

The Cultural Divide

According to an 1850 census, the US population was 23,191,867 – up from 13 million in 1830. And the 1850s was a decade of more population growth for the North. According to the 1860 census, the US population was 31,443,321 – an increase of 39 percent in one decade.

In 1860, the South had about 8 million whites, compared to about 20 million in the North.

Southerners complained of the advantage that the North had in attracting immigrants – although the North with its different kind of economy could absorb the increase of free people better than could the South. What Southern planters wanted was more slaves. Cotton production had been growing, from 160 million pounds in 1820 to around one billion in 1850, and to 2.3 billion pounds in 1860 – a growth of 230 percent in the 1850s.

The number of slaves in the US at the beginning of the century was 1.2 million. According to the 1860 census it was 3,953,760, almost all in the South. In the US, slave mortality rates had been exceeding slave birth rates, and the growth in slave population was dependent on the illegal importing of new slaves from Africa. The United States and most Western nations had declared the slave trade with Africa to be piracy and punishable by death, but only the British had been seriously combating the trade. From 1843 to 1857 the US had seized only 19 ships transporting slaves, and of those 19 only 6 were prosecuted. The British in this same period had seized nearly 600 ships and had prosecuted all but 38.

The North and South were different in a variety of ways. The North, especially New England, had greater percentage of middleclass people. It had more small manufacturing industries, capitalists and banking. By 1840 there were 1,200 cotton-goods factories in the United States, two-thirds of them in New England, which was importing cotton from the South and using water power from its rivers. By 1850 the North had more than 1,500 woolen mills, most of them individually owned, producing blankets, flannel and worsteds. Firearms and furniture were being produced in the North. There were boot makers and shoemaking – a winter occupation for New England farmers and fishermen. And people were investing in labor saving machinery – advancing

technology in order to reduce manual labor or labor costs.

New England was also the heart of sea born commerce in the United States. By the late 1840s, ships powered by steam engines were replacing sailing ships in hauling freight and passengers across the Atlantic Ocean, the new technology and competition reducing shipping rates. Foreign commerce grew dramatically in the 1840s and 1850s. The North was manufacturing power looms and exporting them to Europe. Ships owned by Northerners were shipping the South's cotton to Europe, mainly to Britain – cotton being two-thirds of US exports.

Northern communities were an anthill of activity. There were not yet many city parks, pleasure resorts, or much game playing. The Puritan work ethic prevailed, people working long hours and six days per week. College rowing teams was the only competitive sport, the average adult seeing leisure and games as a waste of time. But oddity shows had begun – the Jerry Springer shows of that time but with real freaks, some fake freaks and dwarfs – as had been practiced by kings. Orchestras were beginning to appear in the bigger cities, and operas were performed, while in New England the name "theater" was in bad repute and the names "museum" or "athenaeum" were used instead.

In the 1850s a boom in railroad development across the North was changing business organization and management and reducing freight costs. Railroads were influencing a rise in real estate values, increasing regional concentrations of industry, the size of business units and stimulating growth in investment banking and agriculture. Wheat production was moving westward with the rail lines. The federal government was granting federal lands to states for building railroads, and railroad companies were selling their land grants they had received from the federal government to individuals as farm sites.

The Northern economy was still largely farming – small farms – with adolescents having time for fishing and hunting. The North was growing mainly food, and farmers were investing in steel plows and mechanical reapers, which were reducing the labor and time required to plant and harvest.

In the North was still plenty of misery. Plumbing – what there was of it - froze in the winter, and in the 1850s most homes were still heated by wood or coal in open furnaces. Cooking used the same fuel, while whale oil was being used in lamps in the cities and candles were still

being used in rural areas. Health care was still largely in a realm of ignorance, with no one knowing how to cure tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria, yellow fever, typhus and other diseases. But in the North was some optimism, with predictions that electricity and machinery would be transforming life and relieving mankind of drudgery.

New England was more devoted to education than was the South. Of the nation's 321 public high schools only 30 were in the South. In the South the sons of the poor were likely to receive no education. Illiteracy was more common in the South. Education there was more for the gentry, and teaching tended to be private.

The South worked slaves in mining, ironworks and on the railroads, but the South was more of an agricultural society, with more of a division between a landed gentry and their poorer, often barefoot, cousins. Women were viewed differently. In New England, women were more active and hard working, a few of them becoming doctors, writers or activists in their church. Women of the landed gentry in the South were put on pedestals, and they had slaves to do their work. The Southern gentry was more into fox hunting, horseracing, and into dueling, for which the Puritans of New England had scorn. The South had a higher percentage of horsemen and soldiers than did the North.

Southerners looked askance at developments in the North. They disliked the increase in loudness of Puritanism's proclamations in the 1850s. They disliked the Puritan strictures and prohibitions against a good drink, strong language and fun on Sundays. They believed more in leisure than did the Puritans, and they were aided in this by milder winters.

Southerners were investing in slaves rather than in machines. Planters were interested in the size of their holdings rather than in cash to invest elsewhere in the economy, and those with a good spread of land were more happy to break even than were the capitalists of New England. Southerners looked upon New Englanders -- whom they called Yankees -- as greedy and boorish -- as did some in the North outside of New England. People in slave-owning families did not have the same work ethic as Northerners. Planters were borrowing from New England banks in order to do their spring planting and they had little love for their creditors.

Professionals in the South were little interested in becoming investors in

the economy in general. Instead of becoming Yankee-like, they dreamed of buying land and a few slaves and retiring as a Southern gentleman on their small plantation. Only 25 percent of Southerners owned slaves. Most slave owners owned fewer than five slaves, and only 12 percent of Southerners had twenty or more slaves. Many whites who had no slaves looked with envy upon the wealthy, and to a degree admired them. The poor scraped hard on little plots of land for subsistence. They knew how hard the plantation slaves were driven, and there was sympathy for the slave in this regard, but they did not want to see the slaves freed. Similar to most Northerners, they saw themselves as superior to black people, and the Southern poor drew some comfort from their belief that they were not on the bottom of society's hierarchies. And with large numbers of slaves nearby, the Southern poor feared that if the slaves were freed they would overrun, steal from and perhaps murder them.

In the North was a general dislike of slavery but little favor in coercing the South into freeing the slaves. Abolitionists were a minority – and more in New England than elsewhere in the North. But there was also hostility toward slavery from abroad, and it reached its peak in the 1850s. Britain had ended slavery in the 1830s, and France in 1848. Outside of the South, only two major powers still had legal slavery: Spain in its colonies, notably Cuba; and Brazil.

Southerners were moved by arguments that countered the rising hostility toward slavery in the 1840s and 1850s -- arguments led by the South's religious leaders. The religious denomination of the planters was largely Episcopalian, which was more ritualistic (liturgical) and more hierarchical and conservative than the Congregationalists of New England -- whose tradition was more hostile toward aristocracy and in the 1850s decidedly anti-slavery. The North and South had common religious denominations, such as the Methodists and Baptists, but social and economic circumstances had split the way they viewed the world and had split these denominations into Northern and Southern halves.

The interconnection between the economies of the North and South mollified the differences in opinion for some Northerners. Commerce was peace-minded, and among manufactures in the New England was a tendency to avoid the slavery issue. They wanted no irreparable split from their source of cotton. And Northerners had an interest in keeping the South as a good customer of its food and manufactured products. The South grew more cotton than food and was importing its food from

the North. The South bought its shoes from the North, much of their weaponry, and it rode on carriage wheels produced in the North. The federal government had high tariffs on products from Europe which protected the North's markets in the South, in addition to supplying the government with 85 to 90 percent of its revenues. (There was as yet no federal income tax.)

In the North were people who feared that with secession and no more tariff barriers, the South would start buying from Britain. And it was feared that secession might also be accompanied by a repudiation of debts owned by Southerners.

Southern states, meanwhile, were tied together economically as well as culturally. Virginia and Kentucky grew little cotton, but these two states were supplying the cotton states with food, mules, iron products and other goods.

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