

Society of the Old South (1820-1860)

In the time of the Second Awakening, the South was embraced with turmoil and uncertainty. Class conflicts, outdated traditions that contradicted the new social tendencies, and economic instability became the most burning issues for the community; to a great extent, these three factors interrelated and aggravated each other. These negative trends are the most strongly associated with the Old South of the period between 1820 and 1860. The antagonisms that were growing in a region burst with the conflict that is known as the Civil War.

The Economic potential of the South was limited; agriculture was the pillar that gave the region the opportunity to support itself. Crops of sugar, rice and wheat brought the biggest share of income; the most profitable sector was cultivation of cotton. Unlike the Northern states, The South lacked developed industries; multiplied by the lack of population and poor urbanization process, it made the region dependent on cotton crops. However, cotton was ideal for farmers and plantation owners since it did not require new lands to be continually cultivated because of soil depletion like other crops needed.

Considering poor industrial development of the region, those who could afford running a cotton field quickly grabbed lands that were initially inhabited by local Indian tribes to take their chances in the "Cotton Kingdom." The South quickly became a global cotton manufacturer capable to distribute the product not to the North only, but to the European countries as well.

To keep their "kingdom" secure, Southerners needed many people to work the cotton fields; facing the lack of the workforce in the field, white Southern plantation

owners supported slavery as a means of forcing people work as intensively as needed. The Old South was one of a few regions to continue slave trade, despite numerous previous attempts to end the practice. Northern states banned bringing new slaves to their territory but never made serious attempts to stop trade in the Southern lands until the early 1820s. Northern states and European countries that banned the practice gave little thought to fighting against the practice of enslaving Africans by the South, yet never hesitated to continue the purchase of cotton imports. Most large slave plantations were located in the Western and Southern areas, some of which were initially inhabited by local Native Indian tribes before they were evicted from this territory. As additional lands became available, Southern families tried their hand in the cotton fortune.

While the population of slaves was growing, cities developed slowly, and the overall population growth was limited. Those who did not take part in the cotton industry chose other forms of agriculture. In many cases, this required obtaining new land, as many kinds of crops exhaust soil.

The class system in the Old South consisted of several levels that formed a pyramid-shape structure. At the very top, there were the white plantation owners. To become the highest class, one was to meet the following requirements: being male, owning a plantation or some other kind of business, and generally having more than 50 slaves. Of all the white southerners, only one of four actually achieved this status. Most white Southerners never saw the beautiful plantation society of places such as Tidedale (Davidson, DeLay, Heyrman, Lytle, and Stoff 322). The tier below the top of the pyramid belonged to a larger class of land owning whites with smaller income and authority. These were independent farmers who worked the land with their families and generally

owned smaller plots. Commonly referred to as yeoman farmers, this was the “middle class of the South” (327). The institution of slavery hurt this group as it made production cheaper and forced yeoman farmers to compete with mass production and low costs. However, yeoman farmers still supported slavery mainly because of their racist views and fear that emancipation would cause former slaves’ rise up against the whole white population.

The bottom of the “white section” of the population was the working poor whites. These Southerners frequently had as little or even less than an actual slave, and often worked together with slaves in the fields of wealthy plantation owners. Unlike yeoman farmers, they never owned big plots of land and had low incomes. Their greatest life achievement was often becoming a manager for a large plantation owner. Frequently, resentment for their place in the society led to aggressive behaviors against the black slave men and women working aside them in the field. Together with their racism, this became the ground of their opposition to emancipation.

The tier that was situated second from the bottom in the imaginary social pyramid of the South included free blacks. A free black individual had to take documents with him/her all the time. Harassed and often captured for suspicion of being a run-away slave, free blacks generally moved to cities or closer to Northern borders in the hope of finding employment and safety (336). Jobs were scarce and limited, and laws were enacted to ensure that these people (the largest urban population in the South) would not succeed and would remain poor.

At the very bottom of the social structure of the Old South, there was the most numerous group that included enslaved black population. This tier consisted of house

slaves, those in charge of duties from cooking to sewing and nursing, and field slaves who spent their days in the fields and often lived in small enclosures with other families haring their living supplies. Most worked very long hours, had little or no freedom in any aspect of their life and were subject to whipping or other severe punishments. Although the figures of infant mortality and life expectancy were worse than those of their white counter parts, slaves still were the dominating part of the population. The goods they produced kept the economy of the region.

Despite the horrific living conditions and hard work, slaves often found ways to relieve the pressure of captivity by forming their unique culture. Songs, a sense of family, folk tales and their own branch of Christianity helped mitigate the sadness they felt and served as a way to teach the younger generations about family history (350). Sometimes it might happen that a group of slaves rose in rebellion against their owners. The most famous case was Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831 (ibid.). Nat and a group of other slaves stopped obeying to their supervisors and began expressing their indignation killing men, women and children. Eventually, Nat and all his followers were captured, many of them were sentenced to death.

Rebellions like that of Nat Turner made some states rethink the issue of slavery. In this particular case, Virginia came up with intent to abolish slavery completely, but at the final vote, the majority declined this initiative. As long as slavery stayed legal, the South continued utilizing it to produce goods and thus support the economy.

The South held tight to its beliefs that America was the democracy, but in that democracy, white people were the elite beings. With these firmly held values, Southern politicians used smear campaigns accusing other politicians of being abolitionists in

National elections. Founding Fathers, judges, preachers and other famous personalities of the Southern region, such as Jefferson, wrote about the need for slavery and firmly believed that blacks could not function without the guidance given by a white owner. While the final ideas and suggestions on what to do with enslaved people varied greatly in different authors' statements, yet none felt the practice should be eliminated completely. By 1830, the South's identity took shape of the land of slave holding, the paradise for upper-class whites who wanted their white-based democracy rights intact. Holding their values tightly, the issue of slavery was not resolved until after the bloodiest war in America, the Civil War.

Works Cited

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