Learning Outcomes

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

LO¹ Describe social life in the commercial North as it developed between 1830 and 1860.

LO² Describe social life as it developed in the South between 1830 and 1860 as a result of dependence on cotton.
Regionalized identities persisted despite the best efforts of politicians to bridge sectional gaps.

Between 1830 and 1860, American life became increasingly regionalized. Different ways of living emerged in the North, the South, and the West. Work relations were different, communities developed in different ways, and people often thought of themselves in regional terms. “I’m a northerner,” they might say, “and I don’t work for slave wages.” Another might say, “In the West, we operate by a different law.”

Slavery, western expansion, and commercial development were the vital issues that perpetuated regionalized identities, although the transportation revolution bound the West with either the North or the South. These regionalized identities persisted despite the best efforts of politicians to bridge sectional gaps (see Map 12.1).

This chapter describes social life in the North and the South as it developed during the Market Revolution. The next chapter describes life in the West, which had an identity all its own.

LO1 Social Life in the Commercial North

Three forces dramatically altered life in the northern United States in the three decades before the Civil War: (1) the Market Revolution, (2) massive immigration, and (3) urbanization.

The Market Revolution

First, although some protested the Market Revolution (recall Thoreau and others from Chapter 10), most northerners accommodated and even promoted the transitions associated with it. The beginnings of an industrial urban sector, the opening of the farmlands of the West, and the interconnectedness of the different groups living in the North affected the social life of every northerner. For the most part, northerners acclimated themselves to these changes. Railroads crisscrossed the North. Commerce blossomed. The Market Revolution ignited the processes that made the North look like a modern society.

Immigration

The second dramatic change was the massive wave of immigrants that came to the United States between 1830 and 1860. By 1860, about 20 percent of the total population of the North was foreign-born. Most of the immigrants came from Europe, and nearly two-thirds came from just two countries: Ireland and Germany. These immigrants settled...
mostly in the North, creating distinct immigrant neighborhoods. As these immigrant groups became established and stable, they prompted new definitions of what it meant to be an American. These were not descendants of the American Revolution and thus had a different vision of what America meant.

### Urbanization

The third dramatic change to affect the northern states was urbanization. In 1860, the cities still housed a minority of the American population (most Americans were still farmers), but within their borders the dramatic interplay of America’s obvious social divisions played out. Differences between black and white, rich and poor, and native-born and foreign-born all became flashpoints in early-nineteenth-century urban American life. Each of these developments contributed to a unique and tumultuous social life in the antebellum North. And the cities would only continue to grow.

**A stone house typical of those built by the early German and Swiss immigrants to what is today called Pennsylvania Dutch country.**
Life in the Northern Countryside

These events had widespread ramifications for all groups, but life in the North varied depending on whether one lived in the cities or in the countryside.

Communal Values

For the most part, communal values still prevailed in the northern countryside. Farm families gathered regularly to raise barns, participate in politics, and attend church. Social networks were strong. Sewing bees and apple bees brought communities together. Most farming families in the “Old Northwest” of Illinois, western Pennsylvania, and Indiana (areas west of the Appalachians but east of the Mississippi River) found a balance between their roles as consumers and as producers. Some, like the Shakers and the utopians, rejected these impulses, but most northerners adapted to them.

Decreased Isolation

Nevertheless, change did come to the northern countryside. For one, the countryside was less isolated than it had been. Markets sprang up at railroad depots, and mail and news traveled rapidly from one part of the country to the next.

Meanwhile, the transportation revolution communicated new ideas to once-isolated areas. The itinerant ministers of the Second Great Awakening, for example, moved across the country on canals and, later, railroads. The countryside also enjoyed an active lyceum circuit, where clergymen, reformers, Transcendentalists, socialists, feminists, and other provocative speakers would speak. The North opened some public schools and enjoyed a burgeoning newspaper industry as well. The press, though, was heavily partisan, because it was usually financed by political parties. This meant that in almost every town there were at least two papers: one Democrat, one Whig. Meanwhile, the entire North, including the countryside, achieved almost universal literacy in those years. And at the same time, immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia moved into the Old Northwest to continue the farming life they had left behind in Europe.

City Life

City life in the North was changing much more rapidly than life in the country. The cities were growing at a tremendous rate. Between 1830 and 1860, the number of towns with 10,000 or more people quintupled, totaling ninety-three in 1860. There were seven towns in the North with more than 100,000 people. In 1830, there had been just one city that large, New York City, which had just over 200,000 inhabitants. By 1860, more than 814,000 people lived in New York, making it by far the nation’s largest city. The Market Revolution had increased the importance of commercial hubs, making cities singularly important and vibrant.

Immigrants

Immigrants contributed to much of the urban growth. In all, more than 5 million immigrants came to America between 1830 and 1860. The peak period of immigration came in the late 1840s and 1850s, when nearly 1 million Irish came to the United States to escape the potato famine. Many Germans came at this time too, especially in 1848, after a failed revolution in Germany forced many political dissidents to flee. Unlike the Irish, these German immigrants, called the 48ers, were educated and often financially well off.

The immigrants arrived in such numbers that they changed the nature of the cities. For example, more than half of all the inhabitants of New York City were foreign-born in 1855. More than a third of Bostonians were. Within the cities, immigrants usually created enclaves of ethnic neighborhoods, starting their own churches, leisure societies, sports clubs, and charitable organizations.

While most of these new immigrants stayed in the Northeast, some moved to the Midwest. In 1855, for example, more than 60 percent of St. Louis was foreign-born. And many of the 48ers moved to the rural western provinces, where they could farm and where they could vote after just one or two years of residency. These new immigrants largely avoided the South because of its dependence on slave labor, which limited access to jobs.
Racial and Ethnic Identities

With the arrival of these millions of immigrants, many Americans began to consider what it was that made someone an American. One response was to define an American as someone with an English background who was born in the United States. The most ardent supporters of these views formulated a racial and ethnic identity that differentiated the various immigrant groups and proclaimed the superiority of their own group, usually labeled “native Americans.” They chastised the Irish, equating them with black slaves in the South. And they were offended by the German tradition of gathering at beer gardens on Sundays, which these “native Americans” considered a day of worship. The native American movement, sometimes called Nativism, moved into politics and into the social and economic life of America as well. Nativists placed restrictions on what fields of business the new immigrants could enter, where they could live, and where they could find work. The influential temperance movement also contained within it a large amount of anti-Irish and anti-German nativism. This was the era when the term yankee came to have meaningful social significance, differentiating between those whose family lineage predated the Revolution and those who arrived later.

Related to this racial and ethnic stereotyping was a brutal form of anti-Catholicism. The Irish were usually willing to work for lower wages than anyone else, which provoked anti-Irish sentiment from workers who felt threatened by this cheap labor force. Because the Irish were identifiable by their Catholicism, mobs, angry at how the nation was changing, sometimes attacked Catholic churches, convents, and priests. In Boston, where large numbers of Irish had settled, anti-Catholic riots broke out regularly. Public education became more visibly influenced by Protestantism in the 1840s and 1850s, prompting many American Catholics to establish alternative parochial schools.

But identity formation went both ways. Upon their initial arrival, Irish and German immigrants routinely referred to themselves by the town or county from which they came. But after just a short time in America these immigrants began to consciously think of themselves as “Irish” or “German” or “Swedish.” A common language was one feature that bound certain groups together. Religion also helped newcomers feel part of a cohesive group, especially for the Irish. Restricted to certain neighborhoods, immigrant groups developed communities that embraced cultural forms harking back to the homeland. For instance, Milwaukee and St. Louis maintain extensive brewing industries today, a legacy of the German immigrants who settled in these cities during the middle of the nineteenth century. Several of these communities also still have Turnvereine, or turnvereins, gymnasiums founded in the spirit of the German liberation movement that erupted in 1848.

Read a song written by a recent Irish immigrant about his struggle to find a job.

Read a newspaper account of an anti-Catholic riot in Philadelphia.

The immigrants arrived in such numbers that they changed the nature of the cities.
In addition to the formation of racial and ethnic identities, the combination of ethnic enclaves, middle-class professions, and the incredible wealth earned by canal builders and others led to highly visible social divisions. While most of the working class lived in small apartments, wealthy Americans were constructing large mansions. By the 1850s, affluent neighborhoods had access to indoor plumbing and gas lighting. The wealthy moved through the cities via horse-drawn cars, and they built neighborhoods away from industrial hubs. And the rich were getting richer: in 1845, almost 80 percent of New York City's individual wealth was owned by just 4 percent of the population. Poorer people had none of these luxuries and were often forced to live in the least desirable neighborhoods, near stockyards or slaughterhouses.

One result of these increasing economic distinctions was the creation of identities associated with being a member of a specific class. Although never totally distinct from ethnic, racial, and religious divisions, there was a growing commonality in how poor people talked, voted, and fought. Much of the lower-class consciousness developed not in the workplace, but in places of leisure, where workers felt most free. It was in these locations that organizers had success developing the political parties of the working class.

Along with a slowly forming working-class consciousness, the cities also became crucibles of the middle class, made up mostly of managers, desk workers, and educators. This group of educated middlemen and their families cultivated a middle-class identity between wealth and poverty. Their children slept one to a bed, they owned several pieces of large furniture, and their sons often went to college. Women were central to the formation of the middle class, and indeed, one hallmark of a...
middle-class family (in contrast to working-class families) was that its women rarely worked outside the home. As work moved out of the home and into factories and commercial centers, the home became idealized as a haven in a heartless world, and middle-class women were expected to cultivate and maintain this idealized perception. In serving as the moral centerpieces of middle-class society, women became the backbone of reform efforts designed to improve the moral character of the nation. Consequently, teaching became the main profession open to middle-class women. Catharine and Mary Beecher headed up efforts to ensure that middle-class women were prepared to teach middle-class children the proper disciplines.

Leisure

Also during this period, several forms of leisure became commodities to be purchased rather than merely games to play. Although urban Americans still gathered at taverns and competed in physical contests, enterprising merchants developed networks of theaters and professional sports. Boxing, horse racing, track and field, and, in the 1850s, baseball, all evolved into professional sports during this era, attracting large crowds and merits their own pages in the newspapers. In contrast to male-dominated professional sports, theaters provided social spaces for both men and women.

Towns routinely constructed theaters early in their development, featuring plays by Shakespeare and other luminaries. Perhaps the most popular form of entertainment was minstrel shows, featuring white men smeared with burnt cork (to make them look black) who lampooned slave life in the South. The joke was intended to be twofold, making fun of the South for its backward ways and also ridiculing African Americans for being, in the actors’ minds, doltish and childlike. The most famous minstrel show featured an actor portraying a slave doing a silly dance and singing a song about “jumping Jim Crow.” Despite the slow elimination of slavery in the North after the Revolution, northern racism held firm. The minstrel shows ran concurrently with Shakespeare’s plays and other forms of what might today be thought of as high culture. Throughout the 1800s, audience participation was expected at plays, and the interaction between performer and audience made plays a democratic form of entertainment rather than a polished form reserved for the educated elite.

In the private spaces of their homes (and with increased access to indoor gas lighting), Americans also began to read more. The number of newspapers skyrocketed during these years (funded mostly by political parties), and American novelists flourished. Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Fanny Fern were some of the most popular authors. The best-selling book of the period was Harriet Beecher Stowe’s antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; or, *Life Among the Lowly* (1852). Stowe and Fanny Fern were part of the growth of a
“ladies’ literature” in which middle-class women used their leisure time to cultivate what historians have since called a “sentimental culture.” Despite the dismissive title, Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin emerged from the sentimental culture but had far-reaching political ramifications, enlightening people across the country to the conditions of southern slavery. Many of the other works of ladies’ literature were less politically engaged, more often propagating middle-class morality than espousing abolitionist ideology.

Free People of Color

The cities of the North were also home to free people of color, albeit in small numbers. In all, there were about 500,000 free people of color in the United States in 1860, about half of whom lived in northern cities. The remainder lived in border states, especially in and around Baltimore, Maryland. These enclaves were important not so much for provoking nativist opposition (as the Irish did), but because they created lasting institutions that perpetually supported movements for freedom. One institution was the organization of African American freemasons named after its founder, Prince Hall.

The most influential institution for free people of color, though, was the black church. During the Second Great Awakening, a majority of African Americans became Christians. Barred from worshipping in several houses of the Christian religion, black Americans founded the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in the 1790s. By 1816, there were enough branches to merit a national organization, and by 1824 the AME Church had several thousand congregants. More than just places of worship, the churches functioned as schools and community centers. Because white people were unwilling to block church development for fear they would be accused of preventing Christian worship, the churches developed a separate sphere of freedom for black Americans.

In the wake of the development of the black church, several African American voluntary groups appeared, promoting abolition, temperance, and other reform causes. Black social fraternities prospered as well. If free blacks could not successfully conquer white racism, they could create institutions that developed a class of black leaders and an ideology of independence. Leaders such as James Forten and Reverend Henry Highland Garnet became political advocates for the abolition of slavery during these years. And the educated members of this society began referring to themselves as “Colored Americans” rather than “Africans” in order to assert their membership in the American nation. Throughout the 1840s and 1850s, these black Americans swayed between optimism and pessimism about the place of black people in America,
and with the Civil War, their struggle would become central to the nation’s political agenda.

**Conclusion**

In general, most Americans in the North accommodated the Market Revolution. The wealthy got wealthier, and the middle class created a unique and comfortable life for itself. Immigrants poured in, and, although the working class faced brutal working hours, painstaking labor, and few benefits beyond a paycheck, all they had to do was look south to see that they were much better off than the laborers there, a great majority of whom were enslaved and had no hope of freedom. Indeed, it was around the idea of “free labor” that many northerners, diverse as they were, united. All the symbols of the Market Revolution, including railroads, newspapers, the telegraph, and more, were created by “free laborers,” meaning those who were free to work or not to work—in other words, those who were not enslaved. Impoverished as many were, they saw themselves as uniquely distinct from the slave society of the South.

**LO² Social Life in the Cotton South**

Between 1830 and 1860, southerners experienced dramatically different developments than northerners. In every way, cotton became king. It constituted nearly half of the exports of the entire nation, and southerners knew that they could get rich if they could succeed as cotton farmers. But growing cotton required slaves and land, so southerners brought slaves and slavery with them into the southwestern territories of the United States. This ended any potential talk of gradual emancipation during this period. Furthermore, southerners had little need for big cities, and, without jobs to offer, they did not attract immigrants in the same numbers as the North. This was the period when southerners solidified their plantation economy and developed a vehement defense of it—one based on the superiority of the white race.

When we think of the antebellum South, we are prone to think of images culled from the novel and film Gone with the Wind, which portrayed the leisurely lifestyle of a landed and cultured white elite being served by willing and subservient black slaves. But three facts are vital in understanding how the actual prewar South contrasted with this image (see “The reasons why...” box on page 209).

**Southern White Society**

While the North was notable for distinctions between the countryside and the city, there were no similar complexities in southern society, because there were so few cities. White southern society was stratified between yeoman farmers and wealthy planters. A group of landless white people ranked below the farmers (but above slaves), mostly working as laborers on farms or as frontiersmen settling the Southwest. But most white southerners were either wealthy planters or yeoman farmers.

**The Planters**

The planters viewed themselves as paternalistic aristocrats managing preindustrial fiefdoms. They were deeply involved in national and international markets (for instance, the development of the telegraph in 1845 allowed them to monitor cotton prices in England). But they usually preferred to keep the marketplace at a distance. They spent their summers abroad and sent their children to be educated.
in Europe and at the Ivy League colleges in the North. The planters also often entered politics, considering themselves the natural leaders of society. Financially and politically powerful, the planter class fought all attempts to make their society more democratic. It resisted funding public education through taxation and defeated similar attempts to create internal improvements that would have invited more commerce and industry to the South. Content with the society they had created, southern planters resisted change unless it could earn them greater profits.

Yeoman Farmers

Only a tiny minority of white southerners were planters; the majority were yeoman farmers. Yeoman farmers were largely self-sufficient, living with their families on remote farms or in small towns, and missing out on much of the Market Revolution. They were usually forced onto less desirable plots of land, and, most of the time, these farmers used most of their land to plant cotton and the rest to grow crops needed by the household. They used the money earned from cotton to purchase items that could not be grown in southern soil, such as coffee.

Most yeoman farmers remained largely isolated from markets. A few acquired large plots, bought slaves, and became wealthy, but this was rare. Social mobility was limited in the antebellum South, and when it did occur, it mostly pushed people downward. Thus, at some point during their lives, nearly one-quarter of white southerners were landless and thus forced to search for work on someone else’s farm or push west in search of work. With few public schools, most yeoman farmers were also uneducated. (At least 20 percent of white adult southerners could not read.) Consumed by the work of their farms, they remained isolated in their culture, which was centered on family, church, and region.

The Defense of Slavery

No matter what their station in society, nearly all white southerners were advocates of slavery. For the planters, this was an easy decision: slavery, while expensive to maintain, was profitable, and profits and social norms overcame any moral difficulties.
For yeoman farmers and landless white people, the existence of slavery ensured that there was always a class of people below them socially, that there was always one rung farther down the ladder. The presence of slaves kept alive their hopes that maybe one day they too might own slaves and become wealthy.

**Nat Turner**

In the 1830s and 1840s, white southerners developed a more militant defense of slavery. In doing so, they were responding to one of the most violent slave revolts in American history. In 1831, Nat Turner, a Christian preacher, led a group of slaves through the Virginia countryside, brutally murdering sixty white people of both sexes and all ages during a two-day stretch. Turner’s plan was to raise an army of freed slaves and lead an insurrection against the southern white planters. The white response was overwhelming and harsh. White militiamen attacked the group associated with Turner, but also indiscriminately killed slaves not involved in the insurrection. Perhaps more than two hundred slaves were killed in retaliation. Turner was eventually captured and hanged, but not before being interviewed by southern physician Thomas R. Gray, who published the interview as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. The book sold well from its first publication, and it is one of the most haunting tales of American slavery.

### Legal Restrictions

Besides the violent damage done to black bodies, Nat Turner’s insurrection also caused white southerners to pass further laws restricting black freedoms. Many states prohibited slave literacy. Others required all slave meetings to be supervised by whites. Slave behavior was monitored. In 1832, the Virginia legislature developed a plan that would simultaneously emancipate its slaves gradually and then deport them all to Africa. The plan did not pass, and no other open discussion of emancipation ever occurred in the South until the Civil War.

### A Sterner Defense

Beyond punitive and legal ramifications, the reaction to Nat Turner stimulated a change in the way slavery was understood in the South. In this period, southern writers developed a defense of slavery that suggested that slavery was good for both races, because black people were not equipped to take care of themselves and needed white, paternalistic masters to protect them. White slaveholders began to cite biblical references to slavery, suggesting that the institution was somehow sanctioned by God. Thomas R. Dew, George Fitzhugh, and J. D. B. DuBow all advocated the benefits of slavery in widely read publications. Through them, the South’s understanding of slavery transitioned from being a “necessary evil” (as it was conceived during the revolutionary period) to being a “positive good.”

“...The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm; still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains, yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven; with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man, I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.”

—*Thomas R. Gray, The Confessions of Nat Turner*
Slave Society

Certainly no slave would agree with the notion that slavery was a positive good. Life for slaves was arduous, a relentless grind of forced labor in uncertain social conditions, shadowed by the constant threat of abuse. Most slaves were field hands growing sugar, rice, tobacco, and especially cotton. Some were house servants who cooked and cleaned for their masters and helped take care of their children. Some were skilled artisans, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, or ironworkers. A few worked as longshoremen or shipbuilders in port cities such as New Orleans, Louisiana, and Charleston, South Carolina. Yet all were regarded as property, to be bought, sold, or bartered at the whim of their owners.

The law did not protect slave families. Husbands and wives, as well as parents and children, could be separated from each other permanently, without notice. Although there were official limits on the treatment of slaves (the murder or unjustifiable mutilation of slaves was illegal in most states, and state laws set minimum standards for the amount of food, clothing, and shelter that must be provided for slaves), such laws were unenforceable because slaves were prohibited from taking their masters to court.

Despite severely restricting the rights of slaves, many slave masters believed it was in their best interest to treat slaves decently—as long as the slaves remained obedient. Masters were generally profit-minded men who understood that healthy laborers were more productive than those who were sick or abused.

Owners also recognized that healthy slaves were more likely to produce healthy offspring. Slave reproduction mattered to plantation owners because the United States had outlawed participation in the international slave trade in 1808. While Caribbean slaveholders frequently worked slaves to death only to replace them with new imports, this was impossible in the United States. Nevertheless, the fact that slaveholders had an interest in keeping their slaves alive did not mean that slaves were treated humanely in the antebellum South.

Work

The work conditions endured by slaves were as varied as the tasks they performed, but plantation labor was usually organized in one of two ways. The first was the gang system. Under this system, masters organized slaves into groups of twenty to
twenty-five workers, supervised by a white overseer or a black slavedriver. This method of organizing labor was most commonly used on cotton plantations. During the major seasons of cotton cultivation, slaves labored in the fields for up to sixteen hours a day. Although most masters, in keeping with their Christian beliefs, gave their slaves Sundays off and required only a half-day of work on Saturday, working under the gang system was backbreaking.

The second major labor system was the task system. As the name suggests, this system assigned each slave a specific set of tasks to accomplish each day. Once slaves had accomplished these tasks, their time was largely their own. The task system was common on rice plantations, because rice did not require the constant care and toil that cotton did. Slaves working as domestic servants also commonly labored under the task system. Although the task system often gave slaves more freedom, slaveholders frequently set unrealistic expectations for slaves and then punished them for failing to finish their work.

Some slaves did not work in either of these two systems. Instead, they had special arrangements that allowed them an unusual amount of freedom. This was especially common among slaves living in the cities. Although urbanization did not occur as quickly as it had in the North, slave states had a small number of cities, including Baltimore, Richmond, Charleston, Mobile, and New Orleans. Each city housed large slave populations, and, even though urban slaves remained the property of their masters, owners could not exercise complete authority over their slaves in the city. For instance, a skilled slave carpenter needed the freedom to move about the city to reach job sites. Craftsmen, such as blacksmiths or jewelers, often worked independently, sharing a portion of their earnings with their master. As these slaves’ experiences attest, slavery was an adaptable economic institution, working in a variety of agrarian and urban settings.

Quarters

Despite the wide variety of possible slaving conditions, most slaves were owned by planters who lived on large plantations. In these conditions, most slaves lived in slave quarters, defined as a group of cabins set away from the master’s home. The cabins were usually organized around families, who tended personal gardens and raised their own animals. On the largest plantations, slave quarters were significant-sized communities with ample freedom away from the watchful eye of the master.

Community

In slave quarters, slaves created a culture far removed from that dictated by white southerners. From the beginning, Africans came to America with their own cultures, and the experience of slavery did not completely obliterate those cultures. The influence of African cultures was especially strong in the music, dancing, and verbal expressions that slaves used in their everyday lives and religious ceremonies.

Family lay at the center of slave culture. Although masters retained the right to separate spouses, siblings, parents, and children from each other, slaves remained determined to preserve a sense of family. Slave marriages were not legally recognized, but slaves entered marital unions with great joy and celebration. Some marriages were made by obtaining the master’s verbal consent. When possible, slaves maintained traditional nuclear families with a father, a mother, and children living together. Within this family unit, men and women followed traditional gender roles, although they worked side by side, doing the same work in the fields. At home, women usually did the indoor work, such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, and raising children, while men did chores outside the home, like hauling

—I heard them [slaves] get up with a powerful force of spirit, clapping they hands and walking around the place. They’d shout, ‘I got the glory. I got the old time religion in my heart.’

—Mose Hursey, former slave from Red River County, Texas

slavedriver
Supervisor or overseer of slave labor, usually employed on a cotton plantation

task system
Work arrangement under which slaves were assigned a specific set of tasks to accomplish each day; often employed on rice plantations and in domestic service situations
water and gathering wood. Although premarital sex was common in slave quarters, at some point every slave was expected to choose a mate and settle down. Maintaining a two-parent family was not within their control, however. Whenever it was convenient or profitable, many masters sold off married slaves, leaving mates behind. One estimate suggests that, in the four decades preceding the Civil War, around 600,000 slave husbands and wives were separated from each other in this way.

Religion served as another pillar of slave culture. Most slaves arrived in America holding some form of West African religious belief. They usually believed in a Supreme God or Creator, as well as in the existence of a number of lesser gods. During the colonial period most slaves continued to practice their native religions, and slave owners did little to introduce their slaves to Christianity, fearing that if slaves became Christians they would have to be freed.

During the Second Great Awakening, however, most slaves became Christians. And despite the controlling efforts of the masters, slaves formed their own ideas about Christianity, molding their native practices with Christian beliefs. Many slaves also maintained belief in benevolent spirits and in the practice of conjuring or foreseeing the future. Theirs was a jubilant faith, promising deliverance. Religious services in slave quarters included dancing, singing, and clapping. Spirituals were the most significant form of African American music developed during this period. For obvious reasons, the biblical lessons slaves emphasized were not those that commanded obedience and docility, but those that inspired hope for the future. The God they worshiped was one who would redeem the downtrodden and lift them up to heaven on Judgment Day. The master might be rich and powerful in this life, but many slaves took solace in the conviction that they would attain glory in the next one.

**Resistance and Revolt**

Although several slave revolts are well remembered today, it is worth wondering why there were not more of them. Partly the answer has to do with the harsh reaction southern whites had after slave revolts. Still, the low number of slave revolts in American history should not be interpreted as a lack of resistance on the part of American slaves. Most slaves who wanted to buck the system simply found less overt ways of insulting or irritating their masters, especially considering that punishments for revolt were so severe. Slaves broke tools and machinery in order to slow production. Some feigned illness and injury to avoid work. Still others stole goods from their master to sell or trade for other goods. Even in their everyday demeanor, slaves occasionally outsmarted their owners. They could pretend to be ignorant and happy, as whites believed them to be, and use white stereotypes of them as a way to escape work. For example, intelligent slaves often faked confusion to avoid being assigned certain tasks or to explain why work was not completed. They were resisting their condition in a subtle, undetectable manner.

Those who wanted to resist white authority in more dramatic fashion, but did not want to take the chance of organizing widespread revolts, had another option. They ran away. However, few slaves found permanent freedom in this way, especially if they were trying to flee states in the Deep South, defined as Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Southerners organized slave patrols to watch for
runaways and used hunting dogs to track escaped slaves. Slave owners also used newspapers to alert whites across the South to be on the lookout for certain runaways. Because so few southern blacks were free (only about 8 percent), slaves on the run were easily sighted.

Despite the odds, many slaves did flee, and a few found permanent freedom. Some runaways found help from the Underground Railroad, defined as a network of men and women (white and black) who opposed slavery, sheltered runaway slaves, and expedited their journey to freedom. One slave who successfully escaped bondage and settled in the North was Frederick Douglass. After his escape, Douglass became one of the foremost figures in the abolition movement. He wrote about his experiences in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), which traces his personal journey from slavery to freedom.

**And in the end . . .**

By the 1830s, the North and the South had begun to develop divergent societies. The Market Revolution and slavery served as obvious battle lines. And indeed, these two societies were growing increasingly at odds with one another, both politically and culturally. For instance, although most northerners did not favor abolition, they generally agreed that slavery contradicted the way of life that the Market Revolution was bringing about, one that underscored the presence and importance of labor that was free to choose its manner and place of employment. The North was also becoming increasingly urbanized and industrialized, with a large population of landless (often immigrant) workers.

Southerners, meanwhile, had begun to articulate the concept that slavery was not shameful, but essential to the protection and improvement of the black race. The region remained a predominantly agrarian society that depended on slave labor for the cultivation of its most profitable crop, cotton. Many in the South viewed the growth of cities and commerce in the North as a move away from the values on which the country had been founded and toward materialism and greed. Northerners, in turn, tended to view the South as a region stuck in the past, venerating the kind of class system and aristocracy against which the revolutionary patriots had rebelled decades earlier.

In addition, the two regions had widely differing attitudes toward the role of the federal government. The North depended on the high tariffs of the American System to protect its growing manufacturing concerns, and the government used the income from the tariffs to finance the roads, canals, and other internal improvements that northerners needed to bring goods to market. Southerners opposed high tariffs. They did not need tariffs to

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**What else was happening . . .**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Revolutions occur throughout Europe protesting industrial disorder and aristocratic rule. Most fail.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish <em>The Communist Manifesto</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1849</td>
<td>The first safety pin is patented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Beer is first sold in glass bottles. Before that, patrons had their beer poured into a bucket or cup that they brought with them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>The words and music to “Jingle Bells” are registered, under the title “One Horse Open Sleigh”—which didn’t stick.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1857</td>
<td>Elisha Graves Otis demonstrates his passenger safety elevator at the Crystal Palace Exposition in New York by cutting the elevator’s cables as it ascends a 300-foot tower.</td>
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protect their cotton production, so tariffs accomplished nothing for southerners beyond raising the cost of the imported goods they wanted to purchase.

Until the 1830s, most northerners had been content to tolerate slavery outside their own state borders but, as the nation expanded geographically, Americans were repeatedly forced to confront the issue. Should slavery be allowed to move west? Over the next few decades, the question of whether or not slavery would be allowed into new western territories reappeared continually, and conflict over this question would lead to sectional tensions, political conflicts, and eventually, a civil war. What made the issue so pervasive was the continued move to the West, which had a culture and society all its own. This continued move westward is the subject of the next chapter.