When the Georgia Trustees first envisioned their colonial experiment in the early 1730s, they banned slavery in order to avoid the slave-based plantation economy that had developed in other colonies in the American South. The allure of profits from slavery, however, proved to be too powerful for white Georgia settlers to resist. By the era of the American Revolution (1775-83), slavery was legal and African slaves constituted nearly half of Georgia's population.

Although the Revolution fostered the growth of an antislavery movement in the northern states, white Georgia landowners fiercely maintained their commitment to slavery even as the war disrupted the plantation economy. In fact, Georgia delegates to the Continental Congress forced Thomas Jefferson to tone down the critique of slavery in his initial draft of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Likewise, at the constitutional convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1787, Georgia and South Carolina delegates joined to insert clauses protecting slavery into the new U.S. Constitution. In subsequent decades slavery would play an ever-increasing role in Georgia's shifting plantation economy.

Cotton and the Growth of Slavery

For almost the entire eighteenth century the production of rice, a
crop that could be commercially cultivated only in the Lowcountry, dominated Georgia's plantation economy. During the Revolution planters began to cultivate cotton for domestic use. After the war the explosive growth of the textile industry promised to turn cotton into a lucrative staple crop—if only efficient methods of cleaning the tenacious seeds from the cotton fibers could be developed.

By the 1790s entrepreneurs were perfecting new mechanized cotton gins, the most famous of which was invented by Eli Whitney in 1793 on a Savannah River plantation owned by Catharine Greene. This technological advance presented Georgia planters with a staple crop that could be grown over much of the state. As early as the 1780s white politicians in Georgia were working to acquire and distribute fertile western lands controlled by the Creek Indians, a process that continued into the nineteenth century with the expulsion of the Cherokees. By the 1830s cotton plantations had spread across most of the state.

As was the case for rice production, cotton planters relied upon the labor of enslaved African and African American people. Accordingly, the slave population of Georgia increased dramatically during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In 1790, just before the explosion in cotton production, some 29,264 slaves resided in the state. In 1793 the Georgia Assembly passed a law prohibiting the importation of slaves. The law did not go into effect until 1798, when the state constitution also went into effect, but the measure was widely ignored by planters, who urgently sought to increase their enslaved workforce. By 1800 the slave population in Georgia had more than doubled, to 59,699, and by 1810 the number of slaves had grown to 105,218.

The 48,000 Africans imported into Georgia during this era accounted for much of the initial surge in the slave population. When Congress banned the African slave trade in 1808, however, Georgia's slave population did not decline. Instead, the number of slaves imported from the Chesapeake's stagnant plantation economy as well as the number of children born to Georgia slave mothers continued to outpace those who died or were transported from Georgia. In 1820 the slave population stood at 149,656; in 1840 the slave population had increased to 280,944; and in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War (1861-65), some 462,198 slaves constituted 44 percent of the state's total population. By the end of the antebellum era Georgia had more slaves and slaveholders than any state in the Lower South and was second only to Virginia in the South as a whole.

The lower Piedmont, or Black Belt, counties—so named after the region's distinctively dark and fertile soil—were the site of the largest, most productive cotton plantations. Over the antebellum era some two-thirds of the state's total population lived in these counties, which encompassed roughly the middle third of the state. By 1860 the slave population in the Black Belt was ten times greater than that in the coastal counties, where rice remained the most important crop.

**Slaveholders**

Although slavery played a dominant economic and political role in Georgia, most white Georgians did not own slaves. In 1860 less than one-third of Georgia's adult white male population of 132,317 were slaveholders. The percentage of free families holding slaves was somewhat higher (37 percent) but still well short of a majority. Moreover, only 6,363 of Georgia's 41,084 slaveholders owned twenty or more slaves. The planter elite, who made up just 15 percent of the state's slaveholder population, were far outnumbered by the 20,077 slaveholders who owned fewer than six slaves. In other words, only half of Georgia's slaveholders owned more than a handful of slaves, and Georgia's planters constituted less than 5 percent of the state's adult white male population.

These statistics, however, do not reveal the economic, cultural, and political force wielded by the slaveholding minority of the
Slaves controlled not only the best land and the vast majority of personal property in the state but also the state political system. In 1850 and 1860 more than two-thirds of all state legislators were slaveholders. More striking, almost a third of the state legislators were planters. Hence, even without the cooperation of nonslaveholding white male voters, Georgia slaveholders could dictate the state's political path.

As it turned out, slaveholders expected and largely realized harmonious relations with the rest of the white population. During election season wealthy planters courted nonslaveholding voters by inviting them to celebrations that mixed speechmaking with abundant supplies of food and drink. On such occasions slaveholders shook hands with yeomen and tenant farmers as if they were equals. Nonslaveholding whites, for their part, frequently relied upon nearby slaveholders to gin their cotton and to assist them in bringing their crop to market. These political and economic interactions were further reinforced by the common racial bond among white Georgia men. Sharing the prejudice that slaveholders harbored against African Americans, nonslaveholding whites believed that the abolition of slavery would destroy their own economic prospects and bring catastrophe to the state as a whole.

Propping up the institution of slavery was a judicial system that denied African Americans the legal rights enjoyed by white Americans. Since the colonial era, children born of slave mothers were deemed chattel slaves, doomed to "follow the condition of the mother" irrespective of the father's status. Georgia law supported slavery in that the state restricted the right of slaveholders to free individual slaves, a measure that was strengthened over the antebellum era. Other statutes made the circulation of abolitionist material a capital offense and outlawed slave literacy and unsupervised assembly. Although the law technically prohibited whites from abusing or killing slaves, it was extremely rare for whites to be prosecuted and convicted for these crimes. The legal prohibition against slave testimony about whites denied slaves the ability to provide evidence of their victimization. On the other hand, Georgia courts recognized slave confessions and, depending on the circumstances of the case, slave testimony against other slaves.

The relative scarcity of legal cases concerning slave defendants suggests that most slaveholders meted out discipline without involving the courts. Slaveholders resorted to an array of physical and psychological punishments in response to slave misconduct, including the use of whips, wooden rods, boots, fists, and dogs. The threat of selling a slave away from loved ones and family members was perhaps the most powerful weapon available to slaveholders. In general, punishment was designed to maximize the slaveholders' ability to gain profit from slave labor. Evidence also suggests that slaveholders were willing to employ violence and threats in order to coerce slaves into sexual relationships.

Over the antebellum era whites continued to employ violence against the slave population, but increasingly they justified their mastery in moral terms. As early as 1790, Georgia congressman James Jackson claimed that slavery benefited both whites and African Americans. The expanding presence of evangelical Christian churches in the early nineteenth century provided Georgia slaveholders with religious justifications for human bondage. White efforts to Christianize the slave quarters enabled masters to frame their power in moral terms. They viewed the Christian slave mission as evidence of their own good intentions. The religious instruction offered by whites, moreover, reinforced slaveholders' authority by reminding slaves of scriptural admonishments that slaves should "give single-minded obedience" to their "earthly masters with fear and trembling, as if to Christ."
This melding of religion and slavery did not protect slaves from exploitation and cruelty at the hands of their owners, but it magnified the role played by slavery in the identity of the planter elite. In 1785, just before the genesis of the cotton plantation system, a Georgia merchant had claimed that slavery was "to the Trade of the Country, as the Soul [is] to the Body." Seventy-five years later Georgia politician Alexander Stephens noted that slavery had become a moral as well as an economic foundation for white plantation culture. The "corner-stone" of the South, Stephens claimed in 1861, just after the Lower South had seceded, consisted of the "great physical, philosophical, and moral truth," which is "that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition."

**Slaves**

Depending on their place of residence and the personality of their masters, slaves in Georgia experienced tremendous variety in the conditions of their daily lives. Although the typical (median) Georgia slaveholder owned six slaves in 1860, the typical slave resided on a plantation with twenty to twenty-nine other slaves. Almost half of Georgia's slave population lived on estates with more than thirty slaves. Most Georgia slaves therefore had access to a slave community that partially offset the harshness of bondage. Slave testimony reveals the huge importance of family relationships in the slave quarters. Many slaves were able to live in family units, spending together their limited time away from the masters' fields. Frequently Georgia slave families cultivated their own gardens and raised livestock, and slave men sometimes supplemented their families' diets by hunting and fishing. Christianity also served as a pillar of slave life in Georgia during the antebellum era. Unlike their masters, slaves drew from Christianity the message of black equality and empowerment. In the early nineteenth century African American preachers played a significant role in spreading the Gospel in the quarters. Throughout the antebellum era some 30,000 Georgia slaves resided in the Lowcountry, where they enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy from white supervision. Most white planters avoided the unhealthy Lowcountry plantation environment, leaving large slave populations under the supervision of a small group of white overseers. Slaves were assigned daily tasks and were permitted to leave the fields when their tasks had been completed. Lowcountry slaves enjoyed a far greater degree of control over their time than was the case across the rest of the state, where slaves worked in gangs under direct white supervision. The white cultural presence in the Lowcountry was sufficiently small for slaves to retain significant traces of African linguistic and spiritual traditions. The resulting Geechee culture of the Georgia coast was the counterpart of the better-known Gullah culture of the South Carolina Lowcountry.

The urban environment of Savannah also created considerable opportunities for slaves to live away from their owners' watchful eyes. Slave entrepreneurs assembled in markets and sold their wares to black and white customers, an economy that enabled some slaves to amass their own wealth. A number of slave artisans in Savannah were "hired out" by their masters, meaning that they worked and sometimes lived away from their masters. Savannah's taverns and brothels also served as meeting places in which African Americans socialized without owners' supervision. This cultural autonomy, however, was never complete or secure.

The rice plantations were literally killing fields. On one Savannah River rice plantation, mortality annually averaged 10 percent of the slave population between 1833 and 1861. During cholera epidemics on some Lowcountry plantations, more than half the slave population died in a matter of months. Infant mortality in the Lowcountry slave quarters also greatly exceeded the rates experienced by white Americans during this era. In addition to the threat of disease, slaveholders frequently shattered family and community ties by selling away slaves. More than 2 million southern slaves were sold in the domestic slave
Emancipation trade of the antebellum era.

Three-quarters of Georgia's slave population resided on cotton plantations in the Black Belt. These slaves typically experienced some degree of slave community and they tended to be healthier than Lowcountry slaves, but they were also surrounded by far greater numbers of whites. Some one-fifth of the state's slave population was owned by slaveholders with fewer than ten slaves. These slaves doubtless faced greater obstacles in forming relationships outside their owners' purview. Whatever their location, slaves in Georgia resisted their masters with strategies that included overt violence against whites, flight, the destruction of white property, and deliberately inefficient work practices. White southerners were worried enough about slave revolts to enact expensive and unpopular slave patrols, groups of men who monitored slave gatherings, stopped and questioned slaves traveling at night, and randomly searched slave homes. Slaves in Georgia experienced hideous cruelties, but white slaveholders never succeeded in extinguishing the slaves' human capacity to covet freedom.

Secession, the Civil War, and the End of Slavery

By the late 1820s white slaveholders in Georgia—like their counterparts across the South—increasingly feared that antislavery forces were working to liberate the slave population. The publication of slave narratives and Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 further agitated abolitionist forces (and slave owners' anxieties) by putting a human face on those held by slavery. In the months following Abraham Lincoln's election as president of the United States in 1860, Georgia's planter politicians debated and ultimately paved the way for the state's secession from the Union on January 19, 1861. Statesmen like Senator Robert Toombs argued that secession was a necessary response to a longstanding abolitionist campaign to "disturb our security, our tranquillity—to excite discontent between the different classes of our people, and to excite our slaves to insurrection." Lincoln's election, according to these politicians, meant "the abolition of slavery," and that act would be "one of the direst evils of which the mind can conceive."

Ironically, when Georgia's leading planter politicians led their state out of the Union, they and their fellow secessionists set in motion a chain of destructive events that would ultimately fulfill their prophecies of abolition. The arrival of Union gunboats along the Georgia coast in late 1861 marked the beginning of the end of white ownership of black slaves. As hundreds of Lowcountry slaves fled across enemy lines to seek sanctuary with Union troops, Georgia slaveholders attempted to move their slaves to more secure locations.

By fall 1864, however, Union troops led by General William T. Sherman had begun their destructive march from Atlanta to Savannah, a military advance that effectively uprooted the foundations for plantation slavery in Georgia. Amid the chaos and misfortunes unleashed by the war, African American slaves as well as white slaveholders suffered the loss of property and life. In the wake of war, however, white and black Georgia residents articulated opposite views about emancipation. The former slaveholders bemoaned the demise of their plantation economy, while the freed slaves rejoiced that their bondage had finally ended.

Further Reading


Slavery in Antebellum Georgia. Tim Lockley (bio). Daina Ramey Berry. "Swing the Sickle for the Harvest is Ripe": Gender and Slavery in Antebellum Georgia. If you are a graduate student just starting out on a research topic that includes gender, slavery, or Georgia, then this book can be highly recommended. If you are not an academic but you would like to know more about how enslaved people lived their lives in
two different parts of Georgia, then this book is also for you. However, if you are a practicing academic, familiar with the vast literature on enslaved women, on slavery more generally, or with the history of antebellum Georgia, you risk coming away from this book feeling that you have not learned a vast amount that is new about any of the Read Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia PDF Online. Putar

Slavery in Georgia is known to have been practiced by the original or earliest-known inhabitants of the future colony and state of Georgia, for centuries prior to European colonization. During the colonial era, the practice of Indian slavery in Georgia soon became surpassed by industrial-scale plantation slavery. The penal colony of the Province of Georgia under James Oglethorpe banned slavery in 1735, the only one of the thirteen colonies to have done so. However, it was legalized by royal decree in