

Industrial North versus Agricultural South

The Civil War, or the War Between the States as it was known in the South, arose out of social, political, and economic differences between the Northern states, where slavery had gradually been abandoned, and the Southern states, where slavery had become both an economic system and a way of life—even though most white Southerners did not own slaves.

In reality, there were very few large plantations in the South and many small farms. The large plantations had anywhere from 20 to 200 slaves and raised tobacco or cotton. The crop depended on whether the plantation was located in Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and North Carolina, where tobacco was the chief crop, or in the Deep South, where cotton was king. Small farmers typically raised their own food and a small cash crop like tobacco or cotton; usually, they owned few, if any, slaves. There were few wealthy small farmers. However, the rich planter with a large plantation worked by hundreds of slaves became the ideal to which many poor Southern whites aspired. This ideal took hold in their imaginations and explains why so many poor Southerners were willing to fight for an institution from which they did not directly benefit. Southern intellectuals developed certain arguments to justify the continued use of human beings as slaves. One argument said that slavery was essential to the Southern economy, which was based on the cultivation of cotton, a very labor-intensive crop. These same white Southerners pointed to the abuse of workers in Northern mills and factories and claimed that slavery was actually preferable to working in such a mill. Slavery, they said, ensured that slaves had food, clothing, and shelter, regardless of whether they were healthy and able to work or too ill or too old to work. Some Southerners made religious arguments and claimed that certain Bible passages seemed to sanction slavery. Another argument used was the racist argument that black people were inherently inferior to whites and needed to be taken care of, like small children.

The North by this time had become the center of American industry. Northern farms were small for the most part and had little potential for great wealth; they could not grow cotton or tobacco or other large-scale cash crops. However, certain parts of the North were well suited to the development of industry, and the Industrial Revolution that had begun in Great Britain had quickly taken hold in the Northeast. The North had reserves of coal to produce power for factory machines, and it had an abundance of people to run the machines. Men and women were moving away from farms, and thousands of immigrants were entering the country every year. By 1860, almost all the industry in the nation, most of the banking and financial centers, most of the rail lines, and most of the coal, iron, and gold reserves in the nation were located in the North.