

ferment, both physical and intellectual, forced them to grapple with the question of slavery's morality and utility and, after a brief period of uncertainty, left them far more committed to the peculiar institution than they had previously been. With emancipation in the North, slavery became ever more deeply identified with the South, Southern interests, and the Southern way of life. The next time Southern whites fought for their "liberty," it would be explicitly for their rights as slave owners.

it became an increasingly important justification for slavery; the assumption that blacks were not fit for freedom was crucial to the defense of slavery in an era of liberty and equality. Although arguments for the innate inferiority of blacks to whites were not fully elaborated until later, a new racism was one of the ironic byproducts of Revolutionary-era republicanism.

Equally problematic—and significant for the future—was the reconciliation of liberty and slavery, terms that in other times and places have seemed to be diametric opposites. The concept of liberty, like that of rights, assumes for most present-day readers, as it did for most antebellum Northerners, an abstract character. Its origin and early usage, however, were often much more specific and were related to custom, tradition, and interest: just as slaves commonly viewed as theirs by right the little privileges that were extended to them (such as the “rights” to cultivate garden plots and enjoy certain holidays), so, too, colonists put great stock in the “English liberties” they enjoyed by tradition, and viewed the abrogation of those liberties as signs of monarchical despotism.

Although the Revolution fostered an abstracted sense of rights—specific “liberties,” enjoyed by specific groups, became a generalized “liberty” belonging to all—many Southerners continued to use the term in the older sense. According to this usage, infringing on their right to own slaves was a violation of their liberty. In this manner, Southerners in the antebellum period were able to portray themselves as both ardent defenders of slavery (that is, of blacks) and equally ardent proponents of liberty (that is, their own). To many Northerners, the simultaneous defense of liberty and slavery seemed patently hypocritical. To defenders of slavery, however, the right to own slaves was *their* most important liberty (the meaning of which came close to the right to pursue one’s own interest); indeed, they insisted that to deprive them of the right to own slaves would be to subject them to slavery (just as the Patriots had argued that the British, in infringing on their traditional liberties, were subjecting them to slavery).

Although formal articulation of these arguments was still in its infancy at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was clear that Southern slavery had survived the multiple threats it faced during the Revolutionary era and, like steel tempered by fire, had emerged from that era stronger than ever. Before the Revolution, Southern whites had generally taken slavery for granted. The Revolutionary

missions without legislative approval, and those in the upper South (such as Virginia's act of 1806) required newly freed blacks to leave the state or face reenslavement. Laws expelling free blacks were not always strictly enforced, but they sent the clear message that most Southern whites regarded the existence of free blacks in their midst as a troublesome anomaly; the only proper status of blacks in white society was that of slave.

Formal defense of slavery did not yet reach the crescendo that it would during the late antebellum period, but here, too, the trend was clear. If the Revolutionary era saw the first sustained attack on slavery in the South, that attack was met by the first sustained defense of it; what is more, whereas the attack was feeble and short-lived, the defense would prove remarkably hardy and persistent. Most early arguments in defense of slavery were tentative and practical and lacked the later boastful assertions that slavery provided the best possible form of social organization. Still, many of the racial, religious, and paternalistic arguments that would flourish during the three decades before the Civil War were already evident in embryonic form during the late eighteenth century. Five pro-slavery petitions, signed by 1,244 persons and presented to the Virginia legislature in 1784 and 1785, asserted that emancipation was "exceedingly *impolitic*" because it would produce "Want, Poverty, Distress, and Ruin to the Free Citizen"; they also appealed to property rights, however, proclaimed that slavery was best for the slaves, pointed to biblical precedent, and warned of "the Horrors of all the Rapes, Murders, and Outrages, which a vast Multitude of unprincipled, unpropertied, revengeful, and remorseless Banditti are capable of perpetrating."¹⁶

Indeed, the Revolution clearly served to accentuate two themes that would be central to Southern white thought in the antebellum years. One was the racial component in the defense of slavery. Although the Revolution did not immediately democratize American society, it produced an egalitarian republicanism that posed a severe problem for those who would defend slavery: if all men were created equal, how could some hold others in bondage? As Duncan J. MacLeod and other scholars have pointed out, the only logical answer to this question (aside from replying that they could not) was to assert that those held as slaves were somehow so different from free Americans that they were not entitled to the same rights and privileges. Because race was the most easily identifiable difference,

repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them. The laws do not permit us to turn them loose, [even] if that were for their good."

Even this retreat to benevolent stewardship did not, however, represent Jefferson's ultimate position. By 1819, he had come to identify almost wholly with the defense of Southern "rights" against those who would limit the spread of slavery into Missouri. Espousing the casuistic doctrine that the expansion of slavery would actually weaken the institution, by bringing about its "diffusion," the Sage of Monticello in his more honest moments expressed the Southern dilemma with brutal frankness: "We have the wolf by the ears," he declared in 1820, "and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other."¹⁵

Lacking Jefferson's introspective ambivalence, most Southern whites came to accept slavery as a legitimate if not yet necessarily desirable institution, and the early nineteenth century saw a general hardening of sentiment on the subject. As evangelical Protestants made their peace with the peculiar institution, active support for abolitionism was more and more confined to Quakers, who represented a tiny fraction of the population; 78 percent of the leaders of the North Carolina Manumission Society in the 1790s were Quakers. Panicky reaction to the Saint Domingue revolution of the 1790s and Gabriel Prosser's abortive uprising of 1800 dealt a further blow to what remained of Southern abolitionist sentiment—and organization—among non-Quakers; by the early nineteenth century, abolitionism was virtually nonexistent in the deep South and increasingly limited in the upper South to small pockets of dissenters on the fringes of society.

Private manumissions, by which thousands of blacks had received their freedom in the 1780s and 1790s, also declined precipitously in the nineteenth century (although they never ceased altogether). Concern for order, property rights, and their own economic security exceeded interest in the rights of their slaves among all but the most exceptional slave owners; even Jefferson failed to free his slaves, either during his lifetime or upon his death. Changing attitudes toward manumission were evident not only in the behavior of individuals but also in the actions of state legislatures, which, one after another, beginning with South Carolina in 1800, moved to restrict the slaves' access to freedom. Although state laws varied slightly, those in the lower South typically barred private manu-

youthful liberalism, their children revealed little of the moral ambivalence and few of the doubts their parents felt about slavery. The Revolutionary-era challenge to slavery proved to be a short-lived phenomenon.

This development may be clearly illustrated by examining Thomas Jefferson's changing attitude toward slavery. Jefferson never renounced his belief that slavery was wrong, but as he aged he abandoned his youthful conviction that it could readily be abolished. In his original draft of the Declaration of Independence, rejected as too inflammatory by the Continental Congress, he had denounced George III for foisting slavery on the colonies, noting that that monarch "waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating the most sacred right of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him." Unlike many others of his generation, however, Jefferson harbored serious doubts that blacks' "depravity" could be attributed entirely to their slave status, and he expressed strong views on what he considered their innate racial characteristics. In his celebrated *Notes on the State of Virginia* (written in 1781-82 and published in 1785), he argued that blacks were physically unattractive—maintaining that they displayed a "preference" for whites "as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black woman over those of his own species"—stressed their deficiency in reasoning, and proclaimed that "in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous."

Jefferson's opposition to slavery always rested more on the harm it did to whites than on the harm it did to blacks, and after the Revolution he grew increasingly cautious in his criticism of the peculiar institution, increasingly concerned about the perils of too reckless an assault on the very basis of the South's social fabric. By 1805, although still believing that anti-slavery sentiment was on the rise, Jefferson admitted that he had "long since given up the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us." Nine years later, forced to concede that emancipation sentiment was not spreading among the next generation, he had abandoned hope for any near-term end to slavery, contenting himself instead with advocating humane treatment of its victims: "My opinion has ever been that, until more can be done for them, we should endeavor, with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed & clothe them well, protect them from ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be fed by no

emphasis on the equality of all souls, white and black, before God. The 1790s and 1800s, however, saw a sharp reversal of this trend toward religious unorthodoxy, as Deism—and reason in general—lost its appeal to white Southerners, at the same time that evangelical Christianity lost much of its egalitarian thrust. Baptism and Methodism continued their advance throughout the South, but their message was no longer tinged with anti-slavery overtones. Indeed, during the antebellum years, the Southern churches would become bulwarks of the peculiar institution, and Southern religious spokesmen would lead the way in developing arguments in its behalf.

Economic considerations reinforced this new conservatism. If the tobacco crisis that gripped much of the Chesapeake region had facilitated moderate opposition to slavery, Southern economic expansion in the early nineteenth century had the opposite effect, for people are much less likely to question an institution when they are making money from it hand over fist than when they are suffering from hard times. Although tobacco never fully recovered its position of dominance in the upper South, and conditions in much of the Chesapeake remained depressed until the 1830s, the South as a whole experienced substantial economic growth, based primarily on a surge in the planting of cotton (see chapter 4, section II). This surge brought a sharp increase in demand for labor at precisely the same time that the importation of new slaves was being ended, and therefore resulted in a substantial increase in slave prices throughout the South. Ironically, ending the slave trade may have strengthened the commitment of Southern whites to slavery, both by putting upward pressure on slave prices and by removing the most easily identifiable barbarity associated with the slave regime.

The changing intellectual climate of the post-Revolutionary South had a major impact on attitudes toward slavery. Whereas many well-intentioned Southerners in the 1780s could legitimately believe that slavery had been placed on the road to gradual extinction and that “enlightened” sentiment would gradually become more and more opposed to the peculiar institution, a generation later it was clear that this was not to be. Not only did natural population growth among slaves mean that Southern slavery could, unlike slavery elsewhere in the New World, continue to flourish even after African imports were cut off; Southern white opinion moved steadily away from the moderate, rational questioning of slavery shown by many of the Founding Fathers. If these leaders abandoned much of their

tional African laborers before the 1808 deadline than with the moral ambiguities of holding humans in bondage. And in the upper South, the kind of moderate questioning of slavery that was so pervasive in the 1770s and 1780s declined during the 1790s and early 1800s, as a new orthodoxy increasingly took hold of the region. During the Revolutionary era, the South was home to much of the most liberal social thought in America, as the "great generation" wrestled with the problem of slavery, challenged traditional religious doctrine, and championed a republicanism that when pushed to its Jeffersonian limits had a strong egalitarian thrust. During the post-Revolutionary years, however, the South began a retreat from this liberalism, a retreat that would in the antebellum years leave the section the undisputed home of conservatism.

As in the growth of Revolutionary-era liberalism, a number of factors helped bring about its decline. A reaction against the more radical tendencies present in the American Revolution—spurred in part by revulsion over the excesses of the French Revolution—increasingly led statesmen in the new nation to espouse a conservative strand of republican thought that emphasized protection of property and order rather than equality. (In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson had substituted "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" for John Locke's "life, liberty and property.") By the time of his death in 1809, Thomas Paine, that fiery exponent of republican egalitarianism who had at one time captured the imagination of a fledgling nation struggling against despotism and privilege, was widely reviled as a radical and an infidel; the former hero died in obscure poverty, his funeral attended by only six persons, including a Quaker and two blacks.

A similar trend was evident in Southern religion. Revolutionary-era Southerners had been among the least orthodox of Americans. Calvinist-oriented Northerners had long derided Southerners for not taking their religion seriously enough; Presbyterian tutor Philip Fithian, who spent 1773–74 on the plantation of Robert Carter III, filled his diary with scathing comments about the perfunctory nature of religious behavior among Virginia Anglicans. During the Revolutionary era, this tendency toward religious moderation was supplemented by a new challenge to established tenets that took the dual forms of a rational questioning of Christian faith epitomized by the Deism that captivated many gentry intellectuals, and of an evangelical commitment to that faith that brought with it an egalitarian

ened interest in emigration was a sign of the growing pessimism that gripped many free blacks during the 1850s, for emigrationist sentiment has always been a key index of black attitudes toward white America, rising during times of particular hardship and receding during periods of hope and progress.

Most free blacks, however, rejected the notion of emigrating to Africa, for they saw themselves as (and indeed were) quintessentially American and looked upon Africa as a distant and savage land. (The idea of sending blacks "back" to Africa drew more support from whites who sought to remove a thorn in the side of the slave regime or to "purify" America than from blacks who sought to improve their status.) In the North, they fought for their own rights by holding "colored conventions" in which they promoted common interests and cautiously demanded equal treatment, and they worked as abolitionists to promote the rights of those blacks still in slavery; in 1829, David Walker stirred (and in some cases alarmed) free blacks throughout America with his "incendiary" booklet *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*, in which he denounced slavery as a crime against humanity and called for its violent overthrow. Despite all the disabilities they faced, even in the South free blacks were sometimes able, as historian Loren Schweninger has recently demonstrated, to acquire impressive quantities of wealth, often with the help of particular whites who acted as their sponsors and protectors. Although most free blacks in the South remained propertyless, one of every six rural family heads in Maryland and Virginia owned land in 1860, and one in seven urban families in the upper South owned real estate.

However oppressive "freedom" was for blacks in America, it remained far preferable to slavery. Blacks made this preference clear when they "voted with their feet": tens of thousands put themselves in mortal peril to escape slavery, but virtually none voluntarily gave up freedom for bondage.

VI

DESPITE THE HOPES AROUSED during and immediately after the American Revolution, Southern slavery survived the era intact. The reform spirit had never spread very far in the lower South, where most slave owners seemed far more concerned with securing addi-

in which they are large property holders . . . , such persons as courts and juries would not hesitate to believe under oath."¹⁴

The vast majority of the South's free blacks, however—about 85 percent—lived under very different circumstances in the upper South. They were darker, poorer, less urban, and less educated than those farther south; only about one-third were mulattoes or resided in cities. They typically lived on the margins of society, as farmhands, casual laborers, and occasionally small landowners, shunned by most whites and isolated from most slaves. Those who lived in cities—Baltimore and Washington, D.C., contained most of the region's urban free blacks—worked as domestics, day laborers, factory hands, and artisans and usually lacked the elitist pretensions evident in the lower South. Where they were able, they often fraternized with (and sometimes married) slaves.

Wherever they lived, free blacks faced hardship, persecution, and physical insecurity, all of which grew after 1850 as the Fugitive Slave Act increased the risk in the North of being kidnapped into slavery and concerted action in the South threatened more stringent enforcement of existing restrictive legislation; in the deep South, free blacks were sometimes pressured into enslaving themselves to masters of their own choice, and the free black population actually declined. Faced with such implacable white hostility, free blacks turned increasingly inward to their own community organizations, the most important of which were the independent "African" churches that emerged in the 1780s and 1790s; in Philadelphia, for example, the Free African Society, a quasi-religious organization founded in 1787 by former slaves Richard Allen and Absalom Jones, spawned a number of churches, the most influential of which was Allen's Bethel Church, which in 1816 expanded to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Overwhelmingly Baptist and Methodist, African churches flourished openly in major cities of the North and were sometimes tolerated in the urban South. Free blacks also set up schools for their children (usually clandestinely in the South) and formed a wide variety of mutual-aid associations to provide members with benefits such as burial and insurance.

During the crisis of the 1850s, free blacks not only turned inward but also increasingly looked outward, as some concluded that white America would never provide a hospitable environment and viewed with increasing favor the prospect of emigration to Liberia. Although only a small number of blacks actually moved to Africa, the height-

the term to apply to people of African origin. Note that in both of these cases, the meaning of "Creole" differs substantially from that of "creole," used earlier in this book.) In Mobile, Pensacola, and especially in New Orleans, these light-skinned Creoles prided themselves on their wealth, breeding, heritage, and membership in exclusive organizations such as Mobile's Creole Fire Company Number 1 and New Orleans' octoroon balls. Refugees from Saint Domingue brought similar attitudes with them when they settled in New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston.

The free black population in the lower South, unlike that in the North or upper South, was overwhelmingly light-skinned; in 1860, the census categorized about three-quarters of lower-South free blacks (and more than four-fifths of those in Louisiana) as mulattoes. A majority of these "free colored" were, like their cousins in the North, urban dwellers, although the South was, overall, overwhelmingly rural. Although most of them could hardly be termed wealthy—and many supported themselves through a variety of menial occupations including day labor, domestic service, and prostitution—they occupied many skilled positions, and held a near monopoly on some important service occupations such as barbering. A significant minority, both urban and rural, *were* wealthy. In Louisiana's Natchitoches Parish a colony of free Creoles, descended from an eighteenth-century French settler and an African slave, grew and flourished until by 1860 it contained 411 persons who owned 276 slaves; equally remarkable was the free South Carolina family whose patriarch, cotton gin maker and planter William Ellison, owned 63 slaves in 1840.

The position of elite free blacks in the deep South was never secure, but because they were few in number and seemed so different from the mass of slaves—a difference they strove to accentuate—they usually received at least grudging toleration from prominent whites whose favor they strove to curry. In southern Louisiana especially, but to a lesser extent elsewhere along the Gulf Coast as well as in Charleston and Savannah, many whites followed a practice common in much of Latin America but rare in most of the United States of distinguishing between mulattoes, especially their own sons and daughters, and blacks. As a Louisiana judge ruled in 1850, in allowing a free Negro to testify against whites, many of the state's free population were "respectable" as well as "enlightened by education, and the instances are by no means rare

1810 to 12.8 percent in 1860, primarily because of a surge of manumissions in Delaware, which by the mid-nineteenth century had become virtually a free state, and in Maryland, which, as historian Barbara J. Fields has shown, was threatening to do so; in 1860, 91.7 percent of Delaware's and 49.1 percent of Maryland's black population was free. In the lower South, by contrast, the proportion of free blacks decreased after 1810, as state after state passed new laws restricting manumission and harassing those who had been manumitted, and after 1840 the absolute number decreased as well. By 1860, only 1.5 percent of deep-South blacks were free, and half of these lived in Louisiana. In Mississippi, free blacks constituted only 0.2 percent of the population. The great majority of free blacks in the antebellum South were descendants of those who received their freedom between 1780 and 1810.

There were significant regional variations in the status and character of the free black population, both between North and South and within the South. Northern blacks, although free, were objects of both legal discrimination and vicious hostility. Excluded from most public schools, denied the right to vote (except in Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and—if they could meet a property requirement—New York), forbidden by (sporadically enforced) law from entering many states, jeered at and at times physically attacked by whites who refused to work with them or live near them, blacks quickly came to appreciate the difference between freedom and equality. Although their legal rights were usually greater than those of free blacks in the South, and a few of them achieved wealth and prominence, most Northern blacks were relegated to menial occupations such as day laborers and domestic servants. They constituted a highly urban population: more than three-fifths lived in cities at a time when fewer than one-fifth of all Americans did.

Although there were relatively few free blacks in the deep South, their condition was, ironically, in many respects better than that of those in the upper South. An unusually high proportion of them were elite people of "color"—neither physically nor mentally black—who set themselves apart from the mass of slaves. This was especially true of descendants of French and Spanish colonists who lived along the Gulf of Mexico and called themselves "Creoles" to indicate their ancestry. (White descendants of the French and Spanish commonly referred to *themselves* as "Creoles" and refused to use

escaped slavery in a variety of ways, ranging from state-enacted emancipation in the North to private manumissions and flight in the South. Some in the upper South were the beneficiaries of sweeping acts by individual slaveholders who, prompted by newly felt moral qualms, freed all their bondpeople; others were objects of selected manumissions by less idealistic masters—most commonly in the upper South but also in the lower South—of particular favorites (including their own children); others still, especially in the border states, were discharged from bondage because they were old and no longer able to perform useful labor. Slaves who were able to earn money could sometimes purchase their own freedom. Fugitives escaped slavery by fleeing to the North, especially from the border states of Maryland, Delaware, and Kentucky, and by blending with free blacks in cities such as Baltimore and Charleston. In addition, during the 1790s and 1800s, hundreds of free, light-skinned refugees from Saint Domingue entered the United States, concentrating in Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans, much to the alarm of local whites.

In sheer numbers, the growth of the free black population was staggering. Although statistics on free blacks before the Revolution are lacking, it is clear that there were few; as late as 1782, only about 1,800 out of 220,582 black Virginians—less than one percent—were free. Between 1780 and 1810, however, the number of free blacks in Virginia surged, reaching 12,766 (4.2 percent) in 1790 and 30,570 (7.2 percent) by 1810. In the United States as a whole, the number of free blacks rose to 59,466 (7.9 percent of all blacks) in 1790 and 186,446 (13.5 percent) in 1810. Over half these free blacks were concentrated in the upper South, where more than 10 percent of all blacks were free by 1810. As a proportion of the black population, however, free blacks were most numerous in the North; by 1810 three-quarters of Northern blacks were free, and by 1840 virtually all were. In the lower South, by contrast, the number of free blacks grew far more modestly, from 1.6 percent of the black population in 1790 to 3.9 percent in 1810. At the latter date in South Carolina and Georgia, only about 2 percent of all blacks were free. (For statistics documenting this section, see table 2.)

It was this post-Revolutionary beginning that provided the basis for the South's free black population in the antebellum period, for after 1810, few slaves were freed. The proportion of blacks who were free grew slightly in the upper South, from 10.4 percent in

in 1807 and taking effect in 1808. In their usual cautious, roundabout manner, the Founding Fathers succeeded in ending the importation of Africans to the United States; many believed, incorrectly, that this ending would doom slavery in the United States as well.

The Constitutional Convention showed the Founding Fathers at their most cautious with respect to slavery. In drafting the Constitution, they carefully avoided the word "slavery," resorting to a variety of euphemisms such as "other persons" and "person[s] held to service or labor." At the same time, they acceded to slaveholding interests by recognizing the right of masters to reclaim fugitives and by unanimously accepting a compromise formula whereby for purposes of congressional representation a slave would count as three-fifths of a free person, thereby substantially augmenting the political power of the Southern states. In the future, both supporters and opponents of slavery would wrap themselves in the Constitution and claim to be expressing the views of the Founding Fathers. In fact, although most of the decisions taken by the delegates at the Constitutional Convention represented compromises rather than clear-cut victories for pro-slavery or anti-slavery forces, on balance the Constitution bolstered slavery by throwing the power of the federal government behind it.

Still, to many informed Americans in the 1790s, time seemed to be on the side of reason, reform, and progress. The Northern states were in the process of abolishing slavery within their borders. Congress had acted to guarantee that the Northwest would be forever free. The laws of several Southern states had been changed to facilitate private manumissions, and hundreds of slave owners in the upper South were taking advantage of these laws to free some or all of their chattels. And although importation of new slaves remained legal in South Carolina and Georgia, a compromise had been worked out that would end such importation in 1808. In short, a moderate opponent of slavery—like many of the Founding Fathers—had good grounds for being cautiously optimistic. Slavery appeared to be in full retreat, its end only a matter of time.

V

THE REVOLUTIONARY and post-Revolutionary years saw the emergence, for the first time, of a large community of free blacks. They

three-quarters of all Northern blacks were free, and within a generation virtually all would be.

Complementing the abolition acts of individual Northern states was legislation by Congress to restrict the geographical scope of slavery. Because the western territories were largely unsettled (except by Indians), the movement to prohibit the spread of slavery there did not challenge vested interests in the same way that the movement to abolish slavery in existing states did, and received considerable support from those convinced that slavery, although wrong, could not be immediately ended in the South. In 1784, a bill drafted by Jefferson, which would have barred slavery from all the western territories after 1800, was defeated by a single vote. Three years later, the Northwest Ordinance did abolish slavery in a vast area north of the Ohio River known as the Northwest Territory, including the present states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin.

The African slave trade, viewed as deplorable even by many defenders of slavery, was also the object of considerable legislation, at both the state and the national level. Widespread opposition to the trade in the North and upper South led the second Continental Congress to pass a resolution opposing slave imports in 1776, and a number of states (including Virginia in 1778) banned such imports on their own. In the upper South, economic depression sharply reduced the demand for new slaves, and the happy convergence of economic interest with principle easily carried the day. Farther south, however, in South Carolina and Georgia, planters suffered from an acute shortage of labor and bitterly resisted what they considered the hypocritical efforts of those who now had enough slaves suddenly to force others to do without.

Although advocates of the slave trade represented a small minority among the Founding Fathers, they were powerful enough to force a compromise on the question at the Constitutional Convention of 1787: the new Constitution prohibited Congress from outlawing the slave trade for twenty years. During this period, labor-hungry planters in the lower South imported tens of thousands of Africans; indeed, more slaves entered the United States between 1787 and 1807 than during any other two decades in history. Still, the general understanding among those who were politically active was that Congress would abolish the slave trade at the end of twenty years, an expectation that was borne out by congressional legislation passed

vented most of Randolph's and Carter's slaves from ever receiving their freedom, and Washington lacked the legal authority to free the numerous "dower Negroes" belonging to his wife, Martha, from a previous marriage; of 277 Washington slaves, 124 belonged to George at the time of his death in 1799, while 153 belonged to Martha.) A smaller number of slaveholders—often Quakers—followed to the end the logic of their antislavery convictions and freed all their slaves immediately. Acts of private manumission freed thousands of blacks in the upper South following the Revolution, and for the first time, especially in Delaware and parts of Maryland, seemed to threaten the very survival of slavery; in Delaware, three-quarters of all blacks were free by 1810 (see table 2 and section V, below).

Farther north, state action was more decisive. Because slaves in the Northern states formed only a small proportion of the population and constituted a minor economic interest, abolishing the peculiar institution in an era that celebrated liberty and natural rights proved relatively easy, although often painfully slow. During the three decades following the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, every Northern state initiated complete slave emancipation. The process varied considerably. In some states, emancipation was immediate: the Vermont constitution of 1777 prohibited slavery, and soon thereafter Massachusetts courts, reacting to a series of freedom suits brought by blacks themselves, interpreted that state's constitution as outlawing slavery, too; as the state's chief justice put it in 1781, "there can be no such thing as perpetual servitude of a rational creature."¹³ In most Northern states, however, especially those with a significant slave population, emancipation was gradual, so as to provide as little shock to society (and the masters' pocketbooks) as possible. According to Pennsylvania's law of 1780—the first of five gradual-emancipation acts passed by Northern states—all future-born slaves would become free at age twenty-eight. New York's law of 1799 freed future-born boys at age twenty-eight and girls at twenty-five; New Jersey's act of 1804 (the last emancipation act of a Northern state) was similar, but provided that boys would receive freedom at age twenty-five and girls at twenty-one. Because these gradual-emancipation laws freed no one actually in bondage at the time of their passage, and freed children subsequently born into slavery only when they reached adulthood, the North contained a small number of slaves well into the nineteenth century. By 1810, however, about

loudest yelps for liberty among the Whites in the Revolutionary era were acutely aware of the problem.¹

Whites in the Revolutionary era w question of slavery. A few American abolition societies emerged in the South as one heavily dominated by Quakers; as one moved farther south. Others association with what they regarded as ing freedom for their slaves either immigrated (in their wills. Even among the who never freed their slaves, however about an institution that seemed to Many agreed with Thomas Jefferson for moral and practical reasons, and we a gradual and peaceful death.

Indeed, the Founding Fathers too bring about slavery's gradual demise ment, they typically abjured hasty disruption of society, preferring cautious action long-term progress; rather than a confrontation, they favored a strategy of change weakest. Still, there seemed reason would ultimately prove otherwise—t American slavery and put it on the road

Much of the action on slavery during the curbed at the state level. In the upper of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware mission, making it easier during the 1790s to free their bondsmen. (From 1723 to 1793, manumission had been illegal in Virginia.) In the extent in North Carolina and in the prompted by both principled opposition demand for labor stemming from the cotton, growing numbers of slave owner laws to free some or all of their slaves only a few select favorites; others, such as Randolph, and Robert Carter III, provided freedom of all their slaves, thereby secured out suffering financial loss. (Legal action

The Revolutionary era, in short, saw the further differentiation of upper from lower South, although increased slave autonomy characterized both sections. In the Chesapeake region, an overwhelmingly creole slave population lived in close physical and cultural contact with whites, many of whom exercised relatively loose control over their slaves and expressed heightened concern for their physical and spiritual well-being. In the coastal region of the lower South, most blacks lived in a world of their own, largely isolated from whites, and developed their own culture and way of life; into this world poured tens of thousands of Africans imported in a last surge by labor-hungry planters anxious to beat the anticipated cutoff of the slave trade in 1808. Although these regional distinctions would persist in the nineteenth century, the contrast between upper South and lower South would never be so great as it was during the years immediately following the War for Independence.

IV

THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA also saw an increasing gap between the South as a whole, where slavery survived the challenge to its legitimacy and remained firmly entrenched, and the North, where slavery gradually gave way to freedom, albeit a severely restrictive freedom. Because the Revolution was waged for "liberty," and generated an enormous amount of rhetoric about despotism, tyranny, justice, equality, and natural rights, it inevitably raised questions about slavery, questions that seemed all the more pertinent in view of the determined efforts of slaves to gain their own freedom, and it is no accident that the United States was the first country to take significant (although ultimately limited) action against the peculiar institution. Patriots commonly denounced the "slavery" they suffered at the hands of the British, and insisted that they would rather die than remain slaves; although there was considerable hyperbole in this rhetoric—clearly Patriots did not believe that they were slaves in the same sense their own chattels were—the irony of fighting a war for liberty at the same time that they held one-third of their own population as slaves was not lost upon them. They might not have liked the way British Tory author Samuel Johnson phrased the matter when he asked rhetorically, "How is it that we hear the

the prospect of securing freedom in the North. And the Gabriel Prosser conspiracy of 1800, a carefully planned but abortive uprising in which thousands of blacks were to attack Richmond, shows the potential for armed rebellion in even the most trusted, "acculturated" slaves. In a number of ways the Prosser uprising, nipped in the bud after being revealed to authorities by a black informer, bears the mark of the Revolutionary age, for if the uprising's planning was facilitated by the easy association and relaxed controls prevalent at the time, its leaders seem to have been influenced by the era's rhetoric of liberty. Perhaps too much should not be made of the conspirators' ideology. Blind hatred of slavery—and of those responsible for it—motivated participants far more than abstract theories of the social good; as one recruit coolly stated, "I could kill a white man as free as eat." Still, a number of reports indicated that the rebels had planned to spare Quakers, Methodists, and Frenchmen because they were "friendly to liberty."¹⁰ Clearly, many black Virginians were aware of the "outside" world—and of the contradiction between the "liberty" their masters invoked and the slavery they practiced.

Slave autonomy in the lower South manifested itself very differently. The coastal low country of South Carolina and Georgia was dominated by a black majority—with a heavy African component—who often saw little of their owners. In two ways the Revolution acted to accentuate this distinctive pattern. Wartime disruption and the military obligations of whites increased the existing tendency toward owner absenteeism and further isolated the slave population from white Southerners; as one historian put it, "wartime anarchy created a power vacuum in the countryside that allowed slaves to expand their liberty."¹¹ A postwar surge in slave arrivals from Africa, prompted in part by a conscious effort to make up for the heavy wartime losses and in part by a determination to secure as many laborers as possible while the federal government still tolerated the importation of slaves, reinforced this black isolation and sharply differentiated the low country from the Chesapeake, where the turn of the nineteenth century was a time of growing cultural interaction between white and black. During the late eighteenth century, notable features of low-country slave life—owner absenteeism, slave isolation, the task system, the internal slave economy—became more pronounced, even as Gullah took root as the embodiment of the region's cultural distinctiveness.

In the Chesapeake region, the war dealt an added blow to the already faltering tobacco economy and thus accentuated the surplus of slaves. Slack demand for slaves had many consequences, ranging from the proliferation of private manumissions to the cessation of African imports, but one of the most important was a relaxation in the severity of the slave regime and increased opportunity for individuals—especially males—to escape field work and engage in skilled occupations. In Maryland, according to historian Lorena S. Walsh, “ordinary field hands spent more time in self-sufficient activities such as gardening, hunting, and fishing,” while agricultural diversification led to a proliferation of new jobs. “By the end of the century many men were performing a greater variety of tasks,” she concluded, “and even on large plantations they sometimes worked on special projects by themselves or with only one or two mates and not always under constant supervision.”¹⁹ This relaxation was also facilitated by the increasingly creole character of upper-South slaves, whose behavior no longer seemed so “outlandish” to whites as did that of Africans. The largely acculturated slave population enjoyed considerably more “breathing space” than had Africans whose breaking in was thought to require careful supervision of every move.

Slaves who earned the trust of their masters often received increased freedom to dispose of their “spare” time. Those with particular skills were sometimes allowed to hire themselves out, contracting on their own and paying their masters a fixed weekly fee from their earnings, the remainder of which they kept. Far more common were slaves whose masters, having too many hands, hired them out for odd jobs or seasonal work. Although slaves who were hired out were not necessarily treated better than those who were not—hirers has less direct financial incentive than did owners to take good care of their laborers—slave hiring provided slaves with new experiences, contacts (white and black), and knowledge, and broadened their horizons. Trusted slaves visited friends and relatives on nearby holdings and also increasingly interacted with whites in the revival meetings that converted whites and blacks alike to evangelical Christianity. Increased freedom of action for slaves went hand in hand, ironically, with growing contact between white and black.

This loosening of controls in no way implies that slaves had come to accept their servitude, except in the sense that they made the best of the circumstances in which they found themselves. They continued to run away, with fugitives now for the first time having

explaining why his slaves had decreased in number from 172 in 1776 to 132 in 1789: 64 slaves had disappeared one night in 1779, and there followed "years of general . . . calamity, . . . in which all but the particular friends of the British thought themselves fortunate if they could raise provisions, and save their negroes from being carried off."⁸ When British forces evacuated Savannah and Charleston at the end of the war, some ten thousand blacks accompanied them. An uncertain future awaited them (and the thousands more removed from New York City): some died, some gained their freedom, and others wound up as slaves elsewhere (usually in the British West Indies).

Estimates vary on the number of people who escaped slavery during the Revolution. Allan Kulikoff has recently suggested that about five thousand slaves from the Chesapeake area and thirteen thousand from South Carolina reached the British, with smaller numbers from North Carolina and Georgia, for a total of some 5 percent of all Southern blacks. (These would have constituted considerably more than 5 percent of black adults and of black males, however, since young adult males were disproportionately represented among the fugitives.) But this figure represents only the tip of the iceberg. Many other slaves fled their owners but did not go over to the British. The extent of the loss to slave owners in the lower South is indicated by the sharp decline between 1770 and 1790 in the proportion of the population made up of blacks (almost all of whom were slaves): from 60.5 percent to 43.8 percent in South Carolina and from 45.2 percent to 36.1 percent in Georgia. Philip D. Morgan has estimated that during the Revolution, South Carolina lost about 25,000 slaves (or about 30 percent of the state's slave population) to flight, migration, and death. When one adds to these imprecise estimates the slaves who were freed by emancipation in the North and private manumissions in the South, one can begin to see the magnitude of the jolt the Revolution provided to American slavery.

The Revolutionary era also brought significant changes to the lives of slaves who did not run away, as both masters and bondpeople strove to make sense of radically new conditions. Some, especially in the North and the upper South, received (or were promised) their freedom (see section IV). Increased autonomy also characterized the daily lives of the majority of Southern blacks who remained slaves. This autonomy took strikingly different forms, however, in the upper and lower South.

wound up fighting the Patriots. At least forty-seven blacks served the British in a Hessian regiment; others worked as scouts, guides, and laborers.)

The destruction, confusion, and loss of authority that accompanied the war provided slaves with numerous opportunities to escape bondage. The absence of able-bodied white males and the proximity of enemy forces produced an abrupt decline in discipline on many farms and plantations throughout the South; slaves were emboldened, and masters complained of a breakdown of order and deference. No mass uprising of slaves occurred in the United States during the American Revolution, the way it did in Saint Domingue during the French, for American slaves lacked the overwhelming numerical advantage enjoyed by their Haitian cousins. Tens of thousands of slaves did, however, take advantage of the wartime disruption to run away. The fugitives faced varying fates.

Dunmore's proclamation unleashed massive flight among slaves in the upper South. On June 25, 1776, nine of Landon Carter's slaves, whom he denounced as "accursed villains," ran away at night, "to be sure," the planter guessed, "to Llord. Dunmore"; later he heard a rumor that minutemen shot and killed three of the fugitives. In part because the British governor lacked a land base after December 1775, only a relatively small number of slaves—the usual estimate is eight hundred—reached his forces, and most of these died from disease (especially smallpox); when Dunmore's fleet left the Potomac on August 6, 1776, it carried with it some three hundred fugitive slaves. But these represented only a small fraction of the slaves who had fled, and slaves continued throughout the war to seize any opportunity to run away. Jefferson's "Farm Book" lists some thirty slaves of his who escaped in 1781, with various descriptions such as "joined enemy" or "caught smallpox from enemy & died."⁷ Most fugitives fled individually or in very small groups, to avoid detection, but the turmoil and weakened authority that accompanied the Revolution made possible, for the last time until the Civil War, coordinated escapes of whole families and larger groups as well. Upon occasion the population of entire plantations, including all eighty-seven slaves owned by John Willoughby in Norfolk County, Virginia, ran away.

Because disruption was even greater in the lower South, so, too, was opportunity for flight. The scope of both is evident in testimony at the 1807 inventory of a deceased South Carolina planter's estate

was evident farther south; three months earlier, Patriots in Charleston had hanged and burned a free black harbor pilot suspected of helping slaves flee to British ships.

As this incident suggests, despite varying responses Americans were unable to come up with a satisfactory way of blunting the British appeal to their slaves. Virginia planter Robert Carter III warned his people that a British victory would result in their being sold into a far more oppressive slavery in the West Indies. A very different approach came from South Carolina Colonel John Laurens, who for both idealistic and pragmatic reasons proposed enrolling up to five thousand slaves in the Patriot army, with freedom promised for them at the war's end; the proposal—scaled back to three thousand slaves—won the eventual endorsement of the colonel's prominent father, Henry Laurens, but was defeated by the South Carolina legislature early in 1782. Some slaves did serve in the Patriot army: Maryland specifically authorized slave enlistments, and several states (North and South) allowed slaves to serve in place of their masters, usually with informal promises of subsequent freedom; New York offered freedom to slaves in return for three years of military service, with a compensatory land bounty to be paid to their owners. Small numbers of *free* blacks served in all states except South Carolina and Georgia, and a few bondsmen enlisted, pretending to be free. Most slaves, however, saw little reason to believe that the War for Independence was their war; it was important to them because it provided many with a new opportunity to escape their own thralldom, not because it pitted the forces of freedom against those of despotism.

Unable or unwilling to compete with the British for the loyalty of their slaves, Southern masters struggled to preserve a threatened way of life. In the Chesapeake region, British depredations of 1775, 1777, and 1781 intensified the existing economic crisis and induced some planters to flee with their slaves to the security of the backcountry or to Kentucky and Tennessee. Wartime destruction was greater still in the South Carolina and Georgia low country. First loyalist planters saw their property plundered by rebel forces; many Tories were able to evacuate their slaves to safer locales (including the West Indies), but others lost some or all of their holdings. Patriots suffered a similar fate after the British captured Savannah in 1778 and Charleston in 1780, and many of the loyalists returned—temporarily, it turned out—to reclaim their slaves. (Some of these slaves

monarchy and hereditary privilege. It is hardly surprising that these modern Renaissance thinkers also questioned slavery.

In America, these were also the men who led the movement for independence and have often been referred to as Founding Fathers. Usually members of the colonial elite, they included lawyers such as John Adams and self-educated artisan-intellectuals such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. In the South, however, they were most often wealthy planters. An extraordinary generation of planter-politicians—historian Clement Eaton termed it the “great generation”—led the American states to independence, created a new government, and dominated that government during its early years. Although they ranged from Maryland to Georgia, they were most concentrated in Virginia; one thinks immediately of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Patrick Henry (all among the largest slave owners of their day) but could easily add others, such as George Mason and Edmund Randolph. Although these leaders were part of an international community of intellectual-statesmen that even before the outbreak of the American Revolution had come to challenge the legitimacy of slavery, that Revolution would soon lead them to push their challenge substantially further.

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR had a major impact on slavery—and on the slaves. Wartime disruption undermined normal plantation discipline, and division within the master class offered slaves unprecedented opportunities that they were not slow in grasping. The Revolution posed the biggest challenge the slave regime would face until the outbreak of the Civil War some eighty-five years later; indeed, it appeared for a while as if the very survival of slavery in the new nation was threatened.

The British wasted little time in reaching out to the slaves as potential allies against the American rebels. On November 7, 1775, Virginia's Governor John Murray, Earl of Dunmore, issued a proclamation offering freedom to all slaves who would bear arms against the rebellion. Throughout the South, the offer raised understandable panic among slaveholders already fearful for the loyalty of their slaves; “if the Virginians are wise,” noted Washington, “that arch traitor . . . Dunmore should be instantly crushed.”⁶ Similar concern

"Negroes in Virginia" with Carter's wife (whom he greatly admired), he was pleased to find that "she esteems their value at no higher rate than I do." They agreed that if the slaves were sold, the money loaned out, and the land allowed to lie uncultivated, "the bare Interest of the price of the Negroes would be a much greater yearly income than what is now received from their working the Lands." Fithian's conclusion was pointed: "How much greater then must be the value of an Estate here if these poor enslaved Africans were all in their native desired Country, & in their Room industrious Tenants, who being born in freedom, by a laudable care, would not only enrich their Landlords, but would raise a hardy Offspring to be the Strength & the honour of the Colony."⁵

New religious developments provided a final source of anti-slavery thought. It is not always easy to isolate religious from other motivation in the second half of the eighteenth century, because people so commonly phrased other sentiments in religious terms; a thin line, for example, frequently separated economic law from natural law or divine law in the rhetoric of the time. Nevertheless, it is clear that the religious revivals that began with the Great Awakening in the 1740s and spread through much of the South in the 1770s and 1780s had a major impact on thinking about slavery. Not only did evangelical Christians show a new interest in the souls of the slaves, but they also often displayed real anguish about slavery itself. Especially in the upper South, Methodists and Baptists, who stressed humility, submission, and the equality of all souls before God, seemed ready during the last quarter of the eighteenth century to follow the Quakers into anti-slavery agitation.

Before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, then, slavery had emerged for the first time as a major issue. Although diverse strains of thought had converged to produce this development, they were in a broad sense related to each other. On both sides of the Atlantic, the third quarter of the eighteenth century saw a remarkable growth of intellectual activity among educated gentlemen—and a much smaller number of ladies—convinced that they represented the dawn of a bright new era. These gentlemen thought, wrote, and exchanged information about an extraordinary range of subjects, from the orbiting of planets and the taxonomy of animal species to human nature and ideal forms of government. Maintaining that the key to progress lay in reason, they questioned established beliefs, such as the divinity of Christ, and established institutions, such as

thority in favor of an "Inner Light" that would guide each individual to religion and morality; by the 1760s, most had come to view slavery as unethical. To Quakers, the slave represented the diametric opposite of the dependable, orderly, and industrious worker that they strove to create. As prominent Quaker abolitionist John Woolman put it, explaining his response in 1757 to a Virginian who insisted that blacks were too slothful to be free, "I replied, that free Men, whose Minds were properly on their Business, found a Satisfaction in improving, cultivating, and providing for their Families; but Negroes, labouring to support others who claim them as their Property, and expecting nothing but slavery during Life, had not the like Inducement to be industrious."⁴ Among Quakers, more than among any other group, environmentalism combined with a capitalist worldview and religious sensibilities to produce principled opposition to slavery.

More widespread was the related view that slavery was inefficient and socially degrading to society at large. The germs of the "free labor" critique of slavery that would be fully developed in antebellum years were already present in diverse strains by the middle of the eighteenth century. Planters as different as William Byrd II and Thomas Jefferson joined outside observers in worrying that growing up with slaves made white Southerners lazy, haughty, and overbearing. Others feared that white children would absorb the "brutish" behavior of the blacks who surrounded them and become degraded themselves. But it was the harmful economic impact of slavery that seemed most obvious of all. Planters had long lamented what they considered the slovenly work habits of their slaves, who needed to be coaxed and chided, bribed and beaten to engage in their everyday labor, and in times of pique they had wondered aloud whether plantation management was worth the effort. During the second half of the eighteenth century, such concern was exacerbated in the upper South by the crisis in the tobacco economy.

Economic hardship proved especially conducive to questioning established relations, including slavery; indeed, many outside observers, and some Southerners as well, blamed slavery itself for the economic hardship. New Jersey-born minister-in-training Philip Fithian, who spent 1773-74 in Virginia tutoring the children on Robert Carter III's Nomini Hall plantation, was no abolitionist, but he was convinced that slavery degraded the manners, morals, and work habits of whites and blacks alike. When he broached the subject of

emetician Benjamin Banneker received considerable attention during the late eighteenth century; even Thomas Jefferson, who had more doubts than many of his contemporaries about the intellectual potential of blacks and who dismissed Wheatley as a mediocre poet, was impressed by Banneker. "I am happy to be able to inform you that we have now in the United States a negro . . . who is a very respectable Mathematician," the Virginian wrote the Marquis de Condorcet in 1791. "I shall be delighted to see these instances of moral eminence so multiplied as to prove that the want of talents observed in them is merely the effect of their degraded condition, and not proceeding from any difference in the structure of the parts on which intellect depends."³

The spread of capitalism, and the new "dismal science" of economics that it spawned, contributed significantly to the questioning of slavery. Slavery lacked a basic ingredient of capitalism: the free hire of labor through mutual agreement of consenting parties. Substituting the physical coercion of the lash for the economic coercion of the marketplace, slavery thus did violence to the central values implicit in capitalist relations. While most late-eighteenth-century merchants only dimly perceived (or did not perceive at all) the conflict between slavery and a capitalist worldview, the logic of belief in free trade and the freedom of the individual to succeed—or fail—on the basis of one's own efforts inexorably led to challenges to slavery's legitimacy. Early political economists—including Adam Smith, whose book *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) remained for decades the most influential justification of the principles underlying capitalism—believed that slavery, by preventing the free buying and selling of labor power and by eliminating the possibility of self-improvement that was the main incentive to productive labor, violated central economic laws; like government regulation of wages, prices, and interest rates, slavery constituted an artificial restraint of trade.

The view that slavery was immoral because it violated fundamental economic law—which eighteenth-century thinkers almost invariably elevated to either natural or divine law—was especially prevalent among the Quakers, who in both Britain and America took the lead first in opposing slavery and then in organizing abolitionist groups to combat it. A small sect dominated by hardworking businessmen "distinguished by their mercantile wealth and above all by their entrepreneurial leadership," Quakers rejected religious au-

necessary first step in the overall challenge to slavery, because it involved the questioning of established practices; once begun, it was not always clear where such questioning would stop.

Take South Carolina planter and merchant Henry Laurens, whose letters during the 1740s and 1750s were filled with straightforward business comments on the buying and selling of Africans; "please to observe that prime People turn to best Account here," he wrote his supplier in 1757, that "the Males [are] preferable to the Females & that Callabars are not at all liked with us when they are above the Age of 18, Gambias or Gold Coast are prefer'd to others, Windward Coast next to them." By 1763, however, expressing qualms that were increasingly prevalent among others of his generation, Laurens had decided that he "would rather not pursue the African Trade" (although he did not immediately cease participating in it). Later in the year he went further still, agreeing with a Moravian missionary who had written to him complaining that children whose parents owned slaves grew up lazy; Laurens responded that he "wished that our oeconomy & government differ'd from the present system but alas—since our constitution is as it is, what can individuals do?"² Within a few years, in action highly atypical of whites in labor-hungry South Carolina, Laurens had moved beyond this cautious disquiet over slavery and decided that individuals could, in fact, make a difference; in 1779, he and his son John, both active Patriots, promoted an unusual (and ultimately unsuccessful) scheme to enroll in the Revolutionary army three thousand slaves who would be freed at the end of the war.

Among intellectuals, a spreading belief in human malleability sparked questions about the grounds for enslaving Africans. In the seventeenth century, English thinkers (on both sides of the Atlantic) had been struck by what they considered the savagery of Africans, and in the first half of the eighteenth century, many white Americans had come to see blacks as innately depraved, fit only for slavery. In the second half of the eighteenth century, however, growing awareness of the cultural diversity of peoples, accompanied by intense interest in the question of human nature, spawned new thinking on the question of black "depravity." Perhaps it was their slave status that created slave-like behavior, rather than the behavior that justified the status; if so, blacks removed from slavery would no longer act like slaves. Because discovery of talented blacks could confirm this environmentalist hypothesis, poet Phillis Wheatley and math-

its morality as well as its utility. This questioning of slavery, even when it did not lead to clear-cut support for universal emancipation, represented a significant departure from the general neglect of the subject that had previously prevailed. The challenge to an established institution in turn elicited vigorous protests from those convinced that their interests, and the social fabric in general, were being recklessly threatened.

A variety of factors converged, beginning in the third quarter of the eighteenth century and accelerating during the Revolutionary War, to produce this development. Perhaps most basic was a fundamental shift that occurred in the middle decades of the eighteenth century, under the influence of the Enlightenment, thought that flourished among Western European and American intellectuals, in attitudes toward cruelty, rights, fair play, and toleration of differences: in short, how human beings should treat one another. Because of this pervasive shift, these years must be regarded as a kind of watershed, separating the modern from the pre-modern eras. Seventeenth-century settlers in the colonies—and usually their children as well—lived in a world that took for granted stocks and tongue-borings, religious proscriptions, fear of witches, and savage repression of the lower orders. The Founding Fathers who led the American Revolution spoke instead of natural rights, political liberty, freedom of religion, and equality before the law. In this new intellectual climate, the treatment, and even the ownership, of slaves became a pertinent subject.

Especially significant were changing notions of what constituted legitimate treatment of those who were poor, weak, or different. A new concern for humane treatment—symbolized by the stricture in the Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution against “cruel and unusual punishments”—led to a sharp decrease in the use of corporal punishment on free adults. Although this decrease did not extend to slaves (or children), heightened attention to the mistreatment of slaves was evident both among outsiders shocked by the barbarities they witnessed and among resident masters concerned with the lives of their people. This opposition to the physical mistreatment of slaves did not necessarily lead to opposition to slavery itself; indeed, in the antebellum years, accentuating the humane treatment of slaves became a prime concern of the peculiar institution’s defenders, who believed that by softening slavery they would render it more secure. Still, attention to treatment was a

ery. For centuries, a wide range of social thinkers had seen the institution as fully compatible with human progress and felicity. Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke differed from one another in many ways, but the three, proponents respectively of reason, Christian theology, and liberty, agreed in finding slavery an acceptable part of the social order. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, only a handful of thinkers in the British colonies dared challenge this long-standing consensus; the most notable early criticism of slavery came from the pen of Massachusetts judge Samuel Sewall, whose cautious pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph* (1700) elicited an immediate and forceful rebuttal (*A Brief and Candid Answer*) from merchant-politician John Saffin. This was, however, an isolated exchange that made little impression upon contemporaries, few of whom bothered either to defend or to attack slavery. Largely taken for granted, the institution was simply not much of an issue for the white colonists.

Where slavery did compel attention, it was almost always over pragmatic considerations involving the utility of particular policies, not the morality of human bondage. The first substantial movement in defense of slavery occurred in newly settled Georgia, where for a variety of practical reasons—chief of which was concern that the Spanish in Florida would incite slave revolt among their neighbors to the north—an act of 1735 barred slaves from the colony; proponents of slavery, who stressed the necessity of black labor for the prosperity of the semitropical colony, carried the day by 1750, when the prohibition was lifted. Other colonists, however, worried about the threat to security posed by too many slaves. As planter William Byrd II noted in 1736, in praising Georgia's prohibition on slavery, too many slaves produced "the necessity of being severe," for "numbers make them insolent" and their "base Tempers require to be rid with a tort Reign, or they will be apt to throw their Rider." Lamenting that "this is terrible to a good naturd Man," Byrd opined that "the farther Importation of them in Our Colonys should be prohibited lest they prove as troublesome and dangerous everywhere, as they have been lately in Jamaica."¹ Precisely such fears—supplemented by the desire to raise money—prompted several colonies to pass import duties on slaves, beginning in the 1690s.

In the Revolutionary era, slavery for the first time became a serious social issue. Relatively few people called for its immediate abolition, but many, including some slave owners, expressed real concern over

The American Revolution

I

THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA witnessed the first major challenge to American slavery. Almost overnight, it seemed, an institution that had long been taken for granted came under intense scrutiny and debate: critics questioned its efficacy and morality, proponents rushed to its defense, and thousands of slaves took advantage of wartime turmoil to flee their bondage. Tangible results of this challenge included the abolition of slavery in the North, a sharp increase in the number of free blacks in the upper South, and the ending of the African slave trade. Despite these developments, however, slavery in the Southern states emerged from the agitation of the era largely unscathed. Indeed, for all the talk of natural rights, manumission, and abolishing imports from Africa, the slave population of the new nation in 1810 was more than twice what it had been in 1770.

II

UNTIL THE MIDDLE of the eighteenth century there was little questioning in the colonies—or anywhere else, for that matter—of slav-