



## THE ECONOMY OF THE SOUTH



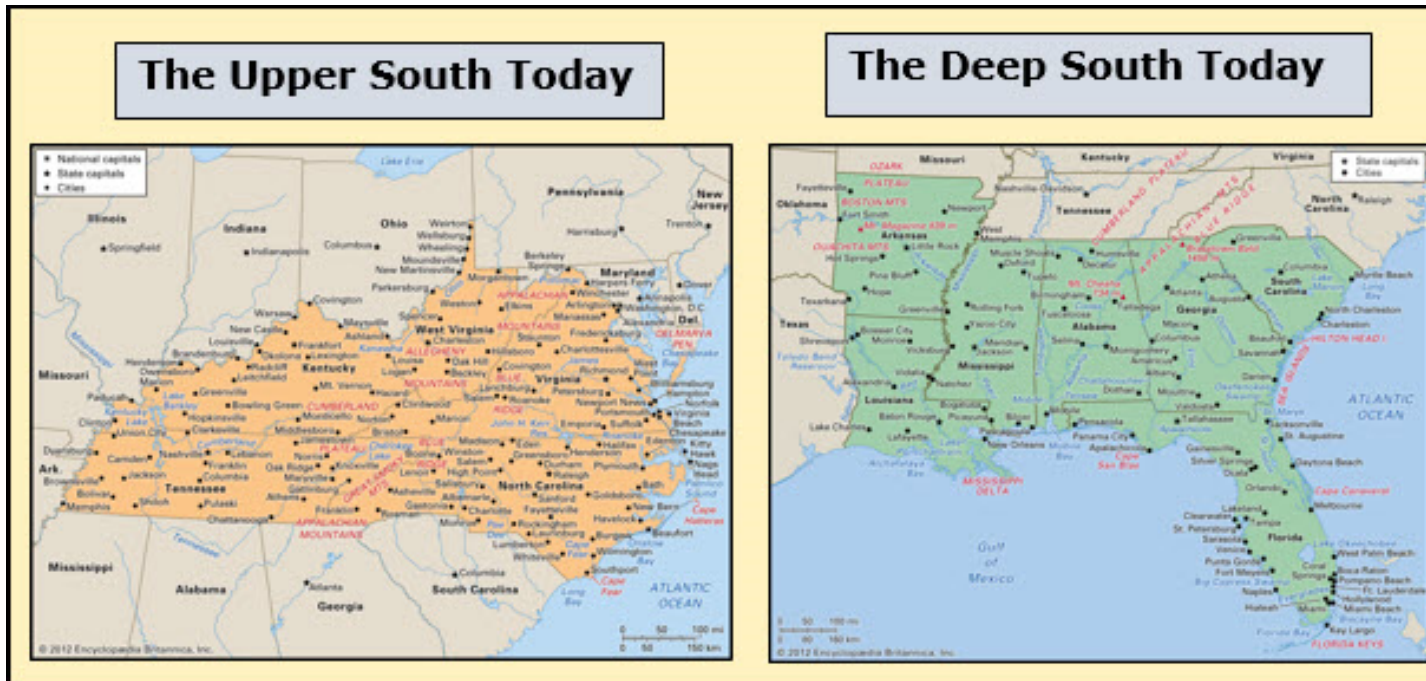
*Lithograph of a Cotton Plantation on the Mississippi River*

### Unit Overview

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the American South had built a thriving economy, and its wealth was greater than any country in Europe with the exception of Great Britain. Unlike the North, the basis for the region's financial achievement was agriculture and, more specifically, the cultivation of cotton. However, much of the South's success was derived from the labor of enslaved Africans. Let's see how it all happened.

### The Upper and Deep South

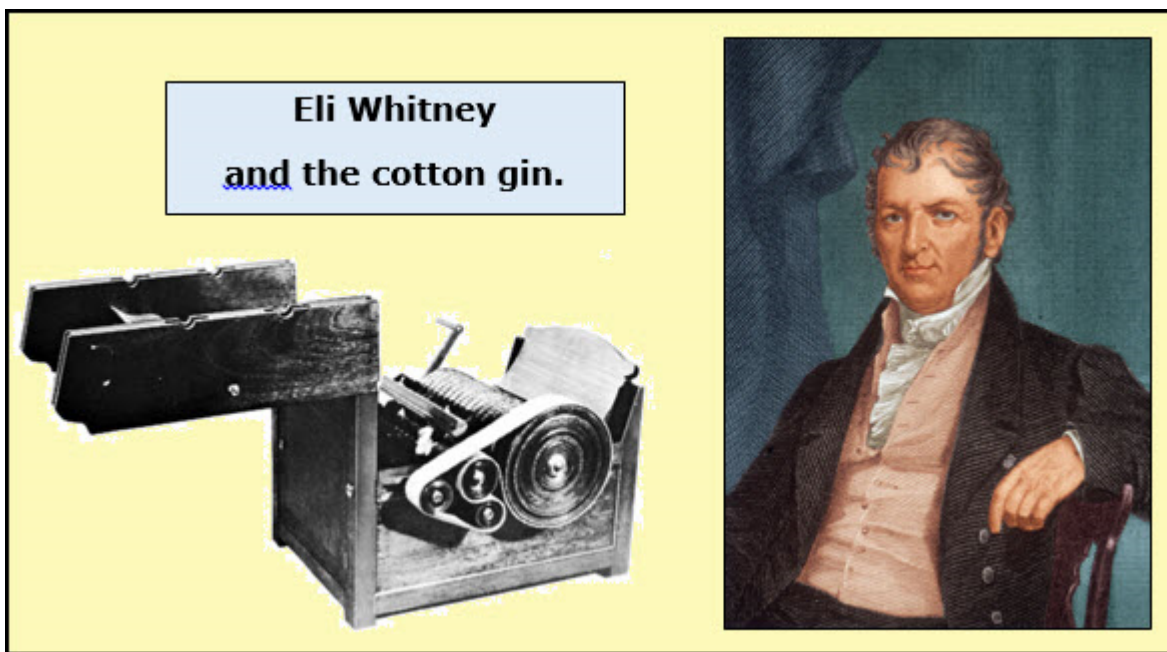
In colonial times, most southerners lived along the eastern seaboard in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina, a region that later became known as the **Upper South**. As the number of settlers increased, they moved beyond the coastal plains into the **Deep South**, an area made up of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina and Texas. Although both the Upper South and the Deep South relied on agriculture, their economies developed in different ways. The Upper South focused on tobacco, wheat, hemp and vegetables, while the Deep South emphasized cotton, rice, indigo and sugar cane. Movies and novels have encouraged the American public to envision the South as a series of massive plantations worked by hundreds of slaves. In reality, some parts of the South included mountains and forests that were unsuitable for plantation farming. Less than 1% of southerners kept more than fifty slaves, and the average property owner was more likely to live in a log cabin rather than a luxurious mansion.



Go to Questions 1 through 3.

## King Cotton

The **Industrial Revolution** inspired new textile mills and an interest in machine-made cloth. This increased the demand for raw cotton fiber. Although well-suited to the climate of the American South, cotton proved to be a difficult crop to prepare for market. Cotton plants produced hundreds of small, sticky seeds that clung to the fibers. These had to be removed before sending the cotton to market. The work was so tedious that the average worker could only clean about one pound a day. This changed in 1793 with the invention of the **cotton gin** by **Eli Whitney**. Using this machine, a worker could clean fifty pound of cotton per day. It was also small enough for one person to carry. Plantation owners increased the amount of cotton under cultivation, and soon the Deep South was producing 60% of the world's supply. About 30% of the cotton grown in the U.S. went to northern factories, while British textile firms purchased most of the remaining 70%. By 1860, cotton made up one-half of the goods exported to foreign countries by the United States.



Like all property owners, cotton plantation owners had regular expenses, such as the purchase of seed and equipment. These were referred to as **fixed costs** since they involved about the same amount of money annually. Cotton prices, however, were dependent on the market and varied from season to season. In an attempt to receive the best return, planters sold their cotton to agents in New Orleans, Charleston and other southern cities. The agents, who arranged to store the cotton in warehouses until it reached what was believed to be its highest price, conducted

business in buildings known as **cotton exchanges**. In the meantime, agents extended credit in the form of loans to the planters. Because the planters did not receive payment until the cotton was traded, the majority of southern plantation owners were continuously in debt.



*Cotton Office in the New Orleans Exchange: Edgar Degas, 1873*

Debt discouraged southern farmers and plantation owners from supporting new taxes for government-funded projects, such as better roads and public schools. It also meant that there was less money to invest in private companies for the construction of canals and railroads. In 1860, only one-third of the nation's railroad lines were in the South, and most of them were short runs used to transport cotton to market. For the South, the region's lack of railroad track would prove to be a major disadvantage during the Civil War.



Go to Questions 4 through 8.

## **Southern Society**

As in the North, white southern society could be pictured in the shape of a pyramid. Planters who owned the most land and the most slaves formed the upper

class and represented about 3% of all southern slave holders. Although most built homes comparable to large farm houses, some lived in beautiful mansions and imported fine furniture from Europe. They hired tutors for their children or sent them to boarding school. Household slaves took care of the personal needs of the planter's family. Because they were often in debt, well-to-do plantation owners measured their wealth by the amount of land they owned, the number of slaves they had and the material goods they possessed.

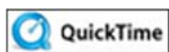


**Millford Plantation House**



**Walnut Grove Plantation House**

Below the planters on the social scale were farmers who owned smaller properties and fewer enslaved Africans. The majority of white southerners, about 75% of the population, did not own slaves. Called **yeomen**, they worked their own farms, grew their own food and raised livestock. Some families rented land for a share of their crops and labored as tenant farmers. The poorest whites cleared what land they could on the edge of the forests and fed their families by hunting game.



Plantation Life: The Reality

When a southern property owner died, the land was usually handed down to his oldest son. Therefore, younger sons had to choose other careers or professions.

Some became lawyers, doctors or military officers; others made a living as manufacturers. On a much smaller scale than their northern counterparts, a few southerners were operating textile mills, flour-processing companies, lumber yards and iron works by 1860. For example, Joseph Reid Anderson took over the **Tredegar Iron Works** located near Richmond Virginia in 1840. He turned it into one of the nation's leading producers of iron within a few years. However, agriculture continued to be the focus of southern economy and society.



Go to Questions 9 through 12.

## Slavery in the South

By the mid-1800s, between 3.5 and 4 million people of African descent lived in the American South. In 1808, Congress passed a federal law prohibiting the slave trade, but this legislation did not outlaw the buying and selling of slaves within the United States. As the production of cotton and other cash crops expanded, the demand for slaves in the Deep South increased. The price that planters were willing to pay for slaves also increased. Slave traders were determined not to lose out on this opportunity to make profits.

Because they could no longer bring enslaved Africans into the country legally, professional slave traders had to find new sources for marketable slaves. Since the children of slaves shared their parents' status, they were considered property and were often put up for sale by their owners. For African Americans, the separation of families was one of the most dreaded aspects of slavery. Another source of marketable slaves was the Upper South. Because some areas of Virginia and Maryland had been farmed in the same way for almost two hundred years, the soil was wearing out. It was no longer economical or practical to keep slaves, and their sales resulted in handsome profits. Therefore, these farmers chose to sell their slaves rather than to free them. Slave traders then offered them at auction to planters in the Deep South.



*Slaves Waiting for Auction: Painted from a sketch made in 1853*

During the American Revolution, a small number of enslaved Africans in the South had been given their freedom. Most worked for very low wages at unskilled jobs in southern cities or as farm hands. A few eventually were able to buy land and owned slaves. Sometimes they purchased members of their families at auction to free them. The **Metoyer** family of Louisiana is a rare example of an African-American ownership of a large plantation. They owned thousands of acres and over 400 slaves.



*Slave Cabin: Arundel Plantation, South Carolina*

Even though they faced hardships and uncertainty, slaves remembered and practiced many African customs. They told folk stories to their children and sang songs from their homeland. Traditional dances were handed down to new generations of African Americans. Many slaves accepted Christianity, but they also continued to follow the religious practices of their African ancestors.



Go to Questions 13 through 15.

## **Resisting Slavery**

Since the 1700s, slave owners took threats of rebellion very seriously. To prevent such an event, most southern states passed a series of **black codes**. These laws became stricter and more numerous between 1830 and 1860. Throughout the South, it was illegal for enslaved Africans to assemble in large groups or to leave their master's property without a pass. Black codes also made it a crime to teach slaves to read and write, because white southerners believed these skills made them more likely to revolt.



In spite of determination to prevent them, there were anti-slavery rebellions. You can learn about several of them by watching the video listed below. The most famous one took place in Virginia in 1831. **Nat Turner**, a religious leader popular among his fellow slaves, led his followers in a violent attack that resulted in the deaths of fifty-five whites. Turner was hanged, and white southerners imposed even stricter black codes. Because most slaves realized that armed uprisings like Turner's Rebellion had little chance of being successful, they looked for other ways to resist. Some slaves protested by performing their tasks very slowly or by pretending to be ill. Breaking tools and occasionally setting plantation buildings on fire were also used in attempts to gain some respect from the white community.



Slave Revolts



Go to Questions 16 through 18.

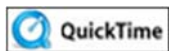
## Making an Escape

Some slaves hoped to change their lives by running away. Sometimes this involved short distances to search for a relative or to escape a harsh master. A few, however, hoped to gain their freedom by escaping to the North. This was a dangerous and complicated undertaking, especially from the Deep South. Those who succeeded were mostly from the Upper South and had help from the **Underground Railroad**. The Underground Railroad was not underground, and it was not a railroad. Operated by free blacks and whites who opposed slavery, it was a network of escape routes that enabled runaway slaves to move secretly from one safe house to another.



*Harriet Tubman and a Group of Escaped Slaves*

**Harriet Tubman** was one of the runaways to complete the journey. Born a slave in Maryland, Tubman made her break for freedom when she was thirty years old. She returned to the South nineteen times to help others escape. Although southern officials offered a reward for her capture and arrest, she continued her work and died a free woman at the age of ninety-three. Her life story is described in the video listed below. Unlike Tubman, however, most runaways were unsuccessful. When captured, they faced severe punishments, such as whippings or beatings.



Harriet Tubman and her Escape to Freedom



Go to Questions 19 and 20.was

## What Happened Next?

During the first half of the nineteenth century, a growing number of Americans decided that slavery was wrong. They formed societies to support their cause and demanded change. The anti-slavery movement drew sharp criticism from not only southerners but from northern factory workers, who feared that an influx of former slaves would threaten their jobs. Could the issue of slavery be resolved? Did the anti-slavery movement actually help enslaved people? Before moving on to

explore these topics in the next unit, review the names and terms found in Unit 30; then, answer Questions 21 through 30.



Go to Questions 21 through 30.