother a black slave from whom he was separated at an early age. His first escape attempt failed and he landed in jail. He was trained as a ship caulker in Baltimore and escaped to New York in 1838 by disguising himself as a sailor.

He moved to Boston, changed his name to Douglass to avoid capture, and worked as a common laborer for three years. After a speech before an antislavery meeting, he became an abolitionist agent. He eventually split with Garrison and formed his own paper, *The North Star.* After the Civil War, he was prominent in Republican politics and served in various federal positions, such as minister to Haiti from 1889 to 1891.

**Quote:** “I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free state.… It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced.… This state of mind, however, very soon subsided; and I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness. I was yet liable to be taken back, and subjected to all the tortures of slavery. This in itself was enough to damp the ardor of my enthusiasm.” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* 1845)

REFERENCE: William McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (1990).

## Martin Delany (1812–1885)

Delany was the pioneering black nationalist and author who advocated that African Americans leave the United States.

He was born a free man in Virginia. His grandfather was said to have been an African chief who was captured and sold to America, and traditions and memories of Africa remained alive in Delany’s family.

Delany moved to Pennsylvania, became involved in the black convention movement, and started a black newspaper. For a time, he worked with Garrison and Douglass but despaired of abolitionism after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and began working to encourage blacks to leave America.

In 1856, he moved to a fugitive-slave community in Canada. Before his exploratory trip to Africa in 1859–1860, Delany communicated with African Americans in Liberia. Upon his return to the United States, he served in the army during the Civil War. He later became involved in Republican politics in South Carolina during Reconstruction.

**Quote:** “I care but little what white men think of what I say, write or do; my sole desire is to benefit the colored people. This being done I am satisfied—the opinion of every white person in the country or the world to the contrary notwithstanding.” (Letter to Frederick Douglass, 1852)

REFERENCE: Victor Ullman, *Martin R.. Delany: The Beginnings of Black Nationalism* (1971).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1830–1860):

Slavery: Is slavery an intolerable institution?

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| ***Yes:*** Antislavery forces: abolitionists, led by Garrison, Weld, and the Grimké sisters; Free Soil and Republican politicians, led by Lincoln, Seward, and Sumner. |   | ***No:*** Proslavery forces: white southerners, led by Calhoun, Davis, and Butler; northern moderates, led by Webster, Douglas, and Buchanan. |

ISSUE #1: Is slavery a violation of fundamental moral and religious principles?

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| ***Yes:*** Antislavery leader Angelina Grimké: “The great fundamental principle of abolitionists is, that man cannot rightfully hold his fellow man as property.… It matters not what *motive* he may give for such a monstrous violation of the laws of God. The claim to him as *property* is an annihilation of his right to himself, which is the foundation upon which all his other rights are built. It is high-handed robbery of Jehovah; for he has declared, ‘All souls are mine.’” |   | ***No:*** Proslavery Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina: “Inequality seems to characterize the administration of the providence of God. I will not undertake to invade that sanctuary, but I will say that the abolitionists cannot make those equal whom God has made unequal, in human estimation. That He has made the blacks unequal to the whites, human history…has pronounced its uniform judgment.” |

ISSUE #2: Is slavery incompatible with the most fundamental American principles?

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| ***Yes:*** Antislavery leader Abraham Lincoln: “There is no reason in the world why the negro is not entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence—the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I hold that he is as much entitled to these as the white man. I agree with Judge Douglas that he is not my equal in many respects.… But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man.” |   | ***No:*** Proslavery Senator Stephen A. Douglas: “At the time the Constitution was framed there were thirteen states in the Union, twelve of which were slaveholding states and one a free state.… For one, I am opposed to negro citizenship in any and every form. I believe this government was made on the white basis. I believe it was made by white men for the benefit of white men and their posterity forever, and I am in favor of confining citizenship to white men…instead of conferring it upon negroes, Indians, and other inferior races.…” |

ISSUE #3: Would the attempted abolition of slavery threaten the foundations of the Union?

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| ***No:*** Antislavery leader William Seward: “Hitherto the two systems have existed in different states, but side by side within the American Union. This has happened because the Union is a confederation of states. But in another aspect the United States constitute only one nation.… It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation or entirely a free-labor nation.… Our forefathers knew it to be true, and unanimously acted upon it when they framed the constitution of the United States.” |   | ***Yes:*** Proslavery Senator Alfred Iversen of Georgia: “Sir, I believe that the time will come when the slave states will be compelled, in vindication of their rights, interests, and honor, to separate from the free states and erect an independent confederacy.… At all events, I am satisfied that one of two things is *inevitable;* either that the slave states must surrender their peculiar institutions or separate from the North.… No union or no slavery will sooner or later be forced upon the choice of the southern people.” |

ISSUE #4: Should slavery be allowed to expand into the territories if the people of those territories want it?

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| ***No:*** Antislavery leader Abraham Lincoln: “I believe we shall not have peace upon the question until the opponents of slavery arrest the further spread of it and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction.… Now I believe if we could arrest the spread, and place it where Washington and Jefferson and Madison placed it, it would be in the course of ultimate extinction and the public mind would, as for eighty years past, believe that it was in the course of ultimate extinction.… The crisis would be past and the institution might be let alone for a hundred years—if it should live so long—in the states where it exists, yet it would be going out of existence in the way best for both the black and the white races.” |   | ***Yes:*** Proslavery Senator Stephen A. Douglas: “Whenever it becomes necessary, in our growth and progress, to acquire more territory, I am in favor of it, without reference to the question of slavery, and, when we have acquired it, I will leave the people free to do as they please, either to make it slave or free territory, as they prefer.… If they prohibit slavery, it shall be prohibited. They can form their institutions to please themselves, subject only to the Constitution; and I, for one, stand ready to receive them into the Union.” |

REFERENCES: Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (1962); J. Jeffrey Auer, ed., *Antislavery and Disunion, 1858–1861: Studies in the Rhetoric of Compromise and Conflict* (1963).

# questions for class discussion

1. How did slavery affect whites—those who owned slaves and those who did not? (See boxed quotes on page 342 and page 343.)

2. How did blacks respond to the condition of slavery? (See boxed quotes on page 344 and page 348.)

3. Why did the South move from viewing slavery as a “necessary evil” to proclaiming it a “positive good”?

4. How effective were the abolitionists in achieving their goals? Did they hasten or delay the end of slavery? (See section Thinking Globally on pages 356-357 and boxed quote on page 355.)

5. Was Britain being hypocritical by freeing their slaves in the West Indies while openly importing cotton from the slave-owning South? What role, if any, should other nations have taken in America’s slave question?

6. Were basic freedoms jeopardized or forfeited with regard to congressional action about the question of slavery (Gag Resolution, mail restrictions)? Were the decisions of Congress justified?

# CONTENDING VOICES: WILLIAM A. SMITH VS. AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How and why did southern clergyman William A. Smith defend slavery?

2. Contrast Smith’s views with the ideas represented by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833?

# varying viewpoints

**Expanding the View**

* Stanley Elkins, *Slavery* (1959).

A view of slavery as a totalitarian system that destroyed blacks’ personalities:

“Both [the Nazi concentration camp and slavery] were closed systems from which all standards based on prior connections had been effectively detached. A working adjustment to either system required a childlike conformity, a limited choice of ‘significant others.’… Absolute power for [the master] meant absolute dependency for the slave—the dependency not of the developing child but of the perpetual child.… The result would be something resembling ‘Sambo.’”

* Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1972).

A view of slavery as a paternalistic system within which blacks could maintain their humanity:

“Thus, the slaves, by accepting a paternalistic ethos and legitimizing class rule, developed their most powerful defense against the dehumanization implicit in slavery. Southern paternalism may have reinforced racism as well as class exploitation, but it also unwittingly invited its victims to fashion their own interpretation of the social order it was intended to justify. And the slaves, drawing on a religion that was supposed to assure their compliance and docility, rejected the essence of slavery by projecting their own rights and value as human beings.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. How does the holder of each of these viewpoints see the relationship between masters and slaves?

2. How does each of these historians connect the nature of slavery with its effect on blacks?

3. What might each of these historians say about the long-term effects of slavery on African Americans?

4. Do Genovese’s contentions contradict Frank Tannenbaum’s arguments?