Chapter 14 Lesson 4

People of the South

ESSENTIAL QUESTION How do people adapt to their environment?

Enslaved Africans faced many hardships but were able to establish family lives, religious beliefs, and a distinct culture.

Southern Agriculture

How were Southern farms different from Southern plantations?

Slavery was at the heart of the Southern economy, but that did not mean that every white person owned large numbers of enslaved people. White society in the South was complex and had many levels. Most white Southerners fit into one of four categories: yeomen, tenant farmer, rural poor, or plantation owner.

Small Farmers and the Rural Poor

Most white people in the South were yeomen (YOH• muhn), farmers who generally owned small farms of 50 to 200 acres (20–81 ha). These yeomen lived mostly in the Upper South and in the hilly areas of the Deep South. They did not practice plantation-style agriculture. They grew crops to use themselves and to trade with local merchants. Yeomen generally owned few or no enslaved African Americans.

Another group of Southern whites worked as tenant farmers. They rented land from property owners.

These classes of white Southerners made up the majority of the white population of the South. They lived in simple homes—cottages or log cabins. The poorest of these groups lived in crude cabins.

These rural poor were often stubborn and independent. Though they were looked down upon by many, they were proud of their ability to provide for their families.

A few free African Americans also held enslaved workers. Some free African Americans bought members of their own families to free them, although others worked their enslaved workers in the same manner as white Southern planters.

Plantation Owners

The larger plantations covered several thousand acres. In addition to the land they owned, plantation owners measured their wealth by the number of enslaved people they had. In 1860 only about 4 percent of slaveholders held 20 or more enslaved workers.

Earning profit was the main goal for owners of large plantations. To make a profit, they needed to bring in more money than they spent to run their plantations.

Large plantations had fixed costs. These are operating costs that remain much the same year after year. For example, the cost of housing and feeding workers is a fixed cost. There is no easy way to reduce a fixed cost.

On the other hand, the price of cotton changed from season to season. A change in price often meant the difference between a successful year for a plantation and a bad one.

Plantation owners—who were almost always men—traveled often in order to ensure fair dealings with traders. Their wives often led difficult and lonely lives. They took charge of their households and supervised the buildings. They watched over the enslaved domestic workers and sometimes tended to them when they became ill. Women also often kept the plantation's financial records.

Keeping a plantation running involved many tasks. Some enslaved people cleaned the house, cooked, did laundry and sewing, and served meals. Others were trained as blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, or weavers. Still others tended livestock. Most enslaved African Americans, however, were field hands. They worked from sunrise to sunset to plant, tend, and harvest crops. An overseer (OH • vuhr • see • uhr), or plantation manager, supervised them.

Identifying What group made up the largest number of whites in the South?

The Lives of Enslaved People

How did enslaved African Americans try to cope with their lack of freedom?

The fate of most enslaved African Americans was hardship and misery. They worked hard, earned no money, and had little hope of freedom. They lived with the threat that a slaveholder could sell them or members of their family without warning. In the face of these brutal conditions, enslaved African Americans tried to build stability. They kept up their family lives as best they could. They developed a culture all their own that blended African and American elements. They came up with clever ways to resist slavery.

African American Family Life

The law did not recognize slave marriages. Still, enslaved people did marry and raise families, which provided comfort and support. Uncertainty and danger, however, were always present. There were no laws or customs that would stop a slaveholder from breaking a family apart. If a slaveholder chose to—or if the slaveholder died—families could be and often were separated.

In the face of this threat, enslaved people set up a network of relatives and friends. If an owner sold a father or mother, an aunt, an uncle, or a close friend stepped in to raise the children left behind. These networks were a source of strength in the lives of enslaved people. Large, close-knit extended families became an important part of African American culture.

African American Culture

In 1808 Congress banned the import of slaves. Slavery remained legal, but traders could no longer purchase enslaved people from other countries. Some illegal slave trading continued, but by 1860, almost all the enslaved people in the South had been born there.

Though most enslaved people were born in the United States, they tried to preserve African customs. They passed traditional African folk stories on to their children. They performed African music and dance.

Enslaved people also drew on African rhythms to create musical forms that were uniquely American. One form was the work song, or field holler. A worker led a rhythmic call-and-response song, which sometimes included shouts and moans. The beat set the tempo for their work in the fields.

African American Religion

Many enslaved African Americans followed traditional African religious beliefs and practices. Others, however, accepted the Christian religion that was dominant in the United States. Christianity became for enslaved people a religion of hope and resistance. Enslaved people prayed for their freedom. They expressed their beliefs in spirituals, African American religious folk songs. The spiritual below, for example, refers to the biblical story of Daniel, whom God saved from being eaten by lions:

"Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel

Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel

An' why not-a every man."

—from Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel

Spirituals helped enslaved people express joy—but also sadness about their suffering here on Earth. Enslaved people also used spirituals as a way to communicate secretly among themselves.

Slave Codes

The slave codes, sometimes called black codes or Negro Laws, were laws in the Southern states that controlled enslaved people. Such laws had existed since colonial times.

One purpose of the codes was to prevent what white Southerners dreaded most—a slave rebellion. For this reason, slave codes prohibited enslaved people from gathering in large groups. The codes also required enslaved people to have written passes before leaving the slaveholder's property.

The slave codes made teaching enslaved people to read or write a crime. White Southerners feared that an educated enslaved person might start a revolt. They thought an enslaved person who could not read and write was less likely to rebel.

Fighting Back

Enslaved African Americans did sometimes rebel openly against their owners. One who did was Nat Turner.

Turner, who had taught himself to read and write, was a popular religious leader among the enslaved people in his area. In 1831 he led a group of followers on a brief, violent rampage in Southhampton County, Virginia. Turner and his followers killed at least 55 whites.

Two months after the uprising began, authorities captured and hanged Turner. Still, his rebellion terrified white Southerners. White mobs killed dozens of African Americans, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion. Whites also passed more severe slave codes, making life under slavery even harsher.

Armed revolts such as Turner's were rare because enslaved African Americans realized they had little chance of winning. For the most part, enslaved people resisted slavery by working slowly or by pretending to be ill. Sometimes they might set fire to a plantation building or break tools. Such acts helped enslaved African Americans cope with their lack of freedom. Even if they were not free, they could strike back at the slaveholders.

Escaping Slavery

Enslaved people also resisted by running away from their owners. Often their goal was to find relatives on other plantations. Sometimes they left to escape punishment.

Less often, enslaved African Americans tried to run away to freedom in the North. Getting to the North was very difficult. Among those who succeeded were Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, two African American leaders.

Most who succeeded escaped from the Upper South. A runaway might receive aid from the Underground Railroad, a network of "safe houses" owned by people opposed to slavery.

Moses Grandy, who did escape, spoke about the hardships runaways faced:

"They hide themselves during the day in the woods and swamps; at night they travel. . . . In these dangerous journeys they are guided by the north-star, for they only know that the land of freedom is in the north."

—from Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy

The big danger, of course, was capture. Most runaways were caught and returned to their owners. The owners punished them severely, usually by whipping.

Explaining How did the African American spirituals develop?

Southern Cities

What changes did urbanization introduce in the South by the mid-1800s?

Though mostly agricultural, the South had several large cities by the mid-1800s, including Baltimore and New Orleans. The 10 largest cities in the South were either seaports or river ports. Cities located where the region's few railroads crossed paths also began to grow. These included Chattanooga, Montgomery, and Atlanta.

Free African Americans formed their own communities in Southern cities. They practiced trades and founded churches and institutions, yet their rights were limited. Most states did not allow them to move from state to state. Free African Americans did not share equally in economic and political life.

In the early 1800s, there were no statewide public school systems in the South. People who could afford to do so sent their children to private schools. By the mid-1800s, however, education was growing. North Carolina and Kentucky set up and ran public schools.

The South lagged behind other parts of the country in literacy (LIH • tuh • ruh • see), the ability to read and write. One reason was that the South was thinly populated. A school would have to serve a wide area, and many families were unwilling or unable to send children great distances to school. Many Southerners also believed education was a private matter.

Identifying What factors made possible the growth of the few Southern cities?