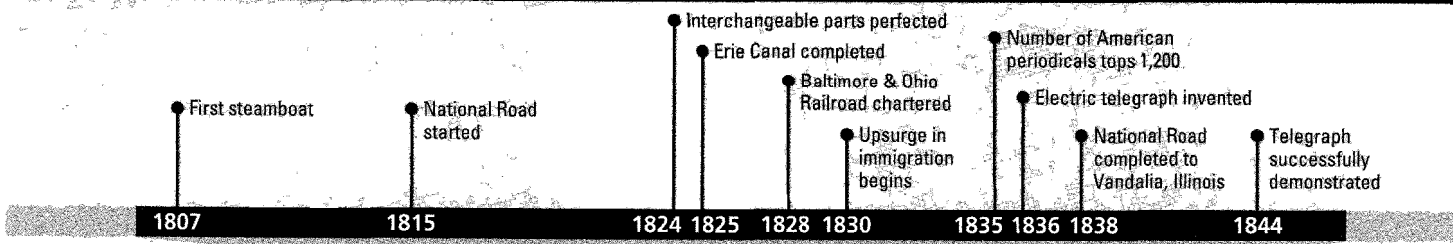
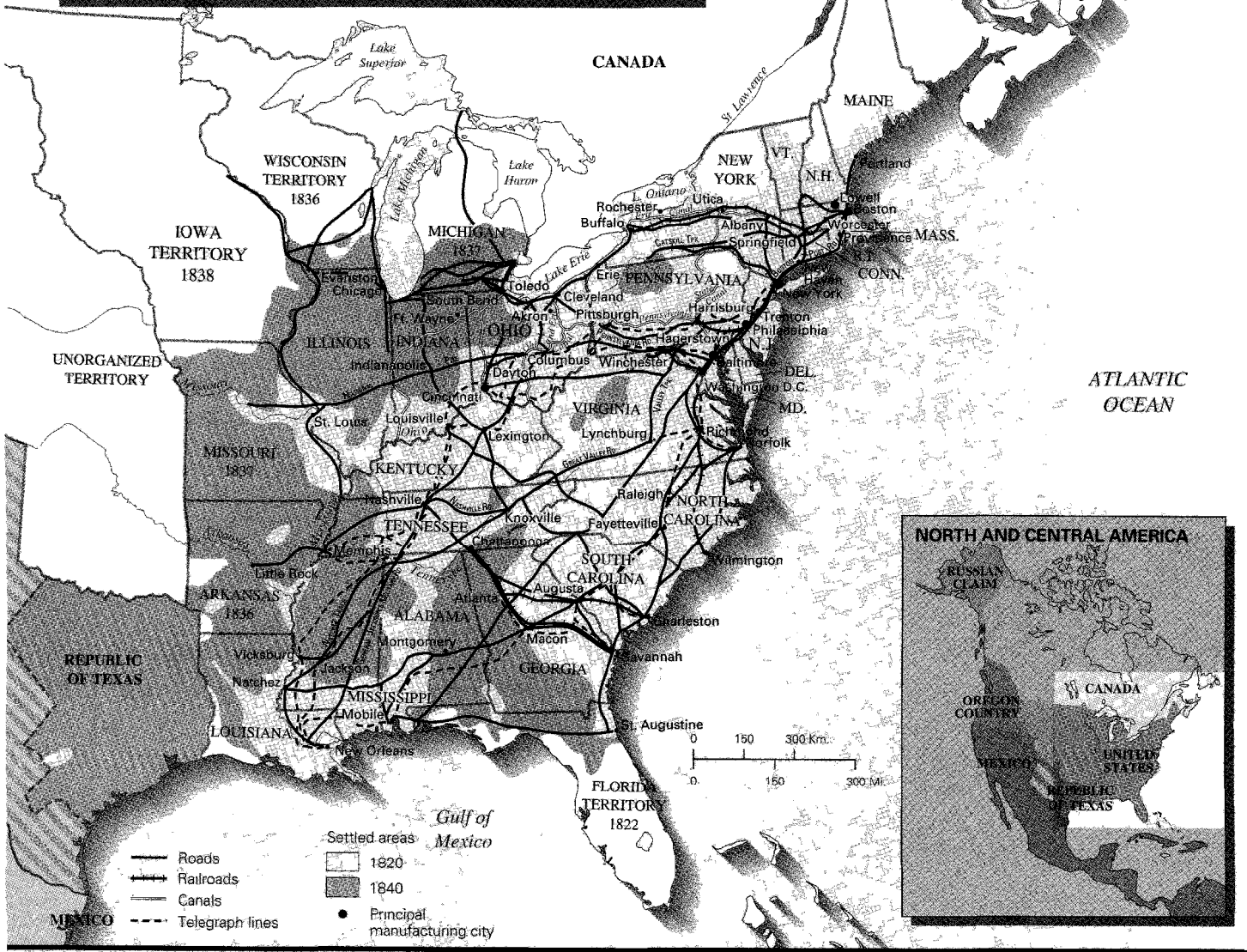


ROADS, CANALS, RAILWAYS, AND TELEGRAPH LINES, 1850 A transportation and communications revolution took place between 1820 and 1850 as roads, canals, rails, and telegraph lines reached out to bind the many parts of the nation together. The intimate connections made possible by the new lines of communication shown here ensured economic growth but also increased tensions between the nation's sections by making it difficult to ignore the vast differences between regional cultures.



The Great Transformation,

1815-1840

The Transportation Revolution

- How did newly emerging networks of transportation and communication change the expectations of Americans in the North, West, and South?

The Manufacturing Boom

- How did new manufacturing techniques following the adoption of interchangeable parts change the nature of work?
- How did the developing factory system affect the expectations of artisans and elite and middle-class Americans?

The New Cotton Empire in the South

- How did the expectations of southerners—black and white—change after 1820?
 - How did white southerners choose to respond to these changing expectations, and what new constraints resulted for slaves, free blacks, and poor whites?
-

(INTRODUCTION)

Expectations
Constraints
Choices
Outcomes

In the quarter century after the War of 1812, the United States underwent a profound economic transformation that affected the lives of virtually all Americans. Although most Americans *chose* to remain farmers as of 1840, it was clear that the agrarian republic of the Founding Fathers was rapidly disappearing, particularly in the Northeast, where an industrial revolution was well under way.

The effects of this economic transformation were felt even in regions where farming remained the mainstay. Whether growing cotton or corn, farmers by 1840 expected to sell their crops in distant markets rather than subsisting on the fruits of their toil. Most had become thoroughly integrated into a national market economy. Jefferson's ideal of the isolated, self-sufficient yeoman farmer had largely vanished.

The spread of commercial farming and the proliferation of manufacturing were made possible by a revolution in transportation that occurred after the War of 1812. Although some *constraints* on transportation still remained as of 1840, a network of roads, canals, and railroads connected the nation in a way that had been unimaginable in 1815. The improving transportation system encouraged the *expectations* of manufacturers, farmers, and businessmen that they could sell products profitably in faraway markets.

In the North, new techniques of manufacturing such as the invention of interchangeable parts and new methods of organizing work led to a host of

unexpected *outcomes*. Skilled workers were no longer needed to make complicated machines, and the value of labor declined along with the range of *choices* open to workers. Factory owners and their families *chose* to live in fashionable neighborhoods far away from their factories, leaving daily operations of the workplace in the hands of clerks and managers.

The American South underwent a profound transformation during this era as well. The hunger that British and American textile mills shared for raw cotton gave southerners great *expectations* for enormous prosperity. The astounding growth of cotton agriculture led to the equally explosive growth of slavery. The *outcome* was a political and social economy in the South that would shape every soul in the region.

Each step in this great transformation generated waves of change, altering *expectations*, removing old *constraints*, and then creating new ones. A whole generation was forced to make *choices* the likes of which no previous generation of Americans had faced. One long-term *outcome* of the choices these people made was that the foundation for a modern America was set firmly in place.

The Transportation Revolution

The movement to improve transportation after the War of 1812 had two origins. The first was the recognition that the poor state of American roads had been a considerable handicap for American troops during the war. The second was the rapid settlement of the Old Northwest and the Old Southwest. As farmers moved into these fertile

lands, they began producing huge agricultural surpluses. It quickly became apparent that improved transportation was needed to take advantage of the agricultural bounty being produced in these regions.

Before the War of 1812, travel on the nation's roads was a wearying, bone-rattling experience. Those who could afford to travel by stagecoach were bounced along over muddy, rutted roads at the pace of 4 miles per hour. The enjoyment of such

Chronology

A Revolution in Transportation

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1807 Robert Fulton tests the <i>Clermont</i> | 1830 Steam locomotive <i>Tom Thumb</i> beaten by a horse in a race |
| 1815 Government funding for the National Road | 1830-1840 Immigration approaches 600,000 for the decade |
| 1812 First successful steamboat run from Pittsburgh to New Orleans | 1834 Main Line Canal from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh completed |
| 1817 Construction of Erie Canal begins | 1836 Samuel F. B. Morse invents electric telegraph |
| 1819 <i>Dartmouth College v. Woodward</i>
<i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> | 1838 National Road completed to Vandalia, Illinois |
| 1824 John H. Hall perfects interchangeable parts for gun manufacturing
<i>Gibbons v. Ogden</i> | |
| 1825 Erie Canal completed | |

dubious luxury cost the equivalent of a pint of good whiskey for each mile traveled.

Although some private turnpikes had existed since the 1790s, the road-building business took on new energy after the War of 1812 when the federal and state governments began financing road improvements. The federal commitment began in 1815 when President Madison supported the government-funded National Road between Cumberland, Maryland, and Wheeling, Virginia. Such a road was a military and postal necessity, Madison declared. By 1838, the government had spent in excess of \$7 million on this road, also known as the **Cumberland Road**, extending it all the way to Vandalia, Illinois.

New roads helped to alleviate the transportation problems faced by the growing nation, but they hardly solved them. Some small manufactured goods could be hauled west along the roads, and relatively lightweight items like whiskey could move the other way. But heavy, bulky products were still difficult and expensive to move. At a minimum, hauling a ton of freight along the nation's roads cost 15 cents per mile.

Water transportation remained the most economical means for shipping large loads. Unfortunately, navigable rivers and lakes seldom formed usable transportation networks. Holland and other European countries had solved this problem by digging canals. After the War of 1812, the state governments opened an era of canal building.

New York State was the most successful at canal development. In 1817, the state started work on a canal that would run more than 350 miles from Lake Erie at Buffalo to the Hudson River at Albany.

turnpike A highway on which tolls are collected at barriers set up along the way; companies that hoped to make a profit from the tolls built the first turnpikes.

Cumberland Road A national highway built with federal funds; it eventually stretched from Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois, and beyond.

freight Any goods or cargo carried in commercial transport.

This canal would tap the rich agricultural regions of western New York and the Great Lakes. When completed in 1825, the Erie Canal revolutionized shipping. The cost of shipping a ton of oats from Buffalo to Albany fell more than 80 percent, and the transit time dropped from twenty days to eight. The canal enabled a flood of goods from America's interior to reach New York City and made that city the nation's commercial center.

The spectacular success of the **Erie Canal** prompted state governments to offer all manner of financial incentives to canal-building companies. The result was an explosion in canal building that lasted through the 1830s.

Pennsylvania's experiences were typical. Jealous of New York's success, Pennsylvania proposed a system of canals and roads that would make it the commercial hub of the Western Hemisphere. At the center of this system was the Main Line Canal connecting Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. The problem was that the two cities were separated by mountains over two thousand feet high. Using locks to raise boats over this height was a technological impossibility. Engineers finally designed a portage railroad over the Allegheny Mountains.

The Allegheny Portage Railroad permitted passengers and cargo to make the trip across the mountains on land but without leaving canal boats. The canal boats were floated onto submerged railcars. Steam power was then used to pull the railcars, which were attached to a cable, up a series of inclined planes. After being pulled up five steep inclines, the railcars began the descent to the canal at the other side of the mountains. At the bottom of the last incline, the boats were unloaded and placed in the canal to continue the trip to Philadelphia or Pittsburgh.

The portage railroad was an engineering marvel. The completion of the Main Line system in 1834 allowed a family to travel relatively quickly and comfortably all the way from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh. The tolls alone, however, cost as much as six acres of prime farmland. In the long run, the Main Line Canal was a dismal financial failure, never earning investors one cent of profit.

Despite Pennsylvania's experience, nearly every state in the North and West undertook some canal building between 1820 and 1840.

States and private individuals invested over \$100 million on nearly 3,500 miles of canals during the heyday of canal building. Nearly all experienced the same sad financial fate as Pennsylvania's Main Line Canal.

Steam Power

Canals solved one problem of water transportation but did not address the issue of how to move people and goods upstream on America's great rivers. While a barge could make it downstream from Pittsburgh to New Orleans in about a month, the return trip took over four months, if it could be made at all. As a result, most shippers barged their freight downriver, sold the barges for lumber in New Orleans, and walked back home along the Natchez Trace.

In 1807, Robert Fulton perfected a design that made steam-powered shipping practical. His *Clermont* used steam-driven wheels mounted on the sides of the vessel to push it up the Hudson River from New York City to Albany. Unfortunately, the *Clermont* was not well suited to most of America's waterways. Heavy and narrow-beamed, Fulton's ship needed deep water to carry a limited payload. It did not take long, however, for engineers to design broader-beamed, lighter vessels that could

Erie Canal A 350-mile canal stretching from Buffalo to Albany; it revolutionized shipping in New York.

lock An enclosed section of a canal, with gates at each end, used to raise or lower boats from one level to another by admitting or releasing water; locks allow canals to compensate for changes in terrain.

portage The carrying of boats or supplies overland between two waterways.

Natchez Trace A road connecting Natchez, Mississippi, with Nashville, Tennessee; it evolved from a series of Indian trails and had commercial and military importance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

payload The part of a cargo that generates revenue, as opposed to the part needed to fire the boiler or supply the crew.



- ◆ Though painted many years after the event, this picture captures the excitement of the historic race between the steam-powered *Tom Thumb* and a stagecoach horse that took place in the summer of 1830. The horse won, leading the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to scrap steam power and hitch horses to their cars rather than locomotives. "*The Race of the Tom Thumb*" by Herbert D. Stitt. *The Chessie System, B&O Railroad Museum Archives.*

carry heavy loads in shallow western rivers. By 1812 the *New Orleans* had made a successful run from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.

Steam power took canal building's impact on inland transportation a revolutionary step further. Between 1816 and 1840, the cost of shipping a ton of goods down American rivers fell from an average of 1 ¹/₄ cents per mile to less than half a cent. The cost of upstream transport fell from over 10 cents per mile to about half a cent. In addition, steamboats could carry bulky and heavy objects that could not be hauled upstream for any price by any other means. Dependable river transportation drew cotton cultivation farther into the nation's interior and allowed fur trappers and traders to press up the Missouri River. Only the development of steam railroads would ultimately have a greater impact on nineteenth-century transportation.

Merchants from cities without extensive navigable rivers, such as Baltimore, took the lead in developing this new technology. In 1828, the state chartered the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad. The B&O soon demonstrated its potential when inventor Peter Cooper's steam locomotive *Tom Thumb* sped 13 miles along B&O tracks. Ironically, the B&O abandoned steam power and replaced it with horses temporarily after a stagecoach horse beat the *Tom Thumb* in a widely publicized race held in 1830.

Despite this race, South Carolina invested in steam technology and chartered a 136-mile rail line from Charleston to Hamburg. Here the first full-size American-built locomotive was used to pull cars. Even the explosion of this engine did not deter the Charleston and Hamburg Railroad from continuing to use steam engines.

Rail transport could not rival water-based transportation systems during this early period. By 1850, individual companies had laid approximately 9,000 miles of track, but not in any coherent network. Also, the

distance between tracks varied from company to company. As a result, cargoes had to be unloaded from the cars of one company's trains at line's end, lugged to the railhead of another line, and reloaded onto the other company's cars. There were other problems too. Boiler explosions, fires, and derailments were common. Entrenched interest groups used their power in state legislatures to limit the extension of railroads. These obstacles prevented railroads from becoming a major factor in American life until the 1850s.

The Information Revolution

Since the nation's founding, American leaders had feared that the sheer size of the country would make true federal democracy impractical. During the 1790s, it took a week for a letter to travel from Virginia to New York City and three weeks from Cincinnati to the Atlantic coast. Thomas Jefferson speculated that the continent would become a series of allied republics, each small enough to operate efficiently given the slow speed of communication. The transportation revolution, however, made quite a difference in how quickly news got around.

The Erie Canal enabled letters posted in Buffalo to reach New York City within six days and New Orleans in about two weeks. The increased flow of information caused an explosion in the number of newspapers and magazines published in the country. In 1790, the 92 American newspapers had a total circulation of around 4 million. By 1835, the number of periodicals had risen to 1,258, and circulation had surpassed 90 million.

Samuel F. B. Morse's invention of the electric telegraph greatly enhanced the speed of the communications revolution. His invention, first tested in 1836, consisted of a transmitter and receiver of electrical impulses. The transmitter sent either a short electrical pulse (a dot) or a long electrical pulse (a dash), from which Morse devised his famous code. The major obstacle that Morse faced was sending these electrical pulses long distances over wires. By 1843, he had worked out this problem, and Congress agreed to finance an experimental line between Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. On May 24, 1844, he sent his first message over the line: "What hath God wrought!"

Legal Anchors for New Business Enterprise

Before wholesale changes could take place in American transportation and business, some thorny legal issues needed to be resolved. The American System made questions of authority over finance and interstate commerce increasingly

important. In three landmark legal cases, John Marshall, chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, resolved such questions and cleared the way for the expansion of interstate trade.

If businesses were going to build and operate large enterprises, they had to have confidence in the sanctity of legal contracts. In the case of *Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819), the Supreme Court made contracts secure. The 1769 charter for Dartmouth College specified that the college's board of trustees would be self-perpetuating. In 1816, to gain control over the college, the New Hampshire legislature passed a bill allowing the state's governor to appoint board members. The board sued, claiming that the charter was a legal contract that the legislature had no right to alter. Marshall concurred that the Constitution protected the sanctity of contracts and that state legislatures could not interfere with them.

In *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), Marshall established the superiority of the federal government over state authorities in matters of finance. The case involved the cashier of the Baltimore branch of the Bank of the United States, who refused to put state revenue stamps on federal bank notes as required by Maryland law. McCulloch (the cashier) was indicted by the state but appealed to federal authorities. Marshall ruled that the states could not impose taxes on federal institutions and that McCulloch was right in refusing to comply with Maryland's law. As he wrote, "The Constitution and the laws made in pursuance thereof are supreme."

The supremacy of federal authority was demonstrated again in *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824). This case involved a New York charter given to Robert Fulton and Robert Livingston that granted them exclusive rights to run steamboats on rivers in that state. Thomas Gibbons also operated a

circulation The number of copies of a publication sold or distributed.

electric telegraph Device used to send messages in the form of electrical signals.

indict To make a formal accusation against someone.

steamboat service in the same area, but under the authority of the federal Coasting Act. When a conflict between the two companies ended up in court, Marshall ruled in favor of Gibbons, arguing that the monopoly that New York had granted conflicted with federal authority and was therefore invalid.

Those three cases helped ease the way for the development of new businesses. With contracts free from state and local meddling and the superiority of Congress in banking and interstate commerce established, businesses had the security they needed to turn Henry Clay's dream of a national market economy into a reality.

Manufacturing Boom

During the opening years of the nineteenth century, manufacturing in America was largely a home-based affair. Before the 1820s, American households produced most of the manufactured goods they used. More than 60 percent of the clothing Americans wore was spun from raw fibers and sewn by women in their homes. Craftsmen also worked in their homes, assisted by family members and an extended family of apprentices and **journeymen**.

Beginning during the War of 1812, textile manufacturing led the way in moving production out of the home and into the factory. The intimate ties between manufacturers and workers were severed, and both found themselves surrounded by strangers in new and unfamiliar urban environments.

The "American System" of Manufacturing

At first, mechanized production played only a small part in the manufacturing of textiles. Even Samuel Slater (see pages 184-185), depended on the putting-out **system** to finish the manufacturing process. In this system, manufacturers provided thread and other materials to women arti-

sans, who then wove, dyed, and sewed the final products at home. During slack times in the agricultural year, entire families participated in this home industry. When the householders had used all the thread, they took the finished goods to the manufacturer and were paid for their work.

A radical departure in cloth manufacturing took place in 1813, when the Boston Manufacturing Company mechanized all the stages in the production of finished cloth, bringing the entire process under one roof. By 1822, the factory's success led the company to build a larger one in Lowell, Massachusetts, a town named after one of the company's founders, Francis Cabot Lowell.

The design of the Lowell factory was widely copied during the 1820s and 1830s. Spinning and weaving on machines located in one building cut the time and the cost of manufacturing significantly. Quality control became easier because employees were under constant supervision. As a result, the putting-out system for turning thread into cloth went into serious decline, as did home production of clothes for family use. Ready-made clothing became standard wearing apparel in the 1830s and 1840s.

A major technological revolution helped to push factory production into other areas of manufacturing during these same years. In traditional manufacturing, individual artisans crafted each item one at a time. A clockmaker, for example, either cast or carved individually by hand all

The



monopoly The right to exclusive control over a commercial activity; it may be granted by the government.

apprentices Individuals who work for a master craftsman in order to learn a trade or skill.

journeyman A person who has finished an apprenticeship in a trade or craft and is a qualified worker in the employ of another.

putting-out system A system of production in which manufacturers provided artisans with materials such as thread and dye for use in producing goods at home.

quality control The effort to ensure that all goods produced meet consistent standards.

the gears, levers, and wheels. As a result, the innards of a clock worked together only in the clock for which they had been made. If that clock ever needed repair, new parts had to be custom-made for it. The lack of **interchangeable parts** made manufacturing extremely slow and repairs difficult.

Eli Whitney, inventor of the cotton gin (see page 186), was the first American to propose the large-scale use of interchangeable parts, to manufacture guns in 1798. Whitney's efforts failed because of a lack of start-up money and precision machine tools. But his former partner, John H. Hall, proved that manufacturing guns from interchangeable parts was practical at the federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1824. This "American system of manufacturing" spread to the Springfield Armory in Massachusetts and then to private gun manufacturers like Samuel Colt. Within twenty years, products ranging from sewing machines to farm implements were being made from interchangeable parts.

The use of interchangeable parts speeded up the manufacture of important products and improved their dependability. The new technology also made repairing guns and other standardized mechanisms easy and relatively cheap. Like the textile mills, factories assembling interchangeable parts slashed the production costs. The use of interchangeable parts allowed employers to hire unskilled workers to assemble those parts. Extensive training became irrelevant. A gunsmith with years of experience was likely to find himself working on equal terms alongside a youngster or recent immigrant with no craft experience at all.

New Workplaces and New Workers

Moving manufacturing from the home to the factory changed the nature of work and altered the traditional relationship between employers and employees. To attract workers, some entrepreneurs developed company towns. Families recruited from the economically depressed New England countryside were installed in neat row houses, each with its own small vegetable garden. Each

family member was employed by the company. Women worked on the production line. Men ran heavy machinery and worked as millwrights, carpenters, haulers, or day laborers. Children did light work in the factories and tended gardens at home.

Lowell's company developed another system. Hard-pressed to find enough families to work in the factories, it recruited unmarried farm girls. Because most of the girls saw factory work as a transitional stage between girlhood and marriage, the company assured them and their families that the moral atmosphere in its dormitories would be strictly controlled to maintain the girls' reputations.

In New York, Philadelphia, and other cities, enterprising manufacturers found an alternative source of labor in the immigrant slums. In the shoe industry, for example, they assigned one family to make soles, another to make heels, and so forth. Making shoes this way was not as efficient as making them in a factory, but it did have advantages. Such manufacturers did not have to build factories and could pay rock-bottom wages to desperate slum dwellers.

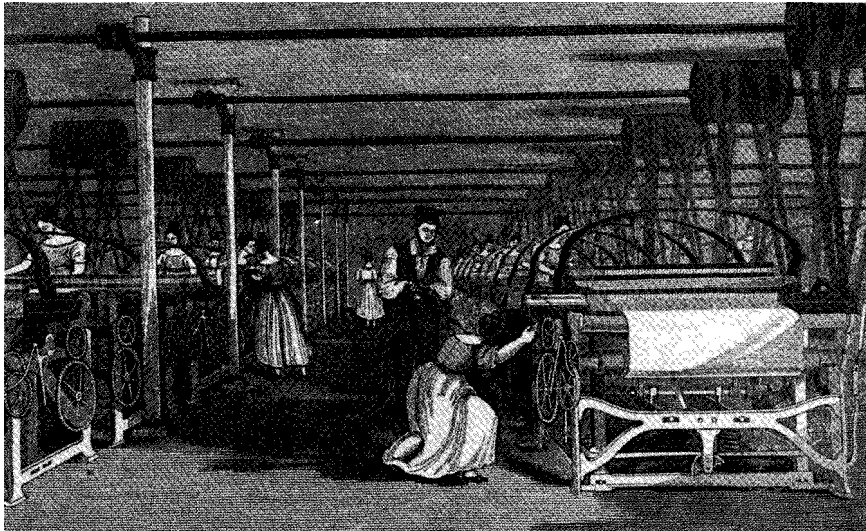
Machine production and the growing pool of labor proved economically devastating to the working class. No longer was the employer a master craftsman who felt some responsibility toward his workers. Factory owners had obligations to investors and bankers, but not to their workers. Owners kept wages low, regardless of the workers' cost of living. As the supply of labor swelled and wages declined, increasing numbers of working people faced poverty and squalor.

The increasing number of immigrants who came to America after 1820 contributed signifi-

interchangeable parts Parts that are identical and can be substituted for one another.

company town A town built and owned by a single company; its residents depend on the company not only for jobs but for stores, schools, and housing.

millwright A person who designs, builds, or repairs mills or mill machinery



- ◆ Women who worked in the new textile factories complained about the noise, tedium, and dangers. This engraving, from the *Memoir of Samuel Slater* (1836), shows the conditions under which they worked. *Museum of American Textile History.*

cantly to the desperate situation of the working class. Between 1820 and 1830, for example, slightly more than 151,000 people immigrated to the United States. In the following decade, that number increased to nearly 600,000; between 1840 and 1850, it soared to more than a million and a half people (see Map 10.1). This enormous increase in immigration changed the cultural and economic face of the nation. Immigrants flocked to the port and manufacturing cities of the Northeast, where they joined Americans fleeing the countryside after the Panic of 1819. Former master craftsmen, journeymen, and apprentices combined with immigrants and refugees from the farm to form a new social class and culture in America.

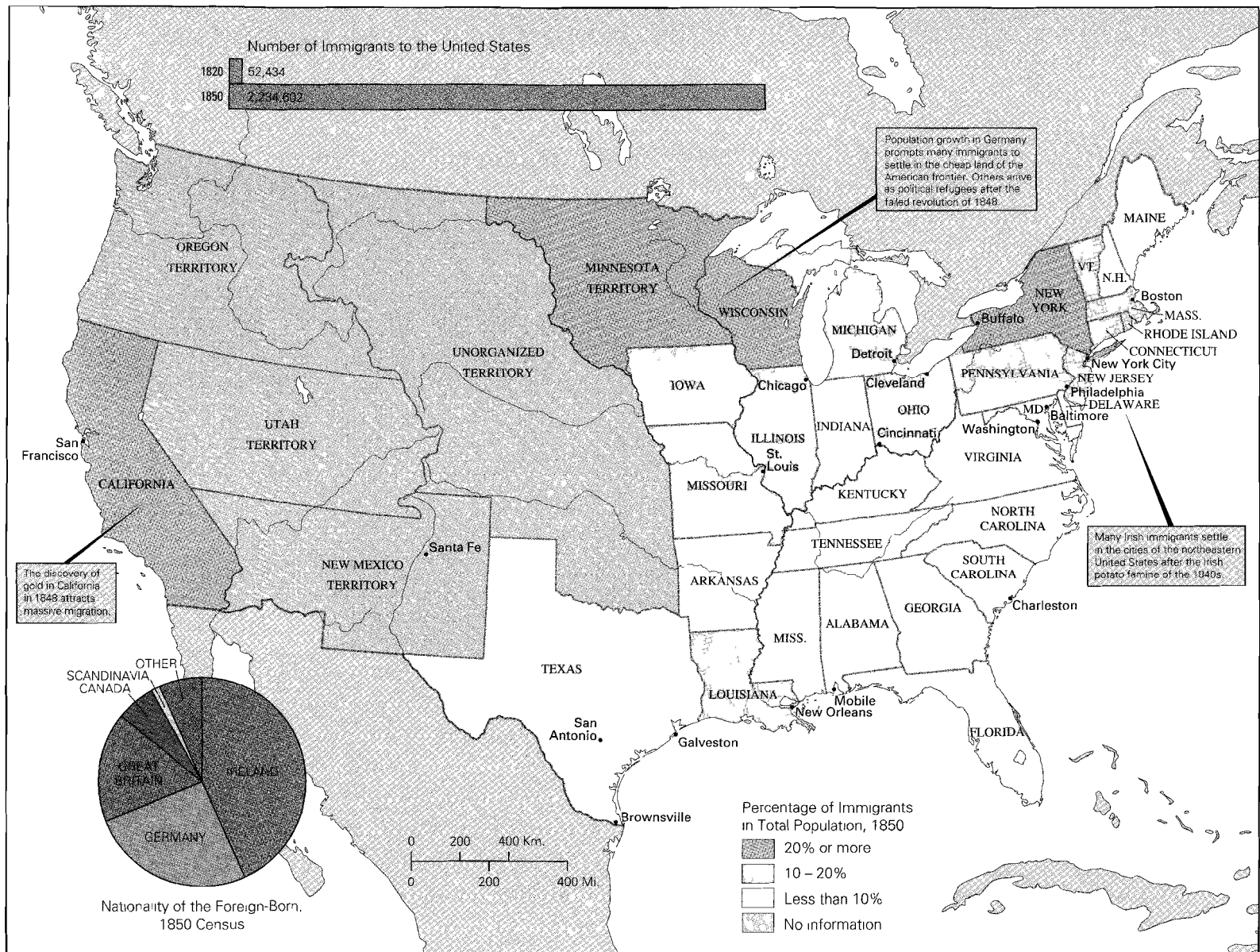
Nearly half of all immigrants to the United States between 1820 and 1860 came from Ireland, a nation beset with poverty, political strife, and, after the potato blight appeared in 1841, starvation. Few Irish had marketable skills or more money than the voyage to America cost. They arrived penniless and virtually unemployable. Many of them spoke not English but Gaelic.

The same was true of many Germans, the second most numerous immigrant group. Radical economic change and political upheaval put peasants and skilled craftsmen into flight. Like Irish peasants, German farmers arrived in America destitute and void of opportunities. Trained German craftsmen had a better chance at finding employment, but mechanization threatened their livelihoods as well. Adding to their difficulties was their lack of fluency in English.

Not only were the new immigrants poor and unskilled, but most were culturally different from native-born Americans. Catholicism separated most from the vast majority of Americans, who were Protestants. In religion, language, dress, eating and drinking habits, and social values, the new immigrants were very different from the people whose culture dominated American society.

Poverty, cultural distinctiveness, and the desire to live among fellow immigrants created ethnic neighborhoods in New York, Philadelphia, and other cities. Here, people with the same culture and religion built churches, stores, pubs, beer halls, and other familiar institutions to help themselves cope with the shock of transplantation and to adapt to life in the United States. They started fraternal organizations and clubs to overcome loneliness and isolation. Living conditions were crowded, uncomfortable, and unsanitary.

Desperate for work, the new immigrants were willing to do nearly anything to earn money. For



◆ **MAP 10.1 Origin and Settlement of Immigrants, 1820-1850** Immigration was one of the most important economic, political, and social factors in American life during the antebellum period. As this map shows, with the exception of Louisiana, immigration was confined almost exclusively to areas where slavery was not permitted. This gave the North, Northwest, and California a different cultural flavor than the rest of the country and affected the political balance between those areas and the South.

manufacturers, they were the perfect work force. As immigration increased, the traditional labor shortage in America was replaced by a labor glut, and the social and economic status of all workers declined accordingly.

Living Conditions in Industrializing America

Working conditions for factory workers reflected the labor supply, the manufacturing company's capital, and the personal philosophy of the factory owner. Girls at Lowell's factories described an environment of familiar paternalism. Factory managers and boarding-house keepers supervised every aspect of their lives. As for the work itself, one mill girl commented that it was "not half so hard as . . . attending the dairy, washing, cleaning house, and cooking." What bothered her most was the repetitive work and the resulting boredom.

Boredom could have disastrous consequences. Inattentive factory workers were likely to lose fingers, hands, arms, or even lives to whirring, pounding, slashing mechanisms. Some owners tried to make the workplace safe, but investors discouraged many from buying safety devices. Samuel Slater complained bitterly to investors after a child was chewed up in a factory machine. "You call for yarn," he declared, "but think little about the means by which it is to be made."

Such concern became increasingly rare as factory owners withdrew from overseeing daily operations. The influx of laborers from the countryside and foreign lands wiped out the decent wages and living conditions that manufacturing pioneers had offered. Laborers were increasingly expected to provide their own housing, food, and entertainment.

Large areas in cities became working-class neighborhoods. Factory workers, journeymen, and day laborers crammed into the boxlike rooms of **tenements**. Large houses formerly occupied by domestic manufacturers and their apprentices were broken up into tiny apartments and were rented to laborers. In some working-class areas of New York City, laborers were crowded fifty to a house.

Sewage disposal, drinking water, and trash removal were sorely neglected in such areas.

Social Life for a Genteel Class

The factory system also altered the daily lives of manufacturers. In earlier years, journeymen and apprentices had lived with master craftsmen and their families. Craftsmen exercised great authority over their workers but felt obligated to care for them almost as parents would. Such working arrangements blurred the distinction between employee and employer. The factory system ended this relationship. The movement of workers out of owners' homes permitted the emerging elite class to develop a genteel lifestyle that set them apart from the rest of the population.

Genteel families aimed at the complete separation of their private and public lives. Men in the elite class spent their leisure time socializing with each other in private clubs and organizations instead of drinking and eating with their employees. The lives of genteel wives also changed. The wife of a traditional craftsman had been responsible for important tasks in the operation of the business. Genteel women, by contrast, were expected to leave business dealings to men. They became immersed in what is called the cult of domesticity, which encouraged women to focus their lives completely on their homes and children. Women who did so believed they were performing an important duty for God and country and fulfilling their natural calling.

labor glut Oversupply of labor in relation to the number of jobs available.

tenement Urban apartment house, usually with minimal facilities for sanitation, safety, and comfort.

genteel The manner and style associated with the elite classes, usually characterized by elegance, grace, and politeness.

cult of domesticity The belief that women's proper role lay in domestic pursuits.

Motherhood consumed genteel women during the antebellum period. The new magazines and advice manuals of the 1820s and 1830s urged mothers to nurture rather than punish their children. Influential author Bronson Alcott helped to convince an entire generation of the need for a gentle and supporting hand and for a departure from harsh, Puritan methods of child rearing.

Despite the demands of motherhood, many genteel women found themselves isolated with time on their hands. They sought activities that would provide a sense of accomplishment without imperiling their genteel status. Many found outlets in fancy needlework, reading, and art appreciation societies. But some wished for more challenging activities. As Sarah Huntington Smith complained in 1833, "To make and receive visits, exchange friendly salutations, attend to one's wardrobe, cultivate a garden, read good and entertaining books, and even attend religious meetings for one's own enjoyment; all this does not satisfy me." Smith chose to become a missionary. Other genteel women during the 1830s and 1840s used their nurturing and purifying talents to reform what appeared to be a chaotic and immoral society by involving themselves in crusades against alcohol and slavery.

Life and Culture Among the New Middle Class

The new class of clerks, bookkeepers, and managers that helped to run the factories owned by the genteel elite sought to find their own cultural level. This middle class had many of the same prejudices and ideals as the elite class. They read the same advice magazines, often attended the same churches, and sometimes belonged to the same civic and reform societies. Nevertheless, the lives of these two classes were different in many respects.

One distinguishing characteristic of the new middle class was its relative youth. These young people had flocked from the countryside to newly emerging cities in pursuit of formal education and employment. While middle-class men found employment as clerks, bookkeepers, and managers, middle-class women parlayed their education and perceived gift for nurturing children into work as teachers. It became acceptable for women to work as teachers for several years before marriage. Some avoided marriage altogether to pursue their hard-won careers.

Middle-class men and women tended to put off marriage until they had established themselves socially and economically. They also tended to have fewer children than their parents had. Because middle-class

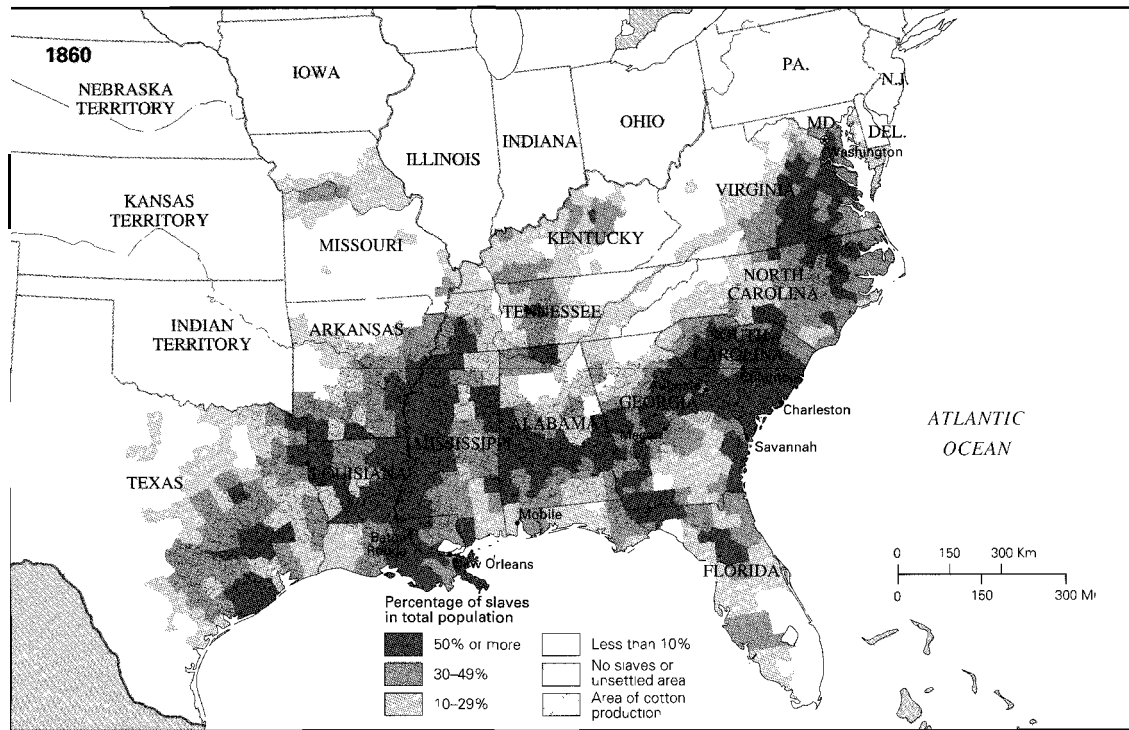
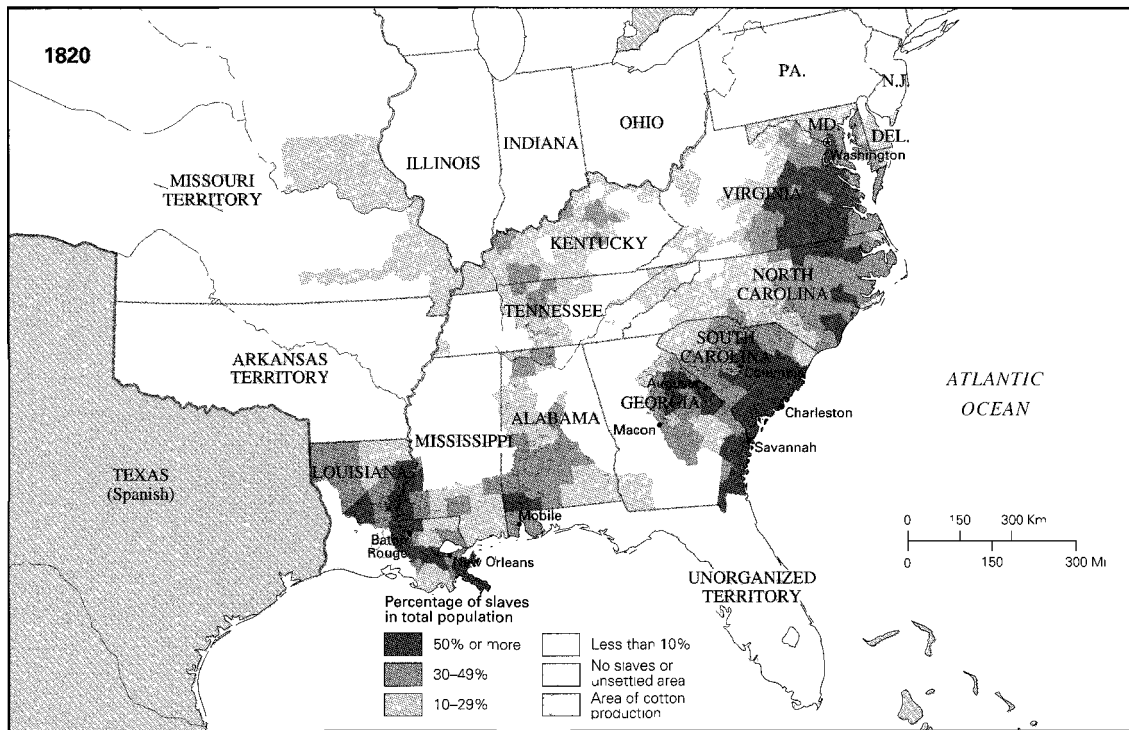
children were sent to school to prepare them to pursue careers, they were an economic liability rather than an asset. Late marriage and birth control kept middle-class families small.

Middle-class city life cut people off from the comforting sociability of farm families and the church-centered communities that shaped and directed rural life. Many unmarried men and women seeking their fortunes in town boarded in private homes or rooming houses. After marriage, they emulated the closely knit isolation of the elite. Accordingly, these couples looked to each other for companionship and guidance.

Like the elite class, this new group sought bonds in voluntary associations. College students formed discussion groups, preprofessional clubs, and benevolent societies. For those out of school, groups like the Odd Fellows and the Masons brought people together for companionship. Such organizations helped enforce traditional values through rigid membership standards stressing moral character, upright behavior, and, above all, order.

The New Cotton Empire in the South

While increasing multitudes packed into the industrializing cities of the North, the South exploded outward seeking new land on which to grow cotton. By 1850, cotton was being grown from the southeastern corner of Virginia to eastern Texas. The ascendancy of King Cotton affected the outlook and experiences of everyone



• **MAP 10.2 Cotton Agriculture and Slave Population** Between 1820 and 1860, the expansion of cotton agriculture and the extension of slavery went hand in hand. As these maps show, cotton production was an isolated activity in 1820, and slavery remained isolated as well. By 1860, both had extended westward.

who lived in the region—large-scale planters, slaves, free blacks, and poor whites.

A New Birth for the Slavery System

Before the emergence of King Cotton, many southerners questioned slavery. In 1782, Virginia made it legal for individual masters to free their slaves, and many did so. In 1784, Thomas Jefferson proposed an ordinance that would have prohibited slavery in all the nation's territories after 1800. Some southern leaders advocated abolishing slavery and transporting freed blacks to Africa. But the cotton boom after the War of 1812 required the expansion of slavery, not its elimination.

The rapid expansion of cotton production revived the slave system. A map showing cotton production and one showing slave population appear nearly identical (see Map 10.2). In the 1820s, when cotton was most heavily concentrated in South Carolina and Georgia, the greatest density of slaves occurred in the same area. As cotton spread west, so did slavery. By 1860, both cotton growing and slavery would appear as a continuous belt stretching from the Carolinas to the Brazos River in Texas.

Although a majority of slaves—58 percent of men and 69 percent of women—were employed as field hands, slaves did much more than just pick cotton. Two percent of slave men and 17 percent of women were employed as house slaves. The remaining 14 percent of slave women were employed in occupations like sewing, weaving, and food processing. Seventeen percent of slave men drove wagons, piloted riverboats, and herded cattle. The remaining 23 percent of the male slaves on plantations were managers and craftsmen. This percentage was even higher in cities, where slave artisans such as carpenters were often allowed to hire themselves out on the open job market. The number of slave artisans declined during the 1840s and 1850s due to pressure from white craftsmen. Nevertheless, they remained a significant proportion of the slave population.

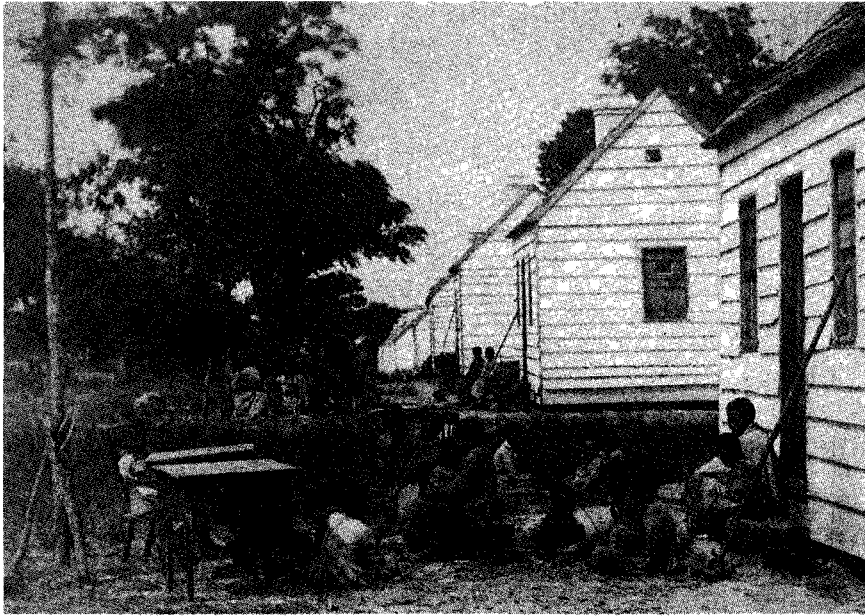
The owners of cotton plantations made an excellent living from slave labor. Although they often complained of debt and poor markets, large-scale planters could expect an annual return on capital of between 8 and 10 percent—the equivalent of what the most successful northern industrialists were making. Agricultural profits in noncotton areas were significantly lower. Outside the Cotton Belt, tobacco, rice, and sugar growers earned considerable money selling off slaves that were not essential to their operations. The enormous demand for workers in the Cotton Belt created a profitable interstate slave trade. Thus even planters who did not grow cotton came to have a significant stake in its cultivation.

Slaves were a major capital investment. In the 1850s, a healthy male field hand in his mid-twenties sold for an average of \$1,800, a skilled craftsman for \$2,500. Even a male child too young to work in the fields or a man in his fifties cost anywhere from \$250 to \$500. The price for female slaves was more variable. A female field hand did less heavy work than a healthy male of the same age and thus cost proportionately less. A particularly beautiful young woman might bring as much as \$5,000 at auction. Such women generally became the mistresses of the men who bought them.

Living Conditions for Southern Slaves

Slaveowners' enormous economic investment in their human property played a significant role in their treatment of slaves. Damaging or killing a healthy slave resulted in a large financial loss, even

- field hands People who did agricultural work, such as planting, weeding, and harvesting.
- house slaves People who did domestic work, such as cleaning and cooking.
- return on capital The yield on money that has been invested in an enterprise or product.
- Cotton Belt The region in the southeastern United States in which cotton is grown (see Map 10.2).



This early photograph, taken on a South Carolina plantation before the Civil War, freezes slave life in time, giving us a view of what slave cabins looked like, how they were arranged, how slaves dressed, and how they spent what little leisure time they had. *Collection of William Gladstone.*

if **slave codes** allowed an owner to do anything to his property. A delicate balance between power and profit shaped planters' policies toward slaves and set the tone for slave life.

Housing for slaves was seldom more than adequate. Generally, slaves lived in a one-room log cabin with a dirt floor and a fireplace or stove. The cabin was usually about 16 by 18 feet and housed five or six people. Slaveowners seldom crowded people into slave quarters. As one slaveowner explained, "In no case should two families be allowed to occupy the same house. The crowding [of] a number into one house is unhealthy. It breeds contention; is destructive of delicacy of feeling, and it promotes immorality between the sexes."

Slave quarters were not particularly comfortable. The windows had only wooden shutters and no glass, so they let in flies in summer and cold in winter. An open fireplace or stove provided light as well as heat for cooking. The need for a cooking fire required slaves to build fires even at the hottest time of year. Furnishings were usually crude. Bedding consisted of straw pallets stacked on the floor. Equally simple rough-hewn wooden benches and plank tables could sometimes be found.

Clothing, too, was basic. "The proper and usual quantity of clothes for plantation hands is two suits of cotton for spring and summer, and two suits of woolen for winter; four pair of shoes and three hats," a Georgia planter observed in 1854. On many plantations, slave women made a durable but rough cotton fabric called osnaburg, which was uncomfortable to wear. One slave complained that the material was "like needles when it was new." Children often went naked in the summer and were fitted with long, loose-hanging osnaburg shirts during the colder months.

Whether slaves were fed an adequate diet remains a controversial issue among historians. Some historians have claimed that slaves were actually fed better—in terms of how much meat they ate—than contemporary workers in the North, in Germany, and in Italy. Although they concede that the slaves' typical fare of corn and pork was monotonous, these historians point out that it was

slave codes Laws that established the status of slaves, denying them basic rights and classifying them as the property of slaveowners.

quite adequate. As one slave noted, there was "plenty to eat such as it was."

Other historians, however, have pointed to high infant mortality rates and low birth weights among slaves as evidence that slave mothers did not receive adequate nutrition. It would also appear that at least until the age of six, slave children as well were not fed a sufficient diet. American slaves at that age were shorter than their contemporaries in Europe, Africa, North America, and the Caribbean—evidence of "disastrous malnutrition." Yet by the age of 17 American male slaves were taller than factory workers in England and German peasants. This evidence suggests that American slaves began to be fed much better once they were capable of working.

What is clear is that diet-related diseases plagued slave communities. These diseases were probably no more common among slaves than among their owners, who also lived on meals consisting mostly of corn and pork. Such a diet often led to diseases such as pellagra that were caused by vitamin deficiencies. Because of the lack of proper sanitation, slaves did suffer from dysentery and cholera more than southern whites.

With the possible exception of sexual exploitation, no other aspect of slavery has generated more controversy than violence. The image of sadistic white men beating slaves permeates the dark side of the southern myth. Such behavior was not unknown, but it was far from typical. Slaves represented money, and damaging slaves was expensive. Still, given the need to keep up production, slaveowners were not shy about using measured force. "When picking cotton I never put on more than 20 stripes [lashes with a whip] and verry frequently not more than 10 or 15," one plantation owner observed. But not all owners were so practical when it came to discipline.

The significant number of slaves who lived on small farms probably did not live much better than plantation slaves. Owners of such farms saw slaves as vehicles for social and economic advancement and were willing to overwork or sell their slaves if it would benefit themselves. When all was going well, slaves might be treated like members

of a farmer's family. But when conditions were bad, slaves were the first victims.

A New Planter Aristocracy

Few other images have persisted in American history longer than that of courtly southern planters in the years before the Civil War. Songs and stories have immortalized the myth of a southern aristocracy of enormous wealth and polished manners upholding a culture of romantic chivalry. Charming though this image of the antebellum South is, it is not accurate.

Statistics indicate that the great planters of popular myth were few and far between. In the early nineteenth century, only about a third of all southerners owned slaves. Large-scale planters were a tiny minority of these. Nearly three-fourths of these slaveholders were small farmers who owned fewer than ten slaves. Another 15 percent of slave-holders owned between ten and twenty slaves. The true planters, who possessed more than twenty slaves, constituted just 12 percent of all slaveholders. Only the very wealthy—less than 1 percent—owned more than one hundred slaves.

Even among true southern planters, the aristocratic manners and trappings of the idealized plantation were rare. King Cotton brought a new sort of man to the forefront. These new aristocrats were generally not related to the old colonial plantation gentry. Most had begun their careers as land speculators, financiers, and rough-and-tumble yeoman farmers. They had parlayed ruthlessness, good luck, and dealings in the burgeoning cotton market into large landholdings and armies of slaves.

The wives of these planters bore little resemblance to their counterparts in popular fiction. Far from being frail, helpless creatures, southern plantation mistresses carried a heavy burden of responsibility. A planter's wife supervised large staffs of

antebellum South The South in the period from 1815 to 1860 before the Civil War; *antebellum* means "before the war."

slaves, organized and ran schools for the white children on the plantation, looked out for the health of everyone, and managed the plantation in the absence of her husband.

All those duties were complicated by a sex code that relegated southern women to a peculiar position in the plantation hierarchy. On the one hand, white women were expected to exercise absolute authority over their slaves. On the other, they were to be absolutely obedient to white men. "He is master of the house," said Mary Boykin Chesnut about her husband. "To hear [him] is to obey."

This is not to say that the image of grand plantations and aristocratic living is entirely false. Enormous profits from cotton in the 1840s and 1850s permitted some planters to build elegant mansions and to affect the lifestyle that they had read about in romantic literature. Planters assumed what they imagined were the ways of medieval knights, adopting courtly manners and the nobleman's **paternalistic** obligation to look out for their social inferiors, both black and white. Women decked out in the latest gowns flocked to formal balls and weekend parties. Young men were sent to academies where they could learn the aristocratic virtues of militarism and honor. Courtship became highly ritualized, a modern imitation of imagined medieval court manners.

Plain Folk in the South

Another enduring myth about the South holds that society there was sharply divided between two kinds of people: slaveholders and slaves. If the planter myth is only partially true, this myth is totally false.

Fully two-thirds of southern white families owned no slaves. A small number of these families owned stores, craft shops, and other businesses in Charleston, New Orleans, Atlanta, and other southern cities. The great majority, however, were proud and independent small farmers.

Often tarred with the label "poor white trash," most of these yeomen were actually productive stock raisers and farmers. They concentrated on growing and producing what they needed to live,

but all aspired to produce small surpluses of grain, meat, and other commodities that they could sell. Many grew small crops of cotton to raise cash. Whatever money they made was usually spent on needed manufactured goods, land, and, if possible, slaves.

These small farmers had a troubled relationship with white planters. On the one hand, many yeoman farmers yearned to join the ranks of the great planters. On the other, they resented the aristocracy and envied the planters' exalted status and power.

Free Blacks in the South

Free blacks are entirely absent from the myth of the South. The Lower South had very few free blacks, but in states such as Virginia free blacks amounted to 10 percent of the black population. Some could trace their origins back to the earliest colonial times, when African Americans had served limited terms of indenture. The majority, however, had been freed since the late 1700s. Most worked for white employers as day laborers.

Some opportunities were available to free blacks. In the Upper South, they could become master carpenters, coopers, painters, brick masons, blacksmiths, boatmen, bakers, and barbers. Black women had few opportunities as skilled laborers. Some became seamstresses, washers, and cooks. A few grew up to run small groceries, taverns, and restaurants. Folk healing and **midwifery** might also lead to economic independence for black women. Some resorted to prostitution.

Mounting restrictions on free blacks during the first half of the nineteenth century limited their freedom of movement, their economic freedom, and their legal rights. Skin color left them open to abuses and forced them to be extremely careful in their dealings with whites.

paternalistic Treating social dependents as a father treats his children, providing for their needs without allowing them rights or responsibilities.

midwifery Assistance in childbirth.

SUMMARY

Expectations
Constraints
Choices
Outcomes

Although seemingly the most old-fashioned region of the country, the South that emerged during the years leading up to 1840 was a profoundly different place than it had been before. As an industrial revolution overturned the economies in Great Britain and the American Northeast, *expectations* for southerners changed radically. Although they clothed their new society in romanticized medieval garb, they were creating an altogether new kind of economy and society. The efficient production of cotton by the newly reorganized South was an essential aspect of the emerging national market economy and a powerful force in a great transformation.

Change in the North was more obvious. As factories replaced craft shops and cities replaced towns, the entire fabric of northern society seemed to come unraveled. The new economy and new technology created wonderful new *expectations* but also imposed serious *constraints*. A new social structure replaced the traditional order as unskilled and semiskilled workers, a new class of clerks, and the genteel elite made *choices* concerning their lives. As in the South, the *outcome* was a great transformation in the lives of everyone in the region.

And tying these two regions together was a new network of roads, waterways, and communications systems that accelerated the process of change. After 1840, it was possible to ship goods from any one section of the country to any other, and people in all sections were learning more about conditions in far distant parts of the growing country. Often this new information raised *expectations* of prosperity, but it also made more and more people aware of the enormity of the transformation taking place and the glaring differences between the nation's various regions. The twin *outcomes* would be greater integration in the national economy and increasing tension as mutually dependent participants in the new marketplace struggled with change and with each other.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Berlin, Ira. *Slaves Without Masters* (1975).

A masterful study of a forgotten population: free African Americans in the Old South. Lively and informative.

Cecil-Fronsman, Bill. *Common Whites: Class and Culture in Antebellum North Carolina* (1992).

A pioneering effort to describe the culture, lifestyle, and political economy shared by the antebellum South's majority population: nonslaveholding whites. Though confined in geographical scope, the study is suggestive of conditions that may have prevailed throughout the region.

Cott, Nancy M. *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (1977).

A classic work on the ties that held the women's world together but collectively bound them into a secondary position in American life.

Dublin, Thomas. *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (1979).

An interesting look at the ways in which the nature of work changed and the sorts of changes that were brought to one manufacturing community.

Eisler, Benita, ed. *The Lowell Offering: Writings by New England Mill Women, 1840-1845* (1977).

Firsthand accounts of factory life and changing social conditions written by the young women who worked at Lowell's various factories.

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. *Within the Plantation Household* (1988).

A look at the lives of black and white women in the antebellum South. This study is quite long but is well written and very informative.

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone with the Wind* (1936).

Arguably the most influential book in conveying a stereotyped vision of antebellum southern life. The film version, directed by Victor Fleming in 1939, was even more influential.

Ryan, Mary P. *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (1981).

A marvelous synthesis of materials focusing on the emergence of a new social and economic class in the midst of change from a traditional to a modern society.

Taylor, George Rogers. *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (1951).

The only comprehensive treatment of changes in transportation during the antebellum period and their economic impact. Nicely written.

