Chapter One

The Urban Perimeter

By 1860 slavery was disintegrating in Southern cities. Forty years earlier, the institution had seemed as stable and vigorous in town as in country. Slaves comprised at least 20 per cent of the population of the major cities. In most places the proportion was much higher, and in Charleston blacks outnumbered whites. Slaves handled the bulk of domestic drudgery; worked in shops and factories; built the streets, bridges, and municipal installations; some even acquired mechanical skills. Within four decades, however, the picture had changed dramatically. In the border cities the institution had nearly disappeared altogether; farther south it had diminished in extent and vitality. Everywhere proportionately, and in many places absolutely, the number of town slaves declined. In the countryside slavery still appeared stable and successful, but wherever it touched urban conditions it was in deep trouble.

A Kentuckian observed in 1848 that "slavery exists in Louisville and St. Louis only in name," for "there are two things that always, and under all circumstances, abrogates slavery. The first is a dense population, . . . the next [is] the intelligence of slaves. Both of these are silently and imperceptibly working their legitimate results." [1] A Louisiana planter, who was also a frequent visitor to New Orleans, had noticed this same process: "Slavery is from its very nature eminently patriarchial and altogether agricultural. It does

not thrive with master or slave when transplanted to cities."[2] Probably the best Northern student of the South, Frederick Law Olmsted, made the same point in 1857. "Servile labor must be unskilled labor," he wrote, "and unskilled labor must be dispersed over land, and cannot support the concentrated life nor amass the capital of cities."[3] And those Negroes who had known bondage in both town and country perhaps understood the problem best. One of them, Frederick Douglass, stated it simply, "Slavery dislikes a dense population."[4]

But what became clear in 1860 was not apparent forty years earlier. In 1820, slavery was as much a part of life in the city as on farm and plantation. In fact, some municipal officials expressed anxiety over the rapid increase in colored townspeople. And surely no one questioned the adaptability of slavery to the urban milieu. Yet experience ultimately proved this assumption mistaken. For, as the cities grew, they produced conditions which first strained, then undermined, the regime of bondage in the South's metropolises.

II

Though the South was primarily rural before the Civil War, it did not lack important cities. Resting on its irregular perimeter were New Orleans, Mobile, Savannah, Charleston, Richmond, Baltimore, Louisville, and St. Louis. These seaports and river towns sent Dixie's produce to the outside, distributed necessary imports to the countryside, and formed enclaves of cosmopolitan life in a generally agricultural society. Scattered across the interior were smaller places, usually state capitals or trading towns, with more than local importance. Then, too, there was Washington, the nation's capital but still very much a regional city. In fact, on the eve of the

Civil War the census listed 30 places of over 8000 inhabitants throughout the South.

Taken together, these urban centers contained only a small part of the South's population, yet their influence was much greater than their numbers. De Bow, writing in 1860, was impressed by their constantly widening significance: "Within the last forty years country life has quietly and almost imperceptibly undergone great changes." These changes consisted "in the country having become more and more dependent on the town. Whether in pursuit of business, pleasure, or information, men leave the country and visit some neighboring city." "Our bodies," he concluded somewhat wistfully, "are in the country, our souls in town."[5]

New Orleans was the largest city of the deep South. It also seemed to many the least American. Founded by the French in 1718, it retained an intensely European flavor even a half century after the Louisiana Purchase. The "old quarter" in 1860 still reminded people of parts of Paris, with its "French noises and French smells, [and] French signs."[6] But beyond Canal Street, dubbed by residents "the Rubicon," was the newer and American section. There Southern architecture suggested native dominance; but the large number of Germans, Irish, and Spanish gave the area a cosmopolitan complexion. "It is unlike any other city in the Union, being foreign in air, in customs, and mainly in population," wrote one visitor.[7] Or, as an early gazetteer put it, "it is a world in miniature."[8]

New Orleans's initial growth under the American flag had been modest, but by the late 'twenties it began an extraordinary expansion. In 1831 William Gilmore Simms could observe that it had "grown prodigiously—perhaps its increase in wealth, population, and business generally, since 1825, is without parallel in the United States."[9] The census figures confirmed this enthusiasm as the population surged from

nearly thirty thousand to over one hundred thousand. A decade later, an exhilarated De Bow could predict that New Orleans "will be indeed to the Father of Rivers, 'as London to the Thames, and Paris to the Seine.'" [10] On the eve of the war, the city counted 168,675 residents.

New Orleans owed its success to its location at the foot of the great river system that drained half the continent. From this strategic spot it handled most of the sugar from Louisiana, cotton from the Southwest, and grain and livestock from the interior. To its wharves came goods from the North, from Europe, Latin America, and the Orient. At the busy season the docks seethed with activity. "The very air howls with an eternal din and noise," a visitor remarked with wonder in 1847. "Drays and wagons of all descriptions, loaded with the produce of every clime, move on continually in an unbroken chain. Ships from every nation, whose masts tower aloft in a dense forest for five miles. . . . Steamboats, and crafts of every make and shape, from every river which empties into the Mississippi are here mingling in the strife of commerce." [11] Another Southerner rhapsodically pronounced the scene as without historical parallel. "Tyre nor Carthage, Alexandria nor Genoa," he wrote, "those aforetime imperial metropoles of merchant princes, boasted no quay like the Levee of New Orleans." [12]

By the late 'twenties the town's exports were second largest in the nation, and for a few years in the late 'thirties and early 'forties it actually surpassed New York. "No city in the world has ever advanced as a mart of commerce with such gigantic and rapid strides, as New Orleans," wrote De Bow, the town's leading booster, in 1846. "In 40 years she has become the fourth city of the world . . . for the magnitude and value of her commerce." [13] And the future seemed unlimited. George Washington Cable, who grew up there in these years, remembered how this development bred "an overweening

confidence in the ability of the city to become speedily and without exertion the metropolis of America, if not eventually of the world." [14]

These expansive dreams, however, were dashed in the next decade. The rate of growth slackened, and though population and trade continued to rise, New Orleans could not match the pace of its competitors across the country. Nevertheless, on the eve of the Civil War, the city ranked sixth in the nation's urban sweepstakes.

One hundred and fifty miles to the east was Mobile, a few years older but considerably smaller than New Orleans. Situated on a bay between the mouth of the Alabama River and the Gulf of Mexico, it had been transformed by cotton from a drowsy little town into a bustling port. French and Spanish at the beginning, it remained so for almost a century, and despite its transformation a visitor occasionally could be struck by the colonial legacy. "The names of the streets are Frenchy," a visitor from Ohio wrote in his diary in 1858. "Dauphin, Royal, Conti, St. Joseph. St. Louis, St. Michael and plenty of other saints." [15] Continuity, too, could be found in a few old families and a sprinkling of creoles and in the "mingled traces of the manners and language of the French and Spaniards." [16] But fundamentally Mobile's population, appearance, and spirit were thoroughly American, if not peculiarly Southern. [17]

The Alabama port's progress dated from its annexation to the United States. Watching its advance, *Niles' Register* asserted in 1822 that "*Mobile* is becoming a place of great importance" and "may soon be one of the most populous of our Southern cities." In just nine years it had grown from "less than 300 inhabitants" to 2800. [18] "We have never witnessed such an influx of strangers as is now pouring into our city," boasted the *Commercial Register* in 1833. And the people kept coming. Two years later, the same editor reported that "the

city is at this moment one-fourth larger than it was twelve months since." [19] In 1840 the census showed over twelve thousand residents, and two decades later it had reached nearly thirty thousand.[20]

The city's ante-bellum boom sprang from the immense productivity of the cotton hinterland. "The great business of the town," Olmsted observed, "is the transfer of cotton, from the producer to the manufacturer, from the wagon and steamboat to the seagoing ship." [21] Indeed, the crop seemed to command every aspect of Mobile's life. A sojourning Briton spoke of the port as a place where "people live in cotton houses and ride in cotton carriages. They buy cotton, sell cotton, think cotton, eat cotton, drink cotton, and dream cotton. They marry cotton wives, and unto them are born cotton children. . . . It has made Mobile, and all its citizens." [22] The crop, another visitor asserted, was "the mighty pivot upon which the business of this city of 30,000 inhabitants revolves." [23]

Built on commerce, too, though facing the Atlantic rather than the Gulf, was Savannah, Georgia's major port and one of the South's most enterprising entrepots. Founded in 1733 by James Oglethorpe, it stood sixteen miles up the river from the ocean, and was English in background and experience. A unique plan had fixed the development of the city around a series of charming little parks which gave the place "a curiously rural and modest aspect." [24] Its sandy streets, kept unimproved presumably for reasons of health, fortified the impression. But the small-town flavor could not conceal the intensely commercial character of a people who prided themselves on their industry and aggressiveness. Occupying, as a traveler noted, "the primal and efficient seat . . . of the energy of Georgia," they advertised themselves as "plain, old fashioned, hard working men and women, who . . . transact business before 8 o'clock a.m." [25]

Though an old city, Savannah rose to importance in Dixie

in the years just before the war. In 1820 Savannah had only 7523 residents, very gradually increasing in the following decade. But by 1840 the figure climbed to over eleven thousand, moved beyond fifteen thousand at the next census, and reached over twenty thousand by 1860. While this growth seemed modest by the lusty Western standards of the time, it nonetheless was a notable achievement to triple population within forty years.

In fact, its aggressiveness had brought it early fame. In 1818 Savannah sent a steamship bearing the city's name on a pioneer, if unprofitable, trip to Liverpool. Fifteen years later, the city started a railroad venture into the uplands. A visiting New Yorker who watched this project remarked years later that it demonstrated "a spirit of enterprise that could honor any place in the country. While containing less than eight thousand people, black and white," he concluded, "it projected and completed . . . a railroad 190 miles in length, to Macon, at that time the longest railroad in the country." [26]

This mercantile audacity paid off. Not only did it sustain a growing population, but the inland trade strengthened every aspect of the city's economy. By 1860 the value of cotton exports alone amounted to over $17 million.[27] Manufacturing, too, felt the stimulus, but without the fanfare of commerce. A municipal official observed in 1848 that "this increase of steam power has been so noiseless" that most residents "will be surprised to learn that of the *eighteen* establishments propelled by steam, *fourteen* of them have been erected within the last ten years." Nearly every indicator carried good news. "Her growing population—the great increase of the mechanical arts—the extended use of steam as applied to mills, presses, and other useful employments—" the same source asserted, "are all evidence of a healthful state of the body politic." [28] "She has both the power and inclination," a visitor contended,

"to maintain her position in the struggle for commercial supremacy now going on among Southern cities." [29]

Savannah depended on cotton no less than Mobile. The great staple came to the docks from nearly every direction and in every kind of conveyance. The river, of course, brought most, but by the 1850's other carriers shared the commerce. "Daily," said one observer, "nine trains came down the Central Railroad . . . with from twenty to thirty cars in each train, loaded mountain high with this article. The depots and plank yards, covering several acres, were groaning constantly under the immense burden, while long trains of horse teams" moved to the commission houses. The "spacious and elegant" homes of successful merchants and factors combined with "large and well filled" stores to demonstrate that many Savannahians profited considerably by this activity.[30] Indeed, as cotton-growing moved to the interior, mercantile leaders chased the trade with railroads and river steamboats.

One hundred miles up the coast was Charleston, oldest and proudest metropolis in Dixie. By 1860 it was no longer the largest or richest, but it still claimed to be the "capital of the South." Acutely conscious of a colonial past that stretched back to 1680 and of earlier days when it ranked among the nation's most important cities, Charleston sought to preserve its supremacy through political and cultural leadership. This was no easy task, for the competitors, old and new, proved many. Yet Charleston had substantial assets. Set on a tongue of land between the Ashley and Cooper rivers, it had easy access to the back country. Its spacious harbor could accommodate most of the Atlantic's shipping at one time. Its climate and beauty, moreover, made it the favorite resort of the rice and cotton planters, who built expensive and tasteful town houses on the blue bay and gave a special polish and sophistication to Charleston society.

The celebrated ease and leisure of aristocratic life, however,

could not conceal the growing difficulties of the city. De Bow, who had lived in both Charleston and New Orleans, could not help but contrast the development of the two places. "When the Crescent City consisted of a few huts on the low lands of the Mississippi, her sister of the Palmetto State was reveling in the riches of foreign commerce, and in all affluence and prosperity," he wrote in 1846. "But now the vision is changed. The noble city on the banks of the Cooper and Ashley looks back to the past with lingering regret," as the Louisiana port forged ahead.[31] From being the nation's fifth largest metropolis in 1810, Charleston dropped to twenty-second in 1860. Its supremacy in the South, moreover, slipped away with the rise of other urban centers.

This descent was relative, not absolute. In the forty years after 1820 the city nearly doubled its population, reaching forty thousand by the Civil War. By 1850 it had annexed the "Neck," a suburb on its only land boundary, which opened up possibilities of further expansion. Yet the growth was never substantial or sustained.[32]

This record of modest growth in a period of immense national urban expansion hurt both the pocketbooks and pride of the people. "Civis," writing in the *City Gazette* in 1824, drew a portrait that would be familiar to a generation of antebellum residents: "Charleston and neck present at this moment, a most gloomy and desponding picture; where scenes of industry, activity and growing prosperity were of late so apparent; where once reigned wealth and happiness, nothing now is to be found, but indolence, apathy, poverty and misery." [33] In 1835 another wrote with irritation that "the South alone, and Carolina and Charleston in particular, appear to be standing still, slumbering in a sleepy hollow, or 'going ahead' in such small movements as scarcely to be perceptible." [34] The changes were so slight during the next decade that one resident asserted that "but for two conflagrations which swept

off many of her old houses" the city even looked the same.[35] The 'fifties proved generally no better. When war came in 1861, the economic memory of most Charlestonians revolved around stagnation and hard times.

The "capital of the South" did not submit tamely to this "premature decay." [36] In the decades before the Civil War business leaders experimented with manufacturing, merchants sought markets in the Ohio Valley, and local officials tried to improve commercial contacts with Europe and the Caribbean. In fact, for a period Charleston's railroad to Augusta was the longest such enterprise in the world. Yet these projects were only partially successful, for the economic tides of the time were running away from the Carolina entrepot. Cotton moved westward, upcountry agriculture languished, and the mountains shut off the transappalachian trade. By the 1850's it was no longer possible to hide the decline. "I was disappointed," a British traveler wrote candidly, "by the general appearance of this capital of the South. On the whole, it has a somewhat poverty-struck look." [37]

Richmond was the only state capital among Dixie's major cities. It was also the only major industrial one. Located on the James River at the head of navigation, it had centered its early hopes on trade. But gradually manufacturing and political affairs became the more important interests. Factories and warehouses crowded along the river bank, their dull brick shells at once ugly and impressive. Farther back from the water stood the Capitol building, "an imposing Grecian edifice, standing alone, and firmly placed on open and elevated ground, in the center of town." Generous private mansions downtown attested to its wealth, but Richmond seemed less Southern than the coastal towns, and reminded visitors of Northern and British cities. "It is a metropolis," Olmsted wrote, "and, of course, the tide of modern life elsewhere reaches it, stirs it, and here and there possesses it." [38]

The strong manufacturing emphasis fortified this impression. As the nation's tobacco center, it stored and processed immense quantities every year. Its Tredegar Iron Company was renowned not only because of its success, but because it employed black labor, which permitted local enthusiasts to proclaim that it was possible to have slavery and industry too. And just beyond the city's edge were extensive coal fields, ready to feed Richmond's furnaces as well as to provide fuel for New York, Baltimore, and Newark.[39] Olmsted first saw the town "through a cloud of bituminous smoke," and recalled "the sensation produced by a similar *coup d'oeil* of Edinburg." [40] Commerce still played an important role in the life of the Virginia capital, but townspeople and visitors alike preferred to think of it as the manufacturing heart of Dixie.

Yet Richmond shared many of Charleston's problems. As the focus of Southern life moved westward, Virginia, too, suffered. The Old Dominion increasingly felt its economic and political power and its national prestige slipping away. "My pride has been humbled by her decline," one "patriot" confessed in 1828, "and I could weep for her fallen greatness." [41] The fears were worse, however, than the facts. The city continued to grow even during depressions, though the pace was not dramatic. From some twelve thousand residents in 1820, the population increased four thousand in the next decade and reached twenty thousand by 1840. Local boosters usually included the suburbs in their estimates, thus adding considerably to the official figures. In 1839 the newspapers claimed 26,000 for the metropolitan area, leading a friendly neighbor to write that "she is going ahead with accumulating velocity," which he thought especially remarkable because until recently "she was in that lethargic condition so characteristic of Southern cities in the same period." [42] On the eve of the Civil War the population had jumped to nearly thirty-eight thousand.[43]

On the northeast corner of the South stood Baltimore and Washington—the former a thriving port and commercial center whose phenomenal rise after its incorporation in 1782 had threatened Philadelphia and concerned New York; the other growing steadily if not spectacularly as the national capital. Both were essentially Southern in population and institutions. Indeed, in 1860, the Maryland port's 212,000 people made it the largest in Dixie and the country's fourth city; and Washington's 61,000 thrust it ahead of the older cities of the South Atlantic states.

On the upper periphery of the South were two other large urban centers, Louisville and St. Louis. Just across the river from each lay free territory, areas connected with the city in every important way but one—the institution of slavery. Indeed, in settlement and growth the two places were Western not Southern. It was only after the emergence of slavery as a divisive issue that the perspective changed. And, ironically, the shift took place at the very time when slavery itself was virtually disappearing from both towns. Yet in 1860 each had some Negro slaves, and as a Louisville editor put it, their "prejudices, interests and feelings" were "extremely Southern." [44]

Louisville grew up at the Falls of the Ohio, the spot where the water strikes irregular shoals that force a break in transportation. The city early provided the facilities for moving goods and people around the hazard. From its founding in 1778 until the opening of the Louisville and Portland Canal in 1830, nearly all the riverborne commerce of the West passed through its hands.[45] Even after the canal broke the initial monopoly, the town's strategic position permitted a generous prosperity.[46]

Louisville's early interest was trade. In fact, in 1836 Gabriel Collins's *Directory* observed that the town depended "almost entirely upon . . . commerce." "No other city perhaps in the

world," he continued, "with such a large commercial business, has a population so small, or employs as little capital in other occupations." [47] This mercantile concentration later proved to be a liability, however, for when the panic of 1837 struck the Kentucky entrepot it did real damage. The census figures which had recorded constant gains in 1820 and 1830 suddenly dropped by five thousand.[48]

Yet soon the old pace was renewed. By 1850 the population had reached over forty thousand, and ten years later it increased to nearly seventy thousand.[49] "It has grown withall at a Western rapidity," Olmstead noted, having "great business, both as an entrepot and as itself, a manufacturing producer." Though "without the whirr of Cincinnati" or the charm of New Orleans, Louisville represented "a good specimen of a brisk and well-furnished city." [50]

St. Louis was both a northern and western outpost of the ante-bellum South. Born in 1764 of French fur-trading activity, it was situated just below the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri. Set aside the great waterways of the central continent, it early thrived on an almost imperial commerce. The coming of the steamboat greatly enhanced its growth and importance. Nearly every hour, the *Missouri Republican* observed in 1855, "some gallant steamer" plows "the waves of the Mississippi, bringing from the North, as far as St. Paul—from the West, beyond the Yellow Stone—from the South, almost to the Gulf, and from the Ohio to the very confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela, the products of the richest and most improved country in the world." On the levee "the genius, enterprise and diversified interests of the nation" were represented. "The sugars of the South lay mingled with the cereals of the North, and the manufactures of civilization contrasted with the peltries of the Indian." [51]

Nor was this merely parochial enthusiasm. *De Bow's Review* was at least as buoyant, claiming that "St. Louis is des-

tined to become commercially more than Venice ever *was*—and in manufactures what *Lowell* is!" [52] Local boosters never tired of chanting the statistics of metropolitan growth. Population increased from ten thousand in 1820 to seventy-eight thousand in 1850, and then jumped to over one hundred sixty thousand ten years later.[53] Steamboat arrivals nearly doubled between 1840 and 1860,[54] while the value of real estate increased more than tenfold in the same period.[55] Nothing, it seemed, could halt the town's inevitable rise. "If vegetation should fail; if sunshine and rain should withhold their accustomed offices; . . . if our mighty rivers . . . should cease to flow," wrote one editor, "then will St. Louis be arrested in her upward march to greatness,—but not 'till then." [56]

III

Southern cities would have grown even more rapidly if the Negro population had kept pace with the white. But the proportion of colored residents declined, and by 1860 most of the major towns were actually losing blacks, both slave and free. In each case the experience was the same. The number of slaves mounted as the city became larger, often increasing faster than whites. At some point, however, the ratio shifted. Negro populations leveled off as the others continued to rise; soon a gradual reduction set in. Every Dixie metropolis went through at least the first two phases of this cycle by 1860, and most had completed all three.

Travelers often did not notice this attrition in the number of urban blacks. Arriving by ship or train, they first saw town life at the dock or station where colored porters, stevedores, and draymen handled baggage and freight. At the hotels, boarding houses, or fashionable homes they saw slaves as waiters, chambermaids, and general domestics. A trip to the market place would find Negro vendors, hawkers, and maintenance men. Even a casual stroll on the street during the day or early evening was likely to exaggerate the size of the black population, for bondsmen could be seen running errands, driving wagons, and doing much of the unskilled outdoor work. These contacts, coupled with an intense interest in the South's system, obscured for most visitors the proportionate decline of Negro residents in the cities.

"The vast proportion of blacks in the street soon struck me," an Englishman wrote about New Orleans. "I should think they were five to one of the white population." [57] In fact, the ratio in the Crescent City at that time was nearly the reverse. Likewise, Fredrika Bremer, visiting Charleston in 1850 when whites outnumbered colored, could assert that "Negroes swarm the streets. Two-thirds of the people one sees in town are negroes." [58] Still another contended in 1857 that "Richmond was at this time literally swarming with negroes." [59]

Yet the facts ran the other way. In Charleston, for example, though initially both groups increased together, the proportion of blacks substantially declined in the two ante-bellum decades. In 1820 the total black population exceeded 58 per cent. But in 1840 the relationship began to change. On the eve of the war less than half the Charlestonians were Negroes, and only slightly more than a third were slaves.[60]

The same pattern emerged in New Orleans, except that the number of free colored was always much higher. In 1805 more than half the city's residents were Negroes, the bulk of them slaves. The immense growth of the next fifteen years did not alter the proportions between the races significantly, though free blacks nearly equaled slaves. The 1830's, however, brought an almost revolutionary increase in population and an important change in the racial complexion of the city. Now over half of the hundred thousand or so inhabitants were

white, though the blacks still numbered almost forty-three thousand.[61]

New Orleans's expansion slowed but did not stop during the following twenty years. But colored residents declined both proportionately and absolutely. Indeed, in 1860, only one in every seven inhabitants was Negro. This trend, of course, ran sharply against the tendency in rural Louisiana, where the slave population rose markedly each year.

In Richmond the decline of bondsmen was relative not absolute by 1860. The decisive decade had been the 'thirties. Until then the blacks had a slight edge over the whites. In the next ten years the ratio changed slightly, then the gap soon widened. At the end of the period Richmond's slaves and free colored comprised less than 40 per cent of the city's population. And the increase in slaves in the last decade was modest—less than 2000—representing a reduction in the rate of growth and presaging a future reduction.

Mobile and Savannah enjoyed their greatest growth later than the larger places, hence the comparative decline of their Negro population did not appear as early. Nonetheless the story was the same. In 1830 the races were almost evenly divided in the Alabama port. By the 1860 census the percentage of blacks had fallen to just over a quarter of the total. Slaves still outnumbered free Negroes nearly ten to one, and while both continued to increase slowly, they lagged far behind the white advance.

In Savannah over half the population was colored in 1830. Within ten years, however, supremacy in the city shifted, the whites having a slight majority. But by 1860 the familiar difference appeared. The Negro population had dropped below 40 per cent, and the number of slaves to approximately a third.

The northeastern cities had a lower proportion of slaves in 1820 than other places, but they, too, conformed to the experience elsewhere. Baltimore's slave population was reduced

by half in four decades, while Washington dropped slightly during the whole period. In both towns, however, the free Negro residents rose continuously but at greatly reduced rates in the 1850's. The combined black population, moreover, comprised a much smaller percentage of the total than before.

Dixie's northwestern cities revealed the pattern even more clearly. In St. Louis and Louisville the numerical distance between white and black was widest, and the Negro descent most precipitous. In both places colored people constituted nearly a quarter of the population in 1830. Yet within thirty years that proportion dipped to about 10 per cent in Louisville and to slightly over two per cent in St. Louis. Indeed, by 1860 there were more free blacks in St. Louis than slaves. And each year found fewer slaves in Louisville. These two towns, then, illustrate best the full cycle of slavery in the cities—early dynamic growth, stagnation, and finally decline.

The broad lines of this development could be conveniently traced in the decennial censuses of the federal government and in occasional local counts by municipalities. But in any given period slave populations varied considerably from year to year. The number of blacks might increase rapidly as masters brought coffles to town for sale, or be depleted as high prices elsewhere drew off urban Negroes. Some whites coming to the growing cities carried bondsmen with them, while others did not. In short, slave populations in the city were changing constantly. Rural statistics, on the other hand, show much more stability, with fewer variations and with steadier growth through the ante-bellum period.

IV

The fluctuations in the number of urban slaves, then, contrasted with rural patterns. Significantly, too, the distribution of bondsmen among city masters differed from the practice in

the countryside. In towns, conditions seemed to foster a broad diffusion of ownership, with a large proportion of white families having at least a few Negroes. Indeed, for most of the period the percentage of slaveholders in most towns was higher than the surrounding areas. Of course, the number in each household was usually small, but the practice was widespread enough to give many a direct involvement in the "peculiar institution."

The 1820 census demonstrated the breadth of early urban slaveholding. In Charleston, of the 2100 "heads of families" listed, over three-quarters owned at least a single Negro.[62] The Richmond figures reveal that about two-thirds of the households had blacks, while in Savannah and Mobile over one-half fell in this category. Even New Orleans, which had an extraordinary number of free colored in 1820, recorded owners as over a third of its white population. More remarkable, in Louisville over 50 per cent of whites held slaves. Clearly, in 1820 the city dwellers in Dixie had a substantial stake in slavery.

By 1840, however, the ratio of slaveholding to nonslaveholding began to change. To be sure, this did not happen in static cities like Charleston, where more than three-quarters of the white families still had colored bondsmen, nor in towns enjoying their first real expansion such as Mobile, where the proportion actually rose. But Richmond saw the percentage dip to about fifty; in New Orleans it fell below thirty. The most precipitous decline occurred in the border cities, Louisville showing fewer than a quarter of the family heads with slaves, while in St. Louis only one in seven owned any.

This tendency accelerated during the last two ante-bellum decades. A new system of scheduling by the federal census bureau in 1850 and 1860 makes comparison with early figures difficult, but local tax ledgers disclose a continuous decline in the incidence of slaveholding. Richmond's experience was

typical. The city's personal property levy hit only a portion of white families, since it applied to just a handful of items. But it included slaves over twelve years old. In 1840 all but a small fraction of the residents paid on Negroes. In 1860 more than 60 per cent of the returns were without taxable slaves.[63] In short, by the Civil War most inhabitants in the Virginia city had no direct financial investment in the system.

During the forty-year period, then, the extent of urban slaveholding can be traced in the census returns and tax ledgers. Until about 1840 the percentage of ownership was higher in the cities than in the countryside. In the 'forties, however, the trend changed, first slowly, then rapidly. Initially the proportion of masters declined as the total population of each community grew. Later the decrease could be measured in absolute terms. By the end of the period most of Dixie's metropolises were shedding slaves, and each year fewer of the residents had a monetary stake in the system.

V

The high incidence of slaveowning through most of the ante-bellum decades meant that, by and large, individual holdings would be modest. A few blacks was the normal unit, though each locality had some masters with more than a score of Negroes. This distribution again set off slavery in the cities from the rural institution, where the plantation, large or small, with its cluster of slaves around a white household, was more characteristic. This pattern of ownership was present almost from the beginning of each town, and it became more distinct as communities grew and populations expanded.

Charleston, with the highest percentage of slaves, provides a good illustration. The 1830 census listed 2873 "heads of families"; 379 had no bondsmen; and 401 had at least ten. A few had more extensive holdings, 87 owners with 20 or more

and 19 with over 30. Yet the great majority of Charlestonians in this year owned some slaves and the number usually was not large. Three decades later there were fewer masters and fewer slaves in the South Carolina metropolis; and the proportion of those with big holdings dropped substantially.[64]

New Orleans had the same experience. The number of large slaveowners was never impressive, but even those few diminished as the decades passed. In 1830, 215 residents had over ten blacks and 22 listed more than 20. On the eve of the Civil War the city listed only 83 "heads of families" owning at least ten Negroes and but 20 with better than a score. In short, substantial holdings had almost disappeared in Dixie's largest urban center.

Though border-city statistics followed the same trend, the Richmond picture was more complex. Over the forty-year period the number of large units increased. Those of ten to twenty rose from 14 to 47 and, more importantly, those of 20 and more jumped from 7 to 93.[65] But this growth was almost exclusively in corporate ownership, representing a widespread use of Negroes in manufacturing. Individual holdings, on the other hand, showed the normal curve, with substantial holdings becoming scarcer as the decades passed.

Though the small unit characterized urban ownership, there were some masters in every city with extensive holdings. Any census of New Orleans, for example, would contain such listings as I.A. Blanc, 69, James Higgins, 155, J.M. Wilson, 45, Walter Campbell, 59, or Isaac Cubrer, 59.[66] Charleston's tax list in 1860 included several entries, like J.W. Bennett, 77, Eliza Ball, 40, Abraham Wilson, 37, Jacob Barrett, 46, Mrs. M.A. Mathews, 36.[67] A similar levy in Richmond in the same year furnishes further examples: R.A. Blackburn, 44, James J. Dorwin, 48, A.W. Taylor, 40, William Graener, 60, William H. Grant, 60.[68]

Increasingly, the large urban slaveowners were business

partnerships or corporations. Working the blacks in shops and factories, they could utilize many more than most individual masters; and some accumulated great numbers. For instance, on Charleston "Neck" two mills, Canonboro and Chrisolus, each had over 70 Negroes in 1840. The Louisville firms Crutchfield & Company and William A. Richardson Bagging Factory both possessed over 40 a decade later. And Factor's Press Company ranked among the largest of Mobile's slaveholders in 1860 with 95 Negroes.

The most spectacular figures, however, were always in industrial Richmond. On the eve of the Civil War, over 54 corporations owned at least ten slaves each. The Virginia Central Railroad held as many as 274, but several others had 75 or more.[69] The possessions of many others, moreover, easily outstripped all but the most affluent individual masters. In New Orleans the incidence of corporate holding was never as high, yet firms like the New Orleans Canal and Banking Company, the Fireproof Cotton Press, and L. A. Garidal & Company could generally be found among the more substantial owners.[70]

VI

Urban slavery increasingly contained an imbalance between male and female Negroes. As early as 1820 women had begun to outnumber men; by 1860 the difference was striking. In the later decades owners began to sell their younger males to planters, especially into the cane and cotton country. Left behind in the cities was a growing surplus of women. Hence, on the eve of the war almost every Southern town had a greatly distorted population distribution, with a glaring shortage of men.*

* See tables in the Appendix, p. 325.

Richmond alone seemed exempt from the trend, but conditions there were so special as almost to prove the rule. It was the place which most widely employed young male slaves in manufacturing, and it was the only city with a significant majority of Negro men. Indeed, the population figures reflect the increasing industrial utilization of this class. At the beginning of the period there was a slight excess of females; by 1860, 57 per cent of the town's slaves were male. No other urban center developed an economy that absorbed this kind of labor, hence other Southern cities saw women in the majority in Negro life.

The sex distribution among urban free colored also followed the same trend found in slave statistics. New Orleans, for example, had 1750 more females than males in this category in 1860, while Charleston developed a large imbalance, the census listing 2000 free Negro women and only 1200 men. Even Richmond, where the slave figures ran the other way, had a 10 per cent surplus of females in the free group on the eve of the war.

Smaller places displayed the same tendency. Savannah initially had more free colored men than women, but by 1840 the ratio changed. In Mobile a similar development left a disparity of more than 10 per cent by 1860. Nor did border cities break the pattern. In both Louisville and St. Louis the female margin was seldom less than in the others and usually greater. But the most compelling illustration of this peculiar urban tendency was Baltimore, which had the largest group of free Negroes in Dixie. There the female surplus was almost five thousand in an aggregate of over twenty-five thousand blacks.[71]

In the cities, the colored women, both bond and free, easily outnumbered the men. In the white population, however, precisely the reverse was true. Nearly every Southern urban center had many more males than females, a disparity that was

especially great in the periods of most rapid municipal growth. For instance, when Mobile enjoyed its first important expansion, it had twice as many men as women. As the pace of development slowed, however, a more normal distribution appeared.

New Orleans, too, showed the same imbalance in the era of its largest growth. In 1830 the census reported the division among whites as 7300 males and 4900 females. Ten years later the figures were 34,900 to 24,600. But as the city's expansion slackened during the next two decades, the numerical gap between the sexes closed substantially. St. Louis's experience brought similar distortions in the population structure, but the disparity was not so quickly reduced, remaining almost 10,000 out of more than 157,000 in 1860.

Less dynamic towns acquired more evenly proportioned white populations. Seldom did women exceed men, and often the difference was not great. Throughout the ante-bellum decades Charleston's statistics reveal no important discrepancy, and in 1860 male supremacy was barely sustained. In Richmond the sex differential among whites was never significant and was only about 5 per cent at the end of the period. At the same time Savannah's surplus of men was somewhat larger, yet it appeared to be declining.

VII

These shifting statistics suggest that in the cities slavery was never a static institution. In fact, nearly every critical aspect of the system changed constantly in the ante-bellum years. The Negro population, the number of slaveowners, the incidence and size of slaveholding, and the sex differentials all varied considerably in each decade. Furthermore, the towns themselves also changed, altering the conditions in which bondage functioned and forcing institutional adjustments to

meet new situations. This flux was less conspicuous on the countryside. There the rural setting promoted a stability seldom found in towns. Indeed, a recent historian has asserted that by the 1830's "Slavery had crystallized; its form was fixed. In 1860 the peculiar institution was almost precisely what it had been thirty years before." Hence, he continues, it is possible "to examine it institutionally with only slight regard for chronology." [72]

These generalizations were perhaps too sweeping even for slavery on the plantations, but they are clearly inappropriate for the cities. In fact, urban slavery developed through two distinct phases in the ante-bellum years. It is hard to find a single dividing point that would fit all places because of the variations in the speed and the extent of growth of Southern towns. Yet a rough watershed can be established between 1835 and 1845. Before that period slavery was an integral part of urban life. As the cities grew, so did slavery. But at some moment the system began to lose ground in the metropolis, and though still present it played an increasingly less important role. That "moment" usually came in the late 'thirties or early 'forties. But whether earlier or later its appearance was common in all Dixie's cities.

In the earlier period urban slavery resembled the plantation system. The incidence of ownership was high, the size of the holdings often substantial, and the presumption of permanence widespread. While slavery encountered difficulties in the city, no one predicted, much less advocated, its abandonment. And the statistical indices in 1820 and 1830 apparently pointed to further steady and substantial growth.

Yet within a decade or two there were many indications of change. The number of urban Negroes declined, fewer whites owned any, and the size of holdings dwindled. In addition, the sale of young bondsmen to the countryside produced an increasing surplus of female slaves remaining in the towns.

New people meanwhile swelled Dixie's cities, which further reduced the importance of the blacks. Clearly the vitality was gone from the system in the urban centers, and each year witnessed a further waning. The transformation was never uniform, but every city experienced it.

No such development occurred in the rural South. "If anything," writes Kenneth Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution*, "the chains of bondage were strengthened, not weakened, in this ante-bellum period." [73] It may be, as some contemporaries and historians have contended, that slavery contained a residual weakness and its vigor in 1860 was largely illusory. Yet, as a Virginian put it, it was "a fixed fact" in that year, and few indices suggested an early collapse. And certainly few Southerners were of a mind to overturn it themselves.

The contrast, then, between urban and rural slavery was marked. Whether the comparison be made of the proportion of slaves to the general population, the distribution of bondsmen among whites, the size of the holdings, or the sex ratio among the blacks, the statistical differences are striking. These figures, however, merely outline a deeper antithesis. Behind the census returns, tax ledgers, and official reports lies a sharper cleavage between ways of living. The city had created its own kind of world, with a pace, sophistication, and environment that separated it from rural modes. In the process it transformed Negro no less than white, slave no less than free man. Hence it is not surprising that slavery as an urban institution differed greatly from its rural counterpart, and that the city slave was often quite unlike his country brother.

Notes

Chapter One

1. *Louisville Daily Journal*, February 22, 1848.
2. Samuel Walker, "The Diary of a Louisiana Planter, Elia Plantation," Typescript, Tulane University Library.
3. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas; Or a Saddle-Trip on the Southwestern Frontier; with a Statistical Appendix* (N.Y., 1857), 37.
4. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (N.Y., 1855), 147-8.
5. *De Bow's Review*, XXIX (1860), 613-14.
6. Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Cotton Kingdom* (N.Y., 1861), I, 291. See also Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of North America* (London, 1855), II, 91.
7. Joseph H. Ingraham, *The Sunny South; a Southerner at Home* (Philadelphia, 1860), 338.
8. John Adam Paxton, *The New Orleans Directory and Register* (New Orleans, 1822), 46.
9. William Gilmore Simms, *Letters; Collected and Edited by Mary C. Simms Oliphant, Alfred Taylor Odell and T.C. Duncan Eaves* (Columbia, S.C., 1952), I, 35.
10. *De Bow's Review*, I (1846), 44.
11. Albert J. Pickett, *Eight Days in New Orleans* (n.p., 1847), 19.
12. Ingraham, *Sunny South*, 338.
13. *De Bow's Review*, II (1846), 53.
14. G.W. Cable, "New Orleans," in the *Tenth Census of the United States, Report on the Social Statistics of Cities* (Washington, 1887), XIX, 256. (Hereafter cited as Tenth Census of U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX.)
15. Howard Horace Justice, *Diary, 1857-1859*, MSS. (Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.).
16. Adam Hodgson, *Remarks During a Journey Through North*

America in the Years 1819, 1820, and 1821, in a Series of Letters (N.Y., 1823), 156.

17. See for example, Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, With Remarks on Their Economy* (N.Y., 1856), 565; Francis and Theresa Pulszky, *White, Red, Black Sketches of American Society in the United States During the Visit of Their Guests* (N.Y., 1853), II, 113.

18. *Niles' Register*, April 6, 1822.

19. *Mobile Commercial Register*, November 7, 1833; September 30, 1835.

20. All the census figures are taken from the Tenth Census of U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX, 191.

21. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 567.

22. Hiram Fuller, *Belle Brittan on a Tour, at Newport and Here and There* (N.Y., 1858), 112.

23. Ingraham, *Sunny South*, 504.

24. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 405; William Cullen Bryant, "A Tour in the Old South," *Prose Writings of William Cullen Bryant*, ed. by Parke Godwin (N.Y., 1884), II, 36.

25. *Savannah Republican*, November 20, 1851; May 16, 1844.

26. Quoted in the *Savannah Republican*, November 20, 1851.

27. *Report of R.D. Arnold, Mayor of the City of Savannah, for the Year Ending September 30th, 1860, Etc.* (Savannah, 1860), 26.

28. Joseph Bancroft, *Census of the City of Savannah* (Savannah, 1848, 2nd. ed.), 3.

29. Quoted in *Savannah Republican*, April 28, 1853.

30. C.G. Parsons, *Inside View of Slavery; or a Tour Among the Planters* (Boston, 1855), 23.

31. *De Bow's Review*, I (1846), 44.

32. This virtual stagnation led to several local censuses by city officials. Their findings, however, only substantiated the dreary figures of the national count. See particularly those of 1824 and 1848. *Charleston Courier*, August 7, 1824; J.L. Dawson and H.W. DeSaussure, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina for 1848* (Charleston, 1849).

33. *Charleston City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, September 20, 1824.

34. *Charleston Courier*, May 29, 1845.

35. *Charleston Courier*, November 29, 1844.

36. *Charleston City Gazette and Commercial Daily Advertiser*, July 24, 1829.

37. James Stirling, *Letters from the Slave States* (London, 1857), 250.

38. Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Back Country* (N.Y., 1860), 280.

39. Kathleen Bruce, *Virginia Iron Manufacture in the Slave Era* (N.Y., 1931), 100ff.

40. Olmsted, *Seaboard Slave States*, 19. For the same view by a British traveler, see Stirling, *Letters*, 335.

41. *Richmond Enquirer*, May 16, 1828.

42. Quoted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, July 30, 1839.

43. Tenth Census of the U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX, 79.

44. *Louisville Daily Democrat*, August 31, 1858.

45. Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier, The Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 13ff.

46. Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers, An Economic and Technical History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), 37.

47. Gabriel Collins, *Louisville Directory for the Year 1836* (Louisville, 1836), vii.

48. Gabriel Collins, *Louisville Directory for the Year 1843-4* (Louisville, 1843), G.

49. Tenth Census of the U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX, 122.

50. Olmsted, *A Journey Through Texas*, 22.

51. *Missouri Republican*, January 8, 1855.

52. *De Bow's Review*, XVII (1854), 397.

53. Tenth Census of the U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX, 567.

54. Hunter, *Steamboats on Western Rivers*, 644-5.

55. Tenth Census of the U.S., *Social Statistics of Cities*, XIX, 576.

56. Charles Keemle (ed.), *The St. Louis Directory for the Year, 1838-1839* (St. Louis, 1838), x; Wyatt Winton Belcher, *The Economic Rivalry Between St. Louis and Chicago, 1850-1880* (N.Y., 1947), 46.

57. J. Benwell, *An Englishman's Travels in America, His Observations of Life and Manners in the Free and Slave States* (London, 1853), 113.

58. Adolph B. Benson (ed.), *America of the Fifties: Letters of Fredrika Bremer* (N.Y., 1924), 96.

59. Robert Russell, *North America, Its Agriculture and Climate; Containing Observations on the Agriculture and Climate of Canada, the United States, and the Island of Cuba* (Edinburgh, 1857), 151.

60. The Charleston figures are somewhat complicated by the annexation of the "Neck," a suburb, in 1850 which enlarged the city's population but did not alter the percentages appreciably.

61. Unless otherwise indicated, these population figures are taken from the federal censuses, manuscript returns.

62. The family unit is a better index of the extent of slaveholding than individual whites, for everyone in the household was a master in the operative sense of the word, even though legal ownership was lodged in the head of the family. Use of this larger unit raises the incidence of slaveholding both on the countryside and in the cities.

63. City of Richmond, Personal Property Tax, 1840, 1850, 1860, MSS., Virginia State Library, Richmond.

64. In addition to the federal censuses, see *List of the Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860* (Charleston, 1861).

65. Richmond, Personal Property Tax, 1820, 1830, 1840, 1850, 1860.

66. Eighth Census, 1860, Louisiana, III.

67. *List of Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860.*

68. Richmond, Personal Property Tax, 1860. Mobile, too, had its share of large owners, James Saunders with 125, Duke W. Goodman with 105, John O. Cumings Jr. with 128, William Moore with 69, and 44 others with over twenty proved that as late as 1860 extensive holdings were not unknown there. Eighth Census, 1860, Slaves, Alabama, IV. Even in cities where the regime of bondage seemed to be dying, a few still kept many Negroes. A. Throckmorton, of Louisville, reported 82 in 1840, while Jonathan Cochran listed 52 and James Breckenridge 46. Sixth Census, 1840, Kentucky, VI. Farther west eleven St. Louisans held over a score, though none had many more than that.

69. Eighth Census, 1860.

70. Eighth Census, 1860.

71. Among Baltimore's slave population women outnumbered men 1541 to 677. Eighth Census, 1860.

72. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution, Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (N.Y., 1956), 28.

73. Ibid., 28.

Chapter Two

1. *Richmond Daily Dispatch*, August 18, 1853.
2. Quoted in Olmsted, *Back Country*, 301.
3. *New Orleans Bee*, October 13, 1835.