

# Workers, Farmers, and Slaves

The Transformation of the  
American Economy, 1815–1848

**“The greatest want of civilized society is a market for the sale and exchange of the surplus of the produce of the labor of its members.... If we cannot sell, we cannot buy.”**

HENRY CLAY, 1824

The United States experienced extraordinary economic growth and change in the first half of the nineteenth century. But the economies of the Northern and Southern regions of the nation evolved along very different paths. The North developed a free labor economy marked by rapid industrialization and

urbanization as well as massive immigration. Essential to this process was the introduction of new technology like water-powered looms, railroads, steamboats, and the telegraph. By contrast, while the South experienced some industrialization and urban growth, the great majority of its expansion and development focused on raising cash crops by means of slave labor. The huge profits generated by cotton cultivation prompted the expansion of plantations into the so-called Black Belt that stretched from Alabama westward.

By mid-century Northerners and Southerners became increasingly self-conscious about the distinctiveness of the labor system in their own region and more critical of that employed in the other half of the nation. This image, *The Tree of Liberty* (1846), illustrates the radical differences between the vision of liberty defended by Northern proponents of free labor and that of Southern defenders of slavery. On the right side of the tree, a slaveholder reclining in a chair while fanned by a slave announces, “Surrounded by slaves & basking at ease by their labor we can have a clearer conception of the value of liberty.” On the other side of the tree, the artist has placed two industrious farmers conversing with one another, and a group of young mill women in front of their factory.

Although North and South had developed different labor systems, each was tied to the expanding market economy that Henry Clay praised in his 1824 address. The expansion of the market economy transformed the countryside in both the North and South and fueled the growth of America’s cities. Economic growth was spurred by new technologies that made agriculture more productive and factories more efficient, as well as by improvements in transportation and communication that spurred consumer demand for the latest goods.

How did the dominant labor systems of the North and the South differ from one another?



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# The Market Revolution



At the start of the nineteenth century, most rural households produced only a small surplus that was traded locally, often through a system of barter that did not require cash transactions. Most manufactured goods were produced by artisans whose workshops were usually located in their homes. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the American economy became more commercially oriented. Farmers began producing cash crops for sale in distant markets, and a wider range of consumer goods, many of them made in factories, became available. The **market revolution**, the term used by historians to describe this transformation, encompassed several interrelated developments that revolutionized agriculture, industry, technology, transportation, and communications. This market revolution would radically change both North and South in the antebellum period. Improved technology such as iron plows and steam-powered cotton gins enabled farmers to produce more crops, while the development of cheaper, more efficient forms of transportation like the railroad allowed them to deliver these goods to markets. The development of new communication technology, notably the telegraph and steam-powered printing press, increased the speed and volume of news and information available to Americans.

## Agricultural Changes and Consequences

Most farmers in both the South and the North before 1815 labored to achieve a “competence,” which meant enough food for a family’s own consumption and a small surplus to trade locally or barter for goods, such as tools, that could not be produced in the home. But beginning in the early nineteenth century, American farmers began raising crops for an expanding commercial market with an eye toward earning profits and accumulating wealth. Periodicals geared to farmers promoted this new emphasis on commercial farming, touted the latest agricultural theories, and advertised the most up-to-date labor-saving devices. Publications such as *The New England Farmer* warned that “the cultivator who does not keep pace with his neighbors as regards agricultural improvements and information will soon find himself the poorer consequence of the prosperity that surrounds him.”

One of the earliest and most important of these “improvements” was an iron plow introduced by Jethro Wood in 1819 that could double a farmer’s efficiency. Within a decade John Deere had improved Wood’s design, creating a plow that seemed to move through soil so easily that it was dubbed the “singing plow.” In the wheat-growing regions of the Midwest, farmers adapted horse-driven machines to tasks such as threshing and raking. Crank-powered

churns transformed arduous women’s tasks, such as churning butter by hand. The cotton gin (see Chapter 7) transformed Southern agriculture. In 1839 the *Farmers Almanac* proclaimed that “scarcely a tool ... has not been altered for the better in some way or other.” The new scientific methods of agriculture included crop rotation and the use of manure for fertilizer.

The creation of a market economy encouraged farmers to concentrate on crops that they could sell for cash in the market place, a trend that caused changes in farming patterns that varied by region. The South concentrated on staples for export such as cotton, while farmers in the Midwest produced grain, particularly wheat. Eastern farmers shifted their efforts to livestock production, dairy goods, fruits, and vegetables.

Market-oriented farming, with its emphasis on efficiency and profit, also transformed social values and communal patterns of life. The new, more commercial approach to farming challenged traditional ideas of neighborliness and community that had been central to rural life. Increasingly farmers began to see harvest parties, husking bees (communal celebrations in which corn was husked), dances, and other ritual communal occasions in which work and leisure were combined as inefficient and wasteful. The *Farmer’s Almanac* in 1833 advised that “if you love fun, frolic, and waste and slovenliness, more than economy and profit, then make a husking.” In

this humorous image of a corn husking (9.1), a man finds a lucky ear of red corn that entitles him to a kiss, but his advance is met by a girl holding a corn "smut," a weathered ear of corn that gave her the right to refuse her suitor.

Upcountry Southern farmers continued to concentrate on production of food for personal consumption and devoted a relatively small percentage of their land to commercial crops. While other regions of the country sought to improve every parcel of land for commercial agriculture, parts of the South remained committed to practices that encouraged a more self-sufficient style of agriculture, geared to personal use. Unlike in the North, for example, where extensive land was enclosed behind fences, most Southern states enacted laws against fencing in lands not used for agricultural production so that livestock could roam freely.

## A Nation on the Move: Roads, Canals, Steamboats, and Trains

Central to the development of commercial, market-oriented farming were improvements in transportation technology and networks. These changes allowed those previously unable to deliver farm

products to the growing cities of the Northeast and Midwest to enter the market. For those already in the market, the costs of business were dramatically lowered. These changes also spread information, including almanacs, books describing the latest agricultural techniques, and advertisements for the latest goods.

The first major development in transportation was the building of a network of roads and turnpikes that by the 1820s helped knit together the major urban areas along the eastern seaboard. New York state embarked on the most ambitious program of road building, adding 4,000 miles of improved road and turnpikes by 1820. The National Road, the first federally funded road in U.S. history, stretched from Cumberland, Maryland, to Wheeling in what is now West Virginia. By the 1830s it would take travelers as far west as Columbus, Ohio. Pennsylvania built the Lancaster turnpike connecting Philadelphia with Pittsburgh and allowing wagonloads of raw materials to travel east while manufactured goods traveled west. By the 1820s 30,000 tons of freight moved by wagon across this route annually.

The new road network dramatically cut travel times: A coach journey from New

**9.1 Corn Husking Frolic**  
Alvan Fischer's 1828 painting captures the festive communal atmosphere of a corn husking. [Source: Alan Fisher, "Corn Husking Frolic", 1828. Oil on Panel, 70.8 X 62.23 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Assoc. #62.27 Photograph © 2010 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]



Why did the *Farmers Almanac* frown on huskings and frolics?

York to Boston that had taken four days in 1800 took half that time in 1824. Even more dramatic was the invention of the steamboat. Navigable rivers such as the Mississippi, Ohio, Missouri, and Hudson had long served as vital arteries for moving agricultural products from the interior to market. This water highway system moved almost exclusively in one direction. Traveling upriver from New Orleans to Louisville, for example, was extremely slow (as long as three to four months) and expensive. As a result few manufactured goods reached the interior regions of the nation. The arrival of the steamboat would revolutionize upriver travel, reducing the same New Orleans to Louisville journey to just over a week by 1826. The rise of the steamboat proved an economic boon to river cities such as St. Louis and New Orleans on the Mississippi and Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati, and Louisville on the Ohio River. Hannah Stockton Stiles, the daughter of a prosperous merchant, stitched this elaborate needlework quilt, capturing the hustle and bustle of Philadelphia's busy waterfront. Stiles included a steam boat, with smoke billowing from its smoke stack (9.2).

### 9.2 Trade and Commerce Quilt

In this quilt Hannah Stockton Stiles created images of maritime trade on Philadelphia's thriving waterfront. [Source: Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, New York. Photo by Richard Walker. New York State Historical Association]



Canals provided another means of moving goods more cheaply and faster than across roads. Since the 1780s private companies had made modest efforts at building small canals, usually less than 20 miles long. In 1817 America had about 100 miles of canal, with no single canal longer than 30 miles. In that same year, however, New York's governor De Witt Clinton persuaded the state legislature to fund a 364-mile canal linking Buffalo on Lake Erie to Albany on the Hudson River. The Erie Canal, as it was called, was an unprecedented undertaking, both in terms of engineering and state investment. The \$7 million in bonds that the New York state legislature approved to fund the project was a huge sum, roughly a quarter of all the money spent by all the states on internal improvements in the 1820s. Although opponents mocked the project as "Clinton's ditch," the Erie Canal was a stupendous success. Before the opening of the Erie Canal, wheat from western New York state took twenty days to reach Albany by wagon and cost almost \$100 per ton to transport. After the completion of the canal, the same ton of wheat could be transported all the way to New York City in ten days at a cost of \$5. Much as the steamboat fueled the growth of river towns, the Erie Canal fueled the development of new cities such as Rochester, Buffalo, and Syracuse. The canal's success sparked "canal fever" across the country, and more than 3,300 miles of canal were completed by 1840 at a cost of about \$125 million.

In 1825, the same year that the Erie Canal was completed, the first railway began operating in England. Americans soon developed their own railroads, and by 1840 railroad mileage surpassed canals. Railroads continued the trend of increasing the speed at which goods and people moved from one part of the country to another. By 1840 the trip between Boston and New York by rail took a mere half day.

Americans greeted with amazement each innovation of the transportation revolution, but the railroad evoked the most powerful responses. "What an object of wonder!" wrote one American in response to his first sight of railroad in 1835. Charles Caldwell, the founder of the University of Louisville in Kentucky, praised the railroad as an agent of civilization that would help spread morality and education by linking people together more effectively. As *Images as History: Nature, Technology, and the Railroad: George Inness's Lackawanna Valley (1855)* indicates, railroads were eager to capitalize on the popular fascination with this new marvel.

What impact did the Erie Canal have on New York's economy?

# Images as History

## NATURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE RAILROAD: GEORGE INNESS'S *THE LACKAWANNA VALLEY* (1855)

The president of the Delaware, Lackawanna, and Western Railroad commissioned George Inness to paint the company's impressive new roundhouse, a facility designed to house and repair trains. Inness took the commission but soon found that his artistic vision and the vision of the railroad were in conflict. For the railroad, artistic considerations were less important than advertising the company's achievements. The main point of disagreement between Inness and his patrons focused on the representation of the roundhouse. The artist wished to render the facility accurately, which would have diminished its importance in the painting. Ultimately Inness agreed to make the roundhouse appear larger than it would have had he rendered the scene in actual perspective. He

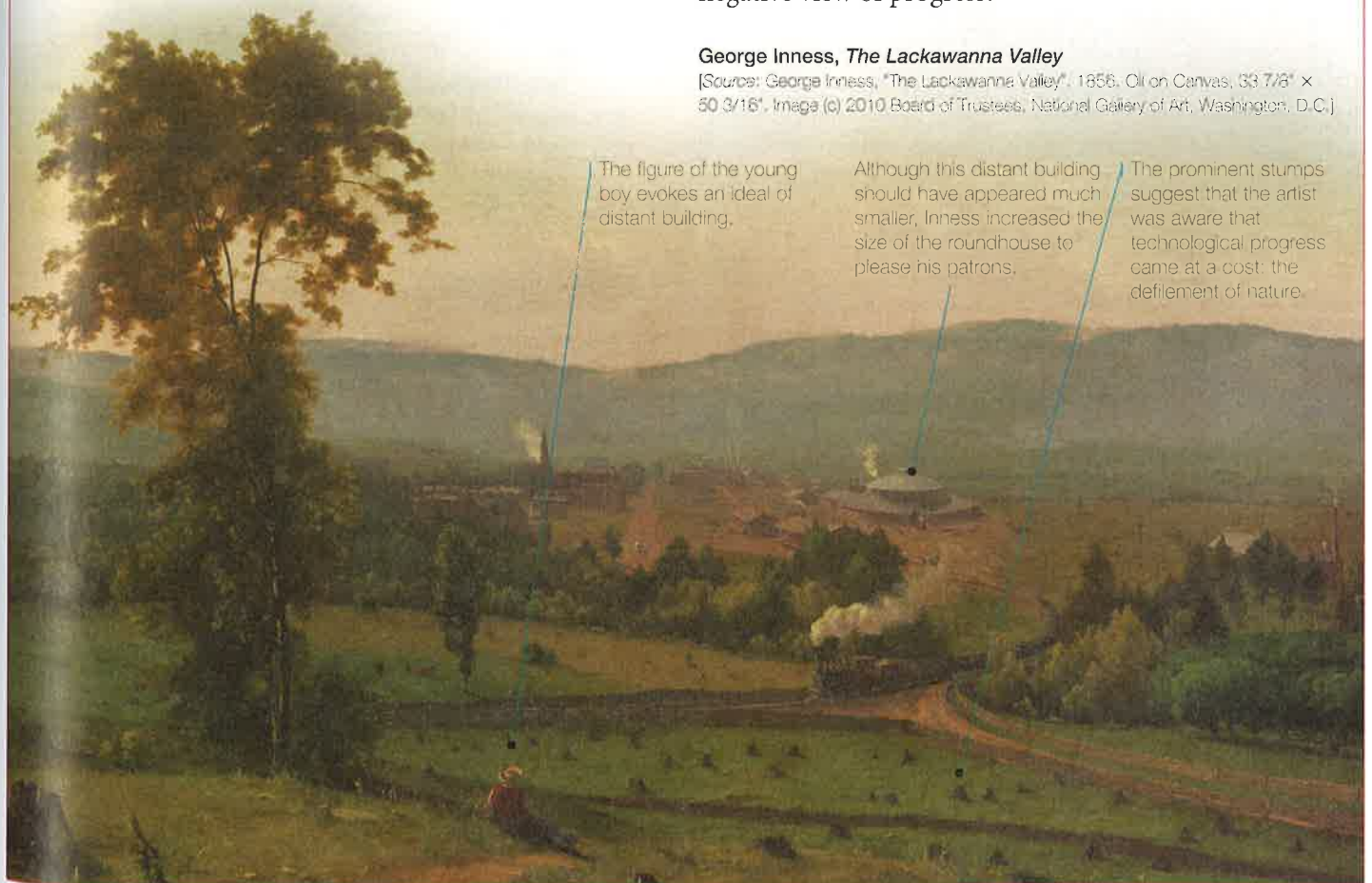
sacrificed some measure of artistic truth to the necessities of the market place.

Inness's painting draws on many of the conventions used to represent nature, but applies them to a scene in which nature and technology coexist harmoniously. Thus Inness includes a reclining youth, a figure often used in landscape paintings. Here, he sits calmly gazing toward the oncoming train. Rather than disrupt the serenity of nature, the train appears to blend harmoniously.

Although Inness portrays the railroad in a positive light, he also suggests the cost of technological progress: A field of tree stumps provides evidence of the negative impact of economic development on landscape. Which aspects of the painting present a positive view of progress? Which aspects suggest a negative view of progress?

### George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*

[Source: George Inness, "The Lackawanna Valley," 1855. Oil on Canvas, 33 7/8" x 50 3/16". Image (c) 2010 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.]



The figure of the young boy evokes an ideal of distant building.

Although this distant building should have appeared much smaller, Inness increased the size of the roundhouse to please his patrons.

The prominent stumps suggest that the artist was aware that technological progress came at a cost: the defilement of nature.

How did George Inness view technological progress in his painting of the Lackawanna Valley?



**9.3 Time Lag for News 1800–1841**  
 Improvements in communication technology and transportation dramatically reduced the time it took for news to travel from the coastal cities to the interior cities.

## Spreading the News

Improvements in roads, canals, and railroads facilitated improvements in communication. The near doubling of the number of post offices and miles of improved postal roads between 1810 and 1820 brought an increase in the number of letters delivered annually from not quite four million to nearly nine million. News traveling from Richmond, Virginia, to New York City in Jefferson's day had taken ten days. By the 1810s this time had been slashed to five days. The advent of the railroad, as the figure (9.3) shows, literally accelerated this trend, cutting dramatically the time for news to travel. For example in 1817 it took nineteen days for news to travel from New York to Cincinnati; by 1841 this time had shrunk to seven days.

The most significant advance in communications was the **telegraph**, an invention that used electricity to send coded messages over wires. The telegraph revolutionized communication. In 1844 Samuel Morse, painter turned inventor who had patented the device in 1837, transmitted a message taken from bible verse—"What hath God Wrought?"—along a telegraph line from Washington, D.C., to Baltimore. The message was in code—the Morse code—that he

also developed. Contemporary observers predicted correctly that the nearly instantaneous communication of telegraphy would usher in a new age of communications. By the middle of the 1850s, companies such as the Western Union Telegraph Company had established offices across the nation, improving communication between major towns and cities as far apart as Boston and New Orleans.

Improvements in print technology sharply reduced the cost of publishing, leading to an enormous increase in the number of newspapers, magazines, and books. In 1801 there were only 200 newspapers in America; by 1835 the figure had jumped to 1,200. The number of magazines also rose dramatically, giving Americans a far greater range of printed materials to read. While most eighteenth-century magazines and newspapers were directed at a broad general audience, many of these new publications were aimed at specific audiences. The *Farmer's Almanac*, for example, dispensed advice about agriculture, while magazines such as *Godey's Lady Book* informed a large and growing group of middle-class women readers of the latest ideas in fashion, literature, and family matters. Also on the rise by the 1830s, American book publishing, with an output of at least a thousand titles a year, nearly

rivalled that of Britain. Between 1825 and 1840 the value of the American book business doubled to \$5.5 million.

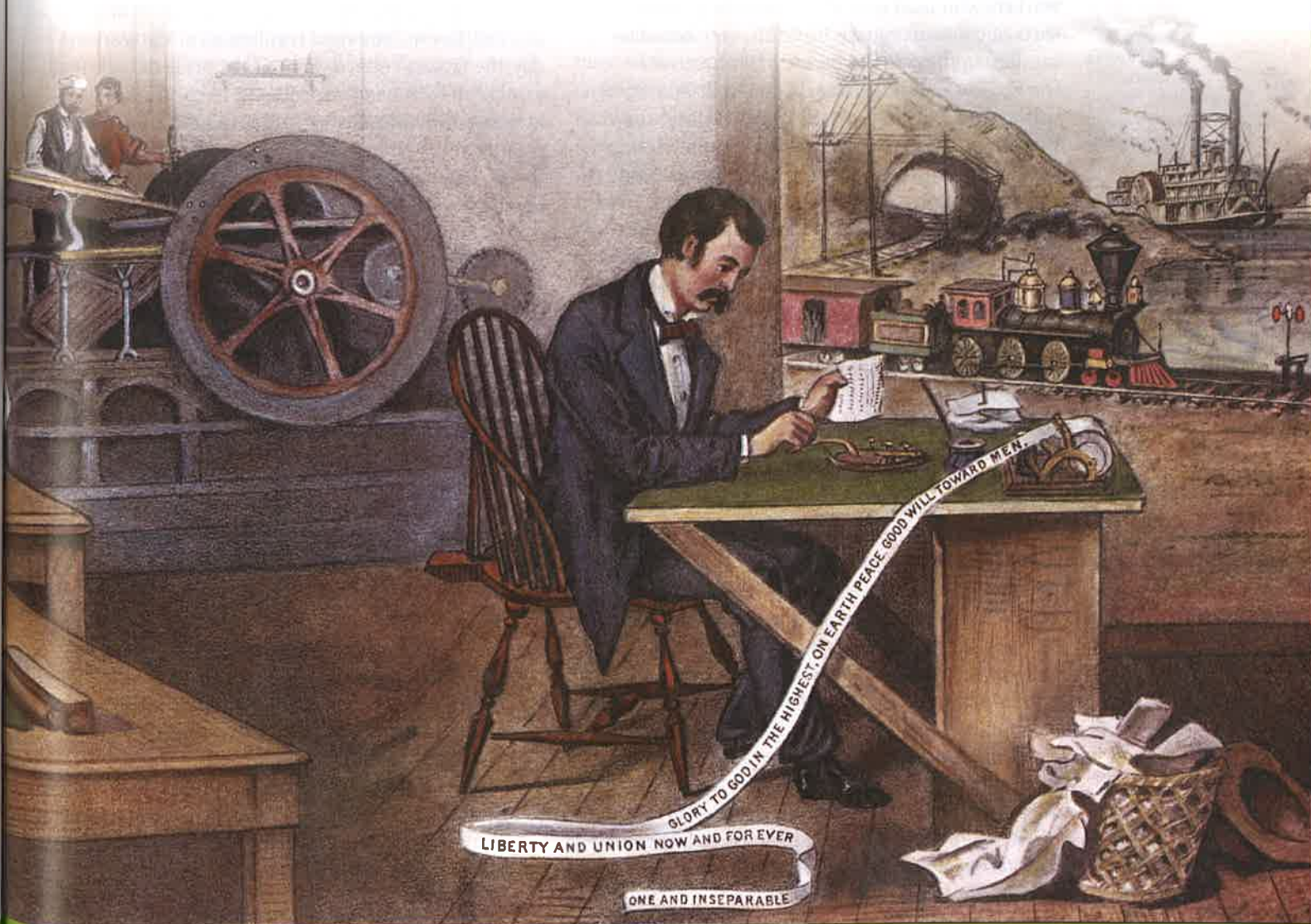
Technological improvements in printing also made it possible to produce better and cheaper images. In 1834 Nathaniel Currier began producing cheap colored lithographic images using a new process of making prints that was cheaper than traditional engraving techniques. Rather than aspire to provide high art, Currier set out to provide “cheap and popular pictures” of contemporary events, historical figures, and scenes of everyday life. Touted as “Printmakers to the People,” Currier’s firm, eventually renamed Currier and Ives, produced images costing as little as 15 cents. These were sold on city street corners, and itinerant peddlers carried them in bags to country stores across the nation. Currier and Ives prints often featured patriotic themes, displaying the wealth, ingenuity, and economic

achievements of the nation. Technological progress proved to be a favorite theme. Consumers could choose from an assortment of steamboats and trains. This late nineteenth-century Currier and Ives print (9.4), celebrating the technological achievements of the first half of the nineteenth century, features a number of inventions that helped transform the American economy, including steam-powered printing presses, steam-powered boats, the railroad, and the telegraph.

Beyond making it easier and faster to send messages and news, the communications revolution also contributed to economic expansion of the market revolution by fueling the desire for new consumer goods and fashions. Newspapers were filled with advertisements for the latest goods. Lavishly illustrated magazines inspired readers to procure the latest fashions.

#### 9.4 Currier and Ives Lithograph of American Technological Achievements

This print celebrates steam-powered printing presses, the steamboat, and the telegraph. These technological innovations made communication cheaper and faster.



What examples of the transportation revolution are evident in this Currier and Ives image of progress?



# The Spread of Industrialization



Beginning in the early nineteenth century, the United States began a transition from a predominantly agricultural economy to an industrial one. This process unfolded unevenly across different sectors of the American economy and followed several different models depending on the industry and region. Driven by the introduction of new manufacturing technology and techniques, industrialization led to a vast increase in the number of goods—everything from clothing and shoes to tools and toys—available to the American consumer. But for many workers, especially skilled artisans, the new industrial economy led to a devaluation of their skills and loss of social status. For less-skilled workers industrialization often meant exploitation, long hours, and low pay. For others, however, the new manufacturing economy opened up opportunities for advancement.

## From Artisan to Worker

The group of workers most dramatically affected by the onset of industrialization was artisans, or workers who used specialized skills to produce all sorts of consumer goods, from shoes to bread to candles. In the colonial period skilled artisans worked in small shops attached to their homes, using hand tools to produce goods for local consumption. They also employed an apprenticeship system, offering boys training in their skills (until about age twenty) in exchange for their labor. The relationship between artisan and apprentice was close. Typically an apprentice lived in his master's house, receiving food, clothing, and education.

In the new factory system first pioneered by Samuel Slater in Rhode Island (see Chapter 7), the artisan system of small-scale production was replaced with a new set of roles: owners, managers, and wage workers. The owner provided the money for the enterprise, the manager supervised the workers, and the laborers did the actual work, which was usually less skilled than the traditional crafts practiced by skilled artisans. Some industries, such as textiles, shifted relatively rapidly to the use of power-driven machinery. Shoe production, by contrast, continued to employ large numbers of manual laborers into the 1860s. In both cases manufacturers undermined the old craft traditions of artisans by breaking down the productive process into simple steps that could be performed by workers with minimal training.

Factory work forced laborers to give up many aspects of working-class culture. The work rhythm of artisans before the rise of the factory included periods of intense activity followed by slack periods

in which artisans might socialize with one another, perhaps meeting in a tavern to drink and discuss politics. Under industrialization the clock ruled. Factory workers were required to follow a strict schedule and perform at a steady pace day in and day out. Beyond the rigid regulations of the workers' day, the factory robbed them of the pride of craft associated with handmade goods. In contrast to **artisan production**, where a skilled craftsman might create one-of-a-kind pieces, factory goods allowed for no originality; goods were designed to be identical.

In addition to creating a labor force of less skilled workers, the new system also led to a sharp separation between home and workplace. Before 1800 most artisans in New York had workshops attached to their homes, but by 1840 two-thirds of them lived in one place and worked in another. The rise of the factory system separated home and work place. The apprenticeship system suffered as well. By 1827 less than a quarter of apprentices lived in the same household as their employer.

If the factory system diminished the control that working people had over their time and work, it increased the goods they could afford to buy. Because factory-made goods cost less to produce, items once available only to the wealthy were now available to families of modest means. Ordinary Americans could now purchase finished furniture, clocks, dishes, silverware, and the latest fabrics.

## Women and Work

The growth of the factory system had a tremendous impact on the lifestyle and status of many American women. While men's work increasingly shifted to

sites outside the home, women's economic activity remained primarily in the home. Nevertheless some women participated more directly in the new manufacturing economy through "outwork." In this system skilled processes were broken down into simpler tasks that could be farmed out to women to perform in their homes. Manufacturers just provided the materials to women with a specified completion date. They saved money because they did not have to provide a workshop or factory, and they paid women a fraction of the wages earned by a skilled male artisan. In New England during the 1830s, some 33,000 women took part in outwork production of palm leaf hats. Among the other goods women produced by this system were paper boxes, hoopskirts, artificial flowers, and cloaks. In urban areas many women depended on the meager earnings of outwork for their economic survival.

In rural areas, such as parts of New England, women might rely on outwork for supplemental income while continuing to perform traditional agricultural work, such as producing milk, butter, and cheese. Women from rural New England would eventually provide the labor force for one of the most ambitious industrial experiments of the day: the Lowell mills.

## The Lowell Experiment

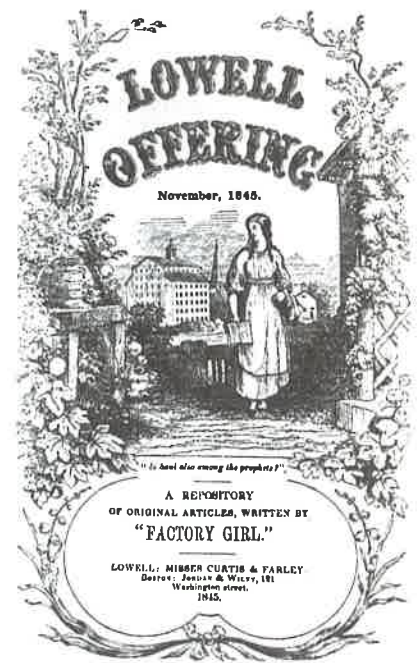
In 1814 a group of Boston merchants decided to expand on Samuel Slater's mill village model (see Chapter 7) and create a large-scale planned industrial town. They built a textile factory in Waltham, Massachusetts, and developed the **Waltham System**, a mill town model that relied on highly centralized factories, each one of which united all the distinctive steps of cloth production under a single roof. The system also came to depend on a large labor force housed in company-owned dormitories.

In 1823 the same group of merchants, led by Francis Lowell, opened an even larger factory on a site in Massachusetts adjacent to the Merrimack River. The Lowell mill consolidated all aspects of cloth production. Cotton from the South arrived at the mills, where it was cleaned, carded, spun, and finally woven into a finished fabric. Within a decade the new mill town of Lowell boasted twenty-two mills, and grew to over fifty mills by 1850. Not surprisingly many competing mill towns subsequently cropped up all over New England and upstate New York.

The mill owners recruited young, single women from rural New England to work at the factory town. To accommodate this workforce and appease their concerned parents, they built dormitories and libraries and provided boardinghouse matrons to supervise the morality of the workers. Each boardinghouse, with up to ten bedrooms per building, housed between twenty and forty women. In some cases two women might have to share a single bed. The boardinghouses also contained a kitchen, a dining room and parlor, and separate quarters for the housekeepers, who were generally older women.

Compared with life in some of the remote New England villages from which most of the women came, Lowell offered many amenities. To begin with Lowell allowed women to earn significantly more money compared with farm labor and domestic service, the two most common occupations for single women. The women operatives in the mills also made friends with their coworkers and enjoyed free time away from the factories to socialize and pursue cultural and educational opportunities not available in their small home towns. As Josephine L. Baker, a mill worker, noted, "there are lectures, evening schools, and libraries, to which all may have access." The mill women even produced their own literary magazine, the *Lowell Offering* (9.5). The magazine, nominally independent of the mills, echoed this rosy portrait. Indeed the cover of this 1845 issue shows a mill girl holding a book and adopting a contemplative pose. She stands in a lush natural setting composed of flowers, trees, and vines. In its early years the Lowell experiment was touted as an example of American ingenuity, a popular destination for European visitors eager to see the wonders of the new world. British novelist Charles Dickens visited and later wrote with wonder that that the mill women were not degraded by factory life, but rather retained "the manners and deportment of young women."

Despite the upbeat image portrayed on the cover of the *Lowell Offering*, life in the mills was hard. The women worked thirteen-hour days, six days a week. Furthermore the noise of the machines, the dust and



### 9.5 Lowell Offering

The Lowell mill women produced this title page of the final issue of the magazine *Lowell Offering*, presenting an image of industrial harmony. The young mill woman, holding a book in her hand, stands amid symbols of natural abundance.

time generated by the manufacturing processes, and the long hours demanded by the mill owners often overwhelmed women accustomed to working out of their homes. As one young Vermont mill woman noted in a letter home to her family, "It is very hard indeed and sometimes I think I shall not be able to endure it. I never worked so hard in my life."

For a decade the Lowell mill owners enjoyed high profits and peaceful labor relations. But increased competition with other textile producers led them in 1834 to announce a wage cut. Furious, the Lowell mill women went on strike, or "turned out." Critics of the strike saw it as a radical assault on the rights of the mill owners' economic freedom and a display of unseemly behavior for women. The mill women defended their actions as an assertion of their rights as American citizens and wrapped their actions in the ideals of independence and liberty that had inspired the American Revolution (see *Competing Visions: The Lowell Strike of 1834*). The strike failed to block the women's wage cut, but their actions were a milestone in the history of both women's rights and labor organization. Within a decade of this early strike, a new organization, the "Lowell Female Labor Reform Association," would join a large national struggle for a ten-hour working day for all workers.

## Urban Industrialization

In contrast to the mill town system developed at Lowell, New York and Philadelphia followed different paths toward industrialization. Metropolitan industrialization was far more diverse than mill town systems. In New York and Philadelphia, factories turned out a multitude of products by using everything from skilled handwork, similar to artisan production, to steam powered machinery run by low-skilled factory operatives. The factories produced an enormous range of goods under this

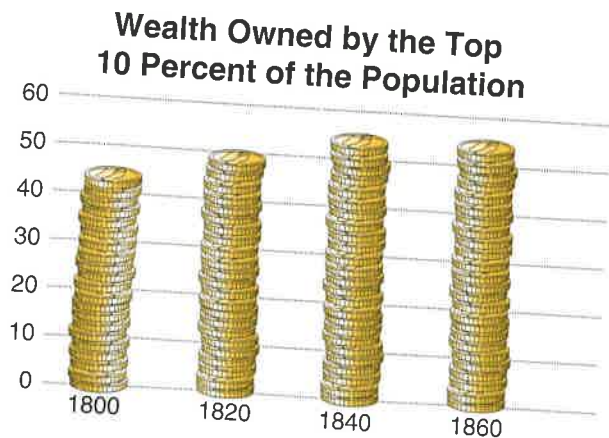
system, including chemicals, paints and varnishes, musical instruments, finished clothing and household tools, machines, furniture, and books.

New York's role as the nation's leading fashion and clothing center emerged during this period. Initially the city took a leading role in the production of cheap "Negro cottons," coarse garments assembled for sale in the South to clothe its large population of slaves. By the 1830s elegant tailors' houses such as the venerable firm of Brooks Brothers were offering well-tailored clothes for the members of the upper class and the more prosperous members of the middle class, who sought to emulate the upper class.

The industrial economy that emerged in antebellum America created jobs and opportunities for many workers, as well as a vast array of consumer products. But not everyone benefited equally from these developments. To protect themselves skilled workers built a large labor movement; twenty labor newspapers emerged in this period to champion the workers' cause. In 1835 twenty thousand Philadelphia workers from a dozen trades walked off their jobs to protest working conditions and to demand a ten-hour workday. The strike was the most successful labor action in the nation's short history and made the ten-hour workday the new standard. By 1836 labor councils or federations, a precursor to modern labor unions, had been founded in thirteen manufacturing centers scattered across the nation, as far north as Boston and as far west as Cincinnati. In the largest cities, such as New York and Philadelphia, more than fifty separate trades joined to form the general councils. The movement collapsed in the wake of a severe economic depression that began in 1837. Hard times produced high unemployment and intense job competition, undermining labor's ability to bargain for higher pay and better working conditions.

Worker unrest stemmed in part from their awareness that a small group of Americans were benefiting more than others from the new economic order. The distribution of wealth became less equal. Between 1800 and 1840 the average wealth of Americans increased by almost a third. By 1860 the average wealth of Americans would increase by another 33 percent. Although the wealth of the average citizen grew, the proportion of wealth concentrated in the hands of the nation's wealthiest citizens also increased (9.6). In 1800 the top 10 percent of the population owned less than half the nation's wealth. By 1860 the richest 10 percent owned two-thirds of the nation's wealth.

**9.6 Wealth Stratification**  
As the nation's wealth grew during the first half of the nineteenth century, it became more concentrated in the hands of a few. The wealthy controlled an even larger percentage of the nation's wealth by the middle of the century.



How did urban industrialization differ from other models of industrialization such as the Waltham (Lowell) model?

# Competing Visions

## THE LOWELL STRIKE OF 1834

In protesting a proposal to cut their wages, the Lowell mill women looked to the language of the American Revolution. They cast the mill owners as tyrants who sought to rob the workers of their independence and reduce them to economic slavery. For those sympathetic to the mill owners, the strikers were un-American, radical followers of the British thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, the champion of women's equality (see Chapters 5 and 6). Why did the protestors at Lowell seek to wrap their cause in the banner of the American Revolution and its ideals?

**The Lowell mill women cast themselves as the heirs to the Patriots who fought the American Revolution. Their appeal for public support focused on issues of rights and independence, themes that echoed the language of the American Revolution.**

### UNION IS POWER

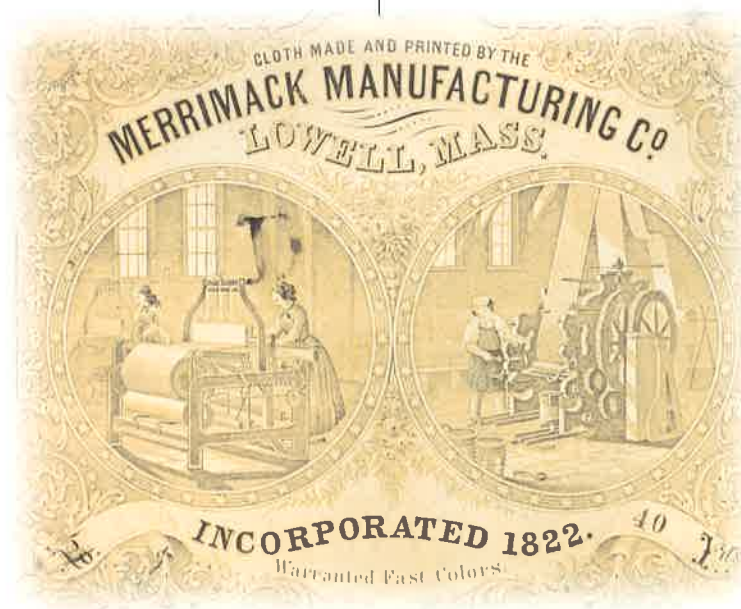
Our present object is to have union and exertion, and we remain in possession of our unquestionable rights. We circulate this paper wishing to obtain the names of all who imbibe the spirit of our Patriotic Ancestors, who preferred privation [poverty] to bondage, and parted with all that renders life desirable—and even life itself—to procure independence for their children. The oppressing hand of avarice [greed] would enslave us, and to gain their object, they gravely tell us of the pressure of the time, this we are already sensible of, and deplore it. If any are in want of assistance, the Ladies will be compassionate and assist them; but we prefer to have the disposing of our charities in our own hands; and as we are free, we would remain in possession of what kind Providence has bestowed upon us; and remain daughters of freemen still.

"Union Is Power," petition of the striking Lowell women, 1834

**In this contemporary report of the Lowell protest, a Boston newspaper highlighted the radical and unladylike behavior of the strikers.**

We learn that extraordinary excitement was occasioned at Lowell, last week, by an announcement that the wages paid in some of the departments would be reduced 15 percent on the 1st of March. The reduction principally affected the female operatives, and they held several meetings, or caucuses, at which a young woman presided, who took an active part in persuading her associates to give notice that they should quit the mills.... The number soon increased to nearly 800. A procession was formed, and they marched about the town, to the amusement of a mob of idlers and boys, and we are sorry to add, not altogether to the credit of Yankee girls.... We are told that one of the leaders mounted a stump and made a flaming Mary Wollstonecraft speech on the rights of women and the iniquities of the "monied aristocracy."

*Salem Gazette*, February 18, 1834



Label showing women at work in the mill

# The Changing Urban Landscape



The rise of industrialization accelerated the growth and changed the nature of American cities. While less than 10 percent of the nation's population resided in cities (areas with population of more than 2,500) before 1820, by 1860 that number had grown to 20 percent. Older cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore grew in population, and a host of new cities in the West such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago emerged as new urban centers. The population growth in these cities was fueled by migration from the American countryside and foreign immigration, especially from Ireland and Germany. Immigration fostered cultural diversity in cities, but it also led to rising tensions and occasional violence along ethnic, racial, and religious lines. Rising tensions between Protestants and Catholics, and between whites and blacks, led to increasing levels of urban violence. Policing became a far more complex problem in these growing cities.

## Old Port Cities and the New Cities of the Interior

With nineteenth-century industrialization and population growth, major changes occurred in American cities. New kinds of neighborhoods developed that reflected the class and ethnicity of their inhabitants. Distinctive working-class

neighborhoods, including the first urban slums, formed. This trend reflected the drop in the number of artisans who owned their homes and the rise of multiple-family dwellings, as well as the number of boardinghouses taking in lodgers.

New York's Five Points neighborhood illustrates the profound changes in the urban landscape caused by rapid economic development. To its working-class inhabitants, Five Points was a poor but thriving multiethnic and racially mixed community. To outsiders, however,

### 9.7 Five Points

This image reflects the elite's view of the Five Points neighborhood. The artist has depicted a robbery in progress in the foreground.

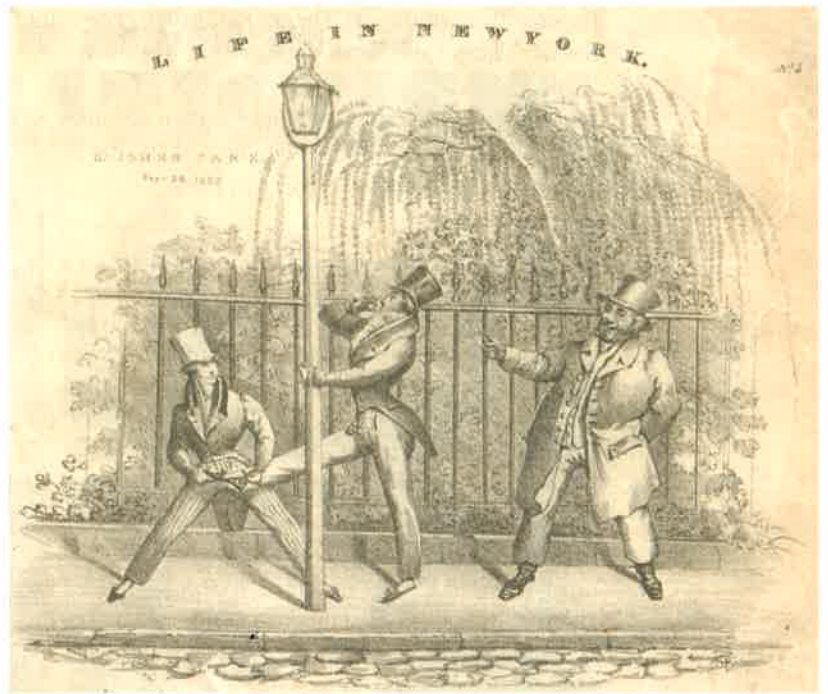


What was the Five Points neighborhood and why did it become so well known?

its shabby housing and reputation for crime, especially prostitution, made it a symbol of urban decline. Thus while its inhabitants saw the neighborhood as a vibrant and diverse community, New York's elite viewed it as a notorious slum to be avoided. This contemporary image (9.7) captures the multiracial character of the neighborhood, but it also reflects the fears of many New Yorkers that Five Points was crime-ridden and dangerous.

Middle- and upper-class families eager to escape contact with working people, immigrants, and free blacks segregated themselves into new, more exclusive neighborhoods. New York's Gramercy Park, for example, was created in 1831 as a private park surrounded by elegant private homes. Ringed by a tall gated fence, the park was accessible only to the adjacent homeowners who received special keys. This image of a similar exclusive enclave (9.8), St. Johns Square in New York, shows a park with a fence that segregates the rich residents from individuals such as the African Americans lampooned in this image for attempting to dress and act above their station in life. The African American figures are caricatures whose physical features are exaggerated to conform to the racist stereotypes of the day.

In 1800 even America's largest urban centers were "walking cities." A person could easily walk around all of New York, Philadelphia, or Boston in just a few hours. By 1820, however, these cities had grown to contain more than half the urban population of the new nation, and by mid-century these once compact walking cities had become sprawling metropolises. Some of this growth came from annexation. Philadelphia in 1854 annexed several of its suburbs, increasing its size from 2 square miles to 129. Much of the growth was driven by advances in mass transportation that allowed city dwellers to live farther and farther away from where they worked, shopped, and visited for entertainment. The first of these modes of transportation, which arrived in 1827, was the "omnibus," an urban stagecoach that carried up to twelve passengers over fixed routes for a flat fee. Expensive, slow, and uncomfortable, it gave way by the 1850s to the horsecar, a twenty-passenger coach pulled on rails by horses. Faster, cheaper, and more comfortable than the omnibus, horsecars, or street-railway lines, spread to virtually every large city by 1860. Philadelphia alone boasted 155 miles of track. At the same time steam-powered locomotives had begun to carry commuters—or people who traveled over a significant distance from home to work—to and from outlying areas.



Within the first decade of the nineteenth century, New York surpassed Philadelphia to become the nation's largest city. Central to this development was the city's harbor, the largest on the East Coast and one ideally suited to become a major port. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 ensured New York's economic supremacy as it connected the city to the Midwest. It increased dramatically the flow of finished goods from Europe and the rest of the United States into the American heartland and the flow of foodstuffs produced by Midwestern farmers into domestic and foreign markets.

Inland cities such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Chicago were among the fastest-growing urban areas in the nation. Situated on rivers or lakes and soon connected by railroads, inland cities became manufacturing centers and often served as transportation hubs. Between 1800 and 1840 these new cities saw their populations quadruple. If any city in America fit the modern stereotype of a soot-covered industrial town, it was Pittsburgh. The French traveler Michel Chevalier remarked that "a dense black smoke which, bursting forth in volumes from the foundries, forges, glass-houses, and the chimneys of all the factories and houses, falls in flakes of soot upon the dwellings and persons of the inhabitants. It is, therefore, the dirtiest town in the United States." Cincinnati, a small settlement on the Ohio River in 1800, emerged as a major industrial center by 1840, producing a wide range of manufactured products, including furniture, tools, candles,

#### 9.8 St. Johns Square

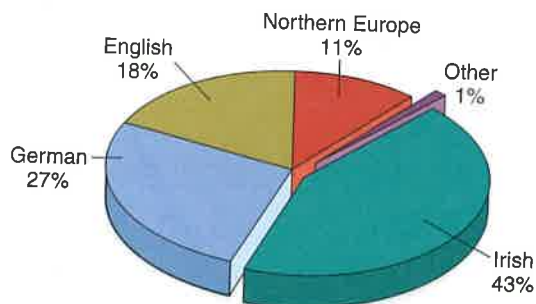
St. Johns Square was one of several gated parks created to keep the poor and working classes separate from upper-class New Yorkers. [Source: The Library Company of Philadelphia]

paper, leather, and soap. The soap industry grew out of the city's large number of pig-slaughtering houses (Cincinnati's nickname was "Porkopolis") that produced fat renderings that provided an essential ingredient for making soap. The firm of Procter & Gamble was founded in the city in 1837.

## Immigrants and the City

The sharp rise in urban populations in the nineteenth century stemmed from two sources: the migration of Americans from rural areas and immigration from Europe. The latter expanded dramatically after 1830, soaring from 23,000 in 1830 to 428,000 in 1854. Immigrants left their homelands for the United States for many reasons, including poverty, poor harvests, warfare, and political and religious persecution. The most dramatic exodus in this period was triggered in 1845 when Ireland's potato crop failed. The disaster killed more than one million people and spurred more than a million others, mostly poor peasants, to cross the Atlantic to America. Both poor harvests and political turmoil in Europe boosted German immigration to the United States. Besides the Irish and Germans, the other large groups of immigrants came from other parts of Britain, notably Scotland and Wales, and from Scandinavia, such as Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians (9.9).

The influx of immigrants from Ireland and Germany between 1830 and 1860 dramatically changed America's ethnic composition. For the first time large numbers of non-Protestants entered American society. Irish immigrants were almost entirely Catholic, while German immigrants included both Catholics and Protestants. Ethnic enclaves with names like *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany) and Little Ireland, with their own churches, mutual aid societies, theaters, newspapers, restaurants, and social clubs, developed in many cities.



**9.9 Sources of European Immigration**

A growing number of immigrants from Germany and Ireland changed the population mix in many parts of the nation. The influx of Catholic immigrants in particular resulted in tensions with Protestant groups.

Irish immigrants generally came from the poorest segments of society; they arrived with very little money and few skills needed in an urban economy. They often ended up in slum neighborhoods like Five Points and came to dominate low-skilled jobs such as laborer and domestic servant. Nonetheless many Irish immigrants entered the skilled trades and several became successful entrepreneurs.

German immigration drew from a more diverse population. As with the Irish, German immigration included many poor peasants forced off the land, but it also included large numbers of skilled artisans and even some liberal intellectuals who fled Germany after the political upheavals of 1848 that swept over much of continental Europe. Germans were more likely than the Irish to become farmers, shopkeepers, or skilled tradesmen. Germans also ventured farther inland, settling places such as Cincinnati and St. Louis. More skilled on average than their Irish counterparts, Germans transformed a number of fields. Adolph Busch, a skilled brew master, brought German-style beer to America, and skilled musical instrument makers such as Heinrich Steinway helped launch such venerable firms as Steinway and Sons, piano makers.

## Free Black Communities in the North

Urban centers in the North and Midwest were home to some of the largest free African American communities in the nation. Free blacks living in enclaves such as Boston's "New Guinea" or Cincinnati's "Little Africa" were probably the most urbanized subgroup in America. Racial segregation was more pronounced in the urban North than in the cities of the South, where urban slaves were likely to live in their masters' homes. Thus an African American living in Boston was almost twice as likely to live in a segregated neighborhood than was an African American living in New Orleans. African American communities developed a variety of thriving institutions, such as churches, schools, and self-help societies.

Still, life for free African Americans was hindered by racial prejudice and discrimination. In the North and parts of the Midwest, exclusion from many of the skilled trades often forced African Americans into the most menial types of labor. This situation actually worsened in the 1840s and 1850s as immigrants, especially the Irish, took over

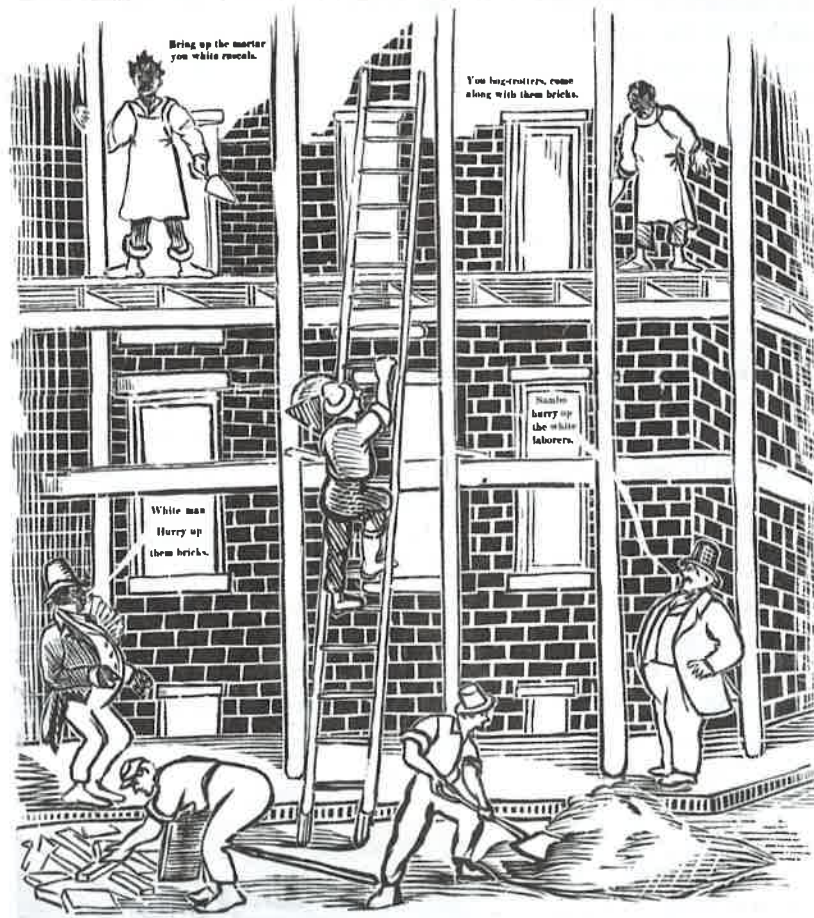
occupations traditionally dominated by African Americans, such as barbers and cart men. In the cities of the North and West, hostility to African Americans competing for jobs with whites intensified. A drawing from the period (9.10) exploits white fears of African American laborers. The racist message of the image is clear: Free blacks will steal the jobs of white workingmen.

Through persistence, talent, and good fortune, some African Americans could surmount the many obstacles they faced in the labor market and achieve financial security or occasionally even prosper. Henry Boyd of Cincinnati provides an example of one such life. Trained as a carpenter while still a slave, Boyd, somehow having managed to obtain his freedom, later began to ply his trade in Cincinnati. Although Boyd was able to find some work, many employers refused to hire him. Yet in 1836 Boyd accumulated enough money to establish his own furniture-making business, and by 1842 his downtown factory was using the latest steam-powered equipment to make furniture. By the 1850s Boyd was employing a mixed-race workforce of some fifty people. Nine years later, however, fire destroyed Boyd's factory. Without insurance Boyd was unable to rebuild his factory, leaving him as he had begun his career—a struggling artisan.

## Riot, Unrest, and Crime

Urbanization in the first half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by a sharp rise in crime and disorder. During the 1830s there were 115 incidents of mob violence, a steep rise from previous decades. One newspaper reported that “a spirit of riot” had taken over the nation's cities.

# THE RESULTS OF ABOLITIONISM!



**9.10** *The Results of Abolitionism*  
This poster warns white laborers that their jobs might be taken by free African American laborers. [Courtesy Library Company of Philadelphia]

Violence increased as growing cities became increasingly divided racially, economically, and ethnically. Anti-Catholic sentiment spurred much of the intensified violence. In 1834 a mob attacked and burned a Catholic convent just outside Boston. Ten years later in Philadelphia, the “bible riots” left twenty dead and two Catholic churches in ashes.

Racial animosity also inspired urban unrest. Cincinnati's African American community faced the ire of white mobs in 1829, 1836, and 1841. A three-day riot in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1831 destroyed most of the African American part of the city. A riot in New York in 1834 destroyed an African American church, school, and a dozen homes. Adding to the tensions of the period and occasionally sparking violence were political battles between Democrats and Whigs, antagonisms between supporters and opponents of slavery, and conflicts



over regulating or eliminating behaviors such as gambling and drinking.

Contributing to the rise in urban violence was the steady increase in the number of single men living outside of traditional family units, a trend that arose from industrialization and immigration. In the 1840s and 1850s, at least 30 percent of male urban dwellers lived outside of family units, usually in boardinghouses. Free from the traditional guidance and restraint of adults and family, young men developed a masculine subculture in which alcohol and fighting played a central role.

The masculine subculture also led to a significant rise in prostitution (as did the poverty of many women), a situation that alarmed many officials. Influential minister Lyman Beecher decried the fact that so many young people were “thrown out upon the open bosom of our city” where they were easily “corrupted by sensuality.” Beecher’s fears were well founded. Theaters encouraged prostitutes to attend their performances as a means of boosting sales, a practice so common that the cheap seats they occupied were dubbed the “guilty third tier.” Many Americans became aware of the prevalence of prostitution in American cities through the media sensation that attended the murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett in New York City in 1836. Rival news-

papers competed to be the first to publish the latest revelation about the case, and the story dominated headlines for months. The salacious appeal of the murder even produced colorful images such as this scene showing the alleged murderer leaving the scene of the crime (9.11). Reflecting the low regard in which prostitutes were held, the man accused of killing Jewett was acquitted despite significant evidence pointing to his guilt.

Most urban crime did not involve sensational tales of murder, but rather petty crimes against property or person. The informal policing mechanisms that cities had relied on in the eighteenth century, including the use of night watchmen and sheriffs who had to rely on community support to quell unrest, proved woefully inadequate to policing a major metropolitan area in the nineteenth century. In 1839 the mayor of New York pushed to create a professional police force, fearing that without strong intervention New York would attain “the character of a riotous city.” In 1845 New York created the first modern professional police force in America, modeled on London’s Metropolitan Police Force. The city employed eight hundred men organized in a military structure; they carried weapons (but not firearms) and were deployed to keep the peace and apprehend criminals.

**9.11** Murder of Helen Jewett  
Currier’s lurid depiction of the murder of the prostitute Helen Jewett was part of the media frenzy surrounding this sensational murder.

[Source: Collection of The New-York Historical Society, Neg. #40698]



What does the murder of Helen Jewett reveal about nineteenth-century city life?

# Southern Society



Even as Northern society changed dramatically between 1815 and 1860 due to immigration, urbanization, and industrialization, Southern society remained committed to slavery and a cash crop economy. The rise of cotton cultivation and the expansion of plantations into the band of fertile land from Georgia to Texas transformed the institution of slavery. Although the vast majority of Southerners did not own slaves, the institution of slavery suffused Southern culture and society. A small minority of planters shaped the political and economic life of the whole South. Addressing a Southern audience in 1850, one Southern leader described slavery as connected with all the South's institutions" and affecting "the personal interests of every white man."

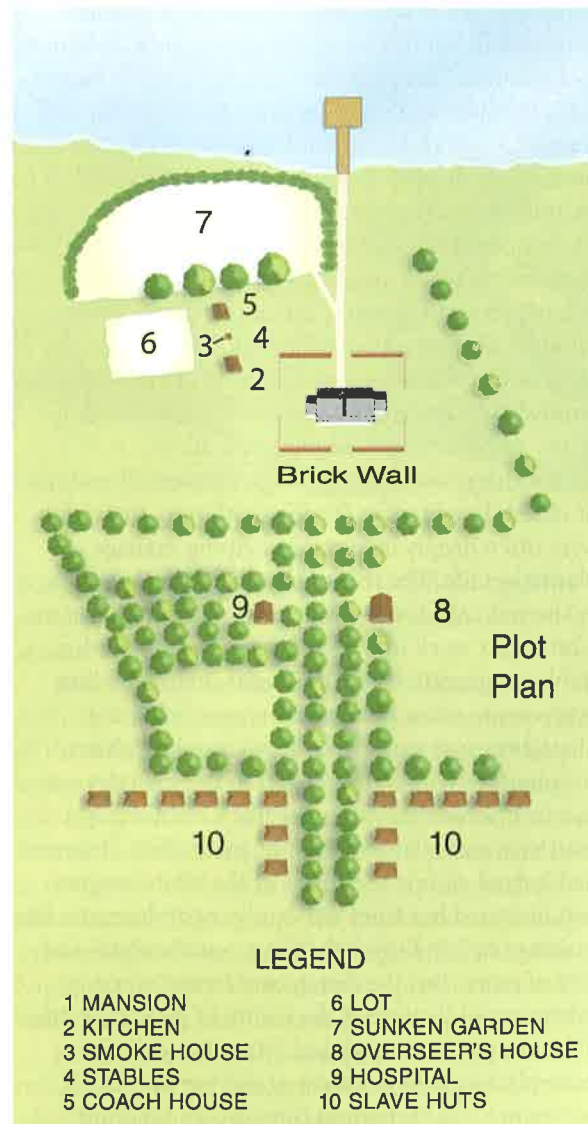
"I could easily prove that almost all the differences which may be noticed between the characters of the Americans in the Southern and in the Northern states have originated in slavery."

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE,  
*Democracy in America* (1838)

## The Planter Class

Only a few planters lived in the grand luxury many people today associate with the world of nineteenth-century slavery (an image celebrated in the classic 1939 film, *Gone with the Wind*). For example at Nottoway, in Louisiana, John Hampden Randolph built a magnificent mansion that contained 64 rooms, 200 windows, and 165 doors. But the typical planter lived far more modestly in a simple two-story wood-framed house. The planter's home, generally described as "the big house" because it was always the largest domestic dwelling on a plantation, was at the center of a variety of smaller out-buildings, including a kitchen, well, dairy, ice house, smokehouse, and laundry. More substantial plantations included many other types of buildings, such as barns, stables, sheds, and storehouses.

Georgia rice planter Henry McAlpin's Hermitage plantation (9.12) resembled a small town, with multiple residences, a hospital, and a variety of other buildings. Indeed, the slave quarters constituted an even smaller village within this self-contained



**9.12 Schematic Map of Hermitage Plantation**  
Large plantations were like small towns. This plantation included a separate overseer's house, hospital, and a collection of slave huts.

community. Most plantations were far more modest. The vast majority of slave owners owned between one and nine slaves. Fewer than 1 percent owned a hundred or more slaves. Thus the typical slaveholder

worked a small family farm of about 100 acres with fewer than ten slaves.

Planters created something akin to English-style aristocracy. Thomas Dabney, who had migrated to Mississippi from Virginia in 1835 to establish a large cotton plantation, aspired to this kind of aristocratic lifestyle. Dabney tried to emulate the life of an English country gentleman, taking tea in the afternoon and treating his less affluent neighbors as social inferiors.

While industrialization in the North created a sharp divide between work and home, physically separating the two realms, Southern plantations fused the two realms together. A large body of advice literature geared toward plantation management appeared in Southern magazines that urged planters to act so that “the Negro should feel that his master is his lawgiver and judge; and yet his protector and friend.” An 1842 advice book reminded planters that, because slaves were “placed under our control,” masters were obliged to care for and instruct slaves so they could “receive moral and religious uplift.” In theory masters sought to “govern absolutely.” “Plantation government,” a Georgia planter wrote, “should be eminently patriarchal.” He went on to say that the planter was not only “the head of the family” but also “should, in one sense, be the father of the whole concern, negroes and all.”

Southern women married to planters or widows or eldest daughters in families without a matriarch were often deeply involved in helping manage plantation life. The role of the plantation mistress, as she was called, was to supervise a group of slaves who might work in the kitchen, nursery, laundry, stable, or garden. While husbands often relied on overseers to assist them and frequently left the plantation to attend to business or public affairs, the planter’s wife was often left to her own devices to run a home that was more like a small village. Southern men claimed that the institution of slavery had helped elevate the status of the white woman and liberated her from the drudgery of domestic life, making her “no longer the slave, but the equal and idol of man.” But the diaries and letters of many mistresses indicate that the reality of plantation life did not meet this lofty ideal. Mary Kendall, for example, wrote in her diary about her loneliness, lamenting that “for about three weeks I did not have the pleasure of seeing one white female face.” Although she did possess authority over the slaves, she did so only as the wife or daughter of the master, to whom she was expected to be obedient.

## Yeomen and Tenant Farmers

Most Southern whites were not planters but yeoman farmers, independent landowners who worked their own small farms. In 1860 more than three-quarters of Southerners owned no slaves. As a result yeomen farmers were dependent on neighborliness and communal cooperation to complete tasks such as planting, harvesting, or building. Lacking the urban centers and cheap transportation that allowed many small farmers in the North to enter fully into the market economy, many Southern yeomen did not produce large surpluses for market. Instead they devoted most of their resources to producing food for their own families and generally allocated only a small portion of their lands for cash crops that could be sold to purchase seed, sugar, and the occasional manufactured good. Since they could not afford the cost of transporting their surpluses to market, yeoman farmers depended on planters to market their small surpluses. They likewise depended on planters for the use of the plantation mill to grind corn into meal. In many parts of the South where planters and yeomen resided side by side, a complex web of economic, political, and social ties bound these two classes together. At the same time many yeomen living in the upcountry regions of the South were fiercely independent and often resented the more affluent planters who dominated their state’s militia, state legislatures, and courts.

Indeed most Southern state legislators and judges were drawn from the ranks of the planter class. The same was true of the officers of the militia. Below the ranks of officers, the yeomanry formed the core of the militia system that had the primary responsibility for catching runaway slaves and guarding against slave insurrection. In this anti-slavery woodcut, the slave patrol is depicted terrorizing a captured slave (9.13), found traveling without a pass. Passes were written by owners and were required for any traveling slave.

Many Southerners owned no land and worked as tenant farmers. In some parts of the South, as many as 50 percent of the white population fell into this category. While some of the landless population in the South comprised young men waiting to inherit land from their fathers, a substantial segment of the population rarely entered the ranks of the solid yeomanry. In some parts of the Deep South densely populated with African American slaves, poor whites fraternized with slaves, including engaging in clandestine activities with them: smuggling liquor



into the slave quarters, helping runaways, or forming sexual liaisons and permanent relationships with slaves. More often, however, the dominance of a white supremacist ideology overcame the prospects of class solidarity across racial lines.

## Free Black Communities

While the vast majority of African Americans in the South were enslaved, some 6 percent of the black population in the South by 1860 lived as free people of color. The vast majority of free blacks resided in the upper South, with especially large communities in border states such as Delaware and Maryland. A third of the free blacks resided in Southern cities, with the largest communities in Baltimore, Richmond, New Orleans, Charleston, Memphis, Mobile, and Natchez. The South's Black Codes were even more restrictive than those in the North (see Chapter 8). Free Southern blacks had to carry identification to prove that they were not slaves.

Southern law also barred them from holding office and in some cases even from testifying in court against whites.

Although life for free blacks in the South was difficult, the shortage of skilled artisans in many cities of the South created opportunities for them to enter trades such as cabinet making. Southern cities were also less spatially segregated than Northern cities, and Southern African Americans played a prominent role as domestics and in some fields and trades such as tailoring and hair cutting. The free black community in New Orleans was one of the most affluent in the South. It published its own newspapers and hosted lavish balls each year for its most elite members.

Religious institutions also played an important role in the free African American community. In addition to tending to the spiritual needs of their congregations, ministers were often leaders within the African American community. The size of the membership of Southern churches far exceeded that of similar institutions in the North. Thus the largest

### 9.13 *A Slave Caught Without a Pass*

In this woodcut from an abolitionist almanac, a slave patrol harasses a slave traveling from one plantation to another.

African American church in the North, New York's Abyssinian Baptist, had a membership of 440 at mid-century, a mere fraction of the size of First African Church of Richmond, which counted 3,160 members.

## White Southern Culture

Wealthy white Southerners in the antebellum years entertained on a lavish scale, hosting parties, balls, fox hunts, and horse races. Fondness for the aristocratic ideal even led some to sponsor medieval tournaments that included jousting. Southerners took pride in their seaside resorts along the Gulf Coast, gracious vacation spots characterized by a "quiet ease." They expressed disdain for the bustling character of Northern resorts such as Newport, Rhode Island, and Saratoga Springs, New York. New Orleans gradually replaced New York as the horse racing capital of the nation. Traditional blood sports such as cock fighting also continued to be popular, particularly among less affluent Southerners.

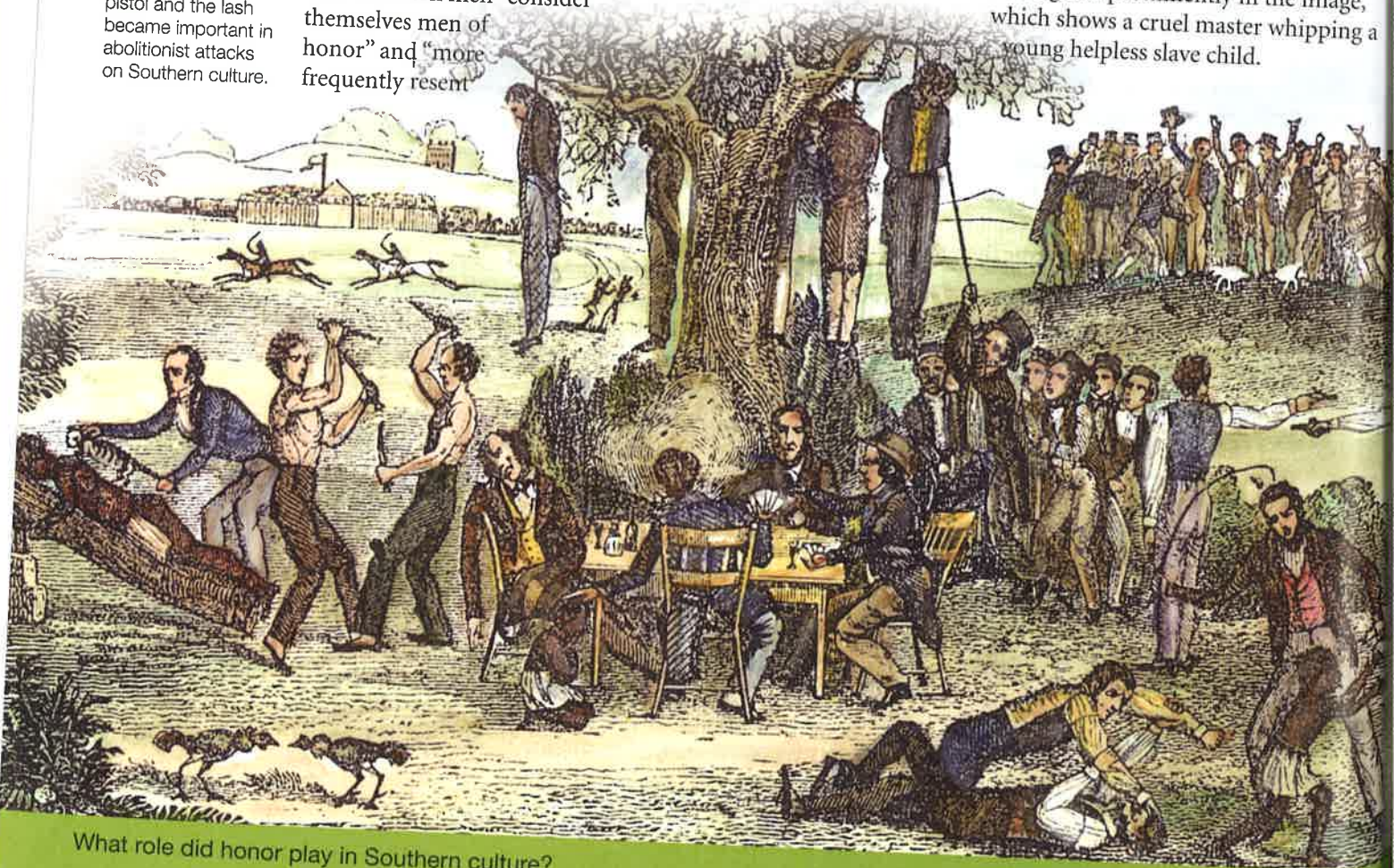
Reputation and honor were central values in the male-oriented Southern culture. An "unsullied reputation," one observer of Southern values noted, was all that a man required to be "on a social level with his fellows." A Scottish traveler remarked that Southern men "consider themselves men of honor" and "more frequently resent

any indignity shown them even at the expense of their life, or that of those who venture to insult them."

When a gentleman experienced an insult from a social inferior, the appropriate response was to caning or horsewhip the offender. Dueling, by contrast, was reserved for settling matters of honor among gentlemen. In 1838 John Wilson, a former governor of South Carolina, published *The Code of Honor; or the Rules for the Government of Principals and Seconds in Dueling*, which explained such things as the role of seconds and the choice of weapons. The centrality of honor to Southern culture was the chief reason dueling endured in this region long after it had been outlawed in the North. Many of the South's leading politicians, including Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay, had participated in duels at one time or another in their careers. This contemporary drawing by a Northern opponent of slavery (9.14) portrays the South as a culture dominated by dueling, brawling, and mobbing. For some Northerners, especially those opposed to slavery, the dueling and other violence they associated with the South was a result of the brutality inherent in the institution of slavery. The connection between slavery and Southern violence figures prominently in the image, which shows a cruel master whipping a young helpless slave child.

### 9.14 Southern Violence

This Northern depiction of Southern violence links the brawling and dueling of Southerners with the brutal labor regime of slavery. References to the pistol and the lash became important in abolitionist attacks on Southern culture.



What role did honor play in Southern culture?

# Life and Labor under Slavery



Slavery was a complex institution that took many forms in the South. Some slaves lived on large cotton plantations and worked in gangs under the authority of an overseer, while others toiled beside their master on small farms. Still others lived in cities where, if they possessed skills, they were often hired out. Regardless of these differences the law treated all slaves as property, leaving them entirely at the mercy of their master who had the power to impose punishment and separate slaves from their families by selling them. To protect themselves slaves developed various traditions and strategies. Many turned to religion to provide spiritual comfort and culture resources to resist the domination of their masters. Slaves also developed subtle forms of resistance such as feigned illness, work slow downs, and destruction of tools and other property. Occasionally slaves took more overt measures like running away, either to seek a temporary respite from the harsh labor regime or to escape North to freedom. The most radical and the rarest form of resistance was insurrection, rising up against the established authorities.

## Varied Systems of Slave Labor

Slave labor produced a variety of other agricultural products—tobacco, hemp, sugar, and rice. But the leading product was cotton, an enterprise in which more than half of all slaves toiled. By 1840 cotton accounted for more than half the nation's exports with most of it heading for European (especially British) textile mills. The remainder was sent north to American textile mills in places like Lowell, Massachusetts.

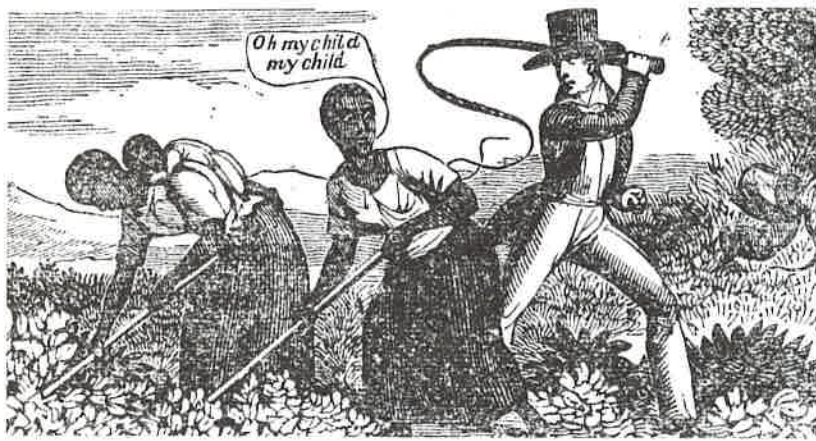
Yet even in those regions of the South in which cotton was not the primary crop, the cotton economy influenced economic life. Many farmers who did not produce cotton produced foodstuffs and supplies for consumption on cotton plantations. For instance hemp was turned into rope that was used to bind cotton bales for shipment.

The antebellum South was divided economically into two regions, the lower South and the upper South. The warm climate of the lower South was ideal for cotton cultivation, as was the dark rich soil of the region stretching from Alabama to Texas known as the **Black Belt**. In the decades after 1820, cotton cultivation spread rapidly westward along the Black Belt, propelled by two factors. First the great wealth produced by cotton provided huge economic incentives for bringing new lands under cultivation. Second because cotton exhausted soil of its nutrients, growers constantly sought new lands to bring under cultivation. To grow and harvest this cotton, planters relied on a labor force that was 90 percent enslaved.

The upper South included eight slave states, but it lacked the fertile land and long growing season necessary for cotton agriculture. As a result the upper South embraced agricultural diversification, including grain and livestock. Of the agricultural staples produced in this region, corn, rye, and hemp (used to produce rope) were particularly important. With each passing decade of the antebellum period, slavery became less and less viable in this region and many masters elected to sell their slaves to the lower South where demand for their labor was extremely high.

Most slaves worked as field hands, toiling from sun up to sun down most of the year. On most large plantations slaves worked in the fields in gangs, which gave their masters more control over their labor. Men and women generally worked together, in many cases supervised by a hired white overseer. Masters sometimes employed slaves to act as drivers, or supervisors, a role that required them to discipline other slaves or face severe punishment themselves. In some cases a clever driver might find a way to protect other slaves from more severe punishment at the hands of an overseer. Larger plantations also employed many slave craftsmen as carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, coopers, and other occupations. Household slaves functioned as cooks and coachmen and in a variety of other domestic duties, such as nannies or cleaning women.

Planters used a system of rewards and punishments to enforce slave discipline. As rewards some planters allowed slaves to maintain a small garden or even sell produce at market. Ultimately,



### 9.15 Broadside with Image of Slave Whipping

To portray the horror of slavery, abolitionists made effective use of the image of slave owners whipping their slaves.

however, labor discipline was enforced by violence. A popular plantation management book that many planters consulted argued that “after reason and persuasion have been exhausted without producing the desired effect, punishment of some sort must be resorted to.” As one English observer of the gang system noted, “Absence from work, or neglect of duty, was punished with stinted allowances,

### 9.16 *The Slave Market, Richmond, Virginia*

An English traveler who accompanied the English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray on a tour of America captured the grim realities of a slave auction.



imprisonment, and flogging.” Northern abolitionist literature made the image of the whip one of their most prominent metaphors of life in the South as this broadside with images drawn from an antislavery almanac reveals (9.15).

Beyond physical punishment Southern masters also exerted control over their slaves by threatening to sell them on the slave market. Slaves residing in the upper South feared being sold “down river” to a cotton plantation because it meant separation from family and kin and more than likely a harsher existence. The sale of slaves tore families apart. By some estimates the sale of slaves may have dissolved as many as one-third of all slave marriages and separated close to half of the children living in the older parts of the South from a parent. The British painter Eyre Crowe painted a scene in a Richmond slave market, in which men, women, and children wait their turn on the auction block (9.16). Scenes such as this were common throughout Virginia and parts of the Carolinas. One of the largest slave auctions occurred in 1859 when the Georgia planter Pierce Butler sold 450 slaves in a single auction lasting several days. A reporter from the *New York Tribune* described the misery of the slaves whose “brothers and sisters” were to be “scattered through the cotton fields of Alabama.” The “expressions of heavy grief,” the reporter noted, reflected their horror at having been “torn from their homes” and separated from their loved ones.

Although the vast majority of the South’s slaves toiled as agricultural laborers, many toiled in some type of

What role did violence play in slave society?

industrial enterprise, primarily those located in the upper South. While the South lagged far behind the North in industrial development, taken on its own it exceeded all but the top five or six industrial nations in production of textiles, iron making, grain and timber milling, sugar refining, and leather tanning. Most of these upper South industries relied on slave labor and by 1850 at least 5 percent (between 150,000 and 200,000) of the South's slaves worked in industry. Employers owned 80 percent of the slaves who worked in industry with the rest hired out on yearly contracts or short-term leases. In some cases enslaved blacks and free whites worked side by side. Richmond's Tredegar Iron Works employed such a mixed labor force until 1847, when a strike by whites prompted the mill owners to turn exclusively to enslaved blacks for all of its labor needs apart from a few white supervisors.

Slaves also worked in nonagricultural enterprises in cities such as Richmond, Virginia, Mobile, Alabama, Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana. Slaves worked as domestics, skilled artisans, carriage drivers, gardeners, couriers, and nurses. Southern cities also employed slaves for public works projects, including sanitation, road building, and bridge maintenance. Savannah, Georgia, and Charleston, South Carolina, even used slaves as firefighters.

## Life in the Slave Quarters

Compared to Brazil, where living conditions were among the worst in the Americas, American slaves lived under less harsh conditions. This fact contributed to a significant natural increase in the slave population in the United States; the population increased nearly fivefold between 1790 and 1850. Still American slave owners often treated their slaves brutally and provided inadequate food, shelter, clothing, and medical care. As a result infant mortality rates for slave children were twice the rate of white children. Life expectancy for whites in the South was between forty and forty-three years, lower than that in other parts of the country; that of the average slave, however, was only between thirty and thirty-three years.

Fanny Kemble, the wife of planter Pierce Butler, described the slave quarters on her husband's plantation in stark terms. "These cabins consist of one room, about twelve feet by thirteen," and providing extremely cramped surroundings. "Two families (together numbering sometimes eight or ten) reside in one of these huts which are mere

wooden frames." Wealthier planters sometimes built sturdier slave quarters that consisted of framed houses with wooden floors or in some cases houses made of brick.

The oppressive nature of slavery also shaped family life. Although Southern law did not recognize the legality of slave marriages, many slave men and women sought to form stable family relationships. Slaves developed their own marriage rituals to seal their unions. The most common was "jumping the broom," a ritual that derived from traditional African marriage practices. Relatives or close friends of the bride and groom held opposite ends of a broom about a foot off the ground, and the couple would jump together over the broom as a symbol of their union. Planters generally encouraged slaves to marry because planters recognized that married slaves were less likely to run away. In addition the offspring of slave marriages provided planters with additional laborers.

On larger plantations a slave family might reside together. In the case of smaller plantations and farms, husbands and wives might reside on neighboring plantations. Such "abroad" marriages were common. Visiting a spouse under these circumstances required obtaining permission, and husbands might see their families only once a week. The slave family included extended kin, such as uncles, aunts, and, most important, grandparents, all of whom took an active role in rearing children.

## Slave Religion and Music

During the 1830s Southern churches embarked on a major missionary effort to convert slaves to Christianity. In proselytizing slaves white ministers stressed the conservative elements of Christian theology, often forbidding slaves from dancing during religious services and reminding them of the passages in the Bible that demanded slaves obey their masters. A popular *Catechism for Colored Persons*, for example, instructed slaves to "count their Masters 'worthy of all honour,' as those whom God has placed over them in the world."

Although slave owners hoped to use religion to instill docility in their slaves, these efforts largely failed. Rather than accept their masters' vision of Christianity, African Americans recast Christianity to suit their own needs as slaves and articulate their hopes. The Old Testament story of Exodus, which told of the flight of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, was particularly popular among slaves. "God was working for their deliverance," a Georgia slave





### 9.17 Plantation Burial

While a slave preacher leads a funeral service, the plantation master and mistress are visible in the woods in between the two trees in the background, a reminder that slaves were never free from the watchful eyes of their masters.

commented, and “would deliver them from bondage as sure as the children of Israel were delivered from Egyptian bondage.” African Americans created covert churches called “brush arbors” or “hush arbors” to practice their version of the faith.

African American slaves also borrowed elements from African religions, creating a distinctive African American religious culture. White observers were perplexed by the “ring shout,” an ecstatic form of worship that mixed elements of African religious practice with Christian beliefs, describing its chanting as “weird” or “droning” and its dance as “wild” and “barbaric.” Yet to the enslaved the ring shout’s rhythmic circle dance involving joined hands, counterclockwise movement to a steady beat, hand clapping, and free-form upper body movements became an important religious ritual.

Slave funeral practices also reflected this fusion of African and Christian rituals. Slaves often scattered broken ceramics over a grave, a practice carried over from African burial practices. A Maryland observer of one funeral noted that the body was interred with a miniature canoe and paddle. The slaves explained that this would allow the spirit to cross the ocean and return to Africa. Because slaves toiled in the fields during the day, their funerals typically took place at night. Torchlight processions to gravesites, accompanied by drumming and other African-

inflected music and chants, appeared eerie to many white observers. Still some white observers, as this painting of a slave preacher leading a funeral service (9.17) shows, overcame their cultural bias and appreciated the sublime beauty of slave burials. Barely discernible in the space between the two trees in the foreground are the plantation master and mistress. The artist’s rendering of the scene provides a visual reminder that slaves were never completely free from the watchful eye of their masters.

**Spirituals**, a distinctive musical art form created by slaves, drew heavily on biblical themes. The figure of Moses and the plight of the ancient Hebrews who were delivered from slavery were two common themes. The River Jordan also figures prominently in slave spirituals. Images of crossing over the great river to freedom in this life or redemption in the next occur as prominent themes as well.

Music played an important role in aspects of slave culture other than religion. Slaves used song as a means to preserve African traditions, help relieve the monotony of work, entertain, or even communicate cryptic messages intended only for other slaves. When slaves “went around singing ‘Steal Away to Jesus,’” a former slave recalled, it not only affirmed the hope of redemption but also often served as practical means of signaling to others that there would “be a religious meeting that night.”

## Resistance and Revolt

Slaves developed a complex range of behaviors to resist the harsh work discipline forced on them. Many preferred to employ subtle tactics to thwart their owners because they minimized the chances for punishment. Slaves feigned illness, broke tools, and slowed their pace of work as means of fighting back against their economic exploitation.

Another means of resistance available to slaves was flight. Typically runaways left only for short periods of time, seeking a brief respite from servitude, or to visit kin and spouses on neighboring plantations. Less frequently slaves sought to gain their freedom by fleeing to free territory in the

“Steal away to Jesus!  
Steal away, steal away home.  
I ain’t got long to stay here.  
My Lord calls me,  
He calls me by the thunder;  
The trumpet sounds  
within my soul,  
I ain’t got long to stay here.”  
Spiritual, “Steal Away to Jesus”

North or in Canada. In the Deep South, some slaves fled to Indian territory or to swamps to escape detection. In a few celebrated cases, slaves devised daring methods of escape.

The most extreme form of resistance was insurrection. In 1831 Nat Turner led the largest slave uprising in American history. A lay preacher Turner had a vision of a battle between “white spirits and blacks spirits” that would commence when the “sun was darkened.” Turner believed that the solar eclipse in 1831 was a divine sign that the time for insurrection was ripe. **Nat Turner’s Rebellion** lasted two days and attracted somewhere between sixty and eighty slaves before authorities were able to subdue the rebels. Before the carnage ended fifty-five whites were killed and as many African Americans. This woodcut from a contemporary account of the rebellion written by a supporter of slavery depicts the rebels unsympathetically, about to attack defenseless women and children, and depicts as heroic the efforts of whites to defend their loved ones (9.18). The bottom of the image shows the militia riding to the rescue of these helpless victims. Many opponents of slavery in the North, however, viewed Nat Turner as a righteous and heroic warrior against the evil of slavery.

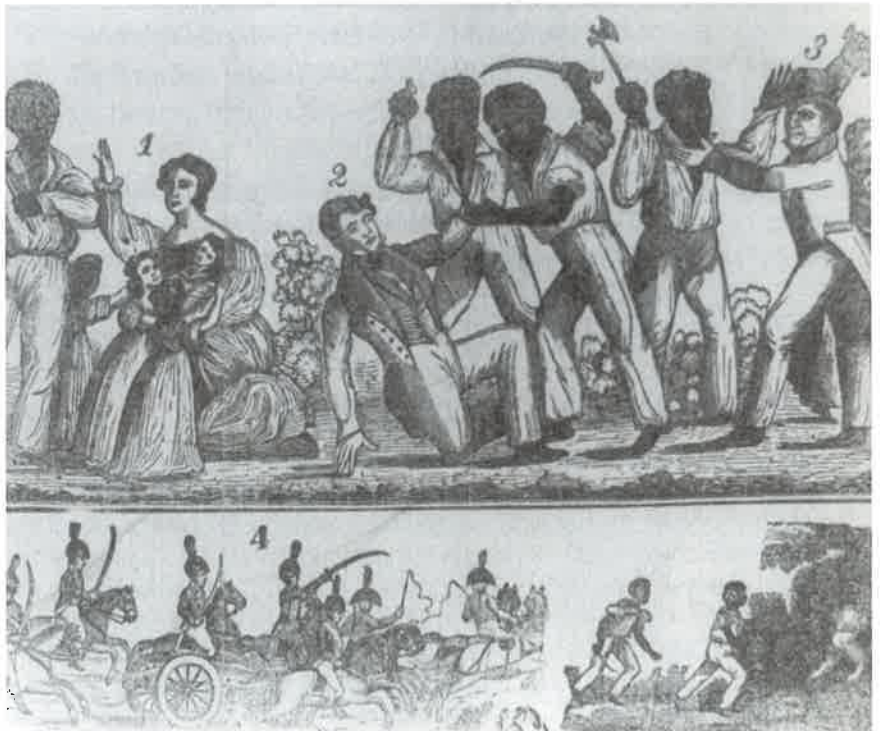
In the aftermath of the Nat Turner Rebellion, Southern states enacted a new series of repressive laws designed to prevent further rebellions. The new laws prevented African Americans from preaching and limited the access of free blacks to firearms. States also strengthened their militia organizations and stiffened penalties for assaults by slaves, making them made capital offenses. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the Virginia legislature even considered abolishing slavery and

debated the issue thoroughly before voting of 73 to 58 against a proposal to end slavery.

## Slavery and the Law

Each Southern state passed its own set of laws, or slave codes, governing the institution of slavery. These laws described the property rights of masters (slaves were categorized somewhere between property and people), the duties slaves owed to their masters, and the punishments for rebellion. Although laws varied from state to state, all slave codes accorded slaves minimal rights. These laws curtailed the movements of slaves, forbidding them to travel without written permission from their masters. The law also did not recognize slave marriages and proscribed teaching slaves to read or write. Slaves had no right to testify in court, and planters served as both judge and jury on their plantations, meting out punishment. On rare occasions a slave successfully obtained a day in court, as in the case where a South Carolina court ruled that a slave could not be tried for the same crime twice, an application of the constitutional prohibition on double jeopardy that was a bedrock of American law. In spite of such modest protections, however, slaves still enjoyed only the slimmest legal protection and remained at the mercy of their masters (see *Choices and Consequences: Conscience or Duty? Judge Ruffin’s Quandary*, page 278).

**9.18 Woodcut Image of Nat Turner’s Rebellion**  
This image reflects the views of Southerners who were horrified by Turner’s uprising.

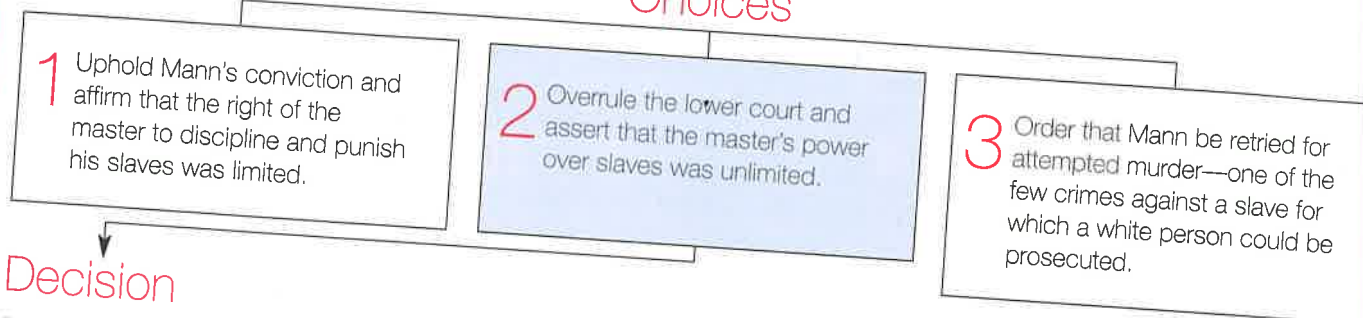


# Choices and Consequences

## CONSCIENCE OR DUTY? JUDGE RUFFIN'S QUANDARY

In 1829 Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin of the North Carolina Supreme Court issued his opinion in *State v. Mann*, a case involving an assault on a slave, Lydia, by John Mann. Lydia's owner, Elizabeth Jones, brought the suit against Mann (slaves could not bring suits) for wounding her slave. Mann had rented Lydia from Jones, which gave him temporary ownership of her. During the time he was her master, he had all the legal authority of her owner, including the right to administer punishment for disobedience. When Mann tried to discipline Lydia, she ran away. Mann then shot and wounded her. A lower court convicted Mann of an assault and battery on Lydia, and Mann then appealed the case to the North Carolina Supreme Court. *State v. Mann* explored legal questions at the heart of slavery. In deciding whether the domination of the master over the slave was complete, Supreme Court Judge Ruffin faced difficult choices.

### Choices



### Decision

Ruffin chose to overrule the lower court and asserted that masters possessed total control of their slaves. Although tempted to sympathize with the plight of slaves and offer them some legal protections, Ruffin argued that the law demanded the denial of such protections. "The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect." To bestow upon slaves basic rights would undermine slavery itself.



Woodcut image of master shooting slave

### Consequences

Within five years, in *State v. Will*, Judge Ruffin's fellow justices partially repudiated his decision. In that case the court accepted that slaves' submission stopped short of yielding their right to defend themselves against excessive force. The case did not dispute Ruffin's major premise that a slave must be totally submissive, but it did reject his other claim that the only means to accomplish this goal was to give the master total power. The court accepted that the master's power did not deprive the slave of a basic natural right of self-defense.

### Continuing Controversies

*What role did ideas of justice play in Judge Ruffin's understanding of the rule of law?*  
 Most modern scholars agree that the decision in *State v. Mann* reflects the fundamentally immoral nature of slavery. The controversy over the decision focuses on a more basic question about law itself. Does law simply reflect the dominant power relations of society? Or, can the law embody ideals of justice or fairness that are not simply a mask to disguise the naked exercise of power? Ruffin's decision reinforced the power of the planter class, and many view it as a vindication of those who believe that the law is a tool that enables the powerful (the masters) to dominate the weak (the slaves). However Ruffin's anguish and the later ruling in *State v. Will* might be seen as proof that law is not simply a tool of the powerful to exploit the weak, but shows that the rule of law does impose constraints on the powerful.

Does the law of slavery support the claim that the law is a tool of the powerful or a constraint on the powerful?

“No one can read this decision, [State v. Mann] so fine and clear in expression, so dignified and solemn in its earnestness, and so dreadful in its results, without feeling at once deep respect for the man and horror for the system.”

Abolitionist HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, (1853)

## Conclusion

The market revolution transformed American life, especially in the North. American agriculture became more efficient, allowing fewer farmers and laborers to produce increasing amounts of food. Improved transportation reduced the cost of transporting raw materials to port cities and industrial centers and manufactured goods throughout the nation. Technological developments such as the steam-powered printing press and the telegraph facilitated an enormous expansion in newspapers, which brought the latest news to Americans and advertisements for an ever-expanding variety of products.

The market revolution also transformed work, promoting the production of goods by workers in factories rather than by artisans toiling in workshops. Several different models of industrial development emerged, ranging from small mill villages in New England to sprawling industrial metropolises such as New York. The metropolises were transformed by mass immigration into multiethnic and multiracial urban centers marked by new

forms of leisure and politics, but also rising rates of crime and disorder that prompted the creation of modern police forces.

At the same time a very different economic and social system developed in the South, one based on an expanding cotton economy that relied on the labor of a growing slave population (nearly four million by 1860). Southern cotton became the nation's top export, supplying the textile factories of Europe as well as the American North. Although most white Southerners did not own slaves, slavery shaped the politics, economy, and culture of the South.

Although slavery varied by region in the South, most slaves lived lives of hardship, deprivation, and abuse. Despite the horrors of slavery, African Americans managed to preserve their idea of family life and develop a thriving culture that provided important resources to cope with the difficulty of their lives. They also developed tactics that allowed them to resist in subtle but effective ways the authority of their masters.



## 1823–1825

### Lowell mill opens

Waltham System at Lowell, Massachusetts, becomes showcase for the new model of industrial production

### Erie Canal opens

One of the great public works projects of the early nineteenth century reduces dramatically the cost of transportation



## 1829

### State v. Mann

Decision affirms the idea that the master's control over the slave is absolute



## 1831

### Nat Turner's Rebellion

Virginia slave leads the bloodiest slave uprising in U.S. history

# CHAPTER REVIEW

## Review Questions

1. What role did technological change play in the improvements in agriculture during the era of the market revolution? What kind of impact on values did such changes foster?
2. What role did the railroad play as a symbol of American progress?
3. How did nineteenth-century ideas about gender roles affect the organization of the Lowell system?
4. How did slavery shape Southern society? In what ways did slavery impact the lives of non-slaveholders in the South?
5. How did slaves modify Christianity to articulate their distinctive religious vision?
6. Why did Judge Ruffin (see *Choices and Consequences: Conscience or Duty, Judge Ruffin's Quandary*) argue that the power of the master must be absolute over the slave?



1834

**First strike at the Lowell mill**  
Mill women's strike at Lowell signals the beginning of a new phase of conflict between labor and capital



1836

**Helen Jewett murdered**  
The sensational murder of Helen Jewett shocks the nation and helps spur a huge increase in newspaper circulation



1838

**The Code of Honor published in South Carolina**  
Etiquette book for Southern politicians who sought to settle matters on the field of honor



1844

**Samuel Morse transmits a telegraphic message from Baltimore to Washington**  
Telegraph provides near instantaneous communication, vastly improving the speed with which news travels

## Key Terms

**market revolution** A set of interrelated developments in agriculture, technology, and industry that led to the creation of a more integrated national economy. Impersonal market forces impelled the maximization of production of agricultural products and manufactured goods. 254

**telegraph** Invention patented by Samuel Morse in 1837 that used electricity to send coded messages over wires, making communication nearly instantaneous. 258

**artisan production** A system of manufacturing goods, built around apprenticeship, that defined the pre-industrial economy. The apprentice learned a trade under the guidance of an artisan who often housed, clothed, and fed the apprentice. 260

**Waltham System** Also known as the mill town model, a system that relied on factories housing all the distinctive steps of cloth production under a single roof. The Waltham System depended on a large labor force housed in company-owned dormitories. 261

**Black Belt** A swath of dark rich soil well suited to cotton agriculture that stretched from Alabama westward, and eventually reached the easternmost part of Texas. 273

**spirituals** Religious songs created by slaves. Spirituals' symbolism drew heavily on biblical themes. 276

**Nat Turner's Rebellion** The 1831 Virginia slave uprising led by Nat Turner shocked many in the South and led to a host of new repressive measures against slaves. 277

**Steve v. Mann** The 1829 North Carolina Supreme Court case that involved a white man's assault on a slave. The case asserted that the domination of the master over the slave was complete. 276

