Doc 5.2.I

Whig opponents favored higher taxes, in order to provide government subsidies for banks, canals, roads, and other internal improvements; but they also ran candidates who appealed to the common people.

Regardless of party, Alabama's legislators usually enacted policies supported by slave owners. However, they took care not to anger the mass of yeomen farmers and propertyless whites by favoring too many expensive measures, such as the public works projects favored by the Whigs. "Voting against appropriations is the safe and popular side," one senator declared, and his colleagues agreed; until the 1850s, they rejected most of the bills that would have granted subsidies to railroads, canals, and banks. They also refrained from laying "oppressive" taxes on the people, particularly the poor white majority who owned no slaves. Between 1830 and 1860, the Alabama legislature obtained about 70 percent of the state's revenue from taxes on slaves and land. Another 10 to 15 percent came from levies on carriages, gold watches, and other luxury goods, and on the capital invested in banks, transportation companies, and manufacturing enterprises.

If taxes in Alabama had a democratic thrust, those elsewhere in the South did not. In some states, wealthy planters used their political influence to exempt slave property from taxation. And they shifted the burden of land taxes to backcountry yeomen by taxing farms according to acreage rather than value. Planter-legislators also spared themselves the cost of building fences around their large fields by enacting laws that required yeomen to fence in their livestock. And, during the 1850s, wealthy legislators throughout the South used public funds to subsidize the canals and railroads in which they had invested.

The Paradox of Southern Prosperity

Seen from one perspective, the southern states' subsidies for transportation were unnecessary. If the South had been a separate nation in 1860, its economy would have been the fourth most prosperous in the world, with a per capita income higher than that of France and Germany. As a contributor to a Georgia newspaper argued in the 1850s, it was beside the point to complain about "tariffs, and merchants, and manufacturers" because "the most highly prosperous people now on earth, are to be found in these very [slave] States."

Yet such arguments tell only part of the story. Many white southerners—especially those who were slave owners—did enjoy higher living standards than other peoples of the world, but most African Americans—30 percent of the population—lived in dire and permanent poverty. And the South's standard of living fell behind that of the North. Both in 1840 and in 1860, the per capita wealth of the South was only 80 percent of the national average, while that in the industrializing Northeast was 139 percent of the average.

Influential southerners blamed the shortcomings of their plantation-based economy on outsiders: "Purely agricultural people," intoned planter-politician James Henry Hammond, "have been in all ages the victims of rapacious tyrants grinding them down." And they steadfastly defended their way of life. "We have no cities—we don't want them," boasted former U.S. senator Louis Wigfall of Texas in 1861. "We want no manufactures: we desire no trading, no mechanical or manufacturing classes. . . . As long as we have our rice, our sugar, our tobacco, and our cotton, we can command wealth to purchase all we want." And so wealthy southerners continued to buy land and slaves, a strategy that brought substantial short-run profits but neglected investments in the great technological innovations of the nineteenth century—water- and steam-powered factories, machine tools, steel plows, and crushed-gravel roads, for example—that would have raised the South's productivity and wealth.

Urban growth—the key to prosperity in Europe and the North—occurred mostly in the commercial cities around the periphery of the South: New Orleans, St. Louis, and Baltimore. Factories—often staffed by slave labor—likewise appeared primarily in the Chesapeake, which had a more diverse economy and a surplus of bound workers. Within the Cotton South, wealthy planters invested in railroads but only to open up new lands for commercial farming; when the Western & Atlantic Railroad reached the Georgia upcountry, the cotton crop quickly doubled. Cotton—and agriculture—remained King.

Slavery also deterred European migrants from settling in the South, because they feared competition from bound labor. Their absence deprived the region of hardworking families and of laborers to drain swamps, dig canals, smelt iron, and work on railroads. When entrepreneurs tried to hire slaves for such tasks, planters replied that "a negro's life is too valuable to be risked" at the dangerous work. Other slave owners feared that hiring out would make their slaves too independent. As a planter explained to Frederick Law Olmsted, such workers "had too much liberty . . . and got a habit of roaming about and taking care of themselves."

Thus, despite its increasing size and booming exports, the South remained an economic colony: Great Britain and the North bought its staple crops and provided its manufactures, financial services, and shipping

facilities. In 1860, most southerners—some 84 percent, more than double the percentage in the northern states—still worked in agriculture and southern factories turned out only 10 percent of the nation's manufactured goods. The South's fixation on an "exclusive and exhausting" system of agriculture filled South Carolina textile entrepreneur William Gregg with "dark forebodings." Gregg feared that the combination of cotton and slavery had been to the South

> what the [gold and silver] mines of Mexico were to Spain. It has produced us such an abundant supply of all the luxuries and elegances of life, with so little exertion on our part, that we have become enervated, unfitted for other and more laborious pursuits.

- **How would you explain the large and expanding domestic trade in slaves between 1800 and 1860? What combination of factors produced this result?**
- **By 1860, what different groups made up the South's increasingly complex society? How did these groups interact in the political arena?**

The African American World

By the 1820s, the cultural life of most slaves reflected both the values and customs of their West African ancestors and the language, laws, and religious beliefs of the South's white population. This mix of African and American cultural values persisted for decades because whites discouraged blacks from assimilating and because slaves prized their African heritage.

Evangelical Black Protestantism

The appearance of black Christianity exemplified the synthesis of African and European cultures. Evangelical Protestantism swept over the white South during the Second Great Awakening, from the 1790s to the 1840s. Baptist and Methodist preachers converted thousands of white families and hundreds of enslaved blacks (see Chapter 8). Until that time, African-born blacks, often identifiable by their ritual scars, had maintained the religious practices of their homelands: Some practiced Islam, but the majority relied on African gods and spirits. As late as 1842, Charles C. Jones, a Presbyterian minister, noted that the blacks on his family's plantation in Georgia believed "in second-sight, in apparitions, charms, witchcraft . . . [and other] superstitions brought from Africa." Fearing "the consequences" for their own souls if they withheld "the means of salvation" from African Americans, Jones and other zealous white Protestant preachers and planters set out to convert slaves to Christianity.

Other Protestant crusaders came from the ranks of pious black men and women who were swept from the Chesapeake to the Cotton South by the domestic slave trade and carried the evangelical message of emotional conversion, ritual baptism, and communal spirituality with them. Equally important, these crusaders adapted Protestant doctrines to black needs. Enslaved Christians pointed out that blacks as well as whites were "children of God" and should be dealt with according to the Golden Rule—treat others as you would be treated by them. Moreover, black preachers generally ignored the doctrines of original sin and predestination as well as biblical passages that encouraged unthinking obedience to authority. A white minister in Liberty County, Georgia, reported that when he urged slaves to obey their masters, "one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off" (see Reading American Pictures, "Slave Life on a Cotton Plantation," p. 381).

Black Protestantism

Indeed, some African American converts envisioned the deity as the Old Testament warrior who had liberated the Jews and so would also liberate them. Inspired by a vision of Christ, Nat Turner led his bloody rebellion against slavery in Virginia (see Chapter 11). Other black Christians saw themselves as Chosen People: "de people dat is born of God." Charles Davenport, a Mississippi slave, recalled black preachers' "exhort[ing] us dat us was de chillun o' Israel in de wilderness an' de Lawd done sont us to take dis lan' o' milk an' honey."

As successive generations of slaves worshipped a European god, they expressed their Christianity in distinctively African ways. The thousands of African Americans who joined the Methodist Church respected its ban on profane dancing but praised the Lord in the African-derived "ring shout." Minister Henry George Spaulding explained the "religious dance of the Negroes" this way:

> Three or four, standing still, clapping their hands and beating time with their feet, commence singing in unison one of the peculiar shout melodies, while the others walk around in a ring, in single file, joining also in the song.

The songs themselves were usually collective creations, devised spontaneously from bits of old hymns and tunes. Recalled an ex-slave: