

The Peculiar Institution

At the end of the Revolution slavery appeared to be a dying institution

Two types of cotton: long-staple and short-staple.

1793 Eli Whitney -- cotton gin

By the early decades of the 19th century short-staple cotton had become America's most important export.

**Cotton: 1800 -- 7 % of U.S. exports – 1840, 51 % – 1850, 58 %
(75 % of the world's cotton came from the South)**

The entire nation, not just the South, benefited enormously from cotton.

1783 -- 500,000 slaves in US

1820 -- 1.5 million slaves; 1840 -- 2.5 million; 1860, 4 million

Southern Society

***Gone With the Wind* image**

Most southern whites did not own slaves

Most who did owned fewer than ten.

1 -- Wealthy planters who owned the large plantations and the large gangs of slaves of fifty or more represented less than one percent of the population.

They were on the top rung of southern society and controlled economic political life.

Chivalry, but in reality sharp, shrewd, ruthless businessmen

Horse racing, duels, honor, women put on the highest pedestal

Plight of women.

2 -- Proprietors of small farms and business entrepreneurs who owned fewer than ten slaves and usually no more than five.

3 – Artisans and business men in cities who owned a few slaves.

Some slaves were taught skills like brick-laying and were hired out. Some were allowed to keep a portion of their wages over-and-beyond what their owner received.

4 -- Non-slaveholding yeoman farmers who owned small farms, primarily in the backcountry, who did all the work themselves.

5 – Poor whites -- clay-eaters,” or “crackers,” or “shiftless poor whites,” or even “poor white trash.” Always sided with planters. Never realized their economic interests tied them more closely with the slaves than with the planters.

Slaves

What slaves in 1830 Virginia experienced was far different from what they experienced in the same state in 1800 or in 1860 as well as far different from the situation for slaves in those same years in Mississippi.

In the lower South slaves made up about 50% of population and picked cotton

Upper south 25% of the population

Personality of the master -- determining factor

Many experiences all slaves had in common -- lack of freedom, the knowledge that one's condition was for life, that there was no hope for freedom from bondage, the daily horror that at any time one's children might be sold to a plantation hundreds of miles away never to be seen again, etc

Field Hands – Slaves owned by small farmers often worked alongside their master in the fields.

Those on large plantations had a considerably different experience.

“gang system” or “task system”

Overseers and Drivers

Daily workday

Living quarters

Household Slaves – better conditions.

Family Life

Marriages were not sanctioned by law

Courtship and marriage in the slave community was similar to that of whites, but with the exception that at any moment the master could intervene in the process.

An older, highly-respected slave had achieved the status of a sage in the eyes of the others would be consulted and asked to perform the marriage ceremony.

“till death *or distance* do us part”

broom-jumping ritual during which they jumped backwards together over a broom lying on the floor.

Slave families tended to replicate white relationships

Women were responsible for child-rearing and all the domestic chores.

Fear of being broken apart

Sexual exploitation. -- inducements and rewards for sexual favors, or bullying women, or outright rape.

Planters' economic interests led them to encourage their slaves to reproduce

Incentives to unmarried child-bearing women to have sex with one of the male slaves. The women were promised gifts, or less work, or, if that did not work, they were threatened with punishment.

Some masters encouraged breeding by rewarding slave mothers for each child they brought into the world and that if they gave birth to twelve healthy slaves they would be given their freedom. Of course when this did happen the mother preferred to stay with her children than to separate from them.

Culture

A vibrant African-American culture

Masters, in order to secure more control over the slaves, and also to placate their own consciences, taught their slaves Christianity.

But the Christianity the slaves absorbed was different from that of their masters.

More emotional, more exuberant, and emphasized the biblical story of the ancient Israelites

Elements of polytheism and voodoo seeped into slave Christianity.

Masters who attended their slaves' services congratulated themselves on Christianizing them. They were clueless.

Negro Spirituals and Field Hollers.

Drums and the "banjar"

Because most slaves were intentionally kept illiterate there was a very strong oral tradition within the slave community. Stories and fables of Africa were told and retold from one generation to the next.

Slaves also invented new folk tales that reveal a sophisticated intuitive wisdom -- the Brer Rabbit stories about the downtrodden con artist rabbit that, in the end, always seems to wind up one step ahead of his tormenters. The rabbit, of course, was the slave, the fox or tiger the master or overseer.

The Internal Slave Trade

By the 1830s the internal slave trade was a multi-million dollar enterprise. Slaves from the Upper South were usually transported to Alexandria, Virginia. From there they were shipped to the main depot in the Deep South, Natchez, Mississippi.

Black shoe polish in their gray hair and oiled their wrinkled withered skin

By the 1840s the going price for a healthy field hand was anywhere from \$500 to \$1700,

Masters were always cognizant that their slaves represented a significant financial investment and this was the primary consideration in providing and caring for the slaves as well as punishing them. It was important to provide the slaves with sufficient nutritional sustenance and medical care so that they would remain productive and healthy.

Dangerous jobs were given to the Irish

Monetary concerns also meant masters had to show restraint in disciplining slaves.

Whipping was the most common physical punishment, but also the stocks were used or branding and sometimes masters set dogs on slaves to maul them.

Resistance

Many slaves fought back when they were struck, e.g., Sylvia Dubois

Running away

The Underground Railroad

Shirking and sabotage

Self-mutilation

Ersatz personalities: Nat, Tom, Sambo

Stanley Elkin, *Slavery*

Rebellion (Suicidal)

Gabriel Prosser – 1800 – Virginia -- kill all the whites, except for Quakers, Methodists, and Frenchmen (US was still involved in the undeclared Quasi-War with France and they hoped the French would come to their aid

Gabriel and 35 others were hanged

Denmark Vesey – 1822 – Charleston -- 9,000 slaves joined the plot to seize weapons at the armory, take possession of Charleston, burn the city to the ground, and free the slaves,

Vesey and 46 others were hanged and scores of other slaves were summarily

Nat Turner – 1831 -- Virginia

“I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first...And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work, and until the first sign appeared I should conceal it from the knowledge of men; and on the appearance of the sign...I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons.”

August 21, 1836 -- At 2:00 am Turner and six of his men snuck into the house of his master, Joseph Travis

“It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet, and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber, it being dark, I could not give a death blow, the hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife, it was his last word, Will laid him dead, with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment, not one of them awoke; there

was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten, until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it....”

Then the killing spree began.

“We started...for Mrs. Reese's, Maintaining the most perfect silence on our march, where finding the door unlocked, we entered, and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed, while sleeping; her son awoke, but it was only to sleep the sleep of death, he had only time to say who is that, and he was no more. From Mrs. Reese's we went to Mrs. Turner's, a mile distant, which we reached about sunrise, on Monday morning. Henry, Austin, and Sam, went to the still, where, finding Mr. Peeples, Austin shot him, and the rest of us went to the house; as we approached, the family discovered us, and shut the door. Vain hope! Will, with one stroke of his axe, opened it, and we entered and found Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Newsome in the middle of a room, almost frightened to death. Will immediately killed Mrs. Turner, with one blow of his axe. I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand, and with the sword I had when I was apprehended, I struck her several blows over the head, but not being able to kill her, as the sword was dull. Will turning around and discovering it, dispatched her also....By this time my company amounted to fifteen, and nine men mounted, who started for Mrs. Whitehead's (the other six were to go through a by way to Mr. Bryant's and rejoin us at Mrs. Whitehead's,) as we approached the house we discovered Mr. Richard Whitehead standing in the cotton patch, near the lane fence; we called him over into the lane, and Will, the executioner, was near at hand, with his fatal axe, to send him to an untimely grave.... As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body, with his broad axe. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner, formed by the projection of cellar cap from the house; on my approach she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow on the head, with a fence rail....”

55 whites killed – pleads not guilty – hanged and skinned

50 others executed, 200 others who had nothing to do with it were murdered by white gangs.