
The Antebellum Period in the United States

Antebellum is a Latin idiom that means 'before the war.' It was employed in the background of the history of the United States to offer clarification regarding the time that led to the Civil War. Many consider the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 as being the commencement of the Antebellum Period. However, some argue that it began as early as 1812. Overall, this was a time in American history when the rise of sectionalism ultimately led to the era of Antebellum.

At the time of Antebellum, South America was a monocultural and chivalric society that was founded upon the sweat and labor of African American slaves, a harsh contrast to the industrialization that was taking place in the northern states or rather the Antebellum South. This old south was a land of cotton fields and cavaliers that had the last knights and their ladies fair. This nostalgic, affectionate view is what many think about when they recall the Antebellum Period. Nevertheless, even with the representations of grand plantations with their extensive staircases and people talking with soft, enunciations of the South, the reality of a whole race of people considered worthless and used as nothing more than domesticated animals is not a matter that can be easily ignored. As such, they were considered property because of their skin color. Their standing as property was inflicted with actual as well as threatened violence. Though blacks lived within the same parameters with white folks, their lives took different forms as the notion of slavery got impressed upon the blacks to a point where they could not forget their status as property, while their white owners boasted of their status as slave owners. Both the slaves and their masters hated each other, and their statuses never approached equality. As such, theorists have come with several theories that explain these kinds of relationships.

The social contract theory for example, supposes that political order is justifiably acceptable strictly under the conditions of the result of an agreement of individuals who are free, equal and rational. Sinha argues that the politicization of slavery only reinforced this notion. Under this theory, many slave owners were justified to deny fairness to their slaves because they were not equal in any context. Antebellum courts also conducted their rulings in regard to this theory and often denied blacks their rights based on the color of their black skin.

An increase in the demand for cotton around the world was the reason why slavery spread quickly at the Antebellum Period. By the 1830s, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama were at the center of cotton production. These regions were the main producers of the cotton of the United States, with the three of them generating over half the amount of the country and the African American slaves were the people working in these fields. Besides working in the cotton plantations, the slaves worked on other fields with a variety of other crops such as rice, sugarcane, corn, and tobacco. Apart from cultivating, slaves were required to cut and heave

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wood, dig trenches, slaughter livestock, clear and prepare new land, repair building and tools among other chores. As such, many worked as drivers, mechanics, carpenters, blacksmiths and other positions in other skilled trades. Black women were in addition expected to care for their masters' families and take care of the children. They were also made to weave, spin, sew, and oversee the families of their masters under the tight scrutiny of their mistresses. Smith talks of the debate that existed regarding slavery, with southerners arguing its importance in comparison to northerners who thought that it should be abolished. As such, slavery increased in the south and they were recognized as property instead of humans. The culture that existed in the Antebellum Period saw different types of relationship formations. Servants who worked and lived near with the families of their masters formed more complex associations as their children and those of their masters developed close bonds with each other. These children often played with each other in the plantations. Black kids also became attached to their mistresses as they did not understand the nature of the environment they had been born into until they were older enough to realize and begin to separate themselves. Black women were subjected to sexual exploitation and they had no one to protect them from the widespread abuse as their men were powerless as slaves. Skilled workers were often given authority to oversee plantation discipline. As such, they harshly punished slaves who could not work fast enough or those who defied their duties among other reasons. Many of them practiced authoritarian relations on their subordinate slaves though there were the benevolent ones.

The living condition of the southern slaves was deplorable. They lived in simple houses with unsanitary conditions that left them vulnerable to disease and bad weather. Their bedding and clothing were inadequate. Conditions in the fields were terrible as the weather beat the slaves who had to persevere or face the wrath of their masters who forced them to work even when they were unwell. Working in rice plantations was pitiable as they had to stand for long hours in water and often contracted malaria and other waterborne diseases. Besides that, they were poorly fed on diets that did not meet their body needs to be able to assume their heavy workload. Those who worked as domestic servants were at times luckier as they would get used garments and easily access food in their master's stores. The economic situation during the Antebellum era meant that slaves could be traded in an auction block. If a farm experienced a financial loss, or the economic situation deteriorated, slaves would be auctioned as property to cover for the financial losses. Some masters also punished them by taking them for auction to separate immediate slave families to keep them away from their extended families.

The 1860 census of the south at the time of the Antebellum Period provides a clearer understanding regarding the era. The population of the south at that time was about 8 million people. Out of the 8 million individuals, 383,000 were owners of about 4 million slaves. About 25 percent of other southern families owned slaves, meaning that three quarter of the population did not work with slaves. Out of those who were slave owners, half of them only owned four slaves or less. In addition, only 2,000 serf owners had more than 100 thralls. As well, 14 of

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these slave owners possessed more than 500 bondservants. These statistics illustrate the distribution of slaves and the number and sizes of the plantations. As one can see, the big plantations which were slave-driven were lesser but held large numbers of serfs and fewer others far between. Amongst the southerner populations, most possessed their own piece of land. However, this land was unfit to large-scale production and was alternatively used to produce crops for the use of the family. Small cash crops were also grown in these lands. Family labor was often used to build these farms as opposed to the typical use of slaves' labor. Even so, these commoner farmers defended the use of humans as slaves because they aspired to become planters in the future and the thought of having to compete with four million slaves did not seem attainable considering that they would be involved in the sale of their cash crop.

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