

The north and the south – "antebellum" differences



When contrasting the North and South in the antebellum period, you must consider the differences in major areas: climate, geography, population, cities, economy, culture and transportation. The South has a climate that is generally warm and sunny, with long, hot, humid summers, and mild winters, with heavy rainfall. Additionally, the soil is plentiful, rich, and full of nutrients. These traits make the Southern climate ideal for large-scale agriculture and the ability to grow many different crops in large amounts. Geographically, the Southeast is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico, and had many broad, slow moving, navigable rivers. Cities developed along these rivers and as ports (for ships) along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts.

The Atlantic Coastal Plain is an area of fertile, rich soil and swamps. To the west of the Atlantic Coast Plain is the Piedmont, another area of good farmland and forests. The population of the South was made up of Europeans (mostly of English and Scotch-Irish descent) and enslaved Africans. By 1860, there were 4 million slaves in the American South, making the United States the largest slave-holding republic in the world. To put it another way, the total population of the South reached 12 million, one third of whom were slaves. The South was an overwhelmingly agricultural region, made up mostly of farmers. Most farmers lived in the backcountry (away from large towns or cities) on medium sized farms, while a small number of planters ran large farms, or plantations. Only one fourth of the Southern population owned slaves, and most of these were the planters who owned only a small number of slaves. The rest of the population was made up of white independent (non-slaveholding) farmers, tenant farmers (who rented land and paid the landowners in crops or money), laborers, or frontier families

who moved to the region for inexpensive land. As noted, most Southerners lived on farms scattered along the coastal plains (near the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico), as well as small farmers in the backcountry. Since the economy was based on agriculture, industries and towns developed at a slower pace than in the North. There were many small towns along the banks of rivers and the coasts. Only a few large cities developed as trading centers in the South (New Orleans, for example), but these were few in number, and smaller than in the North. Plantations were so large and so distant from each other that they became almost self sufficient, like small towns.

Since the Southern economy was based on agriculture, crops such as cotton, tobacco, rice, sugarcane, and indigo (a type of dye) were grown in great quantities. These crops were known as "cash crops" ones that were raised not to be used by the farmer, but to be sold or exported for a profit. They were raised in the greatest numbers on large farms, known as plantations, which were supported by slave labor. After Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1793, cotton took over as "king" of the southern economy. The cotton gin was a machine that separated the seed from the cotton fiber much faster than it could be done by hand. This made the value of each individual slave increase, and made slavery more profitable. To clear land and grow cotton, Southerners started using slave labor more and more. Slavery was essential for the prosperity of the Southern economy.

Thus, both slavery and the cotton industry began to develop rapidly, spreading over many parts of the South. In 1793, Southern farmers produced about 10,000 bales of cotton, but by 1835, thanks to the cotton gin and the increased use of slaves, they were growing over 1,000,000 bales. By the

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mid-1800s, cotton exports made up two thirds of the total value of American exports. Since the South had little manufacturing itself, the Southerners wanted cheap imports, or goods, from overseas. Likewise, since they exported most of their cotton and tobacco overseas themselves, most Southerners believed that high tariffs, or taxes on imported goods, would scare away the foreign markets that bought their crops. For these reasons the South was against tariffs.

Culture and Life in the South revolved around the small, wealthy class of planter and the agricultural system they controlled. Planters were the aristocracy, or upper-class, of the South. They lived like country gentleman of England and ran the political and economic life of the South. Plantations were far apart and developed their own communities, much like small towns. Recreational activities included such things as fox hunting, dancing, horse racing, and watching dog or chicken fights. There were few schools or churches in the South, since neither education nor religion were very organized. The best educated were often the sons of rich planters. On plantations there were sometimes small schools, and often planters hired private tutors to each their children until they were sent off to private schools. Small farmers had little or no education.

Methods of long-distance transports, such as steamships and railroads, affected the South because products could more easily be sold to more distant markets by using them. By 1860 about 10, 000 miles of railroad spread across the Southern states. While this was enough to sell Southern crops more easily, it still was not nearly as vast a railroad system as the

North. Meanwhile, hundreds of steamboats moved Southern crops to the North and to European markets.

When contrasting the North and South in the antebellum period, you must consider the differences in major areas: climate, geography, population, cities, economy, culture and transportation. The North has a climate of warm summers and snowy cold winters. From a geographic standpoint, the terrain is rocky, hilly, making the soil poor for farming. These conditions along with a short growing season made farming difficult. As a result, most Northern farms were "subsistence" farms, or personal farms where farmers grew food or supplies for themselves or their families. Most of the forest was made up of trees that would be used for shipbuilding. There are many sheltered bays and inlets on the Atlantic coast. Settlers found that ships could sail along wide rivers into many of these bays. Most of the rivers are fast, shallow, and hard to navigate. At a certain point, called the Fall Line—a plateau over which eastward-flowing rivers fell onto the western plains—the many waterfalls of most rivers made them no longer navigable. At the Fall Line many ships dropped their cargo. Cities, which served as trading centers, grew up at these points. Soon people realized that the waterfalls were a cheap source of energy, and the water's power began to be used to run factories.

The period between 1800 and 1860 brought rapid population growth throughout the United States. In the North, the overall population rose from about 5 million people to 31 million during these 60 years. Part of this increase was due to massive immigration. Between 1830 and 1850 along, over 2 million Irish, German and other northern Europeans arrived in the

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United States. Most of them settled in the North, where for many of them, it was easy to get a job. Also, unlike the South, where slaves made up almost 1/3 of the total population, most Northern states were "free states" that had not legally allowed the practice of slavery for years.

Cities in the North thrived as centers of business. They were set up along the Atlantic coast and served as centers of trade between the North and European nations. They were centers of manufacturing of textiles (cloth goods) and other products. Throughout the 1800s, many people from rural New England moved to the cities looking for employment opportunities. In 1800, about 5 percent of the population lived in cities, but by 1850, nearly 15 percent did. Increased trade and manufacturing drew many laborers to towns to work. As a result, however, cities were often crowded and dirty. Streets were narrow and unclean. Harbors for boats were not secured, and were poorly kept. Without public sanitation, many city dwellers poured waste or garbage into the streets. And without adequate police forces, crime rates grew. Not until after 1830's were harbors and streets improved, sanitation systems were started, and police forces were created. Public services such as education began to take root. Northern cities became important centers of art, culture, and education. Most cities printed newspapers and books and provided many forms of recreation, such as dancing, card playing, and theater. The Northern economy was based on many different industries, including shipping, cloth textiles, lumber, furs, and mining. The majority of people who lived on small farms found that much of the land was suited for subsistence farming—raising food crops and livestock for family use—rather than producing goods to export, or send to other countries.

Northerners stated to use their "ingenuity" to manufacture all kinds of goods. For instance, the mills of Lowell, MA, used new technologies alongside new methods of production to increase the amount of wools and textiles they could produce. In addition, women first earned the opportunity to work outside of the home through these new mills and factories. With the use of waterpower and coal for steam plants, manufacturing developed quickly. Items such as textiles, iron, and ships were manufactured in great quantities. These goods were traded for foreign products, transported to and from all continents by trading ships. To protect its industries from foreign competition, the North favored high tariffs, or taxes on goods coming in from other countries. If taxes on foreign goods were higher, they would cost more when sold in the United States. As a result, U. S. manufacturers could compete with cheaper prices of goods from overseas. The growth of trade, manufacturing and transportation brought many changes to cities in the North. Cities took on an increasingly important role in determining the culture of the North. Unlike the South, Northern cities developed free of slavery, and allowed many opportunities for free African Americans. Merchants, manufacturers, wage earners, and new business owners also brought new ideas to the North. The majority of Northerners were Protestant Christians. Villages became strong centers of community activities. Both religion and education were organized in towns and cities in a way that the South had failed to do. Most towns had both schools and churches. Public education grew in the North, as well, after the 1830's. More and more young men attended public schools. Still, colleges or universities were reserved mostly for the wealthy.

During the first half of the 1800's, transportation vastly improved and the size of the United States more than doubled. By 1860 there were over 88,000 miles of surfaced (or paved) roads. Canals, mostly built in the North, were a cheap source of transportation. The Erie Canal was clearly a success for New York commercial activities. Many other cities began to follow suit and within a decade a system of over 3,000 canals provided water transportation between the Eastern seaboard and rivers in the West. Not long after the first railroad were laid, and by 1850, 30,000 miles of tracks connected distant parts of the United States. Most of the new rail lines were in the North.