Chapter 11

[[**Big Idea**: Consider the extent to which individualism, new religious sects, abolitionism, and woman’s rights (as the movement was called in the nineteenth century) changed American culture between 1820 and 1860.]]

Our discussion of Chapter 8 focused on cultural values and practices, specifically patriarchy, slavery, and religion. There, I noted that “changes in deeply engrained cultural beliefs and principles occur slowly. . . .” Indeed, such changes often take a generation or more to come to fruition. Here, in Chapter 11, we will watch that happen. During the 1830s and 1840s, some of the new ideas that were introduced around 1800 began to achieve wider cultural acceptance. However, other generation-old movements remained controversial and now generated significant social conflicts.

Let’s look briefly at family ties, women’s status, and slavery.

Eighteenth-century Americans grew up in a world dominated by family ties and stern fathers. The post-revolutionary republican assault on arranged marriages and on primogeniture—the inheritance system that privileged the eldest son—weakened this patriarchal world. By the 1830s, it was giving way to new cultural values. The new outlook celebrated individualistic values and the “self-made man.”

The bonds that bound women to a subordinate place in the family and society remained in place. However, they were increasingly challenged. Women now worked outside the home as textile operatives, teachers, and social reformers. And women’s rights advocates campaigned for the vote and full civil equality. “Individualism”—the word coined by Alexis de Tocqueville to describe the emergent American society—became the motif of the age for both women and men.

Slavery also came under increasing attack. Enlightenment and republican principles of liberty and equality had fueled the post-revolutionary assault against racial bondage. After 1830, the evangelical Protestantism energies unleashed by the Second Great Awakening gave new force to the movement. William Lloyd Garrison and other reformers branded slavery as a sin. They called for its immediate abolition rather than the past practice of gradual emancipation.

Anti-slavery activists found more allies among farmers, workers, and classical liberal economic theorists. They celebrated “free land,” “free labor,” and “free markets”—a web of new cultural values that reflected the outlook of the emergent American capitalist economy. But as the new ideological systems of individualism and economic liberty achieved increasing sway in the North and Midwest, they widened cultural divisions with the South.