Chapter 12

**[[Big Idea:** Explain how the creation of a cotton-based economy changed the lives of whites and blacks in all regions of the South.]]

In 1800 most African Americans lived as enslaved laborers in Virginia and South Carolina. They grew export crops of tobacco and rice on gentry-owned plantations. Six decades later, most blacks were still enslaved workers. However, the majority now lived much further to the west—in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and adjacent states. And they now grew cotton on plantations owned by capitalist-minded entrepreneurs. The world of slavery had been transformed: new geography, new crops, and a new master class.

This process of change was brutal. In fact, historians call it the Second Middle Passage—a reprise of the eighteenth century experience: enslavement in Africa and transit across the Atlantic. After 1800, white owners uprooted a million enslaved people from long-established communities in the Chesapeake and Carolinas and sent them hundreds of miles to the west. Family ties broke as husbands were sold away from wives, children from parents, brothers and sisters from each other. Most ties were never restored. African Americans from diverse backgrounds had to forge new lives in the Mississippi Valley, where they created a religion-infused culture.

White lives and culture changed as well. In the new cotton economy, fewer white families owed slaves. And class differences increased. Some southern whites fled to the uplands, seeking lives as subsistence farmers. Another 40 percent worked as tenants or laborers. Poor whites had limited opportunities for education; many were illiterate. Of poor whites a journalist noted: “Their destitution is not material only; it is intellectual and it is moral.”

The outlook of the slaveowning elite changed as well. The landed gentry of Virginia and South Carolina had long emulated the refined and elegant life-style of their aristocratic colonial ancestors. Cotton entrepreneurs were a different breed, partly because the cotton economy was at an early stage of development. Their goal, a traveler suggested, was “To sell cotton in order to buy negroes—to make more cotton to buy more negroes, ‘ad infinitum’.”

Whatever their cultural differences, both groups of elite planters were firmly committed to the defense of the slavery—the source of their wealth and social power.