

30 The King and His People



A coffer is a walking jail made by shackling people with wrist and leg irons and chaining them together. Slaves ate and slept in the chains.

The cotton gin was invented in 1793. The Civil War—also called the War Between the States—began in 1861.

Andrew Jackson, as you know, became president; John Calhoun was an important senator; and Jefferson Davis was president of the Confederate states—the South—during the Civil War.

It was a king who was messing things up. The Founders had warned about kings. But they were thinking of those fellows on the English throne. It never occurred to them that tyrannical monarchs might take other forms.

This king was called Cotton. King Cotton sat on his throne for about 60 years: from the time Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin until the terrible war between the states.

Cotton's throne was built of the arms, legs, backs, and hearts of Americans—

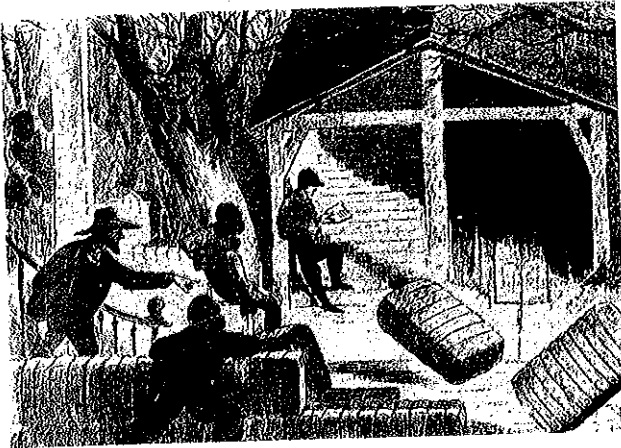
black Americans—who did all the hard work in the king's empire.

The South that King Cotton ruled was different from the South of the 18th-century tobacco and rice planters. King Cotton's South was a new South, with new lands and new names. It grew fast, very fast, from the frontier lands of the former colonies, to the new states of Mississippi and Louisiana, and on to Texas. Wherever land was cheap and cotton would grow there were men eager to make their fortunes.

Most of the newly rich men—the princes that King Cotton crowned—were frontier boys, born in log cabins. These new plantation owners imitated the style of the Virginia and South Carolina aristocrats, but had the energy and ruthlessness of the backwoods. Andrew Jackson was one of them, John C. Calhoun another, and Jefferson Davis yet another.

They were smart, and lucky, too. Each of them bought a little land, worked it, bought a slave or two, worked them, bought more land, and soon had a whole plantation.

There weren't many big plantation owners, but they set the tone for the South. Most of the population was made up of yeoman farmers: people who owned small farms, as Northern farmers did. Most



Some dangerous jobs were done by white people; slaves were too valuable to risk damaging them.

Yeomen didn't have slaves, though a few owned a slave or two. In addition, there were poor whites, who had enough to eat and

not much more. At the bottom of the ladder were the slaves, who were owned by people who talked of liberty.

It was a slow-paced region, where crops grew easily. And that made the South a leisurely place. Perhaps because of that people had time to be polite and kindly—and they were. They had time to tell stories. Southerners were among the best storytellers in the nation. Some say it was the Southern land that made people tell stories—a land of dreamy mists and fogs and mysterious forests where Spanish moss hangs on the trees like lacy gray curtains. Walk in woods like that and you may see goblins and spooks and little people; soon you'll think up your own stories.

Black Southerners told some stories that they brought from their African homelands. And others—like those of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox—were made up here.

There is something else about the Old South that I need to mention. It had a tradition of violence: duels were frequent and so were lynchings. In the 20 years from 1840 to 1860, 300 people were lynched by mobs in Southern states. (To *lynch* means to "kill without a fair trial.") Most of those lynched were white. There was almost no lynching of slaves—they were worth money.

If you want to understand about slavery and the conflict between blacks and whites, you will need to do a lot of reading and thinking. Especially if you want to be fair.

"Simon has permission to sell Turkeys, Eggs &c."
A slave had to have a permission slip to travel or sell goods in the market.

Simon has permission to sell Turkeys, Eggs
Feb 14th 1854
John Triffin

This was a slave song:

We raise the wheat,
They give us the corn;
We bake the bread,
They give us the crust;
We sift the meal,
They give us the husk;
We peel the meat,
They give us the skin;
And that's the way
They take us in.

Some words from another slave song:

Rabbit in the briar patch,
Squirrel in the tree,
Wish I could go hunting,
But I ain't free.

The big bee flies high,
The little bee makes the honey.

The black folks make the cotton
And the white folks get the money.

The word **lynch** came into English about 1830, after John Lynch, a Virginia justice of the peace, set up his own trials and executed people without *due process of law*.



At a slave auction, husbands could be sold away from wives or mothers from babies.

One day my mammy did something and old master...took a leather strap and whooped her. I remember that I started crying.
—OLIVER BELL, REMEMBERING SLAVERY IN ALABAMA

like to be owned, even by someone nice? And always, behind the sweet-smelling magnolia trees and the white-columned mansions, there were chains, whips, and guns. There would have been no slavery without them.

Remember, in the time of George Washington most Southern whites hadn't liked slavery; they just didn't know how to end a bad system. As time went on, Southerners tried to tell each other that slavery was all right. They said that God had created some people to be slaves. They said black people weren't as smart as white people. Then, to make that true, they passed laws that said it was a crime to teach any black person to read and write. One white woman in Norfolk, Virginia, who taught some free blacks in her home, was arrested and spent a month in jail. Can you see what was happening? Whites were losing their freedom, too.

Ending the Slave Trade

Article I, Section 9 of the Constitution said that the slave trade could not be prohibited by Congress until 1808. President Thomas Jefferson knew that time would soon arrive. Would Congress pass laws to end the trade in human beings? In his annual presidential message to Congress and the people, Jefferson said: *I congratulate you, fellow citizens, on the approach of the*

period at which you may interpose your authority constitutionally to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa. That means citizens could now demand that Congress introduce a bill ending the slave trade. On January 1, 1808, it was done.

You will read tales of kind masters and happy slaves and you will read stories of viciousness, cruelty, and abuse. There is both truth and exaggeration in most of those stories.

Yes, there was terrible, brutish, inexcusable meanness in slavery. But most slave owners—even if they were cruel—thought of their slaves as valuable property. They might beat them, but they tried not to do them serious harm. They needed to keep their property healthy.

Yes, there were kind slave owners who cared for the people they owned and treated them well. There was genuine affection between blacks and whites. But how would you

The slaves' battle for liberty is the next act in the drama that began with the Declaration of Independence and those noble words *all men are created equal*. It will help free all Americans. The curtain won't come down with the end of slavery. The freedom drama will continue. Women will demand an act, and Native Americans. Can you think of others who will take roles as freedom fighters? Is there still a part for you to play?