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8.52 Analyze the characteristics of white Southern society and how the physical environment influenced events and conditions prior to the Civil War.

White Southerners, Southern belles, gentlemen, and hospitality

Home to prominent Virginia planter Thomas Lee and his illustrious progeny: Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot Lee— the only brothers to sign the Declaration of Independence, and General Robert E. Lee, who was born in an upstairs bedroom.

Southern belles, gentlemen, and hospitality.

During the 1600s, patterns of life were borrowed from the English countryside and transplanted onto America’s southern shores. These included a glorification of riding, hunting, and etiquette.
From Gone With the Wind, watch a clip of scenes from the movie. These clips show some of the myths of the Antebellum South.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlBc_nlA2so

Tobacco played the central role in defining social class, local politics, the labor system; in fact, it shaped the entire life of the region. The planter was essentially a country gentleman, looking to England for political and economic guidance as well as for its literature, manner of dress, and etiquette. In the 1700s the Virginia gentry established a code of behavior that can still be seen in parts of the south today. Aristocrats had certain rights and privileges, and, in return, had certain responsibilities for their “inferiors.” By around 1825, the dominance of Virginia was fading and the emergence of King Cotton shifted the center of Southern influence to South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi.
Southern cavaliers would sometimes engage in duel to defend their honor.

The southern code addressed the behaviors of both men and women. Gentlemen must be courteous, truthful and honorable. Sins of the flesh were forgiven. He should have a broad understanding of the humanities, including the Greek and Roman classics. Hospitality and generosity were of utmost importance. The ideal man respected his family and treated women with high regard. Strength and courage were glorified. A man was to defend the family name, with his life if necessary. A personal insult to an individual or his family would necessitate a fight, if not a duel.
The manners befitting a proper southern belle were as detailed as those befitting her male counterpart.

The southern woman was genteel and gracious. She knew how to entertain guests and tenaciously defended her husband and children. She was not outspoken and was pure of mind and body.

A proper gentleman, it was believed, should be a lawyer, politician, planter, or military man, rather than be a businessman or other occupation. Because plantation owners had their money tied up in property and slaves, many of the generation could not afford to send their children to prestigious colleges, but were able to send them to the esteemed military schools. This created a generation of very able and talented military officers. Many were trained at West Point and Virginia Military Institute. They held to old-fashioned ideals of what honorable warfare meant. When the Civil War arrived, most of the military leadership talent was southern.
From www.historyforkids.org, read about slavery and the history of slavery on the continent of North America and in the United States.

http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/northamerica/after1500/people/slavery.htm


Click on the following link to


The Southern Argument for Slavery

(Southern slaveholders often used biblical passages to justify slavery.)
From the site Tennessee 4 Me, read about slavery in Tennessee.
http://www.tn4me.org/minor_cat.cfm/minor_id/62/major_id/21/era_id/4

Wessyngton Plantation

By Carroll Van West, Middle Tennessee State University

Located near Cedar Hill, Robertson County, Wessyngton Plantation specialized in dark-fired tobacco from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Joseph Washington, a native of Virginia, established Wessyngton in 1796, the year of statehood, when he acquired property along Sulphur Fork Creek; his subsequent marriage to Mary Cheatham significantly expanded his property. In 1819 Joseph and Mary Washington built the manor house, a distinguished two-story, five-bay red brick example of the Federal style. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The cultivation and curing of dark-fired tobacco took skill, hard work, and time; hundreds of African American slaves produced the annual crop. Washington initially relied on overland transportation to the Clarksville tobacco markets; later he turned to small steamers which traveled the local rivers.

In 1848 Wessyngton was inherited by son George A. Washington, who took advantage in the next decade of the emerging rail system, the high price commanded for African American slaves, and the growing dark-fired tobacco market to become one of the richest men in late antebellum Tennessee. In 1860 Washington owned over 13,000 acres and his 274 slaves raised 250,000 pounds of tobacco. His real and personal estate was valued at $519,000, a property value that was seventy-eight times the average of all property holders in Robertson County.

As with all slave owners, the emancipation of slaves as a result of the Civil War cost Washington a large portion of his wealth, but, compared to his neighbors, Washington emerged from the 1860s as one of the region’s most powerful planters. Washington maintained control over his vital African American labor force by negotiating stringent sharecropper arrangements with his former slaves. Driving a hard bargain, Washington forced his croppers to turn over half their crop while also pledging to work for him at sixty-five cents a day when he needed their labor. Croppers also agreed not to work for anyone else unless they had Washington’s permission, and they agreed to tend the stables, feed the livestock, keep all fences in repair, and to donate three days of labor for every male member of the family. The market for dark-fired tobacco continued to grow in the late nineteenth century, and Wessyngton continued to prosper. In 1892 the plantation passed to son Joseph E. Washington, who managed the property during the heated tobacco wars of the early twentieth century. At his death in 1915, he left the plantation to his wife Mary Bolling Kearns Washington, who owned the property until 1938.

At this time, the estate was inherited by three children of Joseph E. and Mary Washington. They managed the property until forming the Wessyngton Company in 1956 to administer the estate. It stayed in family hands through the 1970s and was designated a Tennessee Century Farm in 1976. But when a new survey of the state’s historic family farms was completed in 1986, Wessyngton had passed from the control of the Washington family. The historic estate continues to operate as a private farm.


The Washingtons of Wessyngton Plantation - Tennessee Crossroads
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3K-9XLITOo

Wessyngton Plantation: A Family’s Road to Freedom
Those who defended slavery rose to the challenge set forth by the Abolitionists. The defenders of slavery included economics, history, religion, legality, social good, and even humanitarianism, to further their arguments.

Defenders of slavery argued that the sudden end to the slave economy would have had a profound and killing economic impact in the South where reliance on slave labor was the foundation of their economy. The cotton economy would collapse. The tobacco crop would dry in the fields. Rice would cease being profitable.

Defenders of slavery argued that if all the slaves were freed, there would be widespread unemployment and chaos. This would lead to uprisings, bloodshed, and anarchy. They pointed to the mob’s “rule of terror” during the French Revolution and argued for the continuation of the status quo, which was providing for affluence and stability for the slaveholding class and for all free people who enjoyed the bounty of the slave society.

Some slaveholders believed that African Americans were biologically inferior to their masters. During the 1800s, this argument was taken quite seriously, even in scientific circles.

Defenders of slavery argued that slavery had existed throughout history and was the natural state of mankind. The Greeks had slaves, the Romans had slaves, and the English had slavery until very recently. Defenders of slavery noted that in the Bible, Abraham had slaves. They pointed to the Ten Commandments, noting that "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, ... nor his manservant, nor his maidservant." In the New Testament, Paul returned a runaway slave, Philemon, to his master, and, although slavery was widespread throughout the Roman world, Jesus never spoke out against it.

Defenders of slavery turned to the courts, who had ruled, with the Dred Scott Decision, that all blacks — not just slaves — had no legal standing as persons in our courts — they were property, and the Constitution protected slaveholders’ rights to their property.

Defenders of slavery argued that the institution was divine, and that it brought Christianity to the heathen from across the ocean. Slavery was, according to this argument, a good thing for the enslaved. John C. Calhoun said, "Never before has the black race of Central Africa, from the dawn of history to the present day, attained a condition so civilized and so improved, not only physically, but morally and intellectually."

Defenders of slavery argued that by comparison with the poor of Europe and the workers in the Northern states, that slaves were better cared for. They said that their owners would protect and assist them when they were sick and aged, unlike those who, once fired from their work, were left to fend helplessly for themselves.

James Thornwell, a minister, wrote in 1860, "The parties in this conflict are not merely Abolitionists and slaveholders, they are Atheists, Socialists, Communists, Red Republicans, Jacobins on the one side and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other."
When a society forms around any institution, as the South did around slavery, it will formulate a set of arguments to support it. The Southerners held ever firmer to their arguments as the political tensions in the country drew us ever closer to the Civil War.

References

1. ushistory.org Homepage.
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