

SECTIONALISM, 1820–1860

*The East, the West, the North, and the stormy South all combine to throw
the whole ocean into commotion, to toss its billows to the skies,
and to disclose its profoundest depths.*

Daniel Webster, March 7, 1850

In 1826, Americans took great pride in celebrating 50 years of independence. A unique political system based on a written Constitution had proven practical and flexible enough to permit territorial growth and industrial change. The United States had both a central government and a collection of self-governing states. However, many citizens resisted giving up powers to a national government and the first two political parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, had expressed strong regional differences. In short, although the United States was young and vibrant in the 1820s, it was still a fragile union.

The previous chapter treated the nation as a whole in the early 1800s; this chapter looks at the differences among the three sections—North, South, and West. Daniel Webster, in the opening quotation of this chapter, rhetorically refers to these three sections in terms of the four main points of the compass as he attempts to portray the dangers these divisions hold for the nation. By examining sectional differences, we can better understand the sectionalism (loyalty to a particular region) that ultimately led to the Union's worst crisis: civil war between the North and the South in the early 1860s.

The North

The northern portion of the country in the early 19th century contained two parts: (1) the Northeast, which included New England and the Middle Atlantic states, and (2) the Old Northwest, which stretched from Ohio to Minnesota. The northern states were bound together by transportation routes and rapid economic growth based on commercial farming and industrial innovation. While manufacturing was expanding, the vast majority of northerners were still involved in agriculture. The North was the most populous section in the country as a result of both a high birthrate and increased immigration.

The Industrial Northeast

Originally, the Industrial Revolution centered in the textile industry, but by the 1830s, northern factories were producing a wide range of goods—everything from farm implements to clocks and shoes.

Organized Labor Industrial development meant that large numbers of people who had once earned their living as independent farmers and artisans became dependent on wages earned in a factory. With the common problems of low pay, long hours, and unsafe working conditions, urban workers in different cities organized both unions and local political parties to protect their interests. The first U.S. labor party, founded in Philadelphia in 1828, succeeded in electing a few members of the city council. For a brief period in the 1830s, an increasing number of urban workers joined unions and participated in strikes.

Organized labor achieved one notable victory in 1842 when the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled in *Commonwealth v. Hunt* that “peaceful unions” had the right to negotiate labor contracts with employers. During the 1840s and 1850s, most state legislatures in the North passed laws establishing a ten-hour workday for industrial workers. Improvement for workers, however, continued to be limited by (1) periodic depressions, (2) employers and courts that were hostile to unions, and (3) an abundant supply of cheap immigrant labor.

Urban Life The North’s urban population grew from approximately 5 percent of the population in 1800 to 15 percent by 1850. As a result of such rapid growth in cities from Boston to Baltimore, slums also expanded. Crowded housing, poor sanitation, infectious diseases, and high rates of crime soon became characteristic of large working-class neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the new opportunities in cities offered by the Industrial Revolution continued to attract both native-born Americans from farms and immigrants from Europe.

| U.S. Manufacturing by Region, 1860 | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------|
| Region | Number of Establishments | Number of Employees | Value of Product |
| North Atlantic | 69,831 | 900,107 | \$1,213,897,518 |
| Old Northwest | 33,335 | 188,651 | \$346,675,290 |
| South | 27,779 | 166,803 | \$248,090,580 |
| West | 8,777 | 50,204 | \$71,229,989 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Manufactures of the United States in 1860*

African Americans The 250,000 African Americans who lived in the North in 1860 constituted only 1 percent of northerners. However, they represented 50 percent of all free African Americans. Freedom may have meant they could maintain a family and in some instances own land, but it did not mean economic or political equality, since strong racial prejudices kept them from voting and holding jobs in most skilled professions and crafts. In the mid-1800s, immigrants displaced them from occupations and jobs that they had held since the time of the Revolution. Denied membership in unions, African Americans were often hired as strikebreakers—and often dismissed after the strike ended.

The Agricultural Northwest

The Old Northwest consisted of six states west of the Alleghenies that were admitted to the Union before 1860: Ohio (1803), Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), Michigan (1837), Wisconsin (1848), and Minnesota (1858). These states came from territories formed out of land ceded to the national government in the 1780s by one of the original 13 states. The procedure for turning these territories into states was part of the Northwest Ordinance, passed by Congress in 1787.

In the early years of the 19th century, much of the Old Northwest was unsettled frontier, and the part of it that was settled relied upon the Mississippi to transport grain to southern markets via New Orleans. By mid-century, however, this region became closely tied to the other northern states by two factors: (1) military campaigns by federal troops that drove American Indians from the land and (2) the building of canals and railroads that established common markets between the Great Lakes and the East Coast.

Agriculture In the states of the Old Northwest, crops of corn and wheat were very profitable. Using the newly invented steel plow (by John Deere) and mechanical reaper (by Cyrus McCormick), a farm family was more efficient and could plant more acres, needing to supplement its labor only with a few hired workers at harvest time. Part of the crop was used to feed cattle and hogs and also to supply distillers and brewers with grain for making whiskey and beer. Farmers shipped grain quickly to cities to avoid spoilage.

New Cities At key transportation points, small villages and towns grew into thriving cities after 1820: Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago on the Great Lakes, Cincinnati on the Ohio River, and St. Louis on the Mississippi River. The cities served as transfer points, processing farm products for shipment to the East, and distributing manufactured goods from the East to their region.

Immigration

In 1820, about 8,000 immigrants arrived from Europe, but beginning in 1832, there was a sudden increase. After that year, the number of new arrivals never fell below 50,000 a year and in one year, 1854, climbed as high as 428,000. From the 1830s through the 1850s, nearly 4 million people from northern Europe crossed the Atlantic to seek a new life in the United States. Arriving by ship in the northern seacoast cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, many immigrants remained where they landed, while others traveled to farms and cities of

the Old Northwest. Few journeyed to the South, where the plantation economy and slavery limited the opportunities for free labor.

The surge in immigration between 1830 and 1860 was chiefly the result of: (1) the development of inexpensive and relatively rapid ocean transportation, (2) famines and revolutions in Europe that drove people from their homelands, and (3) the growing reputation of the United States as a country offering economic opportunities and political freedom. The immigrants strengthened the U.S. economy by providing both a steady stream of inexpensive labor and an increased demand for mass-produced consumer goods.

Irish During this period, half of all the immigrants—almost 2 million—came from Ireland. These Irish immigrants were mostly tenant farmers driven from their homeland by potato crop failures and a devastating famine in the 1840s. They arrived with limited interest in farming, few special skills, and little money. They faced strong discrimination because of their Roman Catholic religion. The Irish worked hard at whatever employment they could find, usually competing with African Americans for domestic work and unskilled laborer jobs. Faced with limited opportunities, they congregated for mutual support in the northern cities (Boston, Philadelphia, and New York) where they had first landed. Many Irish entered local politics. They organized their fellow immigrants and joined the Democratic party, which had long traditions of anti-British feelings and support for workers. Their progress was difficult but steady. For example, the Irish were initially excluded from joining New York City's Democratic organization, Tammany Hall. But by the 1850s they had secured jobs and influence, and by the 1880s they controlled this party organization.

Germans Both economic hardships and the failure of democratic revolutions in 1848 caused more than 1 million Germans to seek refuge in the United States in the late 1840s and the 1850s. Most German immigrants had at least modest means as well as considerable skills as farmers and artisans. Moving westward in search of cheap, fertile farmland, they established homesteads throughout the Old Northwest and generally prospered. At first their political influence was limited. As they became more active in public life, many strongly supported public education and staunchly opposed slavery.

Nativists Many native-born Americans were alarmed by the influx of immigrants, fearing that the newcomers would take their jobs and also subvert (weaken) the culture of the Anglo majority. The nativists (those reacting most strongly against the foreigners) were Protestants who distrusted the Roman Catholicism practiced by the Irish and many of the Germans. In the 1840s, opposition to immigrants led to sporadic rioting in the big cities and the organization of a secret antiforeign society, the Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. This society turned to politics in the early 1850s, nominating candidates for office as the American party, or Know-Nothing party (see Chapter 13).

Antiforeign feeling faded in importance as North and South divided over slavery prior to the Civil War. However, nativism would periodically return when enough native-born citizens felt threatened by a sudden increase in immigration.

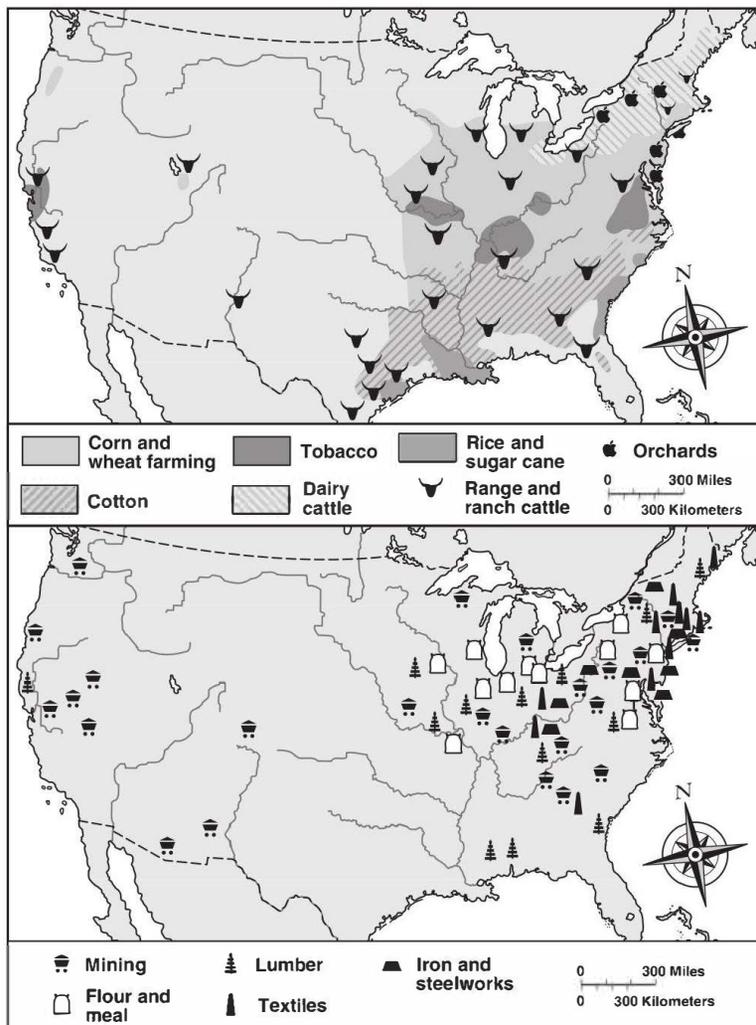
The South

The states that permitted slavery formed a distinctive region, the South. By 1861, the region included 15 states, all but four of which (Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri) seceded and joined the Confederacy.

Agriculture and King Cotton

Agriculture was the foundation of the South's economy, even though by the 1850s small factories in the region were producing approximately 15 percent of the nation's manufactured goods. Tobacco, rice, and sugarcane were important cash crops, but these were far exceeded by the South's chief economic activity: the production and sale of cotton.

AGRICULTURE, MINING, AND
MANUFACTURING BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR



The development of mechanized textile mills in England, coupled with Eli Whitney's cotton gin, made cotton cloth affordable, not just in Europe and the United States, but throughout the world. Before 1860, the world depended chiefly on Britain's mills for its supply of cloth, and Britain in turn depended chiefly on the American South for its supply of cotton fiber. Originally, the cotton was grown almost entirely in two states, South Carolina and Georgia, but as demand and profits increased, planters moved westward into Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. New land was constantly needed, for the high cotton yields required for profits quickly depleted the soil. By the 1850s, cotton provided two-thirds of all U.S. exports and linked the South and Great Britain. "Cotton is king," said one southerner of his region's greatest asset.

Slavery, the "Peculiar Institution"

Wealth in the South was measured in terms of land and slaves. The latter were treated as a form of property, subject to being bought and sold. However, some whites were sensitive about how they treated the other humans that they referred to slavery as "that peculiar institution." In colonial times, people justified slavery as an economic necessity, but in the 19th century, apologists for slavery mustered historical and religious arguments to support their claim that it was good for both slave and master.

Population The cotton boom was largely responsible for a fourfold increase in the number of slaves, from 1 million in 1800 to nearly 4 million in 1860. Most of the increase came from natural growth, although thousands of Africans were also smuggled into the South in violation of the 1808 law against importing slaves. In parts of the Deep South, slaves made up as much as 75 percent of the total population. Fearing slave revolts, southern legislatures added increased restrictions on movement and education to their slave codes.

Economics Slaves were employed doing whatever their owners demanded of them. Most slaves labored in the fields, but many learned skilled crafts or worked as house servants, in factories, and on construction gangs. Because of the greater profits to be made on the new cotton plantations in the West, many slaves were sold from the Upper South to the cotton-rich Deep South of the lower Mississippi Valley. By 1860, the value of a field slave had risen to almost \$2,000. One result of the heavy capital investment in slaves was that the South had much less capital than the North to undertake industrialization.

Slave Life Conditions of slavery varied from one plantation to the next. Some slaves were humanely treated, while others were routinely beaten. All suffered from being deprived of their freedom. Families could be separated at any time by an owner's decision to sell a wife, a husband, or a child. Women were vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Despite the hard, nearly hopeless circumstances of their lives, enslaved African Americans maintained a strong sense of family and of religious faith.

| United States Labor Force, 1800–1860 (in millions) | | | |
|--|------|-------|-------|
| Year | Free | Slave | Total |
| 1800 | 1.4 | 0.5 | 1.9 |
| 1810 | 1.6 | 0.7 | 2.3 |
| 1820 | 2.1 | 1.0 | 3.1 |
| 1830 | 3.0 | 1.2 | 4.2 |
| 1840 | 4.2 | 1.5 | 5.7 |
| 1850 | 6.3 | 2.0 | 8.3 |
| 1860 | 8.8 | 2.3 | 11.1 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

Resistance Slaves contested their status through a range of actions, primarily work slowdowns, sabotage, and escape. In addition, there were a few major slave uprisings. One was led by Denmark Vesey in 1822 and another by Nat Turner in 1831. The revolts were quickly and violently suppressed, but even so, they had a lasting impact. They gave hope to enslaved African Americans, drove southern states to tighten already strict slave codes, and demonstrated to many the evils of slavery. Revolts polarized the country by making slaveholders more defensive about slavery and nonslaveholders more critical of the institution.

Free African Americans

By 1860, as many as 250,000 African Americans in the South were not slaves. They were free citizens (even though, as in the North, racial prejudice restricted their liberties). A number of slaves had been emancipated during the American Revolution. Some were mulatto children whose white fathers had decided to liberate them. Others achieved freedom on their own, when permitted, through self-purchase—if they were fortunate enough to have been paid wages for extra work, usually as skilled craftspeople.

Most of the free southern blacks lived in cities where they could own property. By state law, they were not equal with whites, were not permitted to vote, and were barred from entering certain occupations. Constantly in danger of being kidnapped by slave traders, they had to show legal papers proving their free status. They remained in the South for various reasons. Some wanted to be near family members who were still in bondage; others believed the South to be home and the North to offer no greater opportunities.

White Society

Southern whites observed a rigid hierarchy among themselves. Aristocratic planters lived comfortably at the top of society while poor farmers and mountain people struggled at the bottom.

Aristocracy Members of the South’s small elite of wealthy planters owned at least 100 slaves and at least 1,000 acres. The planter aristocracy maintained its power by dominating the state legislatures of the South and enacting laws that favored the large landholders’ economic interests.

Farmers The vast majority of slaveholders owned fewer than 20 slaves and worked only several hundred acres. Southern white farmers produced the bulk of the cotton crop, worked in the fields with their slaves, and lived as modestly as farmers of the North.

Poor Whites Three-fourths of the South’s white population owned no slaves. They could not afford the rich river-bottom farmland controlled by the planters, and many lived in the hills as subsistence farmers. These “hillbillies” or “poor white trash,” as they were derisively called by the planters, defended the slave system, thinking that some day they too could own slaves and that at least they were superior on the social scale to someone (slaves).

Mountain People A number of small farmers lived in frontier conditions in isolation from the rest of the South, along the slopes and valleys of the Appalachian and Ozark mountains. The mountain people disliked the planters and their slaves. During the Civil War, many (including a future president, Andrew Johnson of Tennessee) would remain loyal to the Union.

Cities Because the South was primarily an agricultural region, there was only a limited need for major cities. New Orleans was the only southern city among the nation’s 15 largest in 1860 (it was fifth, after New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston). Cities such as Atlanta, Charleston, Chattanooga, and Richmond were important trading centers, but had relatively small populations in comparison to those of the North.

Southern Thought

The South developed a unique culture and outlook on life. As cotton became the basis of its economy, slavery became the focus of its political thought. White southerners felt increasingly isolated and defensive about slavery, as northerners grew hostile toward it, and as Great Britain, France, and other European nations outlawed it altogether.

Code of Chivalry Dominated by the aristocratic planter class, the agricultural South was largely a feudal society. Southern gentlemen ascribed to a code of chivalrous conduct, which included a strong sense of personal honor, the defense of womanhood, and paternalistic attitudes toward all who were deemed inferior, especially slaves.

Education The upper class valued a college education for their children. Acceptable professions for gentlemen were limited to farming, law, the ministry, and the military. For the lower classes, schooling beyond the early elementary grades was generally not available. To reduce the risk of slave revolts, slaves were strictly prohibited by law from receiving any instruction in reading and writing.

Religion The slavery question affected church membership. Partly because they preached biblical support for slavery, both Methodist and Baptist churches gained in membership in the South while splitting in the 1840s with their northern brethren. The Unitarians, who challenged slavery, faced declining membership and hostility. Catholics and Episcopalians took a neutral stand on slavery, and their numbers declined in the South.

The West

As the United States expanded westward, the definition of the “West” kept changing. In the 1600s, the West referred to all the lands not along the Atlantic Coast. In the 1700s, the West meant lands on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains. By the mid-1800s, the West lay beyond the Mississippi River and reached to California and the Oregon Territory on the Pacific Coast.

American Indians

The original settlers of the West—and the entire North American continent—were various groups of American Indians. However, from the time of Columbus, American Indians were cajoled, pushed, or driven westward as white settlers encroached on their original homelands.

Exodus By 1850, the vast majority of American Indians were living west of the Mississippi River. Those to the east had either been killed by disease, died in battles, emigrated reluctantly, or been forced to leave their land by treaty or military action. The Great Plains, however, would provide only a temporary respite from conflict with white settlers.

Life on the Plains Horses, brought to America by the Spanish in the 1500s, revolutionized life for American Indians on the Great Plains. Some tribes continued to live in villages and farm, but the horse allowed tribes such as the Cheyenne and the Sioux to become nomadic hunters following the buffalo. Those living a nomadic way of life could more easily move away from advancing settlers or oppose their encroachments by force.

The Frontier

Although the location of the western frontier constantly shifted, the *concept* of the frontier remained the same from generation to generation. The same forces that had brought the original colonists to the Americas motivated their descendants and new immigrants to move westward. In the public imagination, the West represented the possibility of a fresh start for those willing to venture there. If not in fact, at least in theory and myth, the West beckoned as a place promising greater freedom for all ethnic groups: American Indians, African Americans, European Americans, and eventually Asian Americans as well.

Mountain Men From the point of view of white Americans, the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s were a far-distant frontier—a total wilderness except for American Indian villages. The earliest whites in the area had followed Lewis and Clark and explored American Indian trails as they trapped for furs.

These mountain men, as they were called, served as the guides and pathfinders for settlers crossing the mountains into California and Oregon in the 1840s. (See Chapter 12.)

White Settlers on the Western Frontier

Whether the frontier lay in Minnesota or Oregon or California in the 1840s and 1850s, daily life for white settlers was similar to that of the early colonists. They worked hard from sunrise to sunset and lived in log cabins, sod huts, or other improvised shelters. Disease and malnutrition were far greater dangers than attacks by American Indians.

Women Often living many miles from the nearest neighbor, pioneer women performed myriad daily tasks, including those of doctor, teacher, seamstress, and cook—as well as chief assistant in the fields to their farmer-husbands. The isolation, endless work, and rigors of childbirth resulted in a short lifespan for frontier women.

Environmental Damage Settlers had little understanding of the fragile nature of land and wildlife. As settlers moved into an area, they would clear entire forests and after only two generations exhaust the soil with poor farming methods. At the same time, trappers and hunters brought the beaver and the buffalo to the brink of extinction.

| Population by Region, 1820 to 1860 | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Region | 1820 | 1840 | 1860 |
| Northeast: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania | 4,360,000 | 6,761,000 | 10,594,000 |
| North Central: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas | 859,000 | 3,352,000 | 9,097,000 |
| South: Delaware, Maryland, Washington DC, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas | 4,419,000 | 6,951,000 | 11,133,000 |
| West: Colorado, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Oregon, California | ----- | ----- | 619,000 |
| All States | 9,618,000 | 17,120,000 | 31,513,000 |

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*. All figures rounded to the nearest thousand.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF SLAVERY?

Slavery was of fundamental importance in defining both the character of the South and its differences with the North. Until about 1950, the prevailing scholarship on slavery followed Ulrich Phillips' *American Negro Slavery* (1918). Phillips portrayed slavery as an economically failing institution in which the paternalistic owners were civilizing the inferior but contented African Americans. Later historians challenged Phillips' thesis by showing slaves and owners to be in continual conflict. Today the older view of slavery as a paternalistic and even benign institution has been discredited.

The newer views were summarized by Kenneth Stampp in *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (1956). Stampp acknowledged that the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s stimulated many of the new interpretations: "There is a strange paradox in the historian's involvement with both present and past, for his knowledge of the present is clearly a key to his understanding of the past."

Historians continue to debate how destructive slavery was. Some have argued that the oppressive and racist nature of slavery destroyed the culture and self-respect of the slaves and their descendants. In contrast, others have concluded that slaves managed to adapt and to overcome their hardships by developing a unique African American culture focused around religion and extended families.

Economics has also provided a focus for viewing the nature of slavery. Historians have debated whether slave labor was profitable to southern planters, as compared to using free labor. Unlike Phillips, many historians have demonstrated that slavery was generally profitable. A more complex analysis of the economics, social, and cultural nature of slavery is found in Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. In this work, southern society is shown centered on a paternalism that gave rise to a unique social system with a clear hierarchy, in which people were classified according to their ability or their economic and social standing. For whites this paternalism meant control, while for slaves it provided the opportunity to develop and maintain their own culture, including family life, tradition, and religion.

Recently, historians have focused more on regional variations in slavery. For example, compared to slaves on South Carolina rice plantations, slaves on Virginia tobacco plantations lived longer lives, worked in smaller groups, and had more contact with whites. In South Carolina, slaves kept stronger ties to their African heritage.

The changing interpretations of slavery since the early 1900s reflect changing attitudes toward race and culture. While all interpretations do not seem equally accurate today, each provides readers a perspective to consider as they develop their own views.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>Identities & Conflict (NAT) Northeast Old Northwest sectionalism Nativists American party Supreme Order of the Star-Spangled Banner Know-Nothing Party Free African Americans planters Codes of Chivalry poor whites hillbillies mountain men the West the frontier</p> <p>Migration (NAT, MIG) Deep South American Indian removal Great Plains white settlers</p> | <p>Urban Growth (MIG) urbanization urban life new cities Irish; potato famine Roman Catholic Tammany Hall Germans Old Northwest immigration</p> <p>The Slave Industry (MIG/WXT) King Cotton Eli Whitney “peculiar institution” Denmark Vesey Nat Turner slave codes Code of Chivalry</p> <p>Industry & Problems (WXT) Industrial Revolution unions <i>Commonwealth v. Hunt</i> ten-hour workday Cyrus McCormick John Deere</p> | <p>Changing Politics (POL) Daniel Webster Tammany Hall</p> <p>Ignorance (GEO) environmental damage extinction</p> |
|--|---|---|