



Life in the South



Explore These Questions

- What five groups made up society in the South?
- How did African Americans suffer under slavery?
- How did African Americans struggle against slavery?

Define

- slave code
- extended family

Identify

- “cottonocracy”
- Norbert Rillieux
- Henry Blair
- Denmark Vesey
- Nat Turner

SETTING the Scene

“I was born in 1844. . . . First [thing] I remember was my ma and us [children] being sold off the [auction] block to Mistress Payne. When I was . . . too little to work in the field, I stayed at the big house most of the time and helped Mistress Payne feed the chickens, make scarecrows to keep the hawks away and put wood on the fires. After I got big enough to hoe, I went to the field same as the other[s].”

In this excerpt, Jack Payne recalls his life as an enslaved person in Texas. Payne was only one of millions of African Americans throughout the South who suffered the anguish of slavery. Toiling from dawn till dusk, they had neither freedom nor rights.

White Southerners

The Old South is often pictured as a land of vast plantations worked by hundreds of slaves. Such grand estates did exist in the South. However, most white southerners were not rich planters. In fact, most whites owned no slaves at all.

The “cottonocracy”

A planter was someone who owned at least 20 slaves. In 1860, only one white southerner in 30 belonged to a planter family. An even smaller number—less than 1 percent—

owned 50 or more slaves. These wealthy families were called the “cottonocracy” because they made huge amounts of money from cotton. Though few in number, their views and way of life dominated the South.

The richest planters built elegant homes and filled them with expensive furniture from Europe. They entertained lavishly. They tried to dress and behave like European nobility.

Planters had responsibilities, too. Because of their wealth and influence, many planters became political leaders. They devoted many hours to local, state, and national politics. Planters hired overseers to run day-to-day affairs on their plantations and to manage the work of slaves.

Small farmers

About 75 percent of southern whites were small farmers. These “plain folk” owned the



Connections With Arts

In later years, both literature and film gave a false view of plantation life. Writers and film producers focused on the “gentility” of the planters and largely ignored the injustices of slavery. The most successful of these fictional works is the 1939 film *Gone With the Wind*. Based on Margaret Mitchell’s novel, the film won 10 Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Rosedown Plantation

Rosedown Plantation, built in 1835, is located in St. Francisville, Louisiana. It was owned by the wealthy cotton planter, Daniel Turnbull, and his wife Martha. The Turnbolls filled their mansion with beautiful furniture and art from Europe. They surrounded their home with avenues of trees and formal gardens. Today, visitors can tour Rosedown, its gardens, and its many outbuildings. You can even stay overnight and recall the luxurious lifestyle of the southern aristocracy.

★ *To learn more about this historic site, write: Rosedown Plantation, 12501 Highway 10, St. Francisville, LA 70775.*



Original bedroom furniture at Rosedown

land they farmed. They might also own one or two slaves. Unlike planters, plain folk worked with their slaves in the fields.

Among small farmers, helping each other was an important duty. "People who lived miles apart counted themselves as neighbors," wrote a farmer in Mississippi. "And in case of sorrow or sickness, there was no limit to the service neighbors provided."

Poor whites

Lower on the social ladder was a small group of poor whites. They did not own the land they farmed. Instead, they rented it, often paying the owner with part of their crop. Many barely made a living.

Poor whites often lived in the hilly, wooded areas of the South. They planted crops such as corn, potatoes, and other vegetables. They also herded cattle and pigs. Poor whites had hard lives, but they enjoyed rights denied to all African Americans, enslaved or free.

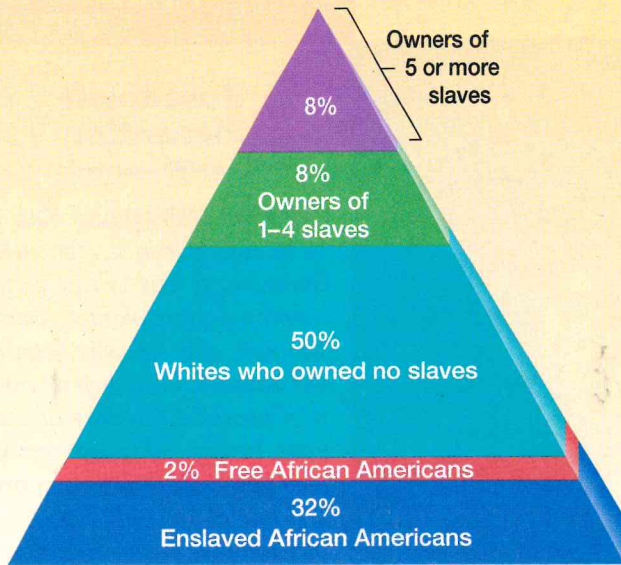
African American Southerners

Both free and enslaved African Americans lived in the South. Although free under the law, free African Americans faced harsh discrimination. Enslaved African Americans had no rights at all.

Free African Americans

Most free African Americans were descendants of slaves freed during and after the American Revolution. Others had bought their freedom. In 1860, over 200,000 free blacks lived in the South. Most lived in Maryland and Delaware, where slavery was

Southern Society in 1860



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*

Graphic Organizer *Skills*

This social pyramid represents the structure of southern society in 1860. At the top were wealthy and powerful planters. At the bottom were millions of enslaved African Americans.

- 1. Comprehension** Which group in southern society was most numerous?
- 2. Critical Thinking** Many white southerners owned no slaves but still supported the institution of slavery. Why do you think they did so?

in decline. Others lived in cities such as New Orleans, Richmond, and Charleston.

Slave owners did not like free African Americans living in the South. They feared that free African Americans set a bad example, encouraging slaves to rebel. Also, slave owners justified slavery by claiming that African Americans could not take care of themselves. Free African American workers proved this idea wrong.

To discourage free African Americans, southern states passed laws that made life even harder for them. Free African Americans were not allowed to vote or travel. In some southern states, they either had to move out of the state or allow themselves to be enslaved.

Despite these limits, free African Americans made valuable contributions to southern life. For example, **Norbert Rillieux** (RIHL yoo) invented a machine that revolutionized the way sugar was made. Another inventor, **Henry Blair**, patented a seed planter.

Enslaved African Americans

By 1860, enslaved African Americans made up one third of the South's population. Most worked as field hands on cotton plantations. Both men and women cleared new land and planted and harvested crops. Children helped by pulling weeds, collecting wood, and carrying water to the field hands. By the time they were teenagers, they too worked between 12 and 14 hours a day.

On large plantations, some African Americans became skilled workers, such as carpenters and blacksmiths. A few worked in cities and lived almost as if they were free. Their earnings, however, belonged to their owners.

Life Without Freedom

The life of enslaved African Americans was determined by strict laws and the practices of individual slave owners. Conditions varied from plantation to plantation. Some owners made sure their slaves had clean cabins, decent food, and warm clothes. Other planters spent as little as possible on their slaves.

Slave codes

Southern states passed laws known as **slave codes** to keep slaves from either running away or rebelling. Under the codes, enslaved African Americans were forbidden to gather in groups of more than three. They could not leave their owner's land without a written pass. They were not allowed to own guns.

Slave codes also made it a crime for slaves to learn how to read and write. Owners hoped that this law would make it hard for African Americans to escape slavery. They reasoned that uneducated runaway slaves would not be able to use maps or read train schedules. They would not be able to find their way north.

Why Study *History?*

Because Music Is Part of Our Culture

Historical Background

From the colonial era on, southerners of diverse backgrounds shared their music with one another. As a result, a variety of rich musical traditions developed in the American South.

African Americans built on the musical heritage of their ancestral homelands. One common technique was the “call and response” in which a soloist sang a line and the group responded. African American music stressed varied rhythms and improvisation, the spontaneous creation of new lyrics and melodies. In the 1800s, these qualities were typical of African American work songs, religious songs, and folk songs.

The early musical traditions of most white southerners were rooted in the tunes and melodies of the British Isles. German, Mexican, Cajun, and other traditions also enriched Southern folk music. The sounds of fiddles and banjos often celebrated house raisings, harvest feasts, and other major events.

Connections to Today

Several American music styles of today are firmly rooted in the South. Blues, jazz, and gospel music emerged from the traditions of African American southerners. Country music and rock-and-roll developed from the folk music of both white and black southerners. In fact, most early rock performers of the 1950s came from the South.

Connections to You

The sounds of jazz, country, and rock are all around you. The next time you pop in your favorite CD, consider the roots of the music



▲ Gospel singers



▲ Country music singer

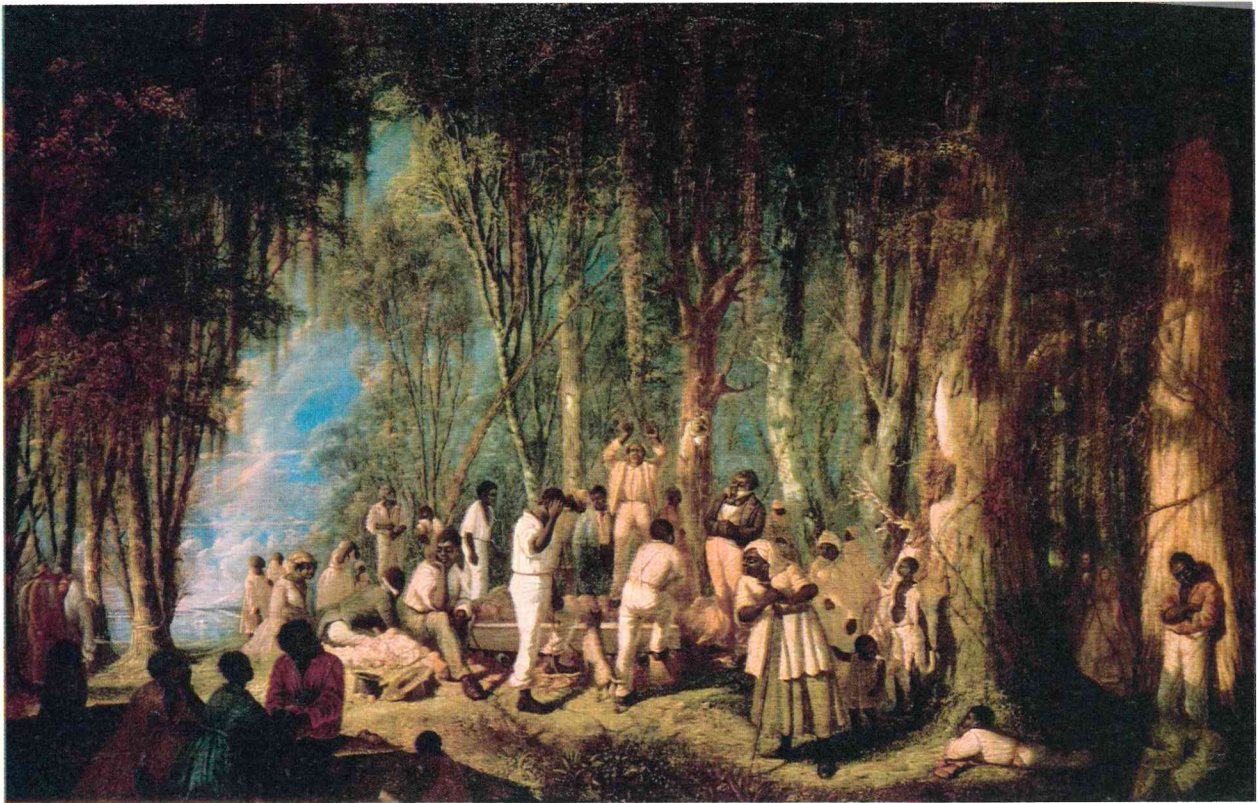
you hear. When you watch a television show, note its theme music. When you go to the movies, listen to the soundtrack. You will discover that American music owes much to the rich and diverse traditions of the American South.

- 1. Comprehension** What music styles of today can be traced to traditions in the American South?
- 2. Critical Thinking** Why do you think jazz and blues music developed in the South rather than in the North?

★ *Activity*

Planning a Documentary Research the history of a music style discussed

here. Then, outline a television documentary on that style. List the topics and pictures that will appear in your documentary.



Viewing HISTORY

African American Community

The painting *Plantation Burial* by John Antrobus is unusual for providing a realistic portrait of life on a southern plantation. The central figures are African Americans. To the right, a white couple keeps a respectful distance from the religious ceremony. ★ **What role did religion play in the life of enslaved African Americans?**

Some laws were meant to protect slaves, but only from the worst forms of abuse. However, enslaved African Americans did not have the right to testify in court. As a result, they were not able to bring charges against owners who abused them.

Enslaved African Americans had only one real protection against mistreatment. Owners looked on their slaves as valuable property. Most slave owners wanted to keep this human property healthy and productive.

Hard work

Even the kindest owners insisted that their slaves work long, hard days. Slaves worked from “can see to can’t see,” or from dawn to dusk, up to 16 hours a day. Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery, recalled his life under one harsh master:

“ We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it

could never rain, blow, hail, or snow too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work. . . . The longest days were too short for him and the shortest nights too long for him. ”

Some owners and overseers whipped slaves to get a full day’s work. However, the worst part of slavery was not the beatings. It was the complete loss of freedom.

Family life

It was hard for enslaved African Americans to keep their families together. Southern laws did not recognize slave marriages or slave families. As a result, owners could sell a husband and wife to different buyers. Children were often taken from their parents and sold.

On large plantations, many enslaved families did manage to stay together. For those African Americans, the family was a

source of strength, pride, and love. Grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles, and cousins formed a close-knit group. This idea of an **extended family** had its roots in Africa.

Enslaved African Americans preserved other traditions as well. Parents taught their children traditional African stories and songs. They used folk tales to pass on African history and moral beliefs.

Religion offers hope

By the 1800s, many enslaved African Americans were devout Christians. Planters often allowed white ministers to preach to their slaves. African Americans also had their own preachers and beliefs.

Religion helped African Americans cope with the harshness of slave life. Bible stories about how the ancient Hebrews had escaped from slavery inspired many spiritual songs. As they worked in the fields, slaves sang about a coming day of freedom. One spiritual, "Go Down, Moses," includes these lines:

“ We need not always weep and
moan,
Let my people go.
And wear these slavery chains
forlorn,
Let my people go. ”

Resistance Against Slavery

Enslaved African Americans struck back against the system that denied them both freedom and wages. Some broke tools, destroyed crops, and stole food.

Many enslaved African Americans tried to escape to the North. Because the journey was long and dangerous, very few made it to freedom. Every county had slave patrols and sheriffs ready to question an unknown black person.

A few African Americans used violence to resist the brutal slave system. **Denmark Vesey**, a free African American, planned a revolt in 1822. Vesey was betrayed before the revolt began. He and 35 other people were executed.

In 1831, an African American preacher named **Nat Turner** led a major revolt. Turner led his followers through Virginia, killing more than 57 whites. Terrified whites hunted the countryside for Turner. They killed many innocent African Americans before catching and hanging him.

Nat Turner's revolt increased southern fears of an uprising of enslaved African Americans. Revolts were rare, however. Since whites were cautious and well armed, a revolt by African Americans had almost no chance of success.

★ Section 4 Review ★

Recall

1. **Identify** (a) "cottonocracy," (b) Norbert Rillieux, (c) Henry Blair, (d) Denmark Vesey, (e) Nat Turner.
2. **Define** (a) slave code, (b) extended family.

Comprehension

3. How did the "cottonocracy" dominate economics and politics in the South?
4. Describe three ways that African Americans suffered under slavery.

5. How did African Americans struggle against the slave system?

Critical Thinking and Writing

6. **Applying Information** How were successful free African Americans a threat to the slave system?
7. **Making Decisions** If you had been an enslaved African American, would you have decided to live under slavery, to try to escape, or to rebel? Explain the reasons for your decision.



Activity Writing a Speech You are an enslaved African American living in the South in the 1850s. Write a speech encouraging people to resist slavery and explaining ways in which they can do it.