

## Overview

### The Expansion of Slavery, 1816–1846

While slavery was a part of American culture since the colonial period, at the beginning of the 19th century, the use of slave labor increased exponentially. It was during this time, when the U.S. shifted to a free-market economy, that slavery became an integral part of American capitalism. In the South, the main reason for the expansion of slavery was cotton, which became the region's primary cash crop with Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin in 1793. The profitability of cotton made slave-based agriculture an entrenched feature of the Southern economy as plantation owners imported large numbers of African slaves to toil in the fields. Slave labor helped spark overall U.S. economic development during this time period, with Southern cotton fueling the growth of Northern textile mills, and Northern manufacturers finding markets for their products on Southern plantations.

#### "King Cotton"

Eli Whitney's cotton gin was a technological innovation that quickly and easily separates cotton fibers from their sticky seeds, allowing Southern plantation owners to produce cotton at a much faster rate than ever before. Soon, the South became increasingly dependent on the slave labor needed to produce cotton. Additionally, the demand for cotton was increasing as the industrializing North saw a boom in textile manufacturing during this time.

More and more, Southern farmers replaced their tobacco, rice, and indigo crops with cotton because it was so profitable, and cotton plantations sprung up across the South and moved westward. Growers took slavery to regions in the Deep South and into newly acquired Western territories, which would become a point of contention between the free society of the North and the slave society of the South.

#### Slave Rebellions and Resistance

As the slave trade increased, so too did slave resistance. By the turn of the 19th century, slaves had developed many means by which to assert control over their own lives in response to the deplorable conditions in which they were forced to live. There were several large-scale slave rebellions organized in the United States during the antebellum (or pre-Civil War) period, including those led by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and perhaps most famously, Nat Turner in 1831.

As knowledge of these uprisings spread, they inspired slaves across the American South to participate in revolts of their own. Slave resistance grew throughout the 19th century, sometimes taking the form of violent revolts, but more often existing as passive and covert rebellions. These nonviolent forms of resistance included such actions as work slowdowns, slaves gaining new skills of which their masters were unaware, and running away to places where slavery was illegal. In these ways and a multitude of others, slaves in the antebellum period attempted to regain their self-possession.

#### Slave Life and Culture

From slave narratives, such as those written by Frederick Douglass, Nat Turner, Harriet Jacobs, and others, we know that life for enslaved individuals in the antebellum period was characterized by suffering and struggle. Slaves were often ripped from their homelands in Africa, brought to America under deplorable conditions, forced into hard labor, and deprived of their selfhood and humanity. During this time period, slaves became the personal property of their owners and were bought and sold as if they were commodities. This often led to the breakup of families as slave traders typically cared little for the familial connections of their "property." Once enslaved, individuals were often subject to abuse of all kinds—physical, emotional, and sexual—from their masters and faced brutal living and working conditions. Generally, slaves were deprived of any sort of formal education, as slave owners hoped illiteracy would prevent slaves from organizing and revolting.

However, despite these living conditions, many slaves during the early 19th century found ways to maintain a sense of their own community and culture. This often took the form of religion, as slaves frequently gathered together,

usually in secret, to take part in group worship. These worship practices often included music and dance. While there was a push among missionaries during the 19th century to convert slaves to Christianity, many slaves held fast to the religious beliefs and traditions of their African ancestors. Slaves also used storytelling as a form of cultural expression, sharing tales of their homelands and traditions verbally in order to connect to one another and to their shared culture. For enslaved individuals who could read and write, recording narratives of their experiences as slaves was also an important tactic in maintaining a sense of self.

Sharing in such cultural practices as religious worship, storytelling, and music and dance was a powerful way for slaves to maintain and reclaim their own identity. In this way, slave cultural activities in the antebellum period functioned as a means of nonviolent resistance that fed efforts to undermine the slavery system in America.

## Expansion of Slavery

From the introduction of African slaves into Virginia until emancipation, the institution of slavery and Southern agriculture interacted in ways that produced continual change both in labor systems and in methods of cultivating crops. The expansion of slavery was directly related to the profitability and development of new staple crops in the South.

### Tobacco

During the 17th century the agriculture of the Chesapeake region, based largely on tobacco and corn, made slavery there different from slavery elsewhere in the Americas. Because the cultivation of the staple crop, tobacco, required continuous but not physically taxing labor, women and older children were almost as useful as men in the tobacco fields. The African American population of the tobacco colonies became the first to reproduce itself. Moreover, tobacco farms and plantations, unlike sugar plantations, were self-sufficient in food, and the tobacco slaves were better fed than slaves elsewhere in the Americas.

Tobacco cultivation made less strenuous labor demands on workers than did tropical crops, which meant that slaves in the Chesapeake did not experience so harsh a discipline as slaves on the sugar islands. So efficient were the 18th-century slave-worked tobacco plantations that they first displaced white family-operated farms and then flooded the market with cheap tobacco. Falling prices and increasing indebtedness caused planters of the Early Republic to lose faith in both the tobacco plantation and the institution of slavery.

### Rice

In the low country of South Carolina the rice industry flourished with slave labor from about 1725 until the Civil War. In the mid-1700s planters learned how to cultivate rice on the borders of inland swamps from slaves who grew rice in West Africa. Soon afterward, they developed the technology of irrigating rice fields beside tidal rivers with a combination of levees and floodgates. The construction of such works required large capital investments and sizable work forces, factors that effectively limited the rice industry to large planters. Because rice plantations had to be situated along the lower reaches of tidal rivers where fresh water levels rose and fell with the ocean tides, the number of rice plantations was relatively small, and, though efficient, those plantations never saturated the market.

Slaves on rice plantations lived and worked under vastly different conditions than slaves on tobacco plantations. Flooded rice fields were perfect breeding grounds for mosquitoes carrying malaria and yellow fever. Most whites, having less resistance to these diseases than blacks, could not survive on the rice plantations during the warm months of the year. Because whites could not supervise rice plantations during the sickly season, these enterprises had to be nearly self-operating. African American drivers directed the day-to-day operations of the plantations, assigning tasks to individual workers. Under the task system of managing labor developed on the rice coast, incentives more than threats of punishment were used to obtain the cooperation of slaves. With minimum interference

in their daily lives by whites, the large populations of slaves on rice plantations were able to preserve much of their cultural heritage and develop their own social institutions.

### Indigo

During the 1740s indigo became a staple crop second in importance only to rice in coastal South Carolina, and from there spread into Georgia and Florida. Indigo, a shrubby annual plant from which a blue dye was obtained, was cultivated on the barrier islands, on high ground adjacent to rice plantations, and in the interior river valleys. Because the nearby rice plantations were successfully employing the task system of managing slave labor, indigo planters applied the same system to their plantations both on the coast and in the interior. In the coastal region indigo planters, like rice planters, had to rely upon slave drivers because living conditions were untenable for whites during the warm months. As a result, indigo slaves, like rice slaves, were relatively free of white supervision. They also were as exposed to unhealthy working conditions as were slaves on rice plantations.

Independence from Britain and the loss of British subsidies dealt a blow to the American indigo industry, although it lingered on for several decades. However, American indigo growers found two new crops to replace indigo during the 1790s: a long-staple cotton that produced well on the Sea Islands, and short-staple cotton that flourished on the uplands. Between 1795 and 1800 all the indigo plantations on the barrier islands were converted to the black-seeded long-staple cotton, soon known as sea-island cotton, while the river valley plantations shifted to growing green-seeded short-staple cotton.

### Cotton

The short-staple cotton industry, originating simultaneously during the 1795–1800 period in the South Atlantic states and in the lower Mississippi Valley, became the most significant agricultural industry in the Old South. From its dual points of origin the culture of short-staple cotton spread from middle South Carolina through East Texas. It became the principal element in the southern economy and employed more than half of the region's slaves. Most of these slaves hailed from the Upper South, for the cotton industry had developed after the close of the overseas slave trade. Experienced in growing tobacco, these slaves made the transition to cotton. Working conditions worsened for slaves when they moved southward from established tobacco plantations to new cotton plantations.

During the 1840s and 1850s an agricultural revolution transformed the institution of slavery in the upland cotton belt. Falling cotton prices in the early 1840s compelled cotton growers to increase production of both cotton and foodstuffs by introducing a family of horse-drawn implements devised originally in Pennsylvania and adopted in Virginia and Maryland during the 1820s and 1830s. With the aid of these sweeps, cultivators, double shovels, and seed planters, slaves, on average, were able to cultivate 20 acres in cotton and corn, plus small grains, sweet potatoes, fruits, and garden vegetables. Mechanization with horse-drawn equipment also released women from the fields for spinning, weaving, and garment making. Also during this decade farmers and planters adopted a superior variety of cotton, called Mexican or Petit Gulf cotton, bred by planters in the lower Mississippi Valley. **The new variety tripled the amount of fiber that workers could harvest during a picking season.**

### Sugar

An important sugar industry developed in the lower South after 1795, when immigrants from Saint-Dominique introduced improved varieties of sugar cane and techniques for crystallizing the juice. Some sugar cane was grown on plantations in South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida, but most of the American crop was produced in southern Louisiana. In the lower Mississippi Valley sugar plantations were situated on rich alluvial lands of the Mississippi and its tributaries. As these lowlands were subject to flooding, planters erected levees and constructed elaborate drainage systems, in many instances utilizing steam-powered pumps. Establishing large sugar plantations required heavy capital investments in lands, slaves, mules, oxen, and machinery. The sizes of Louisiana sugar plantations varied more than rice plantations, but larger, better-equipped, and more efficient units tended over time to displace less well capitalized competitors. Aided by federal protective tariffs on sugar, some sugar planters became extremely wealthy.

Long-staple cotton needs good soil and ideal growing conditions. In return, it gives the grower a good harvest, with fibers separating easily from seeds. Short-staple cotton grows in many more types of soil, but harvesting is difficult. Sticky seeds cling to the short fibers.

In 1790, plantation farmers grew rice, indigo, and long-staple cotton in coastal areas of the southeastern United States. Inland farmers, with less fertile soil, were limited to small farms and subsistence crops. Short-staple cotton was not economical. The amount of labor required for harvest was too great.

## The Cotton Economy

### Cotton Gin

In 1792, [Eli Whitney](#) graduated from Yale University and headed south to work as a private tutor on a plantation. His employer, Catherine Greene, encouraged the young man to investigate ways of making short-staple cotton profitable. In a secret workshop on the plantation, Whitney invented a machine that could separate the cotton fibers from their sticky seeds. He called it the [cotton gin](#).

A small version of the cotton gin could be operated by a hand crank. Larger versions could be powered by water or horses. Whitney immediately applied for a patent for his invention and wrote to his father, "'Tis generally said by those who know anything about it, that I shall make a Fortune by it."

Whitney and his business partner found it difficult to make a fortune, in large part because so many people copied their gin instead of paying them royalties or fees.

### Growing Money

Whitney's machine transformed Southern agriculture. In each decade after 1800, cotton production doubled. At the same time, the [Industrial Revolution](#) brought textile mills to the North and to England, multiplying the demand for cotton. By 1850, the South was growing 75% of the world's cotton and exporting most of it to the Northern states and to England. In this regard, cotton fed the expansion of textile manufacturing which was integral to the emergent transatlantic Industrial Revolution, making [slavery](#) an integral part of this development.

Small farmers became plantation owners; plantation owners made their fortunes. If cotton was king, the Southern planters saw themselves as aristocrats, members of King Cotton's royal court. A new, leisurely lifestyle developed, as described years later by a Southern doctor: "And if fate left us good wine, good dinners, fine horses, and money enough to go abroad every summer, we asked no more of gods or men."

### Built on Slavery

Large cotton [plantations](#) depended on slave labor. As cotton cultivation increased, so did the importance of slavery. Slaves planted, cultivated, and picked cotton. Once the cotton was picked, it went through the cotton gin for cleaning.

[Solomon Northup](#) was a free man living in New York in 1841. He was kidnapped and sold into [slavery in Louisiana](#). In later years, he described the condition of slaves:

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be until the order to halt is given by the driver. The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted," or in other words, carried to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. No matter how fatigued and weary he may be—no matter how much he longs for sleep and rest—a slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear.

Despite the universal repression, slaves rebelled, both in small, daily acts and in organized military actions, like those led at different times and in different places by [Gabriel Prosser](#), [Denmark Vesey](#), and [Nat Turner](#).

Slaves were not the only oppressed group in the South. Native Americans, from the Creeks of Alabama to the Cherokees of Georgia to the Seminoles of Florida, were driven from their homes and robbed of their lands as the cotton gin and short-staple cotton made those lands valuable to American settlers. Driving the need to gain more land, the cotton crop led to westward expansion, which started in the South with a desire for more cotton land.

## Daily Life and Culture in Enslaved Communities

Enslaved Africans in the United States during the 19th century led complicated lives. It was tremendously difficult for enslaved people to sustain communal and even familial relationships in the midst of a system that regarded them as less than human. Nevertheless, they created strong, creative communities that flourished—largely in secret—while sustaining and protecting their members under the brutal system of [slavery](#). These communities (known as "slave quarter communities") existed everywhere slavery was practiced in the U.S.—in rural, agricultural settings as well as in urban areas.

When enslaved Africans were forcibly taken to the U.S., they brought characteristics and customs of different African cultures with them. Some enslaved people could identify the African societies from which they or their ancestors had been taken. Others did not have such specific knowledge. Still, enslaved communities developed a culture that emerged from the African traditions they inherited while also adapting elements of the culture they encountered in the U.S.

### Living and Working Conditions

On large [plantations](#), slave quarter communities could hold 300 or more people, although many communities were not that large. Much rural slavery tended to take place on smaller farms, with most slaveholders having fewer than 12 slaves. On such small holdings, many enslaved people ate and were housed with planter families. City households often had small groups of enslaved people.

From the viewpoint of enslavers, enslaved people (especially on plantations) were supposed to labor efficiently, ceaselessly, and mindlessly—like a machine. Overseers and slaveholders often used violence to force submission to this ceaseless labor. Also in the view of enslavers, enslaved people were supposed to have no ability to read or write and no interest in the world outside the farm or plantation on which they lived.

For many enslavers, the "perfect slave" had no morality, religion, or familial ties. Many states recognized neither the marriages of enslaved people as legal unions nor the bond between mother and child as sacred. Thus, families were often separated when members were sold to different slaveholders. The African American spiritual "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" expresses the pain of being sold away from mother and home.

### Communication Networks

In such inhuman conditions, ongoing and secret communication was necessary to preserve the community as a sanctuary from a dangerous and often unpredictable world. Enslaved individuals and communities developed numerous ways to collect information and distribute it. Some enslaved people passed on information when they traveled for work. These included enslaved artists or artisans like blacksmiths, seamstresses, or musicians whose skills might be lent or "[hired out](#)" by their enslavers. Others carried news as they delivered messages or materials over long or short distances. Enslaved sailors could travel widely and collect regional, national, or international information that found its way into enslaved communities.

Often, enslaved people working within households were able to listen to slaveholders' discussions about current events or other matters. One enslaved woman reported crawling under the house so that she could hear her enslaver

read the newspaper aloud at night—she then shared the news. One enslaved community in Arkansas constructed a map of their plantation by collecting information on the part of the plantation where each person worked, then correlating that information by using the stars as a guide. The entire map was eventually recorded on a quilt.

## Religion

Religious observance brought certain members of enslaved communities together. Enslaved communities included people of various religious beliefs, ranging from African spiritual practices or Islam to a Christianity that was deeply influenced by African ideologies. Many enslaved people who adopted Christianity were attracted to such Protestant denominations as the Baptist and Methodist churches.

Many worship practices were strikingly similar among enslaved communities. One such practice was the [ring shout](#), a combination of singing, rhythm, and movement in which certain members moved around a counterclockwise circle while others sang, clapped, and stomped in complex and compelling rhythms.

## Music, Festivals, and Food

As difficult as enslavement was, people still found time to take part in recreational activities when they were able. For example, family and friends took opportunities to come together for taffy pulls, [quilting](#) bees, dances, and communal singing.

Music and song filled enslaved communities for various reasons. Song was encouraged or even demanded by slaveholders and [overseers](#) because it let them know where enslaved people were, even when they could not see them. Music also encouraged and coordinated the work that made the slave system profitable. For these reasons, singing and other forms of music making were an almost constant occurrence when slaveholders or overseers were present.

At the same time, enslaved people at times used songs to pass on information by encoding messages in the lyrics. In this way, they could share knowledge or plans (such as methods for escaping) without raising the suspicions of enslavers who might overhear them.

The frequent singing and playing of music in enslaved communities can also be explained by the importance of those traditions in Indigenous African cultures. Music played a large role in the African societies that the enslaved people had been kidnapped from, and that tradition was preserved and expanded upon in enslaved communities.

One important example of the relationship of song to work and fun occurred in such harvest festivals as corn-shucking. At harvest time, competing groups of workers from different plantations had a contest to see which group was fastest at shucking the most corn. Each group had a leader who sang to regulate the work, encourage the workers to greater feats of shucking, and make improvised jokes at the opposing teams. When the shucking was over, the enslaved women prepared a great feast for everyone—much of the fun of any communal event was built around food.

The foodways of enslaved Africans reflected African, European, and Native American cuisines and cooking methods adapted to the demands of daily life. Enslaved people in some communities, for instance, chose particular cuts of meat and [vegetables](#) that responded well to all-day cooking, allowing other work to be done at the same time. Enslaved people also augmented the food distributed to them by slaveholders by hunting, fishing, gardening, and collecting such wild foods as nuts and berries. Through such creative and adaptive methods, enslaved communities developed distinctive food cultures that had lasting influences on African American and regional U.S. cuisines.

## Slave Resistance and Rebellion

Throughout the Americas, forms of [slave resistance](#), from rebellion to revolution, articulated the intolerable conditions of enslavement and asserted the rights of slaves to be free. Word of such revolts spread to other slave communities, demonstrating the influence of such knowledge on other rebellions and revolts. Rebellion includes a range of

responses, both covert and open. Hidden and indirect forms of rebellion included day-to-day resistance, such as work slowdowns, deliberately poor work performance, attacks on property, the creation of slave cultures, and literacy practices. Methods of open defiance included refusals to work, demands for concessions, rejections of orders, threats, violence, escape, and revolt. Slaves' knowledge of revolts in other regions and countries enhanced their own determination to rebel and seek liberation.

### Haitian Revolution

The slave uprising of Saint-Domingue, beginning in 1791, was the largest and most successful slave revolt in world history. The insurgency was on a massive scale unprecedented in the Atlantic world, and by 1792, the colony was engulfed in revolution, due in part to the arming of slaves by conflicting factions of whites and free colored people with various alliances and goals. Saint-Domingue had half a million enslaved Africans, comprising 80% of the population. The 1793 emancipation in Saint-Domingue was unusual in that it provided immediate emancipation and granted the former slaves citizenship as well as freedom. [Toussaint Louverture](#) became the leader of Saint-Domingue after emancipation, and in 1804, the new republic of Haiti signed its Declaration of Independence. The [Haitian Revolution](#) was a significant example for slaves abroad and a source of fear to all slave owners. Information about the Haitian Revolution made its way to slaves in the United States despite slave owners' attempts to control information that might encourage insurgencies. U.S. political leaders advised against the public discussion of slave revolts, but they could not suppress the messages about freedom taught by the revolutions in Haiti, France, and the United States.

### Major Rebellions in the U.S. South

The presence of Haitian refugees in Virginia also contributed to slave unrest. In 1800, [Gabriel Prosser](#), a literate blacksmith knowledgeable about revolutionary political currents, planned to capture Richmond, Virginia. He gathered 900 people together at one time, but the conspiracy unravelled due to a torrential thunderstorm. Prosser was reported captured, and, along with approximately 30 fellow rebels, was hanged. Several other slave rebellions in the following decades became linchpin moments for slaves working against the system that oppressed them.

In 1822, [Denmark Vesey](#) conspired to take control of Charleston, Virginia, ultimately gathering 600 to 900 supporters. Vesey, a literate carpenter and sailor, had been inspired by the Haitian Revolution, and he had traveled widely in the Caribbean. Although able to buy his own way to freedom in 1800, Vesey was not allowed to buy his family members out of [slavery](#). Vesey decided to take action when white people closed down his church in 1821. But the tremendous number and diversity of recruits resulted in an information leak that halted his efforts to capture arms and ammunition and then take Charleston, and Vesey was arrested, along with other leaders.

Another major slave revolt was organized by [Nat Turner](#) in 1831 in Virginia. Turner gathered 60 to 80 men and set forward to the ammunition stores of Southampton. More than 50 white people were killed along the way, and vigilante retaliation by angry whites resulted in the death of more than 200 black people, regardless of their connection with Nat Turner. Federal troops were sent in to prevent additional slaves from joining Turner's Revolt. After escaping capture, Turner surrendered. His final statements, expressing his beliefs and reminding his captors of how Jesus Christ had been crucified, became famous.

Because Turner had been a preacher and could read, slave states tightened their laws against literacy and restricted black preachers. The fear that Turner's and Vesey's rebellions engendered brought long-lasting reprisals against slaves. New laws made the [manumission](#) or emancipation of slaves nearly impossible. Slaveholders increased regulations of free blacks, and they rejected any situations that would increase the number of free black people anywhere in the nation. Southern state lawmakers instituted curfews for slaves and free blacks and forbade slaves to assemble together for any reason, even religious. Heightened tensions contributed to slave owners' hysteria about the possibility of slave revolts, and slave owners sought greater political power in order to protect their investments in the bodies of slaves.

### Methods of Resistance

While slaves who risked their lives to join revolutionary movements challenging slavery became important examples to other slaves, there were other methods of resistance. Fugitive slaves operated individually or in clusters to create

secret patterns of everyday resistance, such as poor work performance, misleading the slave owners, and gaining skills of which their masters were unaware. Slaves developed a range of ways to undermine the slavery system. Ultimately, self-removal from the slavery system was an important method for slaves regaining ownership of themselves.

Running away to a place where slavery was not legal was a common strategy. The border states between slave and free states—Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, and Delaware—had even more runaway attempts than the [Deep South](#). Escape disguises and methods were numerous and diverse, with slaves masquerading as free blacks or as whites, men posing as women, or women posing as men. Most runaways set out alone or with only a few others. Slave owners' advertisements for runaway slaves described them in ways that reveal important details about the fugitives, such as skills in trade; the ability to read, write, and speak other languages; appearance; and attempts to reach family members.