Brinkley, Chapter 11

Cotton, Slavery, and the Old South

The Cotton Economy
Most important economic development in the mid 19th century was the shift of economic power from the "upper South" to the "lower South" - the expanding agricultural regions in the new states of the Southwest.

Cotton was "King" of the South's Economy.

Much of the upper South continued to rely on tobacco but it was unstable and exhausted the soil.

Coastal South - SC, GA, and parts of FL still relied on cultivating rice. More stable and profitable than tobacco but needed substantial irrigation and had a 9 month growing season.

Cotton grew successfully in various climates in a variety of soils, but its seeds were hard to remove - needed cotton gin.

Increasing Cotton Cultivation
Demand for cotton increased rapidly with the growth of the textile industry in New England in the 1840s and 1850s.

By the 1850s, cotton was the main crop of the South - almost 2/3 of all US export trade.

Cotton boom in the Deep South. Prospect of profit drew settlers to the deep south.

Most were small slaveholders or slave-less farmers who hoped to move to the planter class.

"Second Middle Passage" - traumatic experience for millions of slaves forced to move from the Upper South to the Deep South. Families were broken up and scattered. Marched over hundreds of miles, tied together in "coffles".

Southern Trade and Industry
Other forms of economic activity were slow to develop in the South. The limited commercial sector that did develop served the needs of plantation owners such as brokers.

Canals were almost nonexistent, RRs were few, roads not suitable for heavy travel.

South was becoming more and more dependent on northern manufacturers, merchants, & professionals. Led to uneven development.

Northeast turned to manufacturing before agriculture declined.

South - agricultural economy was booming, ambitious capitalists rarely looked elsewhere for profit. White southerners thought of themselves as representatives of a special way of life.

Southern White Society
Planter aristocracy exercised power and influence far in excess of its numbers. Compared themselves to the old aristocracies of Europe. Wealthy southern whites sustained their image of aristocrats by adopting a code of "chivalry" and to defend a lady's "honor". They avoided "coarse" occupations such as trade and often went to the military. Owned many slaves.

The Plain Folk
Owned a few slaves and worked closely with them. Owned their own land, devoted themselves largely to subsistence farming, made money, but not substantial profits to expand or get out of debt.

Unequal Education
Sons of wealthy planters - excellent education. Fewer elementary and secondary schools and were inferior to the North. South held over 1/2 of the nation's illiterate population.

The social and economic divisions of whites in the South did not lead to class conflict. None opposed slavery. Partly due to the fact that the poor most were concerned with poverty and no ability to protest and racial supremacy.
“Southern Lady”
Affluent white Southern women occupied roles similar to middle-class women of the North. Lives centered around the home, served as companions to their husbands, hostess, nurturers to their children. “Genteel” southern white women rarely engaged in public activities or held employment.

The cult of honor dictated southern white men give particular importance to the defense of the woman - more subordinate than northern women. Mostly shut off from the public sphere and had few opportunities to look beyond their roles as wives and mothers. Less access to education than in the North.

Female “academies” trained women to be suitable housewives.

20% higher birthrate in the South, but a lower infant mortality rate. Slavery had a mixed impact on white women. Helped spare many women from certain kinds of arduous labor but damaged relationships with their husbands. Mulatto children served as constant reminders of infidelity.

Paternal Relationship  
Relationship between masters and slaves depended on the size of the plantation. Farmers with fewer slaves had more control over their slaves and directly oversaw them. Plantation owners had “head drivers” - trusted slaves to oversee the slaves.

On small farms, the relationship between slave owner and slave could be tyrannical or cruel, or warm and benevolent. Most often, slaves preferred to live on large plantations. Most Blacks resented their lack of freedom. Few were openly hostile to their masters. They depended on whites for their existence. There was a paternal relationship between slave and master. Became a vital instrument for white control. By creating a sense of mutual dependence, whites helped reduce resistance to an institution that served only the interests of the ruling class.

Slavery: The “Peculiar Institution”  
Slavery in the South was distinctive and special. More than any other factor it isolated the South from the rest of American society.

Slave codes forbade slaves to own property, leave their masters’ premises without permission, be out after dark, congregate with other slaves, carry firearms, testify in court against whites, strike a white person, education, marriage, etc.

Enforcement of the codes was uneven. Some slaves did become literate, assembled with other slaves, acquired property, and were not always killed for resisting whites.

Life Under Slavery  
Slaves had a less than adequate diet, were provided with meager clothing, shoes and shelter.

Workdays were longest during the harvest. Slave women worked particularly hard. After laboring in the fields all day they handled the cooking, cleaning, and child rearing. Many were single parents as slave families were divided.

Mothers had large families but their impoverished living conditions meant that most children would not survive to adulthood.

Household servants had a somewhat “easier” life - physically at least. Lived close to the master & his family, eating leftovers from the table, familial relationships may develop, better shelter, etc.

Some resented their isolation, wanting to be with their fellow slaves. White women often took their husband’s infidelity out on the slave woman.

Slave Resistance  
At the extremes, slavery could produce different reactions that served as powerful stereotype in white society.

Slave rebel - resisted either acceptance or accommodation but remained forever rebellious.

Slave revolts were rare, but White southerners feared them nonetheless.

1739, Stono Rebellion; 1800, Gabriel Prosser; 1831 Nat Turner

Resistance was mostly passive: Underground Railroad, “inaziness”, theft, breaking tools, suicide

Culture of Slavery  
Almost all were Christians by the early 19th century. Masters expected their slave to join their denominations and worship under white ministers. Slaves developed own version of Christianity by blending some traditions from Africa - more emotional, reflected African customs, prayer meetings, chanting, more affirming, emphasized the dream of deliverance.

“Pidgin” - Slaves overcoming language barrier. Some African words blended with English.

Music was especially important. Relied heavily on rhythm, created hand instruments such as the banjo. Field workers used songs to pass time. Derived from African and Caribbean traditions.

Black women began child bearing at 15 or younger. Slave communities did not condemn premarital pregnancies. Black couples often lived together before marrying. Customary for couples to marry in a ceremony soon after conceiving a child. Family ties were no less strong than whites.

When marriages did not survive it was often because of the sale of a slave. Extended kinship networks were strong and important. One of the most frequent cases of escape was a slave’s desire to be reunited with family.
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