Standard 8-4.1: The Antebellum South

Explain the importance of agriculture in antebellum South Carolina, including the plantation system and the impact of the cotton gin on all social classes.

During colonial times, agriculture (farming) was the basis of society in South Carolina. South Carolina’s economy, politics, and social standing revolved around the institution of slavery. Large plantations used the headright method and slave labor to work the fields. By 1860, South Carolina had the highest percentage of slaveholders in the nation, even though few slave owners owned large plantations. Most South Carolinians lived on family or subsistence farms and did not own slaves. The majority of slave owners only owned one to two slaves and often worked in the field beside their slaves.

The cotton gin impacted the lives of slaves and the political rights of white South Carolinians. In 1793, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, which separated the seeds from cotton. As a result, cotton growing turned into South Carolina’s new cash crop. Farmers planted more cotton to increase profits and became even more dependent on slave labor. Since cotton could be grown throughout South Carolina, Upcountry farmers increased their ownership of slaves. Since the Regulator Movement, the Upcountry had wanted equal representation in the state legislature. As a result of increased slave ownership in the Upcountry, Lowcountry elites were less fearful of the loss of political power to the Upcountry. In 1810, voting became equal. An amendment to the state Constitution gave one vote to “every free white man of 21” where they currently lived. The voter did not have to own property, but those that did own property could no longer vote in every district they owned land in. South Carolina was the first state to allow voting by all white males over the age of 21.

The slave population continued to grow in antebellum South Carolina because of cotton, even though slave importation (international slave trade) was outlawed in 1808. Because of the great number of textile mills in the North and in England, planters sold cotton at good prices. Both southern planters and northern mill owners became very wealthy due, either directly or indirectly, to slave labor. Planters were hesitant to find new crops to grow once the soil was depleted, instead they moved to new lands. This need for new lands bolstered the southern argument for the westward expansion of slavery.
Plantation life required self-sustaining communities and depended on the institution of slavery for the production of goods and services needed to support plantations. Slaves did the work in the fields and in the plantation houses. They cleared the land, planted, cultivated, harvested, and processed the crops, working from dawn to dusk six days a week. Women and children worked in the fields alongside the men under the supervision of a driver or overseer. Slaves also had a diverse range of skills and might be hired out by the master who would collect the slave’s wages. Other slaves worked in the owner’s homes, cooking cleaning, doing laundry, and raising the owner’s children.

Slave owners had a large financial investment in their slaves and considered them to be their property. Because they were concerned about their property some owners treated their slaves comparatively well, while others brutalized them. Although the treatment of slaves varied from one owner to another, all slaves were consistently denied their freedom and forced to work long hours. Slaves had little time to tend to their own families or to the plots the owners might allow them to cultivate for their own food. Owners provided minimal food, clothing, and shelter. Since the law did not recognize slave marriages, families were often separated when they were sold because of changes in the slave owner’s family or finances. Owners would sell their slaves for a variety of family and financial reasons. The law forbade teaching a slave to read and write.

Slaves lived in small cabins with dirt floors not far from the plantation owner’s house (the Big House) so they could remain under the watchful eye of the master. Slaves were under the constant watch of their owners to prevent them from running away. If they left the plantation, they had to carry a pass. Patrollers roamed the roads constantly watching for escaping slaves. Runaways were hunted down and punished harshly when they were captured. There were a few slave revolts, however the majority of slaves protested by work slowdowns, secretly destroying the master’s property, and faking illnesses. Although slaves were separated from biological family through sale, they created extended family ties and found some peace in religion. African Americans converted to Christianity and attended white-controlled churches that preached that they should be content with their place in the world. However, slaves held secret prayer meetings and emphasized freedom in their spirituals.

South Carolina society and politics were dominated by the Plantation System. The strict class system in South Carolina was based on slave labor. The planter elite were very wealthy, had high social position, and great political power. The master and mistress of the plantation had many responsibilities. Since most
goods were produced on the plantation, both the master and mistress were responsible for making the plantation work. All business decisions, including marketing crops and managing slaves, were the responsibility of the master. The mistress oversaw the house and cared for sick slaves. Sometimes an overseer was hired to help run the plantation. Southerners justified slavery as a ‘positive good’ because owners cared for their slaves better than factory owners did for their factory workers. The ‘positive good’ argument contributed to a growing divide, sectionalism (loyalty to one region instead of the entire country), between the North and South.

Section Review
1. What was South Carolina’s society based upon?

2. What did South Carolina have the most of by 1860? Were there many large plantations in South Carolina during that time?

3. What type of farms did most South Carolinians live on? Did they own slaves? How many slaves were owned by the typical South Carolinian?

4. What impact did the cotton gin have on South Carolina?

5. How did the expansion of cotton effect the upcountry of South Carolina?

6. What important political change took place in 1810? Who could vote in South Carolina?

7. What impact did outlawing the international slave trade have on South Carolina’s slave population?

8. Who was getting wealthy due to the slave labor?

9. Why do you feel planters were hesitant to grow different types of crops?

10. How did growing cotton support the argument for westward expansion of slavery?

11. How did slave owners view their slaves?

12. What was slave life like? What was forbidden of slaves? How could slaves leave a plantation?

13. What happened to slaves that escaped from plantations?
14. What were three ways slaves protested work on plantations?

15. What were slaves told when they were forced to attend white controlled churches?

16. How did slaves feel about religion and what did they attend outside of white controlled churches?

17. What was the impact of slave labor on South Carolina’s society?

18. Explain the roles of the following people on southern plantations.
   Master-
   Mistress-
   Overseer-

19. How did southerners justify slavery? Why did southerners use this justification for the use of slavery?

20. What does sectionalism mean? What effect did Sectionalism have on the U.S.?