

Background Information for the Time Period

The 1850s

A DECADE THAT HELD OUT THE PROMISE OF BRINGING THE COUNTRY TOGETHER AS THE NORTH AND SOUTH REACHED THE POINT WHERE CIVIL STRIFE ENSUED.

In the 1850s the United States was still a land of hope and promise. Most Americans were living well and comfortably, better than their parents before them and with the expectation that if life was good for them, it would be even better for their children. In 1850 the nation was mostly rural, and while the growth of cities was steady and progressively continuous, farms, small towns, and villages dominated the demographics. The production of agricultural products was still worth more than the total output of the nation's factories and industries. There was an obvious energy throughout the nation, a palpable characteristic of what the American people had become and that would, in the short space of two decades, change the United States into the nation it is today. Many Americans of that generation would look back on this time with a degree of nostalgia, as if it were a

"Golden Age," a time of peace and prosperity when everyone felt a serene contentment. The days were perceived as an idyll that others could only envy and wish for themselves. Yet this feeling of exhilaration could not contain the unraveling of this momentum as the United States was becoming a nation that was divided by two separate and conflicting societies on a collision course.

Slavery was one of the factors that led to division between the North and the South. During the colonial era, slavery existed everywhere, but it was the South that became dependent on the system. Southerners needed cheap labor to work the tobacco, rice, and indigo plantations. In the North, especially during the years following independence, slavery gradually died out. Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin (cotton engine), a machine that could flawlessly separate the short fibers from the seeds, reinvigorated the agricultural economy and the slave system in the Southern states. Cotton became the major cash crop of the South. In 1800 the United States exported cotton valued at \$5 million or 7% of the nation's exports. By 1810 cotton exports were valued at \$15 million and in 1840, \$63 million. By 1860 cotton would be 57% of the total exports of the United States with a value of \$191 million. In the South "Cotton was King," and it remained a static agricultural region where slavery became an institutionalized way of life.

The North was diametrically a region of growing cities and industries. Throughout the antebellum era, an industrial base was developing. Immigrants coming to the United States by the tens of thousands came to the North or else they headed out into the western territories. The Northern states were also rural and agricultural but with small holdings that relied on free labor.

Many Northerners began to take issue with slavery, seeing it as a degrading treatment of other human beings. Abolitionists throughout the free states openly condemned the Southern states for their "peculiar institution," and as the criticism increased, so too did the South's determination to keep to its way of life. Southerners always feared that the day would come when the North would dominate politics and enact legislation that would abolish slavery and destroy their economy. It was easy for the abolitionists to speak out against slavery, but they did little to provide any solutions.