# Society in Antebellum America

### The Market Economy and the Transportation Revolution

While the political pot was boiling away, transforming the very definition of democracy and liberty, society and the economy were also melting away old traditions and forging new parts.

Perhaps most importantly, a **market economy**began to form, creating, for the first time, a **national economy.**Remember that before, Joe American generally lived on a subsistence farm, growing his own food and building his own house while his wife made his clothes. He paid on credit or with stuff like potatoes. In a market economy, however, people trade their goods (or their own labor) for cold, hard cash—which they then use to go buy, rather than make, the stuff they need.

Why did this shift suddenly occur? Most of all, because of a **transportation revolution.**Remember how we said it took 50 days to travel from Cincinnati to New York in 1817? By 1850, it only took eight.That's because America suddenly started building tons of transportation networks: railroads, steamboats, canals, national roads. Suddenly, Joe American was connected not only to his own, local market, but also to the markets of far-away cities—even all the way to Europe.

Plus, new inventions like the **spinning jenny,**the **cotton gin,**the **steel plow,**the **power loom,**and**interchangeable parts**made it easier and faster to produce goods. Suddenly, you could create your goods so fast that you had more than your local market could use. Good thing, then, that a railroad by your house helped you ship the extra to New York.

This was great news for the union, because what unifies a country more than one, integrated, interdependent economy? Problem was, though, that although there was a nationaleconomy, it was created by totally differentregionaleconomies. The West, North, and South started to be torn apart by even more differences than ever before.

### The Industrial North

The North started to become an industrial powerhouse. Remember how the War of 1812 had started domestic manufacturing? It took off in the antebellum period. Factories began dotting cities, and cities themselves began to grow at an extremely rapid pace.

The main industry was textiles. Before, the US had relied mostly on British textiles, but with the invention of the**power loom**, suddenly a group of women could be put in a factory to produce tons of finished textiles in record time. So, ironically, some of the first factory workers were women.

The most famous industry to use women's work was the Lowell mill. In the **Lowell System,**women workers were given housing in boarding houses (complete with chaperones to carefully guard their virtue and make sure no naughty men tried to sneak in), fun social events, and good wages. The idea was to lure women who might be a little afraid of leaving home, promising them good care and fun times. [Don't they look bold](http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_CvDCiEFbNy8/S1I8EiaTGzI/AAAAAAAAM4I/Bx-43c2LCLA/s400/Tintype.+University+of+Massachusettes+at+Lowell.jpg)?

This system ended with the huge waves of immigrants that started pouring in during the 1840s. The **Irish Potato Famine**had devastated Ireland, and turmoil in Germany was booting millions of farmers off their land. Desperate immigrants flooded America, settling especially in urban areas like New York.

Americans hatedthem, partly because they were foreign, alien, and often Catholic, but mostly because they were willing to work for obscenely low wages. With so many immigrants willing to work backbreaking hours for pennies, employers stopped caring about giving them benefits and treating them well, and started down the long road of worker abuse.

Americans calling themselves **nativists**started bullying immigrants: in the streets, in gangs, and then in political parties like the **Know-Nothing Party.**Why take on a name that meant "I'm Stupid"? Because they were a secret organization—when anyone asked about them, they would say, "I know nothing." Yeah—they didn't stay secret for long.

Although so many people were becoming poorer, many others were getting rich—richer than anyone had imagined a person could be only a few decades before. All sorts of new jobs arose: employers at factories, brokers who bought raw materials and sold them to manufacturers, retailers who sold the finished goods, and bankers who stored all the gold that was amassing and lent more out to anyone who had a Grand Idea for the Next Big Thing.

### King Cotton in the South

In 1793, a poor guy named Eli Whitney invented the **cotton gin.**He's a "poor guy" because whenever historians want to point to the cause of intensified slavery in the South, they choose the cotton gin. It made producing cotton so much easier and faster than before, that it literally transformedthe South. America started producing ¾ of the world's cotton.

As a result, the slave population increased by about four timesin 50 years. Suddenly, something that had been called the "peculiar institution" became the "awesome-institution-that-we-absolutely-need-and-is-better-than-anything-else." Southerners started defending it like it was their lifeblood—and, economically, it was.

Preachers began insisting that the Bible approved of slavery. Pro-slavery politicians declared it made for a more democratic nation, stronger white men, and more virtuous white women. Little kids in school were told that slaves were like little children, and needed big, strong white people to guide them. Even big planters began to talk about their plantations as "my family, black and white."

As for slaves themselves, their families were torn about, their women sexually abused, and their bodies quite literally [ripped into](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/Cicatrices_de_flagellation_sur_un_esclave.jpg) if they dared to disobey. Many found solace in close-knit communities (the end of the slave trade in 1808 meant that Africans became steadily "Americanized") and the church. Others also found ways to rebel with **passive resistance**—acting stupid, disobeying orders, breaking tools, working slowly, and generally making life extremely annoying for their masters. Historians call this kind of behavior the "**weapons of the weak."**

Southern society became even more aristocratic and unequal than ever before. At the polar opposite end from the slaves were the "big planters," the elite at the tip-top of society. They owned hundreds of slaves and huge swathes of land. Then came the smaller farmers, with 20 or fewer slaves. Then the yeomen farmers who others called "white trash," owned no slaves, and had tiny farms to feed their families. Finally, the lowest of the whites owned no land, but hired out for work.

In the social hierarchy, blacks were beneath all whites, even the poorest. Above the slaves were the free blacks, usually descendants of slaves who had been freed. Some southern states didn't even allow them to stay—once you were freed, you had to high tail it right out. Others let them stay, but forced on them the black codes, laws that said they couldn't own guns, drink alcohol, vote, or even gather in big groups. Remember Nat Turner's Rebellion? Southerners remembered it like it was yesterday—and they were never going to let it happen again.

### The West

For people who hated the northern cities with their stinking (literally—human waste was often piled in corners against walls) cities and who couldn't find land or work in the South, there was another option: the vast lands of the West.

The best thing about the West was that it was always expanding. The Louisiana Purchase extended the frontier line hugely,and then the Mexican government invited Americans to help settle Texas, and then gold was found in California.

The government roundly applauded settlement, and sold off land at extremely cheap rates. Some people, called**squatters,**didn't even bother to buy the land. They bundled into covered wagons, built a house out west, and said "This land is mine by right of my squattingon it with my house and farm and family."

There were all kinds of way to make money in the west. You could farm, for one thing—and so many people did that the Midwest came to be called "**The Nation's Bread-Basket**." You could also cattle ranch, hunt and trade furs, and mine. Sure, you had to struggle against totally crazy weather (cyclones, plagues of locusts, and other weather freaks straight out of the Bible) and Native Americans, but the more people who came out, the more secure you got.

A lotof people kept coming. Westward expansion, people began saying, was America's "**manifest destiny**." That phrase, first coined by a journalist, referred to America's "exceptionalism." Lots of people saw their country as a fantastic place of progress, democracy, and wealth—and many believed these were the fruits of the labor of the**Anglo-Saxon**, white race. They felt it was their duty—to God, mankind, other races, and the earth itself—to spread their civilization over all the corners of the earth. Tired of the East Coast? Want to make a different? Go west, young man.

### Women

A lot of you ladies out there (and, we hope, interested gentlemen) may be wondering when this "HIS-story" will turn to "HER-story." Good for you: the AP certainly has questions on gender.

One thing we can generalize about women in this time period: the **cult of domesticity**began to spread throughout the nation. By this term, historians aren't actually talking about a "cult" (so put away the Reeboks and Kool-Aid), but a cultural phenomenon. The place of women in American society had drastically changed from the time before the Revolution.

In the colonial period, women were second-class citizens. They had no other option than marriage, and very few rights even when they weremarried. When the Revolution rolled around, though, a whole lot changed.

Firstly, women started becoming more politically active. They had attended revolutionary meetings, joined the Daughters of Liberty, and pioneered homespun movements. Then, when the Revolution was won, America had started taking on the ideology of **Republican Motherhood.**The idea was that a democratic republic needed virtuous, educated citizens if it was going to run smoothly. Mothers needed to be educated, intelligent, politically conscious (if not active) citizens who would teach their little Johnnies and Timmies to be good little citizens. The role of mothers in creatingthis kind of citizenry gave them a new, elevated status.

In the antebellum period, this evolved a little. What with the new market economy and gradual industrialization, lots of men started leaving the home and working outside. Sure, at first some women worked in factories too, like Lowell Mills. Increasingly, however, women's place was seen at home.She should stay there and make the house a happy little haven for her husband to come home to after a rough, tough tumble in the scary "outside world" of politics and work. Sure, she should still be educated and intelligent in order to best raise her kids, but her place was increasingly domestic,and outside work was more and more frowned on. This idea of Women's "Home Haven" versus men's "Outside Scary World" is called the **separate spheres**ideology.

Of course, it only wasn't do-ablefor a lot of women, especially poor and immigrant women. Those ladies neededto work to help support their families. Still, **this "cult of domesticity"** became popular because the **middle class**in the antebellum period started becoming. They were not only bigger, but louder as well:they felt that they, being a kind of Goldilocks class (not-too-poor and not-too-rich but juuuuust right) were the real Americans. Their culture—called **Victorian culture**—which talked a lot about stay-at-home-moms, working dads, virtue, self-control, and temperance, became the mainstream.

Were these ladies just cute, tightly corseted, softly-spoken mothers who stayed at home knitting and baking pies? No way. Although culturally prevented from working outside the home, and although legally prevented from participating in politics, women still found a major way to participate: reform and religion.